

A Canadian airman leaves home: Tom Martin

Uncle of Anne Wyminga leaves poignant record behind

By Bob Owen

chronicle@bellnet.ca

It will one day become part of a book, a legacy of the family of Pieter and Anne Wyminga. Right now, it is a poignant and deeply ironic bundle of letters sent by a young man of 18 years to his family in Canada during the tail-end of World War I.

The fascinating account was found in Tom Martin's locker. He had kept a copy of almost every letter he sent home. Tom was Anne Wyminga's uncle. When Anne's husband Pieter Wyminga expressed interest in the historic accounts, they were passed on to the Colborne couple. Glancing through the treasure, it appears all that is missing are the cards and some letters sent to his siblings, and the many photos taken over the year he was away from home.

Pieter hopes to include the contents of the recovered letters in a book he is writing about the family history.

The binder and an accompanying diary are kept in a safety deposit box, a priceless memory of the final year in the young man's life.

PART II

Thomas Martin left Canada in January, 1918 in the service of the Royal Flying Corps. During the final year of his life, Tom kept a copy of most of his letters home. They have been maintained in immaculate condition since they were recovered from his belongings in August, 1918 after he was shot down over Belgium.

The following story details his life in Britain prior to his departure for France early in July, 1918. It is the second in a series of three articles covering the final year of his life.

Many of his letters are deeply ironic, given what we know. They also point to the eternal optimism of youth, the unflinching patriotism and the fullness of life, all taken in a merciless war.

Tom's only recorded letter from the passage to England opens with one of the most poignant statements found in the contents of his papers.

He opens, "Since leaving Halifax I have started a diary as I thought it might be somewhat interesting in after years, and I intend to keep it up, until I arrive back home again if my resolution

doesn't fail."

That diary was found among his belongings. The final entry, was August 11, 1918. He had the title for the next page scrolled at the top of the page waiting for an entry that would never be made. Had he lived, it would have told of his first real "show", a daring battle with five Fokker aircraft just inside the border of Belgium.

The S. S. Tunisian weighed anchor in Halifax, bound for Europe with 11 other ships in convoy behind a cruiser. Nine of those ships carried troops and "Chinese labourers". One contained a hold full of oil. The last, Tom says, has more explosives than the Mont Blanc which exploded in Halifax harbour a month before. In all, close to 40,000 men are crammed on board the nine troop ships.

Two days before arriving in England, the ships enter the danger zone and go on submarine lookout. They are joined by seven destroyers who guide them into port.

Tom finds out later that one of the troop ships was torpedoed, with little loss of life.

Rumours abound as they arrive. One of them has warehouses full of food, enough to

last five years lying in British storage.

The marvels of London

He arrived in England on Wednesday, February 6, 1918 after a ten-day voyage. His next letter to his mother reminds us of his sense of routine. It opens, "As you will see from the date this is Sunday, the usual write letters day." He has arrived in London. The weather is fine, the grass is green, the architecture splendid, the shows are fine, and he has seven days leave to soak it all in.

Tom enthuses to his father about "the underground tubes which are wonderful undertakings. Under the whole of this great City there is a network of tubes through which trains are run about once every two of three minutes and carry you rapidly to any place you may wish to go." He goes on to describe the stations and elevators which carry the passengers to the surface.

He tells his dad the railways, "have the Toronto, Hamilton and Buffalo Railway skinned." Fine, large covered stations "two to three times as big as the Toronto Union... The coaches run so smoothly that you would scarcely know you were moving."

The grand world is opening. The Canadian boy has arrived.

But perhaps it is too much of a good thing.

He reports to his dad on February 13 that he, "won't be sorry to get away from the City, not because I have been having a poor time but because I am running short of what cash I care to spend." There is everything a person could want, except sugar and butter. Technology has solved both parts of that problem for the young airman. He proudly announces that he has discovered "a hundred little pills of saccharine." And oleo-margarine will substitute for butter.

Later he calms his mother's fear of this new additive by telling her he no longer uses saccharine.

His European education

continues; he finds people in service dress better than the people they serve and expect tips. The flowers in Hyde Park are in bloom.

A trip to the country reveals that gardens are being planted in mid-February. The onions are already six inches high. England is, "one of the prettiest places I have ever seen."

Never far from his purpose, he comments in closing on February 13 that he is going to try to get a "Bristol Fighter" to fly, "as they say a whole squadron of German planes are afraid to attack one of them."

Soon we find him in camp, readying for the work ahead. News circulates that fliers aren't sent over until they are 19. He has six months to wait. He speculates that in the interim he may become an instructor or ferry pilot. If he had been held back until that birthday he would not have attacked the five Fokkers in his single fateful air battle.

The perils of flying

In the meantime, his letters are crammed with observations of the country, the arrival of spring, and the lessons learned on the new flying machines, some of which need only a gust of wind when landing to turn them over.

Living in an era when flight was a new experience for everyone, his letters home must have left his family fearful for his life.

In his March 13 letter he recalls getting lost in the clouds and nearly running out of fuel, and another near miss when an engine conked out on him, forcing a crash landing, destroying the undercarriage and propeller. In the same missive he warns about the dangers of killing a spider, claiming that, "a friend of mine predicted all kinds of evil for me (after killing one) and it came out to be true."

On the same day he went out with his instructor to practise forced landings. "My instructor shut off the engine and started talking to me and while doing so

our propeller stopped revolving which we did not notice until quite low down, much too low to be able to dive and set it going again." Tom escaped the crash uninjured. His instructor suffered cuts to his face and legs. Tom notes, "The engine was torn away altogether and the rest of the machine I think could have been used for matchwood." Certainly not the words a worried parent wants to hear. Tom got three days leave to recuperate.

Two weeks later he passes on a message that his friend George has had an airborne fire.

Then in June, from Scotland he writes, "Up here it is well nigh impossible to land without crashing because there are mountains on every side."

His first mention of a girl comes in his St. Patrick's Day letter. It appears that May Tyrrel has written. He is kicking himself for not having visited her when he had been at home.

The approaching month-end has him anxious to get aboard his new machine. He excites, "It is the fastest machine yet brought out by the British and is indeed a wonderful machine which mounts four guns so you can see it is quite well armed."

The same letter reveals that he has been issued a gas mask and been required to take a gas course where helmeted participants pass through a room filled with chlorine gas. Through it all he assures his dad that he won't need the mask anyway, as he will be far from the frontline trenches.

Spring in Chester

April brings the warmer weather and a trip to historic Chester where he can rent a boat for nine pence an hour. Despite his many hours of leisure, he assures his mother that the English girls do not compare with the Canadians and he has nothing to do with them. In the next paragraph he longs for August 18 so that he can get into action.

continued on page 10