

Review

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Philip LaGrandeur. *We Flew, We Fell, We Lived: Stories of RCAF Prisoners of War and Evaders 1939-1945*. St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing, St. Catharines, Ontario, 2006. ISBN 1-55125-110-8

John Reilly, my father's younger brother, joined the RCAF as a navigator early on in World War II. In 1944, his airplane was shot down over Nazi occupied Poland. John spent the remainder of the war in German prisoner-of-war camps. That was about as much as I or any other member of my family, including John's children, knew about his war experience. He rarely spoke of this period in life other than to acknowledge that it had occurred and had been an unpleasant experience to say the least. John was one of my favourite uncles but he was a troubled man in many respects. I now have no doubt that, in retrospect, John suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome.

In the summer of 2006, I participated in a special programme at the University of Winnipeg that drew together university and high school teachers of Canadian History to discuss new approaches to the teaching of that subject. Late one afternoon on a bus returning our group to Winnipeg from an excursion to Manitoba's historic Inter-Lake region, I found myself sitting beside Philip LaGrandeur, a high school teacher from Alberta. I casually asked Philip about his research on World War II that he had mentioned to me earlier in the week. Over the next several hours, Philip LaGrandeur fascinated me with a tale of research that reminded me of the vital importance of oral history and led me, on a personal level, to a much deeper understanding of my uncle John.

LaGrandeur was at the time completing a multi-year research project on the experiences of RCAF airmen who were shot down over enemy territory and detained in Nazi prisoner-of-war camps with airmen from other Allied countries. He explained that theirs was a largely unknown story, because few of the PoW's, like my uncle, ever spoke about life in the camps. Their traumatic experiences for the most part remained hidden from family and friends. This was not an unusual response to the stresses of war, as many studies have demonstrated. LaGrandeur had himself essentially stumbled upon this history. In 1998, a visiting Australian relative told LaGrandeur that his father was an Australian PoW airman who spent time in Stalag Luft III, the site of the Great Escape immortalized in the Hollywood movie of that title. The Australian relative asked LaGrandeur to keep an eye out for any Canadian PoWs who might have known his father. LaGrandeur knew nothing about the subject and could find precious little written on the history of Canadian airmen imprisoned in the camps. He was about to give up his

enquiries when he spotted a Remembrance Day interview in an Edmonton newspaper with a former Canadian airman who had participated in the Great Escape. LaGrandeur contacted the veteran who in a remarkable coincidence told him that he not only knew his relative's father, but in a camp that housed 10,500 men, had actually shared a room with him. Gordon King, the former Canadian airman in question, and LaGrandeur quickly developed a strong friendship. King became LaGrandeur's guide into what to that point was largely an unknown and private history of Canadian airmen.

King introduced LaGrandeur to many other ex-airmen PoWs who belonged to the Airmen's PoW organization, a quasi fraternal and support group of former prisoners. LaGrandeur recognized early in his research that for most of these men "their experiences were personal, and most of them were unaccustomed to talking about them. I had to ensure that I represented their stories accurately." (16) Myron Williams, reports the author, refused to tell his wife, family, or PoW friends about the torture he endured until "he disclosed dark details of his mistreatment at Dulag [transit camp] Luft for the first time during an interview at his home in Calgary in the summer of 2002. His revelation was so overwhelming that he collapsed before he could finish his account" (79).

LaGrandeur devoted the first years of his project to collecting from more traditional historical sources as much information as possible on life in the prison camps. During this time, he also identified men to be interviewed. He next arranged pre-interviews with these informants. LaGrandeur used these meetings to gather background information for his interviews, but perhaps most importantly to establish a trust between him and the men. When the interviewing began LaGrandeur observed that "initially, some of the men found it difficult to reveal their inner thoughts. Over time, they spoke freely, and some revealed things they must have thought they would take to their graves. I was surprised to learn that many of their wives did not know the full details of their stories" (17).

We Flew, We Fell, We Lived: Stories of RCAF Prisoners of War and Evaders, 1939-1945 is the end result of LaGrandeur's research project. The book is divided into three sections, the first of which is composed of a chapter on each of the prison camps and another on prisoner interrogations. The chapters are structured around biographies of men held in each of those camps. A briefer Section 2 is focused on the stories of airmen who avoided capture after being shot down over enemy territory and Section 3 details the forced marches the prisoners endured during the last years of the war. The biographies of the imprisoned airmen are fascinating. The harsh conditions the prisoners endured in the camps, especially in the final year of the war, are disturbing to read about. They included living in overcrowded camps where near starvation conditions and illness were always close at hand and harsh discipline a common practice of the officers and guards patrolling the camps. The forced marches of the prisoners from one camp

to another in advance of Allied forces near the end of the war proved to be particularly brutal for the prisoners. One of the worst such marches was forced upon the PoWs in the Bankau camp in Poland in January 1944. After first walking for several days, the prisoners were loaded into railway cars: “[T]he guards crowded 50 to 19 men into each carriage, leaving them insufficient room to sit or lie down. Then the trains stayed parked on the sightings for up to four days. Most carriages had a single window cut into the wall all covered by barbed wire. Modesty became a thing of the past. Prisoners wracked with dysentery shared one pail and the man closest to the window threw the contents outside” (371). As it turned out, this is one of those experiences about which my uncle John who was held prisoner at Banku never spoke.

It is equally fascinating, though, to read the stories of how the men managed to survive in the camps. Escaping the camps was often imagined, but seldom a real possibility. How then did the men pass their time? There is much detail in the book on daily life in the camps. Most of the PoWs' time was devoted to basic survival: the search for food, sharing of rations, nursing the ill, and the offering of psychological support to one another. But camp life involved much more than this list suggests. The men organized sporting activities including, among the Canadians, hockey, as well as soccer, baseball, cricket, and boxing. Music was an important element within the camps. The men organized choirs and bands of many different kinds and sizes. Elaborate theatrical productions, at least one might say elaborate under the circumstances, were performed by the prisoners. Others passed the time writing poetry, keeping carefully recorded and illustrated diaries or creating drawings which in one way document their experiences. Cartooning was another common practice among the prisoners.

LaGrandeur has used extensively these diaries, drawings, and other documents from the period to illustrate the biographies which lie at the heart of the book. *We Flew, We Fell, We Lived* provides a generous amount of information on the general operations of the camps, the types of planes flown, the organization of the RCAF, and much, much more. There is, in fact, to my mind, too much contextual information though not everyone may agree with this observation, especially military historians for whom much of this detail might prove quite interesting.

LaGrandeur structures each of his chapters around mini biographies of three or four prisoners from the specific camp under discussion in that chapter. These mini biographies were compiled from interviews and written recollections, as well as diaries and other materials related to the particular camp. Through these biographies the reader begins to experience both the dreadful hardships associated with camp life, but also to recognize the resilience of many of the prisoners. It was individual and collective resilience and the care and concern that prisoners showed towards one another that explains why many more men did not die in the

camps. These biographies drew me deeper into the book but they also disappointed me. LaGrandeur took a rather traditional historical approach to presenting these biographies and the writing of his book. They are written in his voice and we hear little of the actual voices of the prisoners. I found this approach surprising in this study in which oral history interviews are such a prominent source of information. The inclusion of the actual words of the prisoners, in essence, their own autobiographies would have greatly enriched the text. After reading the book, I was left, quite simply, wanting to hear more of the voices of the men whose stories LaGrandeur recounts for us. Where they do appear, the voices are compelling. I do hope that LaGrandeur will, in the future, be able to make his interviews available through the Internet to a wider audience.

As for my uncle John, LaGrandeur described the camps in which John was imprisoned and told me of the forced marches through the winter cold that John and his fellow prisoners endured, as their captors shunted them from camp to camp in advance of the approaching Allied armies. The light that this research cast upon the psychological and physical difficulties that John faced as a PoW has led those of us who knew him to reflect differently upon his life. As one of his children said to me, "I wish I had known this about my dad when he was living. It would have made a difference."