



Between Ourselves

Dear John

by Douglas Fisher

Sometimes I want to write a letter to my son John. He's the fourth of five, just 16 years old, and the first of our boys to take a keen interest in World War II.

The letter form appeals to me. It puts me at some distance from his questions and the near disbelief in his eyes when my answers to his questions are brief and uninformative.

Dear John, I'd like to write: Today you asked me what the coloring was of the German Panzerfaust, and further, was the printing or stenciling white or black.

A few nights ago you wanted to know the ratio in a Canadian tank regiment between Shermans with 75-mm. guns and 17-pounder guns. Recently it was a query about the comparative use of tracer in Bren guns with the Browning guns used in tanks and armored cars. Another time it was the use — wearing, carrying, the readiness factor — of respirators or gas-masks. Another time you wanted to know the variety of shells we used in Very pistols and the air or exposure time of the flares. Then you wished to know if most of the German PoWs I saw in Northwest Europe were in some form of camouflage dress, and what were the main colors and patterns of this camouflage.

John, the fact that I couldn't give you accurate answers, let alone educated guesses, doesn't mean that I wasn't thinking and seeing, along with several hundred thousand other Canadian soldiers (and a few million others) from the Normandy beach-head days to the end of the war somewhere near Hamburg.

You have been developing an interest in the war through model building and reading and some of the magnificent picture books that have been published in recent years. I can see the reason so many of these publications went to the reproduction of accurate designs of equipment, vehicles and weapons. To do

so gives a reality and credibility to the product. And much of the post-war discussion of campaigns, strategies, generalship and the reasons for victories, stalemates and defeats has focused on comparative quality in performance and availability of equipment. Perhaps this is best illustrated with the heroic emergence of the Spitfire during and after the Battle of Britain, even though the records indicate the Hurricane was even more essential and intrinsic to the triumph.

Indeed, the air side of the war seems to center more and more, as it is examined by military buffs, on plane types. The Zero, the Spit, the Mustang, the JU-88, the Mosquito, the Lanc, the Fortress, are lionized. There is the more and more popular awareness that the Lancaster was a much better bomber than the Halifax or the Stirling, not least in straight performance figures.

But there is also the careful re-examination by scholars of the whole joint bombing thesis of the British and Americans and its comparative failure.

That is, the immensely costly night and day bombing of German cities — costly in lives of crews and of civilians — had much less military effect than was believed at the time. It was symbolized by "Bomber" Harris and Winston Churchill's uninhibited glee at giving it back to Berlin Germans for Coventry, London, etc. This important failure, and its significance, has not gotten home here, despite our contribution to Bomber Command.

When you and I browse in a good book store, I am staggered at the potential spending one could do if one bought all the books, pamphlets, magazines and models available about the campaigns and hardware of World War II. You really do know more, simply in terms of information, about the materials of that war, from the silhouette of a Panther tank to the rate of fire of a Sten Gun.

In one way, John, I regret this profusion of publishing and model making about the war, much less because my bent, then and now, has been to ignore or pass quickly by data on things for more understanding of why affairs befell as they did in the war, particularly for Canadians, but not a little for our brethren of the time, our mentors and allies, the British. For example, I wonder what contributions their doughty, all-out war effort played in the post-war eclipse and current disasters, literally, of Britain?

Another example to ponder, John. What were the lessons learned by Canadians, the military and the federal bureaucracy, from World War II and Korea on the need to develop our own equipment? While thousands of Canadian boys like you assemble tank models from finely scaled kits — Tigers, Patons, T-34s, Shermans — we finally bumble into a large tank purchase from West Germany. Probably the Leopard is the best buy available. Lord knows the tanks our troops use at present are pathetically worn out and out of date. But outside of a few insiders in the military and maybe a handful of men outside our military (most of whom once were soldiers) there really aren't a score of Canadian citizens, not even members of Parliament, with clues as to what we've gotten into with the Leopard or why we never did develop our own tank, let alone our own armored carrier (remember the Bobcat?).

You don't remember the Bobcat? Well, back in the mid-1950s the government decided to design and develop a plain, reliable armored troop carrier with an amphibious capability. Some 10 years and \$40 million later the plan was let slip after yielding a few prototypes. Eventually, 'buy' won out over 'make' in the 'make or buy' argument that has bemused our official thinkers for so long.

What I'd like you to challenge me

with, John, and my generation, and the next one just ahead of you, are questions such as the following:

If our educational systems and its products are as good as we think, especially when we compare them favorably to the Americans', and if our engineering is as good as it seems at extracting metals and cellulose from our bush country for export, why can't we research, design, build or manufacture even a few of the main components of the equipment and weapon devices that our own military services must have?

My answer to you needs a long book with a chapter about the meekness of our nationalism, at least as our politicians crystallize it, another chapter on our inferiority complex towards our southern neighbors, as though branch plant manufacturing dictates branch plant attitudes about all activities.

Probably the most important chapter would puzzle you for it will reflect my own puzzlement. I conjure up the road situation in which I was at the time of Sherman tanks and Sten guns and Panzerfausts. My image is of a mighty Canadian commitment and a delivery upon that commitment by millions of us.

One side of that commitment was our certitude about its necessity — because of the nature of the enemy! But another side was simply, as it added up throughout the war, the willingness to pull together, to give, to suspend immediate individual aims for an unknown duration.

I have a hunch the willingness and the abilities are there, still inherent in Canada. Certainly, I wouldn't want them evoked by another war. On the other hand, why have we buried the achievements we made in that war, even as you and so many kids like you become 'aficionados' in the minutiae of weapons and vehicles?

The short answer, John, is because we discount ourselves as people with a real national community and purposes. □