

Extract from John Douglas Cowans' "Boyhood Memories: Summers in Metis"

"... it was in the summer too, in Metis, that the realities of conflict became clearest to me. Here we saw visible proof that we were at war. Almost daily we saw convoys of ships heading up or down river.

Overhead fighter planes from nearby Mont Joli airbase practised battle maneuvers. Often, one plane would drag a target behind it and other planes would swoop down on it, guns blazing. A concrete bomb target had been built far out on the end of one isolated rocky point, and we all delighted to watch the 'paint- 'bombs' burst on the surrounding rocks. On occasion and much to our parent's disgust we would find dead seals rotting on the shore riddled with machine gun bullets from some passing fighter plane...

Never, though, was the horror of the war brought home to us more clearly than in the summer of 1944. In those days, the Metis summer residents came mostly from Montreal and as The Black Watch was the Highland Regiment that many of the Montreal fathers and sons of English/Scottish heritage joined, their involvement in the fighting was closely followed, especially in the days and weeks just after the D-Day invasion of France, which had taken place on June 6th. My father had been seriously injured in a car accident in 1943, and he had come home during his recovery, but after had returned to his regiment. We knew that The Black Watch were part of the D-Day action, but my family did not know how Dad was involved. On July 25th, the Black Watch were involved in fierce fighting near May-sur-Orne... Casualties in that terrible encounter numbered 324, of whom 120 were killed, and many of them were from Montreal.

Bit by little bit in the days that followed, word of the enormous losses began to seep through to Montreal. For those families in Metis who had relatives in the Black Watch, a period of dreadful waiting had begun. No details of the massacre were available. Lists of the names of the victims had not yet been made public. First, families would have to be notified. Cottages did not have telephones in those days. There was a phone in each of the hotels, but mostly communication was carried out by telegram. The Telegraph Office was next to the Post Office and it was open for business only during the day... If a message came in for you, it was printed out on strips of paper and stuck onto a telegram form; this was given to the uniformed messenger boy who would get on his bicycle and deliver it to your house.

Sundays in Metis. to this day, begin with Church Services... In those days, the few shops remained closed on Sundays as did the Post Office and, with the exception of a few afternoon hours, so did the Telegraph Office; thus, it was unusual on that Sunday, July 31, 1944 to see the Telegraph boy on his bicycle before noon and upon returning from Church to see the Telegraph Office open. It is unknown how many "We regret to inform you that" messages were delivered that day. Reports from the Department of War of the missing, the wounded, and those who had been killed continued to come into the little office throughout the day.

From our cottage verandah on Beach Road, we could see the messenger boy bicycling down the road, and each time he passed our gate without turning in, we breathed a thankful sigh. Eventually in the evening, the messages ceased, and it is said that someone passing the Telegraph Office noticed the young boy sitting on the steps, his head in his hands, weeping...