

Odyssey:

Coming of Age in World War II

**Author of
"Tootosch The Thunderer"**

James Baker, MDCM

edited by Suzanne James

Tootosch, The Thunderer

God of the Sun, inhabitant of skies
Where flash the forked lightning's jagged flames
From storm clouds black and fiercely ominous;
God of the Ravens, mighty thunderer.
Tootosch, thy totem lives and breathes again.
Once more thy lightning's flash and thunder's roll
Strike terror to the craven hearts beneath.

Thine eyes dart flames, destroying those whose deeds
have earned fly wrath. Amidst the raging storm
Thou came and brought thy fledgling brood with thee.
On wings of fire, fly they now with me
And sing that Cataclysmic song of thine,
The chant of death that only they can sing,
For that they live and, dying, live anew
in those who surely follow after them.

Each night they'll wing their certain way
Amidst the stars that thou dost call thine own
And bring thy curse unto their enemy.
Thy clutch will be within their curving bulls
The eggs of death, that thou didst prophesy
Would burn the tents and scatter pestilence
O'er all the land where dwell the hated race,
Will nightly rain upon their naked beads.
And we who live and are thy savage brood
Desire only this, one boon, of thee,
A warrior's death, a warrior's home in eternity.

Flight Sergeant (Navigator) James R. Baker
January 1945, No. 426 (Thunderbird) Squadron
RCAF Station Linton-on-Ouse



“ODYSSEY: COMING OF AGE IN WWII”

by Dr. James Baker

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

This book is a compilation of letters written by the author – Dr. James Baker, (principally) to his parents during World War II. He joined the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry in September 1939, went Overseas with them that December and served with them as an ordinary Private until mid-1942, at which time he transferred to the Royal Canadian Air Force. He ended the war as a Navigator-Bombardier on heavy bombers, flying with the Thunderbird Squadron of the 6th Canadian Group. He flew a total of twenty-three bombing raids over Europe by V-E Day. He then volunteered for duty with the Canadian contingent which was to join the Americans in the bombing of Japan, but V-J day ended WWII while he was still in Canada training for his new mission. So these letters cover the entire period of WWII: from September 1939 to January 1946.

TWO IMPORTANT FACTS OF INTEREST TO THE PUBLIC

There is very little “blood `n guts” of war in these letter – although there is enough to satisfy the reader who desires the vicarious thrill of reading of someone else’s adventures. Rather, the reader experiences Wartime England through the eyes of a native, young man who was privileged to live among the people (both the small and the great) as few who served in England at that time were able to do. This book records his observations, his thoughts, his dreams, and his reactions to the wartime-life flowing all about him.

WHY DID I WRITE THE BOOK?

I did not “write” the book: rather, the book wrote itself since it is a series of letters to loved one at “home”. My daughter – Suzanne, compiled and annotated them to produce the book you now hold in your hands.

WHAT DO I WANT PEOPLE TO “TAKE AWAY” FROM READING MY BOOK

I want people to recognize and appreciate the greatness of the ordinary British men and women who stood Steadfast when their world seemed to be crumbling into dust all about them. It was their steadfastness throughout the years 1939 to 1943 which saved our Canadian and American way of life, for they held the Nazi war-machine at bay until the might of America could be mobilized to crush the tyranny threatening to overwhelm the world. I want to re-

mind everyone – but more particularly the present generation of young people, of the great debt we owe to the British people. We should never forget their quiet courage in the face of seemingly overwhelming might and their refusal to “buckle under” to the threats that faced them. They were the “Horatios” who held the bridge” for all of us during those dark years.

WHAT DO I WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW ABOUT MYSELF

I am just an ordinary citizen who was privileged to observe and participate however marginally, in great events. After the war I – like so many of my contemporaries, was able to complete my education through the Veteran’s programme for Service men and women. I graduated as a Doctor from Dalhousie University in Halifax N.S. in 1953 and rejoined the RCAF as a Medical Officer. I became a ‘Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada’ in 1964 and continued to practise my specialty of General Surgery in the Canadian Armed Forces until I “retired” in 1972 as a Wing Commander (Lt. Col. in the amalgamated Forces). Since that retirement, I continued to practise my specialty in both Canada and Saudi Arabia until my final retirement to my seaside home in Victoria B.C. in 1984. I am now fully retired from the practise of medicine – but not from the practise of life: I live quietly with my wife of fifty seven years with all of our four children about us – content to “bask in the liquid sunshine of this ‘Little Eden’ on the West Coast”.

AUTHOR’S PREFACE

Readers of this ‘Odyssey’ will learn – early on, that I’d always hoped that someday these WWII letters would be published as a book. The book I visualized would have been compiled primarily for the enjoyment of my immediate family in an attempt to answer the question – “What did you do in the War, Dad?” But as work progressed, it became apparent that these descriptions of life in war-torn England might appeal to readers other than family. Accordingly, my scope was broadened to reach that wider audience.

I had forgotten the excitement of those days, I had forgotten how explicit these letters were in their

descriptions of life in England during WWII, I had forgotten the details of the many adventures of a naive, brash Canadian teen-ager caught up – however peripherally, in great occasions amidst both famous and not so famous people. There is very little “Blood and Guts” in these letters, and two reasons for this omission. For the most part, these letters were written to my parents who had to be shielded from such realities. The second reason is more basic: I was always conscious of the presence of the censors whose dark visages hovered threateningly over my shoulder as I wrote. So there are no explicit descriptions of Army maneuvers while I was in the Army, nor any descriptions of air operations over Europe once I reached the Squadron. However, the reader may be able to sense the darker undercurrents of the war in the letters and to realize that there WERE episodes which could be characterized as “SHEER TERROR”, but these were few and far between and did little to disturb the even tenor of my days. In fact, as I have re-read these letters in the quiet of my retirement, I have come to realize how essentially peaceful was my war even though I served through it all – from Sept. `39 to VE Day and beyond: including three crossings of the wartime Atlantic and twentythree air operations over Europe.

This book owes its existence solely to the perseverance of my younger daughter Suzanne. She it was who found-out about the letters – a legacy from her grandmother, my mother. “Thank God, they had been sorted as to dates!” But after taking over a month to simply read the first two years of letters she began to type them – even though some were barely legible, she re-typed the corrections, she chose and annotated the photographs, she contacted the publisher and awoke his interest, she compiled the press releases, she absolutely ‘mothered’ the book to its completion: t’was a monumental task and I owe her a great debt of gratitude. I know the publication of this book will give both her and myself great satisfaction: for t’is a job “well-done!”

I would have the reader know that I have found great fulfillment in that my boyhood dream has become a reality in ‘the evening’ of my life. It has brought me joy to publically acknowledge my great admiration and love for England and the English people. I wish you – the reader, that same joy when you reach the last page of my Odyssey. I hope you experience that ‘glow of happiness’ which comes at the end of a ‘good read’: for what more could an author ask?

FOREWORD

by Donald Senese Professor of Russian History at the University of Victoria

I was first made aware of this remarkable collection by Suzanne James – Dr. Baker’s daughter, who was attending my class in Soviet History at the University of Victoria and who had just begun transcribing her father’s wartime letters for publication. She showed me a letter which contained details of Lord Beaverbrook’s 1941 mission to Russia and his conversation with Joseph Stalin – details which were recounted to Jim by Lady Astor, and which shed light on the personality and policies of the Soviet dictator. I at once asked for permission to read the entire collection in the hope of uncovering a treasure trove of such “scholarly finds”. What I found instead was the story of a young man’s coming of age in the crucible of war, a story set against a perceptive and beautifully written account of wartime Britain.

The letters – mostly written to Jim’s parents in White Rock, B.C., describe his military experience from his enlistment in the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry in September 1939 to the eve of his participation in the final bombing campaigns against Germany in 1944-45. The rigours of training in both Canada and England are described in detail as is the tedium of army life which he shared with tens of thousands of other Canadian volunteers who had come to England in 1940 to repel an expected German invasion and instead found themselves relegated to years of garrison duty before they could join in the European campaigns of 1943-45. It was this tedium as much as his longfelt ambition to fly that led Jim to transfer to the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1942 and to begin training again – this time as a pilot and navigator.

The most vivid images in these letters however, are not about training or military life, but about wartime England and its people. His descriptions of the Blitz – the German terror-bombing of British cities in 1940-41, form one of the best personal accounts of that terrible episode that I have ever read. They combine vivid eye-witness testimony of the destructive power of the German attack with moving tributes to the courage and spirit of those who suffered under it. The same sensitivity and descriptive power are evident in his descriptions of the numerous friends and acquaintances he met in England during the war, people ranging from ordinary citizens in whose homes he was billeted, to well-known figures in the literary, artistic, journalistic and political life of the country.

In one of his very first letters to his mother, Jim asked her to be sure to save all his letters. Other com-

ments scattered through the correspondence make it clear that at the time, he was looking forward to a career in either writing or journalism: but this was not to be. He found his post-war calling in Medicine. However, no one reading these letters today can doubt that - had he chosen to carry through with his original intention, he would have been an outstanding writer.

Suzanne (Baker) James

My name is Suzanne (Baker) James. I was born in 1952 in Halifax Nova Scotia but I now reside in Metchosin – or a suburb of Victoria British Columbia. I am married with four sons who are now young men – my younger twins are now the age my father was when he joined the PPCLI in 1939! During the past two years, all my spare time has been taken up with the preparation of my father's book for publication. My family's forbearance is gratefully acknowledged for they did not "see" very much of me during that period.

During WWII, my father spent the entire war in what is now known as the 'Canadian Armed Forces' in England, minus a few months in 1943 which were spent in Canada training for aircrew. He joined the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry in Sept. 1939 and went overseas with them in the 2nd Canadian Contingent which landed in Scotland Dec. 30th. The PPCLI spent the years 1940-43 as garrison troops in England – an extremely boring period for a young private anxious to prove his mettle in battle so, in '42 he transferred to the Royal Canadian Air Force as potential air crew: came back to Canada and eventually graduated as a Navigator/Bombardier (Observer). He was again posted to England and ended the war on 426 Thunderbird Squadron in the RCAF 6th Bomber Group in Yorkshire as a commissioned officer with twenty-three operational missions to his credit.

During the war years, my father wrote well over five hundred letters – mostly to his mother who not only saved but passed them on to 'me' in her will. These have since been assembled into a book entitled "Odyssey: Coming of Age in WWII" which is an intensely interesting read as my father was also a keen 'observer' of life all about him. His descriptions of the war's effect upon the ordinary British people amongst whom he was living, provide a unique insight into a facet of the war which has never been described to my knowledge. My father was also a poet, and his poems provide a glimpse into the artistic soul of a young man. All in all, this book provides a valuable and rare record of those "wasted" years from 1939-43 before Canadian troops finally "went into

action". Of course by that time, my father had "Crossed his Rubicon" and embraced the RCAF as his chosen field of action and though his descriptions of aircrew training and operations are sparse or "bare bones" in style (as had to be), one can readily read that he was happy and felt fulfilled at last. Yes! there were "moments of terror" from time to time, but they are lightly passed over and do not seem to disturb the even tenor of his life unduly.

In these letters (or book), Dad describes a vast panorama of life in wartime England: life, death, friends, enemies, authority, self-doubt, travel, travel destinations, churches, steeples, music, concerts, birds, famous and not-so-famous landmarks – cities, towns, villages and hamlets either intact or scarred by bombs, euphoria, loneliness, flowers, weather, dances, literature, educational experiences of all kinds, ambulances, hospitals, military training, food, the Blitzkrieg, follow up of sporadic bombings, sentry duty on lonely outposts, casualties in cities or on the plains but above all, he describes the people he met – both the high & the low born; the 'tinkers, tailors, publicans and sinners' all form grist for his mill and subjects for his pen. T's is most readable and one regrets it has to come to an end but as Alice said,

"You cannot read past the end or it would start all over again!" This then is my Dad's journey through the entire period of WWII: his 'coming of age'.

Odyssey: Coming of Age in World War 11

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THESE THINGS HE LOVED

The blue wood smoke from winter fires curling upward through the frosty air as – pail in hand, he trudged through crunching snow down to the barn in that half-light before the winter's dawn. The rhythmic jingling of harness chains when the unhitching's done and tired horses – aching to be gone to pasture where they cool their sweaty sides by rolling in the fragrant grass, stamped their feet and nuzzled in the green-grown water trough.

The first faint tinkle of ol' Bessie's bell as home she led the herd in summer's dusk along the winding path from out the dingle where grass grew greener – sweeter than elsewhere, for that was where the brawly brook ran through.

The hurrying, bustling days of harvest time when golden wheat stretched – first in swinging waves as far as eye could see – and then, the fields were dotted oer with stooks and then – e're long, the busy hum of threshers filled the air.

All those long harvest days – up e're the sun had thrown it's light upon the sleeping world to work right through the blazing heat of noon, on through the dusk – and if the moon were full, into the night: for threshing must be done before the sky turned gray and sent slow down the first faint fluttering flakes of fairy snow.

These things and hundreds more he loved They were his world and he – content to live and let others live as they saw fit, was happy.

Where is he now? This happy boy who yet was not a boy?

He fast grew up and almost overnight became a man – for when one harvest came, a blacker cloud o'ercast the autumn sky and then a spectre – grimly purposeful, began to reap a harvest yet unripe.

A swath of men – brave men in pride of youth, fell thick and fast before that flashing scythe: and his was one of those whose life was reaped.

Down from the white-traced sky he fluttered – like the blue wood-grouse he had so often shot at home among the beechwoods on the hill. "Killed in Action" thus the cable read: but letters later came and told the tale.

How his Squadron – out upon a fighter sweep oer war-torn France, had found a flock of Huns and though out-numbered, had dived straight in. How – in the melee, he – to save another, had sacrificed his life and fell inflames.

He gave his all that we at home might live, to keep the things that he so deeply loved.

But we (in blindness) see not the things he saw: we take them for our natural heritage and rarely think of those who fought to keep them safe for us. Let us remember them: that one and all the thousands more like him who day by day gave more to us by far than we could ever hope to give to them.

We cannot give our lives perhaps, but we at least can give our bodies and our minds to tasks the nation now demands of us. Let's give ourselves as freely as they gave. Let not the thought of 'self' besmirch the soul – they did not think of self why then should we?