

22 Aug 2003
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Dear Richard:

As to what I can throw into the pot, I doubt that I am not nearly as well informed as your father. He was always closer to George, partly because he had sense enough, unlike me, not to challenge George on strongly-held opinions, partly because his pursuit of the law fulfilled George's early desire to enter the profession. [I guess you know that he began studies with Harry's wife, Mary, he stood first in the law school exams when Harry stood second.]

My father rarely talked about his WW I experiences, at least to me. He tried to join the militia [territorials?] when he was under age, I believe a big 14 or 16, but his mother ratted on him & got him thrown out. I think he tried again at the minimum age & got in. Van probably remembers better. I believe he enrolled at U of T [he had lived with Aunt Tot when my grandfather "remarried too soon" after Louise Estelle died & the family broke up. I hardly knew my grandfather LAUGHTON. I have dim recollections of his being at Grand Bend on rare occasions when I was there. He was on better terms with Uncle Clair because, I suppose, they were in the same business, & Uncle Fred was not as virulent in his rejection as Aunt Tot. I presume father was in the COTC or equivalent at U of T, & I guess quit like Van in first year to go on active service. Perhaps it was wholly jocular, but, again subject to confirmation by Van, my recollection was that he said his Canadian unit would not be trained to overseas standards for something like 6 months, that he deserted, talked his way on board a ship over the pond, & wangled a commission in the British army, with a short period of training at an Oxford college. I think my best way of telling you this story is to print out a part of a draft family history - certainly not complete biography of my father, just a bit to give a flavour, & subject to revision. Van hasn't seen it. There are all sorts of stories I should include, like my mother losing her wedding ring, I think on the honeymoon, & father fixing her up ^{with} a quick & dirty substitute, a kid's ring from a box of Cracker Jack [caramel-coated popcorn.]

Regards,

Uncle Paul

no licences yet, also no service stations; acetylen lamps

In the period leading up to WW I, George drove Tot's car when he was only 12. He & other boys in Parkhill of an age read BP's pamphlets as they came out, founded a Boy Scout troop & persuaded the local dentist to come on board as their Scoutmaster. George tried to enlist in the Territorials but was caught as underage & turfed out. He began studying law at U of Toronto & with Mary, but joined the COTC in his first year (1915) at U of T. It was taking too long for the Canadian contingent to train for overseas, so he said he deserted, wangled a berth on a transport to England, took a commission through a short course held at Magdalen College, Oxford [invited to play "rugby", misconstrued the nature of the game, tackled someone & broke his collarbone], was posted to the 5th of the line, the 26th Northumberland Fusiliers, based in Newcastle. To his dismay he discovered that the troops spoke incomprehensible Geordie. Fortunately the sergeant also spoke English. British officers wore distinctive uniforms with Sam Brown belts, sidearms & peak caps even on the battlefield, so were sitting ducks for German snipers. As a result of this lottery, George was several times acting lieutenant-colonel commanding the battalion, although his substantive rank never changed beyond lieutenant throughout the war. He rarely talked about his experiences; the only story I recall was about German heavy machine guns, which were set to sweep back & forth just over the Allied trench parapets; on one occasion he was standing beside another chap viewing no-man's land when the sweep came up, turned around at the other chap & cut him in two. George was awarded the Military Cross at 19 for single-handedly capturing a German machine nest that was holding up his battalion's advance at Vimy. He went through much of the trench warfare, such as the Somme & Vimy, was sitting on a log by a ruined house at Passchendaele with his old friend, the sergeant, when the latter was hit by a shell & GVL buried in the crater for several days, sent back to Blighty [England] to be put back together, sent back to Canada to die, helped train recruits for a campaign with the White Russians near Vladivostok against the Bolsheviks (including Ken Brown's father), was invalided out with a warning to take it easy & he might live a couple of years. He met Beth as an occupational physiotherapist & later induced Dave Wilson to reintroduce them in Parkhill. Fred & Harry recommended Osgoode, but he hired on as the second staffer for the Department of Soldiers Civilian Reestablishment [later the Department of Veterans Affairs] for a couple of years until the convalescent hospitals were running across the country [mostly TB], then to Maclean's, later Maclean-Hunter. In Oct. 1919 he gave 2 temperance sermons, at College St. Presb'n Church & at a Baptist church. In 1925 he was a presb'n commissioner at Jarvis St. when the Methodist, Congregational, Four-Square & 2/3 of the Presb'ns joined to form the United Church. He became a mainstay of St. George's UC while at 254 Glenview, but finally burned out & dropped all church administrative duties. In WW II he applied

seriously switched to rifle, etc. carried uniform & peak cap (or tin hat, of course)

usher at our wedding. Dr Brown became a hist. Prof. at U of T

chiefly TB, the main killer of Can troops

chair of Board of Trustees, etc

to enlist & faced at his medical review board the chair of the earlier board who had told him he had 2 years to live! The man remembered him & exclaimed, "What are you doing here, Laughton? You've been dead for 25 years!" He was accepted as a captain in the U of T COTC. I didn't know about this & shortly after, while marching along Bloor St. by myself in my COTC private's uniform, saw this tough-looking captain coming toward me, saluted (smartly, of course), & nearly fell off the sidewalk when I realized I had just saluted my own father. (When Paul tried to go on active service in 3rd yr Hon Chem, George pulled a lot of strings to get around the requirement that scientific students complete their degrees & go into defence research, including General Pearkes who had been put up by George & Beth for a while when he fell on hard times after WW I.)

George was Circulation Manager for Maclean's, then Circulation Director for the company. My childhood was filled with books & magazines, including British & US publications that were distributed by MacLean's, such as the Boys' Own Annual, Irving Berlin's music sheets, and all sorts of US magazines such as "Flying Aces" & "Down Beat". I worked a few times at the Maclean-Hunter plant on University Ave, e.g. handling notifications of Christmas gift subscriptions, or returning unsold copies of "Down Beat" for rebate after tearing off the covers. George also was a founder of the Canadian Circulation Audit Board & long-time member of the Audit Bureau of Circulation, president still at his death even after retirement in 1964. He was instrumental in establishing a much-needed industry code of ethics for door-to-door salesmen. He was a long-time member of the Military Club, resigning when a Jewish officer friend was blackballed for membership. George did not take kindly to being crossed. Van had sense enough not to argue with him more than very briefly; Paul did not, stuck to his guns & was subjected to a number of red-faced yelling matches over the years.

At our cottage on Snake Island in L. Simcoe he had a convulsion & went unconscious & clammy one weekend. I had to row to the mainland for help, but he was conscious when I returned. The problem was not properly diagnosed at the time, but much later a arterial aneurysm was detected in his brain, probably an aftermath of the WW I injury. He and Beth were living in London by then, & Van & I were summoned to vote on the risky operation. Since no operation meant a limited life & sudden death without warning, we voted "Yes." He had the operation, it was a success, but he died instantly on June 11th 1966 of a blood clot that probably formed in his leg lying in the hospital bed. He is buried with Beth in the soldier's plot at Exeter.