



Canada's Forgotten War Babies

Part Two

by Jacqueline
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Some
Canadian
soldiers
left behind
a second
family.

In the first installment I introduced one of the most contentious social issues surrounding Canada's participation in the Second World War: the thousands of abandoned and illegitimate offspring that our servicemen fathered abroad.

Today these war "babies" are in or nearing their sixties and a good number are determined to solve the mystery of their origins and are actively engaged in searching for their Canadian roots. Many appreciate the fact that there is little time left and, as a result, their firmness and resolve have only grown more intense. In recent years, groups of elderly veterans re-visiting Europe have been gently approached by middle-aged people bearing placards that read: "Are you my father?"

There are virtually no formal organizations or registries to assist these individuals, the products of brief wartime romances. On continental Europe, only Holland has an organization to help search. Vereniging Bevrijdingskinderen (Association of Liberation Children) was founded in 1984. Britain's ODAC (Our Dads are Canadian) also helps wartime offspring find ex-servicemen fathers. Carol Wilson of Manchester founded the group when she was in the process of attempting to locate her own birth father.

Inevitably, vague and sometimes erroneous information are some of the fundamental barriers confronting war children engaged in trying to uncover their paternal lineage. For example, one British woman discovered when she was in her early thirties that her father, a Canadian soldier, had been named William Green. This was all the information she had at her disposal, and because the name is so ordinary it was like searching for a proverbial needle in a haystack. She wrote to at least 60 Canadians named William Green, hoping desperately that one of her letters might reach the appropriate man. Predictably, she never received a response and continues searching.

Carol Wilson of ODAC was confronted with a similar dilemma. She grew up thinking her stepfather was her dad, but when she was 15, she saw her birth certificate for the first time. The name of her father had not been filled in because, her mother acknowledged, he was a Canadian soldier who had left following the war. After her mother's death, Wilson's aunt gave her a photograph of her father and mother on a beach near the popular resort of Blackpool. Her mother had been so secretive about her father that she had burned all of her pictures of him and refused to say anything about his origins or whereabouts.

Wilson's personal quest came to a bittersweet end in 1996, when she learned that her father was deceased. Undaunted,



Celebrating liberation in Harderwijk, Netherlands, April 18, 1945.

she travelled to Canada to meet her paternal relatives and to acquire a sense of closure after years of searching. She also went on Canadian television to highlight the plight of others in her situation and to lobby the Canadian government for a relaxation of its rigid privacy laws. Canadian officials had severely restricted Wilson's ability to search by denying her written requests for information. "They make us feel like we're the guilty party, and we're really not," she said at the time. "We're the innocent ones."

BUREAUCRATIC NIGHTMARE

For decades Canadian privacy laws have remained the leading source of frustration for war children in search of their fathers. Like American GIs, Canadian servicemen left a legacy of children born to women overseas. Unlike GI children, those of Canadian veterans often have little chance of finding out who their fathers are. A mass of bureaucratic red tape in Canada, including far-reaching privacy laws, prevents them from gaining access to records.

Here, the law does not recognize wartime offspring living overseas or grant them equal rights with their Canadian half-siblings. Specifically, the right to request information under both the Privacy Act and the Access to Information Act is limited to Canadian citizens and permanent residents; these acts do not give any particular status to war children. They are essentially regarded in the same manner as any other foreign citizen or non-relative when they attempt to access information pertaining to their biological fathers through the National Archives of Canada.

Another problem inherent with the Canadian Privacy Act is that it restricts the release of information on Canadian soldiers until 20 years after their death. The only exception to this is when the veteran being sought gives his written permission.

For people such as Carol Wilson, the regulation is totally unacceptable. "We're not trying to cause any problems," said Wilson. "We're just trying to find out who we are." She questions why war children should have to wait until they are around 80 years old and their fathers are long dead

before they can finally discover their roots. By then it will be decades too late!

Some officials at the Privacy Commission in Ottawa have argued they would like to assist the war children and that they can sympathize with their situation. But they stress the information probably wouldn't be available even if the Privacy Act wasn't in place, and that government agencies aren't in the business of finding people.

According to Bill Wood, head of army personnel records at the National Archives, his department handles dozens of requests per year from people looking for relatives and friends. He maintains that because the archives hold the records of over 4 million veterans and public servants, he needs to be given sufficient information before he can even begin searching.

Many war children perceive these types of excuses as almost ludicrous and contend that the Privacy Act is being used as a scapegoat by an embarrassed Canadian government and some veterans who still refuse to take any type of moral responsibility. Indeed, a government official who decided whether service records should be made available to people searching for relatives once told an *Edmonton Journal* reporter that care is taken that no Canadian veteran or his family should have their privacy compromised by the "unwelcome appearance of an illegitimate son or daughter."

Finally, several advocacy groups have complained that there is no coherent policy to deal with a war child's request for information from the National Archives, Military Personnel Unit. It appears that responses are dealt with on an individual basis and no set policy or guideline exists. War children are unaware of their rights and may therefore walk away from an inquiry when faced with a negative response. For the time being, their goal is to force the National Archives, Military Personnel Unit, to provide a detailed set of policy guidelines to all war children upon inquiry.

In the short term, these activists want the Canadian government to open up the files for certain individual cases where proof of paternity or even marriage can be provided. Ultimately, they are fighting for the government to open up

Personnel of the Canadian Red Cross look after babies of Canadian war brides en route to Canada. (DEPT. OF NATIONAL DEFENCE COLLECTION)



the files to all inquiries so that all war children can find their Canadian fathers before it is too late.

AN UNFORGETTABLE CHRISTMAS EVE

Project Roots, an international non-profit group, is now widely considered to be the most prominent organization advocating on behalf of the war children. Founded in 1980 by Lloyd and Olga Rains, it is based in Haarlem, the Netherlands. Project Roots is, in essence, a unique humanitarian "detective agency" that has been enormously successful in locating the long-lost Canadian fathers of British and European war children.

Remarkably it all started with a whirlwind romance nearly 60 years ago. Private Lloyd Rains and his comrades of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry were unwinding after courageously and determinedly participating in the liberation of the Netherlands. Before long Rains came across a petite and attractive Dutch girl named Olga Trestorff. The Canadians would arrange social dances, and it was at one of these occasions that the pair had their first encounter. Despite a few obvious cultural disparities, the young couple immediately fell in love and they were married in Olga's hometown of Haarlem on Christmas Eve 1945.

As a war bride, Olga acknowledges that hers was a joyful experience; she wasn't subjected to the all-consuming shame or relentless heartache shared by many Dutch women of her generation. It wasn't until much later, in 1980, that she had an awakening to their misery. The Rains first became aware of the war children's plight while on a return trip to Holland to mark the 35th anniversary of the end of World War II. As they were taking part in a parade of Canadian veterans, they noticed Dutch men and women — then in their mid-thirties — holding signs saying, "Where are you daddy?"

Their curiosity sparked, Lloyd and Olga Rains searched out some of the sign-bearers. They were extremely touched by this cohort of Dutch liberation children, by their deep turmoil and by their stories of a lifetime spent in a frustrating quest for the Canadian side to their identity. From such inauspicious beginnings, Olga and Lloyd launched what would gradually evolve into Project Roots. After a number of highly successful father-child reunions in the early 1980s, their reputation began to spread internationally and the Rains suddenly found themselves giving media interviews and vigorously spearheading government lobbying efforts.

The couple eventually returned to the Netherlands in 1992, after spending the majority of their lives in Ontario. Over the past 25 years their diligent efforts have been responsible for reuniting approximately 4000 adult war children with their aging fathers in Canada. Even if the veteran has passed away, a war child sometimes gains an extended family. Olga says that success brings mixed reaction, especially from the fathers. A handful of fathers completely reject their wartime offspring. Others, after they and their wives come to terms with the initial shock, are warmhearted and welcoming.

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One veteran who refused to acknowledge his daughter from a wartime liaison was callous enough to appoint a lawyer after Project Roots attempted to contact him. The lawyer requested on behalf of his client that the organization not write or phone him anymore. According to the lawyer, his client's health had been poor and he was not prepared for this "intrusion" into his life. In contrast, a British war child who successfully traced his Canadian lineage recently made the journey to New Brunswick to meet his extended family for the first time; the reception he received moved him to tears. He was treated to a surprise welcome from the whole clan, about 200 relatives in total! There was even a piper in full regalia.

The Rains emphasize that the people they assist are not searching for their fathers with an ulterior motive or for monetary reward, nor do they wish to extract revenge on their paternal families or on the Canadian government. "The Canadian war babies are not looking for monetary gains at all; they are looking for their Canadian roots and their biological fathers. Most of the war 'babies' are better off than their fathers," asserted Olga.

Without a doubt, after six decades most war children have accepted the circumstances of their birth and do not condemn either parent for what occurred. What genuinely motivates them is a sensation of loss or emptiness, as though there is an essential piece of their selfhood missing. "If you are young and you dream about your father, it's a blank hole," said one war child who located her Canadian birth father after thirty years of searching. "But now you can fill it in. You have a photograph of him. The important thing is that I know my roots."

HIS FATHER'S EYES

Although many would argue the issue is still being swept under the carpet, there is evidence that public awareness has been raised to some degree by several high profile cases involving the controversial war children.

Music fans around the world were stunned and intrigued when, in 1998,



For Eric Clapton, knowing who his father was provided emotional closure after decades of pain.

legendary rock blues guitarist Eric Clapton revealed that he had managed to pin down his Canadian origins. The result of a brief encounter between 16-year-old Patricia Clapton and Edward Fryer, a 24-year-old Canadian soldier stationed in England during the Second World War, Eric Clapton was raised by his grandparents near London. Until he was nine years old, the young Clapton was led to believe that his grandparents were his parents. He was also told that his mother was his older sister.

When he discovered the truth about his parents, he became withdrawn and turned to the guitar as an outlet for his confusion. At an early age, he developed an affinity for the poignant sounds of the Mississippi delta blues. By 1965, he had already achieved legendary status as a guitarist; unfortunately, as his fame spread the talented Clapton repeatedly found himself struggling to overcome issues of drug addiction and alcoholism.

Apparently Fryer's name was all that the musician knew for certain regarding his natural father until he received a telephone call at his home in England. A Canadian entertainment reporter had uncovered information that Fryer, following the war and his return to North America, led a rather nomadic existence. His life had been filled with wine, women, song and other children before dying in

a North York veterans' hospital in 1985. Fryer was unaware that he was the father of one of the most influential guitarists in rock history. Or if he was aware, he never mentioned it.

For Clapton — who had penned the lyrics "How did I get here? When will all my hopes arrive? When I look in my father's eyes" — it provided emotional closure after decades of pain. He was delighted to learn that many of his traits mirror those of his biological father, including an aptitude for music. Edward Fryer had left home at 14, learned to play piano and made a living in Montreal bars. As a soldier during the war, he earned extra money playing the piano in British pubs.

"I had heard that he was a very, very conservative guy, a banker in Montreal," Clapton told an interviewer. "I thought 'where do I come from, if it's not genetic?' This desire to play and have fun and chase women is all me? So it's kind of nice to know that some of this stuff got handed on."

Just as with thousands of less prominent war children, connecting with his Canadian family allowed Clapton to release emotions that he had kept bottled up his entire life. "That denial, that suit of armor that denial is so powerful," he said. "I put something in place at a very early age which I think is still there, which when anytime anyone would mention my father I would just immediately go, 'no it doesn't matter to me, I'm fine with that.' And it was just so secure."

According to Clapton he is feeling more optimistic today than he ever has in his life. His drug and alcohol issues are clearly under control and his intuitive devotion to music continues to inspire him. Sadly, for thousands of other war children the genetic link to their inner demons and greatest talents could forever remain a mystery.



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