



Jack Cowle

*Story of a Royal Canadian
Infantry Veteran*

of

World War II





Lest We Forget

Jack Cowle

Jack joined the Royal Canadian Infantry Reserves in 1936 as a member of the Bowmanville Unit as well as the Tank Corp Ontario Regiment in Oshawa. When the war started in 1939, his Regiment was called up and Jack assumed he would go to war. To his surprise, he was never called to go. He tried three times to sign up but each time he was turned down and never given a reason. Jack grew more frustrated as people knew he was in the Reserves and yet not in uniform.

Unknown to Jack, his boss at the Bowmanville Foundry had him declared essential. Finally, a man came down from Ottawa to inform him he was essential, therefore he could not become part of the regular Army.

Jack wasn't prepared to give up. So when he heard of a new recruitment office opening in Port Hope, he was first in line when the doors opened. This time he was successful. The doctors checked him out right then and there and marked him 100%.

He was given a travel voucher and was on his way. First to Toronto, then on the next train to Halifax and soon he found himself walking up the gang plank to board the Queen Elizabeth bound for England. The ship set sail with 25,000 soldiers on board. They had just left the dock when they were called back as an American ship had been torpedoed off the coast of Nova Scotia. The men from that ship were put onto the QE. This meant adding another 5,000 soldiers to an already overcrowded ship. There wasn't any room to move. Everyone slept wherever they could find a spot on the 4 day trip.

Jack tells a funny story about arriving at the dock in Glasgow, Scotland. When he walked down the gang plank, he fell off taking all his equipment with him, including his \$100 rifle. When they pulled him out of the water, his gun was gone. He was told the gun was his responsibility and he would have to pay for it. Somewhere along the line, it was forgotten about and he never did pay.



The men from the ship were transported to Aldershott, England. Upon arrival, they were called to stand on the large parade ground. There were close to 1,000 men gathered in groups. When each man heard his name called he went to his assigned Unit. When the last name was called, there, in the middle of parade ground, was Jack standing all alone. He went up to the Sergeant and said, "What about me?" The Sergeant looked at him and said, "You go where you were told." Jack said "My name wasn't called." It was soon discovered Jack's paperwork had not followed him. With no paperwork, the Army claimed he had jumped on board in Halifax and that he would be sent home.

While discussing the situation, a Captain from the 48th Highlanders came into the office wanting volunteers to go to North Africa. Of course, Jack volunteered. He was determined to get in the war one way or another.

No paperwork meant no proof of him having the necessary vaccinations for Africa, which meant more needles. Now it was off to North Africa. Once again, he met head on with the lack of records. It was decided to send him back to Canada via New York through the American Air Force when serendipity happened again. An Officer came in wanting volunteers to go to Ortona, Italy, so off went Jack.

While at Ortona, a serious incident happened which changed Jack's war plans. A Patrol was sent to search out a nest of Germans. For some reason, a Captain went with them. When the Patrol didn't return, the Colonel sent another Patrol to see what had happened. Jack was part of the second Patrol. As this Patrol got close to where the first Patrol should be, some of the men went ahead while Jack, the Sergeant and one other soldier stood rear guard. As they watched, a flash from the shelling lit up the sky revealing the Patrol surrounded by Germans. They realized no shots could be fired at the Germans without hitting their own men. As they watched, the two men with Jack decided to retreat. Before Jack could do anything he found a gun in his back. Unfortunately, the Sergeant and the other Soldier were killed and Jack was captured. He later learned that the Germans had set up an ambush knowing someone would come for the Captain.



After his capture, Jack was taken to a school where he was held prisoner with 255 other captured soldiers. Food was scarce and Jack lost over 100 pounds and had to be hospitalized for malnutrition. Once in better shape, he was sent to a POW Camp just outside of Munich, Germany. There were 80 separate compounds with 1,000 men in each compound. Jack was in a compound with other Canadians.

One day Jack got a surprise. One of the German guards asked if he had a girlfriend and would he like to write a letter to her. At first, he was reluctant to write it as he was afraid it would be used for propaganda. After talking it over with some of his fellow prisoners, it was decided that if he wrote as if Amy was sitting beside him, there would no harm. So he wrote the letter but never heard anything else about what happened to it.

Every Friday was a special day at the camp as boxes from the Red Cross were handed out. These packages contained coffee, tea, chocolate, socks, uniforms and the most valuable item, cigarettes. Jack soon discovered cigarettes were as good as money and could be bartered for almost anything. Jack quit smoking. Cigarettes would get you a hair cut, your clothes washed and access to any of the other compounds.

Every night the British bombed Munich, so everyday the prisoners were taken from the POW Camp into Munich to clean up the rubble.

On these day trips to Munich, the Prisoners were served this awful soup out of huge big tanks on the back of trucks. The prisoners were able to bribe the guards with cigarettes to let them eat in a café where they asked the people for bread and said the magic word, "cigarettes". The bread was brought back to the camp and traded for more cigarettes. Jack was very creative in keeping his stash of food and cigarettes safe. Sleeping on the top bunk, he hid his stash in the ceiling using condensed milk as glue to keep the hole sealed shut.



Jack had formed a friendship with one of the guards and on special occasions offered the guard his most valued possession, cigarettes. He also shared his chocolate and coffee with the guard's little girl and wife. The guard returned the friendship by sneaking him out of the camp one night, taking him to the railway station, hiding him in a boxcar and telling him to take the morning train to Paris. Unfortunately, Jack fell asleep and the next thing he knew he was being roughly awakened and hauled off to Civilian Jail in Berlin.

His interrogators kept insisting he speak German but Jack couldn't speak a word of the language. One of his interrogators spoke English and explained the confusion. Jack's last name, when spelled with a K instead of a C, is a German name so it was assumed he was a spy. After two weeks in jail, he was released and sent back to the POW Camp.

In early 1945, the Allied Forces and the Russian Force were advancing into Germany coming up to Munich on opposite sides of the City. As these forces got closer, the Germans decided to use the prisoners as shields hoping these Forces wouldn't shoot at their own soldiers. The prisoners were moved up to the front. In one of the little towns just outside Munich, the mayor negotiated with Jack and his fellow prisoners for them to talk to the 11th Armored Division just over the hill asking them not to bomb his town if he let the prisoners go. They were freed by the 11th Armored Division who bombed the town anyway.

The freed captives were taken to Paris and eventually back to Aldersott, England. Jack returned to Halifax on the Ile de France with hundreds of other prisoners and injured soldiers. The ship docked in Halifax on June 28, 1945. Jack was put on a train and sent to Kingston where the love of his life, Amy, was waiting for him.



Amy then told him the story of the letter. It seems the letter had been read on the shortwave radio and a Mrs. White in Arkansas heard the broadcast, copied down the letter, found out who Amy was and sent the letter to her. Jack's mother had been receiving the Missing in Action payments given to all soldiers' families. Then, for some reason they stopped. With Jack's letter, Amy was able to prove he was still alive and his mother's payments were reinstated.

Jack had difficulty getting into the Army and now that he was home, he had difficulty getting out. The Army wouldn't discharge him until he had proof of a job. He wasn't able to go back to his old job so he got a job at General Motors.

Jack had been away from his love for so long he didn't want to waste any more time. He and Amy were married on July 12th, 1945.

Jack firmly believes that through this interesting journey, God was with him all the way.

Thank you, Jack, for sharing your most interesting story. All of us would agree, God was definitely with you.