

On the Road to VE Day

- The Final Six Months from the Diaries of Isabella and George Smithⁱ

By: Gina Heinbockel-Bolik

6 December 1944 - St Nicholas Day

Dear Diary,

The Christmas season is once again upon us and there is still no end to this dreaded war. The invasion of France began six months ago but we are still waiting for everything to be over.

I have not heard anything from George in weeks. Some of the other wives and mothers like Betty Floody and Kate Wallace, whom I see occasionally at the next of kin gatherings, said very much the same. Mail has slowed down for all, it seems. I wonder if this means that my letters and my Christmas parcel are equally slow to arrive. Maybe early October was too late?

Peter found some candy in his boot this morning, a tradition from the old country my parents kept up and I try to keep too. It will be his third Christmas already. Will he ever celebrate with his dad?

6 December 1944

Dear Belle,

Another Christmas is upon us, my fourth outside of Canada and my third in this godforsaken camp. Will I ever get to see our son? I missed so many firsts already, his first steps, his first words, his first birthday, his first Christmas... With every additional year I am stuck here, the list just keeps getting longer. I hope I will be home in time for his first day of school... Sorry, Belle, of course I also missed out on our first, second third and fourth wedding anniversary. Maybe I will make it in time for our fifth. Maybe we can spend it in Algonquin Park, with any luck the maples will have started to turn colours. I know how much you love the fall colours.

No colours here, just pine trees, they do not mind the sandy soil on which the camp is built.

8 December 1944

Dear Belle,

No mail from home in weeks, are you too busy to write? Or do they refuse to transport mail these days? What did arrive today was the traditional Christmas card from Prime Minister Mackenzie King. It says we will receive a small, personal parcel and some books for all in the camp to share. Things must be bad at home. Last year they sent us each a bowl, a sizable plum

pudding, and some toiletries like a toothbrush and shaving soap. For the collective parcel, we received cooking utensils, hard candy and gramophone records. Or are they anticipating the war to be over any time soon and telling us that we have no need for such things anymore? One can only hope, but some days hope is in short supply around here...

11 December 1944

Dear Diary

Spent another evening with our neighbourhood volunteer group packing parcels to be sent overseas. It started to snow as I walked home. I love how the flurries swirl around the lamp post in front of the house. They are forecasting a few inches. Maybe it will be a nice white Christmas this year. I wonder if George has snow already. Hopefully he got the parcel I sent two months ago, those knitted socks and mittens will keep him warm.

12 December 1944

Dear Diary

What storm we had over the past 20 hours. They say we got over 22 inches. I am glad I was able to find a pair of winter boots for Peter last week. Shoes are hard to find these days. There was no way to get to work today. One streetcar even tipped over, and they called for volunteers to help clear the streetcar tracks. I spent much of the afternoon trying to clear the path to our coal chute as we are waiting for a delivery. Ethel was trying to help but at her age, she really should not shovel snow. George would never forgive me if anything happened to her.

23 December 1944

Dear Belle

Today our spirits were lifted a bit, despite the cold and bleak mood, as the Christmas parcels from the Red Cross came through. Food rations have been reduced for so long and that dark German bread is not to my taste. But of course you eat just about anything when you are hungry. The parcel contained the following items:

Can of Turkey, can of honey, can of butter, can of cheese, can of deviled ham, can of Vienna sausage, can of cherries, can of jam, can of nuts, can of candy, can of plum pudding, pack of dates,

pack of tea, box of bouillon cubes, fruits bars, a wash rag, a pipe, a pack of pipe tobacco, 3 packs of cigarettes, 4 packs of gum, a deck of cards, a game and two pictures.

Tony, a fairly new addition to our camp, was a chef before the war and he will create a nice dinner. We are a lucky bunch to have him. The boys in my room always pool their food to get a better meal and they happily do the dishes or help with food preparation in return.

25 December 1944

Dear Belle,

It snowed overnight, about 6 inches, which makes the camp look peaceful. But Christmas was less festive this year than in the past. Some of the guys made decorations out of tin which there is still an abundance of, even with the reduced number of Red Cross parcels. Our camp choir got together to sing and we could hear the songs from the other compounds. The Americans performed Handel's Messiah, we sang Auld Lang Syne among others. For dinner Tony cooked up the contents of our Christmas parcel and he gave the dishes some fancy names. Imagine "Dinde Roti aux Chipolata avec Pommes Frites" and "Pêts de Nonnes aux cerises". Can you tell that he is from Montreal?

25 December 1944 - Christmas Day

Dear Diary,

I think I will remember this Christmas for a while. We still have all that snow on the ground, which makes for such a peaceful mood - ah peace, how I yearn for thee - There weren't many presents under the tree this year. Ethel loved the scarf I had bought for her and Peter played with his wooden toys for much of the day. When I opened the front door this morning, I almost stumbled over a wooden sled that had been put on our front porch. A note said "Merry Christmas, Peter." While I was still contemplating who may have dropped this off, I noticed a letter peeking out of the mail box. A Christmas card from Mr. Davis who lives a few houses down across the street. He said he made the sled for Peter. When I told Ethel, she suggested that we should invite Mr. Davis for dinner since he was a widower and both his sons were serving with the air force and would not be home. He had only moved to our street last spring, so I do not know him well but clearly Ethel had talked to him. I grabbed Peter, put him on the sled and walked over to thank Mr. Davis for his gift. He told me that he liked to work with wood and that making the sled had kept him busy. When I asked if he wanted to join us for our Christmas dinner, he was a bit

hesitant at first, but then he agreed, saying that it would be nice to have company. He arrived later in the afternoon and brought a bottle of French wine and two lovely lavender soap bars, one for Ethel and one for me. I have not had wine in so long. Mr. Davis is a veteran of the First World War, we found out, and his one son is an instructor at RCAF Station Rivers in Manitoba while the other is a pilot with 419 Squadron. It was a lovely way to spend Christmas. I hate to admit it, but for a short while life seemed almost normal again. But now as I write this, I wonder what Christmas was like for George, and I feel a bit guilty.

1 January 1945

Dear Belle,

The mood in camp is somber as we enter yet another year. We hear that a big German offensive in Belgium failed. How much longer will this go on?

1 January 1945 - New Year's Day

Dear Diary

We spent New Year's Eve with the Andersons next door. They had invited about 20 neighbours. William Davis was there too and I am beginning to wonder how well Ethel knows him. Maybe the Christmas dinner invitation had been her plan all along. Ah, good old Ethel.

2 January 1945

Dear Diary,

The results of yesterday's municipal elections were announced and Robert Saunders was elected mayor. I am a bit surprised as he is only 41 years old and many thought Mayor Conboy had handled the snow storm really well. I guess some people wanted change as Saunders had a large majority.

5 January 1945

Dear Belle,

Looks like this winter is going to be just like the last ones. There is a lot of snow on the ground and temperatures have been below freezing. The frozen fire pond serves as a skating rink once again. If we are still here in the summer - I sure hope not - please send skates in the fall.

12 January 1945

Dear Belle,

Your Christmas parcel finally arrived. Thank you for the socks and mittens. It has been cold here the last few days. I cannot believe how much Peter has grown, and to think that the picture is already four months old. You look as lovely as I remember you. Can hardly wait to take you in my arms again one day.

17 January 1945

Dear Belle,

Rumours are spreading in the camp that the Russian army is moving west. There is growing unease amongst the Kriegies as we speculate what will happen when the Russians reach our camp. Will the German leave us behind? Will they use us for some bargain? Some have heard that the Russian do not treat prisoners of war well, rather they see them as traitors. Who knows what liberation means to them. Some of us decided to make preparations since there is not much else to do these days. We try to build simple sleds and sew backpacks to carry extra stuff in case we get marched out.

26 January 1945

Dear Belle,

This morning we heard some shelling in the distance. Over the past few days we have also spotted some Russian planes flying overhead, spotters we think. A clear indicator that the Russians are on the move and making good ground. Camp guards are nervous but no word.

27 January 1945

Dear Belle,

This evening we were told to pack and be ready to march out of the camp within the hour. The Kommandant claims it is to keep us safe from the Bolsheviks. So they will evacuate us rather than leaving us behind. Terribly cold day, snowing. We scrambled to get dressed for the march and to pack our sparse belongings. There is more than anyone can carry. Hard to believe. So

we need to make choices. Warm clothes and food for sure. Still have some cigarettes, our unofficial currency. I kept to trade for other things. Some suggest keeping them to trade with the Germans. I decided to part with some in order to keep my diary. Not sure if the Germans have much to trade these days. Our rooms are in shambles as the boys took whatever they could use to make more sleds. Now waiting...

28 January 1945

Guards kept delaying march several times. Final call came at 2:30 in the morning. Were told to grab Red + parcel at camp exit. Many could not carry a full parcel. Boxes were opened and many things left behind, such waste. Our room shares sled, took turns to pull. Walked for over four hours, stopped in Halbau. Most food too frozen to eat. Lots of discarded items along the side of the road. Told we were halfway to night rest in Freiwaldau. Village too small to house us. Moved on to Leippa. Some of us found room in large barn, others slept in fields around it.

29 January 1945

Marched on. Snowed the whole day. Reached town of Muskau in the evening, over 36 hours on the road. Things a bit better. Organized quarters for us. Scattered all over town in whichever buildings can shelter people. Boys from my room and I billet in pottery. Got soup and some food. Told we would stay for a couple of days before moving to Spremberg.

1 February 1945

Were told this afternoon to prepare to walk out this evening. Weather improved, sleds soon will be of no use, guys try to barter for something with wheels. Tony got us a pram, smaller though.

2 February 1945

Left Muskau late last night. Had to leave John behind, too sick to walk. Snow so wet. Made it to Spremberg by mid-day, housed in barracks of reserve army division. Got hot food and warm water to wash. Soon on the move again to train station. Were told our final destination, a navy camp in northern Germany.

4 February 1945

Finally arrived at new camp. No beds, just wood shavings. So tired.

5 February 1945

Dear Belle,

What an ordeal this was. I finally have time to write in more detail. We arrived here late in the afternoon yesterday but had to stand in the rain in front of the camp for hours as the guards had been ordered to search each one of us before we could enter. At Spremberg about 45 of us were put into rail cars meant for six horses or cattle, no room to lie down. The journey took two days with no food and little water. Train stopped a couple of times which was good as the rail cars had no toilets. Our train ride ended in Tarmstedt but then we still had to walk a couple of miles to the camp. It is called Marlag-Milag Nord and was once a camp for navy POWs. Not much here, little furniture, no food, no fuel. Rumours have it that the Navy POWs ransacked the place before they were evacuated. Well, we did not exactly leave our camp in move in condition either. Much of what we have is what we brought ourselves. We have come so far, yet home still seems no closer. Many guys are pretty sick, but you need not worry, all I have is some blisters on my feet.

27 February 1945

Dear Belle,

We finally got some furniture, steel cots for all and some utensils and our tin bashers have been busy making a new stove. Weather here is very different from Sagan, not as cold but wet and rainy. Clothes and blankets always feel clammy.

8 March 1945

Dear Belle,

Today was our first sunny day since we got here. We crammed together to sit outside with our backs to the barracks facing the sun. I closed my eyes and imagined I was sitting in our garden at home. Some days I fear that it will never happen.

18 March 1945

Dear Belle,

Happy Birthday. Another one that we are apart. Maybe five will be a charm for us. I am not sure if my card reached you in time. I sent it before Christmas.

18 March 1945

Dear Diary,

Today I celebrated my 27th birthday, another one without George. His birthday wishes arrived on time though. He had mailed the card in December. Some of the gals from work took me to The Imperial to watch *The Seventh Veil*. It was a nice change from knitting mittens or socks with Ethel and Florence in the evening.

25 March 1945

Dear Belle,

Today was a somber day as we marked the first anniversary of the escape and the murder of our comrades. The IBC organized a memorial service.

1 April 1945

Dear Belle,

This miserable war will come to end soon, I am certain. For the past two days and nights we saw countless planes flying overhead, and we heard bombs going off in the distance. Hamburg and Bremen must be the targets with their shipyards and oil refineries.

1 April 1945 - Easter Sunday

Dear Diary,

We made our way down to the lake to participate in the traditional Sunnyside Easter Parade. It came of no surprise that William accompanied us. We met up with a few other neighbours as we all took the Queen Street streetcar. It was a nice warm day and it was amazing to see how well dressed people were despite some of the shortages. William took us to the Savarin for lunch. What a treat that was.

9 April 1945

Dear Belle,

This afternoon we were told to prepare for another march. The guards handed us Red + parcels and we once again tried to pack as much as we could. Group Captain Wray tried to delay the march as we heard rumours that the British army was getting close. It is also quite foggy out there this evening. Part of the camp was already on the move when they were sent back to camp. One last night here, for good or bad.

10 April 1945

Left the camp this morning, marching north east. Were strafed somewhere on the road by our own forces, mistaking us for German troops. Some chaps were unlucky.

12 April 1945

Slow going, also got strafed again. Sleeping in fields.

12 April 1945

Dear Diary,

What sad news reached us this evening, when the radio reported the death of President Roosevelt. His funeral will be on Sunday. Truman is the new president. Hopefully it will not stall the end of the war.

15 April 1945

Reached the river Elbe, can see Hamburg up stream. Camped on the bank, waiting to cross.

16 April 1945

Crossed river but only walked a couple of miles today. Skirting Hamburg. Good idea with all the raids.

22 April 1945

Dear Diary,

With all the uncertainty these days, one came to an end today. The Toronto Maple Leafs won the Stanley Cup by beating Detroit 2:1. While I am not much of a Leafs fan despite having lived in this town now for over six years, I prefer them over Detroit.

23 April 1945

Reached Hamberge. Saw lots of POWs on the move. Slept in fields and barns. Looks like we might stay here for a while. Some guards are gone.

28 April 1945

Another short walk of 5 miles or so. Rainy but we get to stay in large barn, part of a large estate.

1 May 1945

Shelling is getting closer.

1 May 1945

Dear Diary,

The radio reported today that Hitler is dead. I pray this means that the war is over.

2 May 1945

British tank arrived at noon. We are FREE.

4 May 1945

Dear Diary,

The end must indeed be near as the Globe and Mail today describes all the plans for VE-Day. It says that the day following an announcement of victory in Europe will be a national holiday. Ethel read the article to me as I prepared supper. We both chuckled that the first thing announced was the closure of all liquor stores, wine shops and breweries on that day. There are a lot of plans for the larger parks in the city, including fireworks in the evening. I am sure people in every household are yearning for this day to come soon.

7 May 1945

Dear Diary,

It is official, the war is finally **OVER, OVER, OVER.**

I did not hear about the news until I got to work. At lunchtime Tip Top Tailors told us to leave work to join the street celebrations. It was a sunny day so I went downtown together with some of the gals from my shift. We bought flags and streamers. Tomorrow will be a national holiday. When I got home, Ethel, Peter and I hugged for a long time. I told Peter that it would not be long for his dad to come home. The look on his face told me that he was still too young to understand much of what had just happened.

8 May 1945

Dear Diary,

I am so tired. We spent much of the day outside, taking part in services and celebrations. The biggest crowds were on Bay Street and we heard the mayor speak in front of City Hall. Later we went to Trinity Park, the fireworks there were splendid. It is all still difficult to believe. I hope that George is well as I have not heard anything from him in months.

9 May 1945

Dear Belle,

I just arrived in England at RAF Station Oakington, near Cambridge. 24 of us were flown here by a Lane from 7 Sqn from an airfield outside of Lubeck. The flight took about three and a half hours. It made me realize how much I missed flying. I wish I had not wasted almost three years on the ground. Maybe they will keep me on. When we arrived here, they walked us to a hanger where they had music and a long row of tables with food and beverages. I had not seen so much food in years. After 1003 days I am looking forward to going to sleep tonight. I will see you soon, Belle.

15 May 1945

Dear Diary,

When I got home from work Ethel caught me right at the door with a big smile on her face. A telegram from the Casualties Officer had arrived informing us that George had safely arrived in England on 9 May. What a relief, life will soon return to the way it was.

17 May 1945

Dear Diary,

Another telegram arrived at the house today, this one from George telling us that he had arrived in England and was well. He also informed us that the RCAF was trying to get the men home but that it could take a while. No matter how long it will take, Peter and I will be here, waiting. What is another month or two after so many years?

ⁱ Isabella and George Smith are entirely fictitious characters. The diary entries however have been carefully researched and describe real events in a way people could have experienced and subsequently commemorated them to their diaries. The last name Smith was simply chosen because it is the most common surname in Canada and thus it is to symbolize a common experience.