WWII Prisoner of War becomes a BC Forest Service Ranger

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The Forest History Association of BC is pleased to publish this portion of a family history of Ian Bruce Macaskie.

While in the British Army, he was captured at Dunkirk in 1940 and spent five years in various German prisons. He emigrated to Canada in 1948 and became a Ranger with the BC Forest Service (BCFS), followed by other jobs in the forest industry for about 10 years.

His story serves to remind us of the significant sacrifices that veterans made not only during the war itself, but also while facing the challenge of adjusting to civilian life. The BC Forest Service community can be proud of the role it played as he met these challenges.

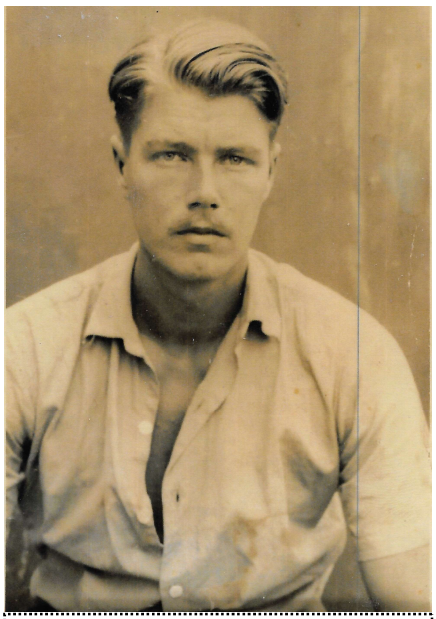
The story is co-authored by Ian's daughter Karin Yarmish, who lives in Prince George, and was expanded and edited for FHABC by Mike Meagher.

P.O.W. to British Columbia

British Columbia (BC) has attracted many thousands of "foreigners" to start/resume an adventurous and satisfying life in its stunning mountains, plains, lakes and ocean shores, often based on its rich and varied forest species.

One well-known such person was Dr. Alan Orr-Ewing, the founder of BC's forest genetics program.[Reference 1] His past as a soldier in World War 2 included 5 years as a German Prisoner of War [P.O.W.], ending in Colditz, the last stop for those officers who had escaped several times to upset German forces and cost them time and materials from, for example, sabotage.

A second British Army Colditz survivor, also after 5 years in various prisons, who moved to BC was 2nd. Lieutenant (promoted to Captain after the War) Ian Bruce Macaskie of the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment. Ian was captured at Dunkirk, imprisoned in various German camps, escaping three times ["whenever possible"] and "followed" the well-worn trail to Colditz by 1943. His first prison at Laufen, in southern Germany, was:



German P.O.W. Photo

> *"the worst for hunger and low spirits. Our food consisted of rotten potatoes and turnip soup. Some of us ate grass prior to the arrival of Red Cross parcels."*

Later, when he identified himself as ".. *a Prisoner"*, Ian composed *"In Praise of the Potato"* that contains:

> *"Once, while fleeing from my oppressors and much in need or refreshment, I dug beneath the yielding soil, awoke a tuber from his slumber, and he fed me without question. Such affection is truly noble.."*

While imprisoned, he and many fellow prisoners were assisted by the Red Cross to write of their constrained lives, as well as keeping in touch with their families "back home".

One typical fall day in Colditz Ian wrote on October 28th, 1944:

> *"I look out of the castle windows and down upon the Town. It is steeped in mist, there is a dampness, a chill in the air …. It is but little warmer in the room. There is no comfort here. I am a prisoner. …. I have been so for nearly five years. Five years. Can you feel the monotony of Summer, Winter after Winter, walled up, shut away from life? Here there is no joy – our world is grey and I am twenty-five today."*

Following 61 months as a Prisoner, Ian and some colleagues collected several of their creations and compiled them into a book titled "Detour" [Reference 2] [NB: For the curious, several books on Colditz exist; example cited below[Reference 3]].

Following release from Colditz, and marriage to Tina, he was appointed in 1945 to a British Army Staff position assigned to interview ex-Prisoners of War by Japan, entailing travel in 1945 to both Washington, D.C and San Francisco twice, ending in March, 1946.

Ian's service was recognized by King George VI on January 31, 1946, via a letter in the London Gazette that contained:

> *"The KING has been graciously pleased to approve that the following be mentioned of gallant and distinguished services in the field: - Royal West Kent;*
> *"Lt. I. B Macaskie (86215)"*

He returned after those stressful years to an England still suffering from 5 years of foreign attacks that had left much of its productive machinery and distribution system destroyed, or at least damaged, reducing its efficiency and sales options. Also, the regular payments to the USA under the "**Lend Lease"** agreement signed by President Roosevelt in 1941 to provide ships to transport armaments, planes and materials was a heavy burden on the British recovery program. The last payment on the original fund of 31.4 B pounds was delivered in 2006! Wartime rationing of meat ended in 1954, signifying a major change in the British "Home" economy. Karin recalls:

> *"I only knew that there was a lot of rationing of food and goods."*

Ian's exposure to the U.S.A. had made a strong impression on his potential future locations, increased by the fact his father had left his family when Ian was only 4 to live in Australia. An offer to join his dad was compared to joining Tina's family in the USA. The move to Wisconsin was made in 1947, resulting in Ian working as a Draftsman for Genisot Engineering in Rhinelander until 1948. He found the job uninspiring, partly due to the lingering effects of the years of poor nutrition and stress, leading to a reduced stamina. Fortunately, Jerry Wood, a former POW friend, encouraged Ian to move to B.C. and work on his farm near Cloverdale, and also enter forestry work via UBC. That option corresponded with Ian's childhood interests as described by Karin:

> *"Dad was always interested in outdoor activities. "... he hiked, fished and camped. He loved trees, plants ... all things to do with nature."*

Ian, Tina and baby Karin crossed the Canada/U.S.A. border on May 13th, 1948 to start the family's new life. After one year "*Self employed*", and financially unable to follow a UBC education, Ian was accepted at "Green Timbers", a BCFS Research Station and nursery in north Surrey, to begin training toward becoming qualified as a Ranger in the on-site Ranger School. In 1949 he began his BCFS career in Prince George to work as an Assistant Ranger, then progressed through "Acting" Ranger, to "Ranger" and graduation from Green Timbers by late 1954.

Karin described Prince George in the late 1940s as:

> *"It was a fairly rough town ... lots of drinking, dirt roads, wooden sidewalks and the lack of many accessories that he had before coming here." Quite a contrast to his original home area of Kent and Berkshire.*

Weather could be a sharp contrast to that of England. A memorable example: the temperature in early November 1955 went from 4 C to – 9 C overnight, proceeding to –31 C in 3 days, continuing to – 42 C in 10 days.

Karin adds:

> *"… there was a very cold winter. Dad said someone had put up a sign saying … 'temporary North Pole.' "*

She continues:

> *"When he first arrived in PG he was sent to a big forest fire …* [I] *believe it was called the Tabor Mountain fire. Mum told me when he came back she hardly recognized him, as he was black from head to toe!"*

Re Karin's Dad's duties:

> *"I was too young to pay attention. He certainly went in the bush and did timber cruising, flew in float planes, did mapping and traveled on trains, river boats and railway speeders to get about the area."*

> *"On one occasion he and another employee were on a speeder in Penny when there was an unexpected train coming around the corner towards them. They had to get the speeder and themselves off the track – just in the nick of time."*

Wildlife was also a constant and credible threat, leading Karin to note:

> *"When he was in the bush he always carried his WWII army revolver or a rifle."* Ian *"took comfort in having them for protection."* Luckily, Karin cannot recall any need for her Dad to use the armaments vs. any of the local fauna.

Mackaskie in Ranger kit in Prince George in the early 1950s

A new feature of the area was the "beehive burners" that removed the sawmill detritus and sawdust, and generated heat for local consumption. Even though that was "*technology of the day"* they produced a perennial smoke that could hang over the area for weeks, especially during winters when the cold, stable, air created a threat to lungs, it was accepted. Karin adds:

> *"A lot of people smoked back then … including my dad, who puffed on a pipe for many years."*

Glimpses of family life by Karin:

> *"My father spent a lot of his spare time reading and also playing chess. The Community Hall offered badminton; fortunately, he was a keen player. My parents both hooked rugs. Mother attended "birthday teas" with the local women. Also, there were movies in the Hall on Friday nights and -- quite often – dances on a Saturday; my parents did not attend those or Sunday church services. I attended school and played outside most of the time alone or with friends."*

Ian enjoyed the time with the BC Forest Service; he worked with well-known Foresters such as Larry Degrace, Tim Decie at Aleza Lake - another "Brit" survivor of the War - and John Bruce, plus Lorne Swannell and his wife, with whom his family formed a life-long association while serving in the Ranger position over time in PG, Aleza Lake and Penny.

But then he was offered a transfer to Quesnel to gain experience in another community offering different climates and tree complexes. Not convinced of that logic, and comfortable in the Prince George area, in 1955 Ian accepted a job as Forest Engineer and Timber Cruiser with Penny Spruce Mills in Penny, a settlement 70 miles eastward on the Canadian National Railway.

One day in early 1955 Ian was tested by the fates when returning from a day of … timber cruising for Penny Spruce Mills in a riverboat when …

> *"trouble came on fast as I was coming out of the side channel into the main stem of the Fraser River. "The 14-foot boat had a long shaft on the motor, .. it caught on something below the surface of the water. … the boat came to a full stop. Caught on the mooring line of a log boom, the boat suddenly took the full force of the river … and I was immediately swimming for my life. The swim itself would not have been so bad but the working equipment around my waist was almost the end of me. I had a 38caliber service revolver, … as well as an abney level, belt axe, increment borer, field compass and a metal container that held my note pad. .. I was wearing … long johns, a wool mackinaw jacket and high-top leather lace-up boots. Life jackets were not considered a requirement.*
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> *I spilled out of the boat into freezing water …it was all I could do to get my bearings and start working toward the nearest shore. … the cold water and heavy weight of the saturated clothing and working gear were going to take me down. It seemed to take an awfully long time before my* ["high top"] *boots touched ground. I was several miles from Penny when I .. made my way through the dense brush …* before *I saw the light from a house. It was the home of Arne and Carrie Mellows* (who) *warmed me up a bit and offered tea. Arne then drove me to our house. … it was a tiring and miserable trek back to the comforts of home. I considered myself a lucky man!"*

The greater responsibility in Penny must have pleased him, but after two years and a depressed market for the Mill, the family realized that such a small town was very limiting re educational and social prospects, so – via a suggestion from Coastal friends – the family left the Interior in 1957 for Vancouver Island, settling in Lantzville and work in the MacMillan-Bloedel's Harmac pulp mill. Such work was not appealing, but led to a job with the Foresters in the company's Northwest Bay Division to the west of Lantzville, directed by Frank Maber, R.P.F. One of life's oddities saw Karin and her husband Dave both working for Macmillan

Bloedel in Vancouver, and later in Port Alberni and Kelsey Bay!

The small Lantzville community suited the family well, particularly when Ian learned of the prospects of a job with the federal Department of Fisheries in Nanaimo. He applied in March 1957 and was accepted, changing his life from forestry to marine ecosystems.

Their future seemingly secure, they bought a lot at 7468 Lantzville Road, and cleared trees sufficiently to erect a house. Their Pan Abode can still be seen on the property, but behind a grand new house that provides a better view of the ocean. As proof of their resolve to confirm their future in BC, the home was built by **Ian and Tina only,** - not a minor chore! Karin disclaimed when asked re her role:

Macaskie "nest" in Lanzville

> *"I was just a kid; I played around the house or at the beach."*

After some time engaged in studies on seals, otters and killer whales Ian learned of the Department's plan to collaborate in an international project to document the populations status of the Northern Pacific Fur Seal, whose rich and deep fur was the target of generations of hunters from Russia to California, leading to the species' near-collapse. The project was to begin surveying and documenting late-winter colonies offshore from Oregon to the Alaskan panhandle over several months. Ian was accepted to the job of documenting the voyage for the Station, resulting in a book: "**The Long Beaches"**[Reference 4] The *"credits in English, Geography and General Science* [in his] *"School Certificate B" (Oxford and Cambridge)"* are evident in the book's many keen observations and perceptive comments on the landscapes and animals – plus the people and cultures encountered.

After 48 years in their chosen community Ian's failing health caused a return to Prince George to allow Tina to share his care regimen with Karin's family and friends. Six weeks after the return, he passed away in 2005 at age 86. Tina lived on with Karin and among her grandchildren and old friends for nine more years.

As for most of the immigrants to British Columbia, the Macaskie family contributed in their own way to several communities in B.C. Son Jason, a fisheries biologist, and daughter Kelsey McLellan, a psychiatric nurse, now live with their families [1 grandson and 4 granddaughters], in Prince George.

Long-term effects were common among P.O.W.s, especially with those imprisoned such long times in poor conditions as Ian, whose feelings about potatoes might have faded since faced with broader choices, but Karin stated:

> *"… the humble potato kept him alive. I am sure he missed the butter. For his entire life he never left anything on his plate and he insisted that I do the same!"*

She continued:

> *"Through all these years, like many former Prisoners of War, he* [Dad] *did not talk much about his war time experiences. I think he worked at blotting out that part of his life."*

and concluded:

> *"Wish I could ask him more questions now!"*

Karin Yarmish and Mike Meagher. February 2021

REFERENCES

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3 Major Patrick Reid, MBE, MC, 1984, *Colditz – The Full Story,* Saint Martins Press, 352 pages.
4 Captain I. B. Macaskie, 1979, *The Long Beaches,* Sono Nis Press, 136 pages.
5 Captain I. B. Macaskie, 1945, *A Poem penned while a POW at age 25*. 1 page
(copied below on page 8)

Three of four generations of the Macaskie/Yarmish family in Prince George, 2019.

IAN B. MACASKIE

A Birthday

I look out of the castle windows and down upon the Town. It is steeped in mist, there is a dampness, a chill in the air, and the wind blows a spattere of rain upon the glass. It is but little warmer in the room. There is no comfort here. I am a prisoner. I have been so for nearly five years. Five years. Can you understand what that means? Can you feel the m monotony of Summer after Summmer, Winter after Winter, walled up, shut away from life? The smell of the sea is in your notrils, the sun shines down the valley. You can walk and walk and watch the plovers wheeling and hear the curlew call. There is a deep fire burning at home and the evening is quiet. All that is yours and much besides, to me they are just a memory. Here there is no joy - our world is grey and I am twenty-five today.

If that boy who years ago looked through the barbed wire at the Bavarian Alps and dreamed of Scottish hills could see the man who now gazes out upon the mist, would he recognise himself? I doubt it. In fact I think he would find a stranger with a hardness in his eyes.

I know that I have changed. And inevitable process. It is not possible to live thus long, continually fighting apathy, always improvising, often hungry, cut off, - without being hammered into a knew shape by the slow beat of time. That is the key-note. Slowness. A dull ache. A weary succession of movements.

Gradually I learned a little about the inconsistencies of human nature, and with the knowledge came tolerance. I learned too, the value of comradeship, and the worth of humour,- that wonderful gift that for a fleeting moment seems to put everything into perspective. I can say that I have been cold and hungry, have lived in squalor, cramped and frustrated. I realise what freedom means.

And for such I have given my youth. I cannot know if the exchange has been a fair one. But I do know that despite all courage, a mature outlook and new-found self-reliance, a man at times can feel desperately alone.

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