

Winston Churchill Parker was POW

By Elaine Thomas

Winston Parker is a long-time supporter of the Bomber Command Museum of Canada. This article was written by Elaine Thomas and posted on Elinor Florence's blog, "Letters from Windermere" in 2018. A bestselling author, Elinor Florence has written many stories about Canadians in wartime, and they can be found on her website here: <https://www.elinorflorence.com/blog/category/wartime-wednesdays/>

Elaine now lives in La Grange, Texas, but she's a former farm girl from Okotoks, Alberta, and that's how she knows Winston Churchill Parker. Her new book, titled [Veterans' Voices and Home Front Memories](#), was released in 2018.

"Saddles and Service", the award winning biography of Winston Parker, was written by Elaine Thomas in 2011. [Saddles and Service](#)

Named for the future British prime minister, 100-year-old Winston Churchill Parker of Okotoks, Alberta, joined the Royal Canadian Air Force, served as a Wireless Air Gunner in a Wellington bomber, was shot down on his unlucky thirteenth mission, and spent the rest of the war as a POW in a German prison camp.



The Early Years

One hundred year-old veteran Winston Churchill Parker, of Okotoks, Alberta, was born on July 31, 1918, the elder son of English-born parents, Herbert Garfield Parker and Amelia "Millie" Emily Churchill. His mother was a cousin four or five times removed of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Winston has an older sister, Jessie Parker Allwarden Fleischman, who is now 102 years old. He also had a younger brother, Geoffrey Lyons Parker, who died in 1985.

"We were all born in Calgary, but we never lived there. I was just a baby and Jessie was two years old when Dad rented a farm with buildings in the Red Deer Lake District south of the city. Our parents brought us up to be proud of our English roots, so we went to gatherings and school wearing what they considered appropriate, a tie and English-style clothes," he recalls.

This photo shows Winston, left, and his older sister Jessie, at the Millarville Fair in 1921.



Winston loved the life of a cowboy from a young age. Here he is shown on the left, with his younger brother Geoff on the right.



Winston Rushes to Join the Air Force

Winston studied tractor mechanics at a college that was the forerunner to the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) Polytechnic in Calgary. He was 21 years old and working for the Home Oil Company when the Second World War began.

Britain declared war on Germany on Friday, September 1, 1939, and Winston joined up three days later, on Monday, September 4. This was six days before Canada declared war on September 10.

“I took a half day off work at the Home Oil and joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. It was not a difficult decision. I had been greatly influenced by the flyer Wop May, and when I was a little fellow, the old Wapiti bombers that flew back and forth a few miles northwest of our farm intrigued me. Besides, we had been brought up in the English tradition that if our country needed you, you volunteered.”

Because facilities to train aircrews were not yet available, Winston went back home until he was called up in August 1940. His family supported both him and his brother, Geoff, who also had enlisted, serving as an RCAF Wireless Air Gunner.

Here are the three siblings: Winston on the left, sister Jessie, and Geoff on the right.



From Calgary, Winston was sent to four British Commonwealth Air Training bases: first to Brandon, Manitoba; then to Dauphin, Manitoba; back to Calgary; and finally to Mossbank, Saskatchewan.

“In June 1941, we got our wings, graduated as aircrew, and were sent overseas on the RMMV Stirling Castle, a South African luxury liner, with about 150 airmen and several hundred army personnel.”

Once he was categorized in England, he was sent to a major Royal Air Force (RAF) station at Cranwell, Lincolnshire. Like his brother Geoff, Winston was a Wireless Air Gunner, meaning that he was responsible for the operation of a gun turret, and sending and receiving wireless messages during the flight.

“The Battle of Britain, which was a fierce air campaign waged by the German Luftwaffe against England, had been over for a while, but the British people considered all aircrew as heroes. It was a little embarrassing because we had just arrived from overseas, but later on, I guess we earned that respect.”

In January 1942, Canadian recruiting promotional photos were shot of a typical RCAF crew and a Wellington bomber being refuelled in England.

Winston and his friend, Jimmy Paton, are shown together standing beside the Wellington.



Here are Winston, left, and Jimmy Paton in the cockpit.



A respected pilot and good friend Dick Laing, with whom Winston flew ten missions, is in the centre of this group photo.



Here's the bomber being fuelled up, in preparation for a deadly flight over German-occupied territory.



Winston's first raid was a short trip across the English Channel to Ostend on the coast of Belgium to bomb barges and drop leaflets.

Cut in the shape of an oak leaf, the message warned the German people in their own language: "In Russia, the fallen leaves are covering your fallen soldiers . . . And the snow will cover the fallen leaves that cover your fallen soldiers."



This one reads: "The leaves are falling, and your promised victory will never happen."



Winston Churchill Parker meets

Winston Churchill

Winston was posted to 101 Squadron RAF, at a permanent station near Cambridge, England. On his first leave, he went to London to visit his uncle, Prime Minister Churchill's personal chauffeur.

Winston finally tracked down his uncle with the help of a sergeant at the front desk at Scotland Yard.

"He told me to look for a car with a specific number in a guarded area, protected by barbed wire. After I walked into the lot and started looking around, a Bobbie grabbed me by the shoulder. I told him I was looking for a certain car number that belonged to the prime minister.

"Not buying my story, he marched me back to Scotland Yard, where the sergeant on duty confirmed he had sent me. Another Bobbie offered to escort me to Number 10 Downing Street, a famous address that didn't have a big, impressive door."

Winston found Mr. Churchill's personal bodyguard and his uncle in a little office just inside. Winston was having a little visit with them when Mr. Churchill came walking through the foyer.

"My uncle stepped out and said, 'Sir, I'd like you to meet the boy my brother named after you.'

"Mr. Churchill stopped, and I was introduced. I had always pictured him as a big man, but he wasn't. Nevertheless, in his dark suit, he was most impressive. I had a signed copy of the famous photo taken by Yousuf Karsh on my living room wall for years."

And here is the photo, taken by the famous Canadian portrait photographer in 1941.



Prime Minister Churchill spent 15 or 20 minutes in conversation with his namesake. Since the young Canadian was one of the first to go through the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, the Prime Minister wanted to know about that, as well as what Winston had observed while crossing the Atlantic.

“After I satisfied his curiosity, Prime Minister Churchill turned to my uncle and said, ‘Take Parker downstairs and show him the War Room. Tomorrow, bring me in and then take the day off to show Parker around London in my car.’

“I was honored. It was a great privilege to see the top-secret War Room. The walls were covered with large maps with different colored pins stuck here and there. The next day, as we drove around London, the Bobbies stopped traffic and waved us through when they recognized Mr. Churchill’s car. That day, though, the only Winston Churchill in the car was me!”

Thirteen was Winston’s Unlucky Number

In the early part of the war, due to the sheer number of German fighters and defences, the average lifespan of an Allied airman was twelve trips. Winston survived those twelve trips, but his luck ran out on April 9, 1942.

“When our aircraft had instrument trouble readying for our thirteenth mission, orders came through for us to pull off to the side and take off as number thirteen. We wondered if that was a bad omen, and it was. Approaching Hamburg, our starboard engine was hit and set on fire. Our pilot gave the order to bail out.”

After Winston safely landed and stashed his parachute, he walked for about three hours down a nearby railway track. A little more than 24 hours later, he was picked up by the German equivalent of the Home Guard and held in a farmhouse.

Members of the German Luftwaffe arrived and took Winston to a Dulag Luft, a transit camp for downed Allied aircrew, for interrogation.

“My parents received a telegram from our commanding officer stating that I was missing in action because our aircraft had not come home.”

This was followed by a second telegram on April 21, 1942 telling Winston’s anxious family that “Sgt Winston Churchill Parker was mentioned in a German broadcast on 20/4/42 as being a prisoner of war. This information should be accepted with reserve pending official confirmation.”

Below are copies of both telegrams.

CANADIAN PACIFIC TELEGRAM

WNA31 72 CML XCI DUPLICATE AND CORRECTED COPY

LONDON

10 1154A

IMMEDIATE MRS PARKER

R R NO 1 MIDNAPORE ALBERTA

DEEPLY REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON NO CAN/R 60366 SERGEANT WINSTON CHURCHILL PARKER IS REPORTED MISSING AS A RESULT OF AIR OPERATIONS LETTER CONFIRMING THIS CABLEGRAM AND GIVING ALL AVAILABLE INFORMATION FOLLOWS SHOULD NEWS OF HIM REACH YOU BY ANY OTHER SOURCE PLEASE INFORM ME THE AIR COUNCIL EXPRESS THEIR SYMPATHY WITH YOU IN YOUR ANXIETY

AIR OFFICER IN CHIEF RCAF OVERSEAS 1000

CANADIAN PACIFIC TELEGRAM

LONDON APR 21-1942 2015

MRS AE PARKER

R R NO 1 MIDNAPORE ALBERTA CANADA

FROM ADMINISTOR KINGSWAY P3121 21/4 YOUR SON CANR60366 SGT WINSTON CHURCHILL PARKER WAS MENTIONED IN A GERMAN BROADCAST ON 20/4/42 AS BEING A PRISONER OF WAR STOP THIS INFORMATION SHOULD BE ACCEPTED WITH RESERVE PENDING OFFICIAL CONFIRMATION STOP ANY FURTHER NEWS WILL BE IMMEDIATELY COMMUNICATED TO YOU STOP AIR OFFICER IN CHIEF RCAF OVERSEAS 1415/21

2:10 PM

Winston and some fellow aircrew were sent by train to Stalag VIII B located in what is now Poland on the Polish-Czechoslovakian border. It was considered a tough, reprisal prisoner of war camp.

“Eventually, we had 135 men to a billet, even though the billets weren’t big. Prisoners slept on and under tables, wherever there was space. The cement floors were so cold our feet literally froze in our leather boots. We were issued clogs to wear around the camp.”

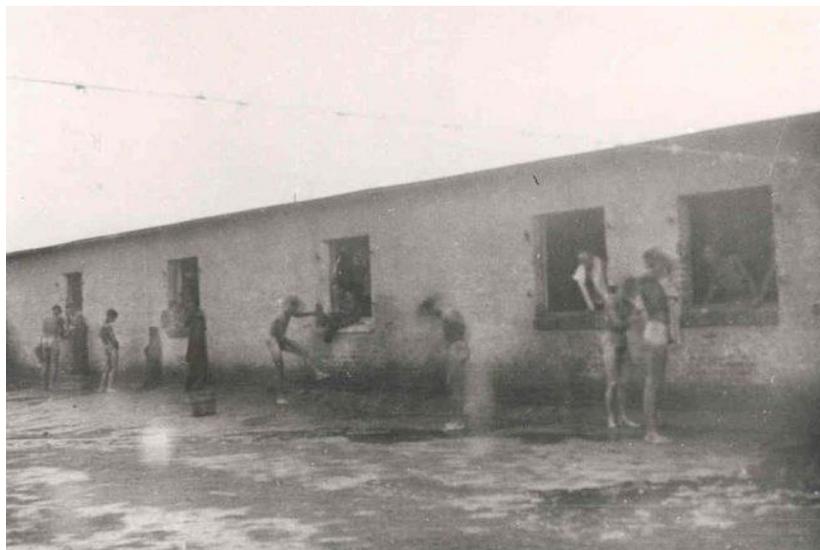
The prisoners took the photos using a pinhole camera they devised. Had they been caught, there would have been severe repercussions.

This photo shows the sleeping huts in the camp.



“If a rainstorm came, we’d get our soap and whip outside to bathe. We were very happy when some chap would get lousy, because the Germans would take our whole billet down to the delousing area. When we stripped off, our bundled clothes were put through a cyanide gas treatment. When we came out of the shower, we would lie down to avoid the deadly cyanide gas fumes, and unwrap our clothes at arm’s length to get dressed.”

This photo shows the prisoners trying to shower themselves off in the falling rain.



Every day, the prisoners received a ration of potatoes, a small slice of black bread about an inch thick, tea made from mint, and soup. Sometimes the soup wasn't too bad; other times, it was terrible. The daily German ration wasn't enough to keep the prisoners going.

"We relied heavily on the Red Cross parcels filled with vitamin-fortified foods. When they came in, we were reasonably healthy and felt pretty good. When they didn't, we didn't feel good. If it hadn't been for the Red Cross, we wouldn't have made it."

In this photo, the airmen are eagerly opening their food parcels.



Here two prisoners are counting out the rations sent to them by the Canadian Red Cross.



The prisoners were permitted to send one letter and two cards home every other month. While they could receive all the letters sent by their family and friends, they were allowed only four clothing parcels a year. That was a highlight in their dull, monotonous lives.

Cigarettes were the camp currency. Although Winston didn't smoke, he used them for barter, once trading packages for three cobs of fresh corn.

Some of the prisoners who were trained as radio technicians constructed a contraband radio that picked up the BBC. The news was copied down in shorthand and passed along by word-of-mouth.

Conditions Grew Even Worse

During the attack by Canadian soldiers on the German-occupied port of Dieppe, France, in August 1942, Canadian troops captured some German soldiers. Allegedly, the Canadians bayoneted some of the Germans so they would never fight against the Allies again.

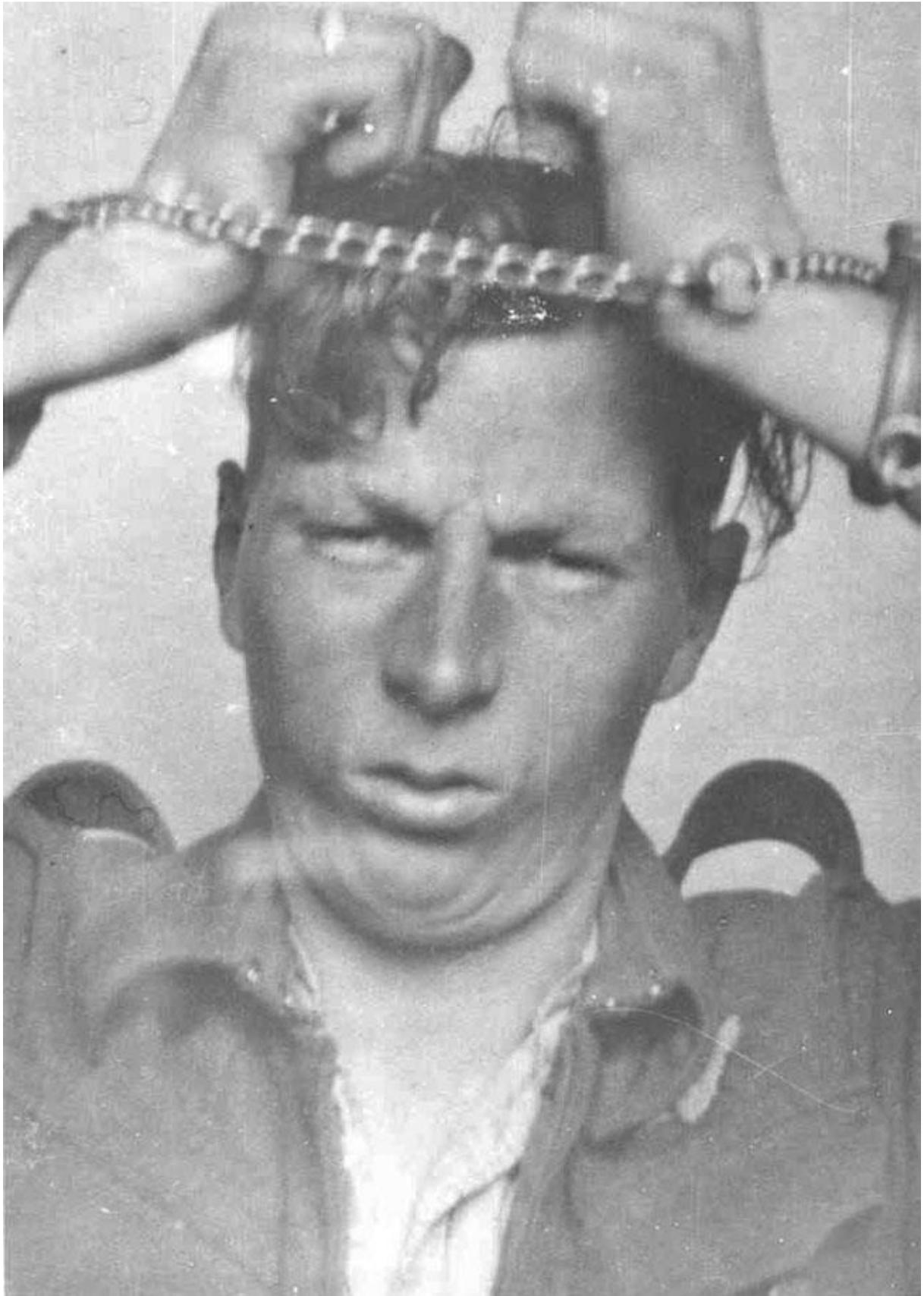
In retaliation, all the POWs who had been serving in the Canadian army were tied up with ropes.

According to Winston: "Not long after that, a bunch of Canadian prisoners were put in a compound not far from us in Stalag VIIIB. Their wrists were tied with cords. We would holler across the fence to them, kind of laughing and teasing, saying, 'They'll take them off for you on Christmas Day!'"

"But our smiles faded when the Germans decided that aircrew would be tied up, too. The cords were so tight they constricted the circulation in our hands.

“Some weeks later, a truck that drove into the compound dumped thousands of handcuff sets. The guards took off our cords and manacled us with handcuffs with 12-inch long chains. Ironically, they had been manufactured in England. While the Germans did take the cuffs off for Christmas Day, it was eleven months before that order was rescinded.”

This photo shows a fellow prisoner wearing the handcuffs.



“During the years we spent in the prison camp, our faith in God was important. We always had hope, believing we would come home. Some fellows had ideas about what they would do then, and others did not. I knew I wanted to be a rancher.”

Winston recalls that when a prisoner in the camp died, he would be given a military funeral at a little cemetery out in the woods. He remembers how very, very cold and miserable it was when The Last Post was played at some of those services, and how hard it was to turn around and leave a comrade there.

This photo shows the dismal sight of a burial in winter.



“We had to find ways to kill time and stay healthy. We walked many, many laps around our compound, and did pushups. We read as much as we could. Whatever material came in, we thumbed through it until it was worn out. An Australian pilot, who was a very good bridge player, taught some of us how to play. I still play bridge once or twice a week.”

After several years in the prison camp, Winston came down with pleurisy. He was sent to Lazarett, the camp hospital. Unfortunately, a prisoner in the next bed was very ill with malaria, and Winston contracted it. He has lived with bouts of malaria on and off since.

The Cruel March Out

As the Russian armies neared Stalag VIII B, the Germans moved their prisoners into columns of men, numbering approximately 1,500, and sent them walking westward on January 22, 1945.

“We marched 35 kilometres at a pretty fast pace the first day, testing our limits. They gave us some shorter marches and occasionally, we’d have a day’s rest. We got so very little to eat that we literally were starving. Some nights, the Germans would bring in big tubs of soup or a ration of bread. Other nights, we were fed nothing. There were no more Red Cross parcels or mail. We sometimes were herded into brick kilns or big sheds filled with straw at night. Other nights, we slept in the open.

“In mid-February 1945, we were marching fairly close to Dresden when we saw more aircraft than we had ever seen in our lives coming over, flying low. During the raid, the German guards ordered the prisoners to lie down in a field and kept their guns trained on them. For nights afterward, they could see the glow of the city of Dresden burning on the horizon.”

When the British would make raids at night, they invariably would drop bombs where Winston and his fellow prisoners had slept the night before.

“It gave us great comfort to tell each other: ‘They know where we are.’ Then one night, the British dropped bombs too close to our column, and one or two of our fellows were killed. I was just shaken up.”

Winston and his comrades marched southwest of Hanover. There, the Germans turned them around and marched them back in the direction in which they had come. By that time, as many as six to eight POWs didn’t get up each morning. They had died in the night.

The blue inked line shows the march from Lamsdorf on the right side, dated January 20, 1945, all the way west to Minden and then eastward again to a point east of Hildesheim on April 11, 1945.

That was the day their cruel march ended.



“On April 11, 1945, we awoke to find the German guards had fled. The next thing we knew, American jeeps and a couple of tanks came rolling toward us. We were no longer prisoners of war!

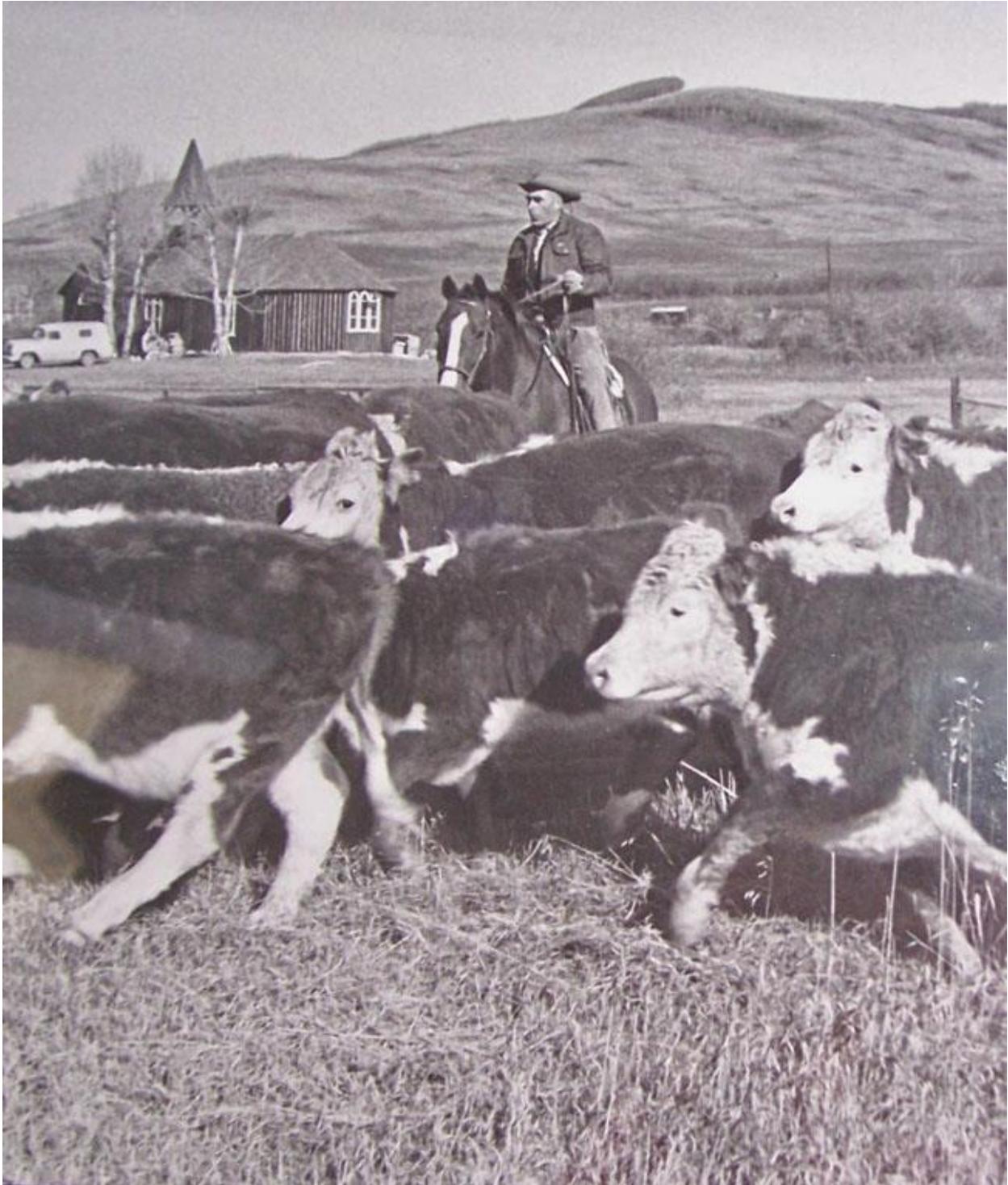
“We had spent nearly three months on the road and travelled over 1,000 kilometres, one of the longest forced marches of World War Two. It has been called the Death March.”

When Winston reached an English hospital, he weighed only 98 pounds. A nurse, who was caring for him, asked if she might have what was left of his boots, and he happily obliged. Early in July 1945, when the SS Ile de France, the third largest ship afloat, sailed for Canada, he was on it.

“I got back to Calgary in mid-July and my family met me at the CPR Station downtown. Jessie recalls that I was thin, drawn and pale. They were anxious to hear about what I had gone through, but I didn’t want to talk about the war. I wanted to try and forget it.”

After the War

Winston's luck had changed. In the ensuing years, he realized his dream of ranching, owning and operating a spread west of Okotoks on the Sheep River. This photo shows him herding cattle, with the historic Christ Church Millarville seen in the background.



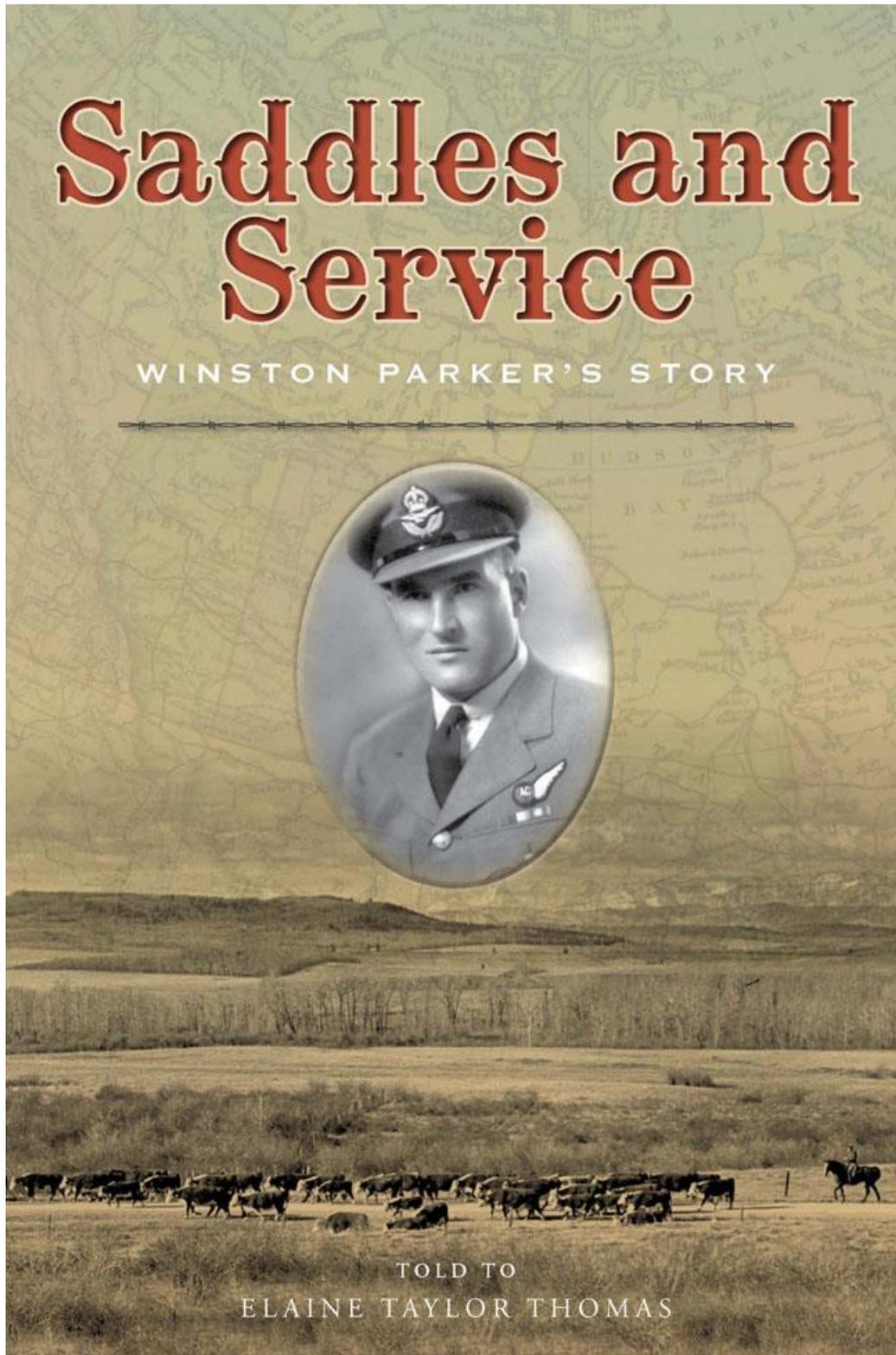
While pouring his tremendous energy into leaving the land in better shape than he'd found it, he built a reputation for kindness and generosity — the best kind of neighbor, friend and community builder.

For decades, if something needed to be done, the familiar refrain in that area was: "Let's ask Parker."

Winston Writes his Memoirs

After retiring to Okotoks, Winston told his life story to Elaine Thomas and donated the book sale proceeds from his self-published memoir titled [Saddles and Service](#) to an endowed scholarship at SAIT Polytechnic for aircraft mechanics.

“I’ve never felt the crews that kept us in the air got the proper recognition and thanks,” Winston says.



In Canada, you may order a copy of Winston's book online from Amazon by clicking here: [Saddles and Service](#).

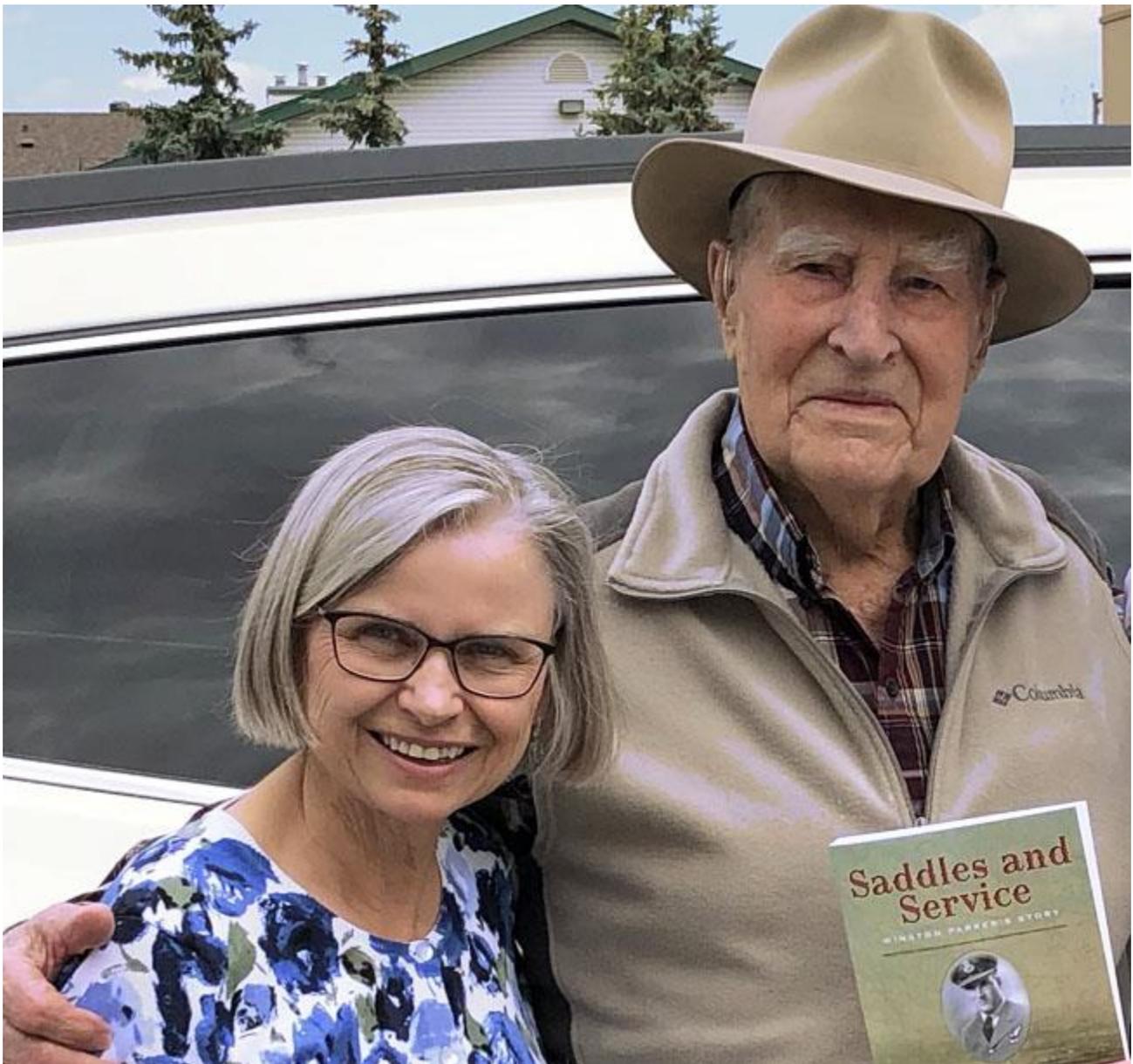
In the United States, you may order a copy of Winston's book online from Amazon by clicking here: [Saddles and Service](#).

A widower with no children, Winston celebrated his hundredth birthday on July 31, 2018. He still lives in Okotoks, where he maintains an active lifestyle. He enjoys a game of crib, reading books, visiting with friends and family, and spending time at the Okotoks & District Seniors Club, which he helped to build.

He still plays bridge! Little could he know that a game he learned in the prison camp as a diversion would bring him great pleasure for the rest of his life.

On November 11, Winston, who has been a member of the Canadian Legion since 1945, plans to attend the community's Remembrance Day service.

Winston Churchill Parker, thank you very much for your willing sacrifice and the suffering you endured while serving your country.



About Elaine Thomas

Elaine, who has called Winston her friend since she was five years old, is a Southern Alberta farm girl who studied journalism at SAIT Polytechnic in Calgary.

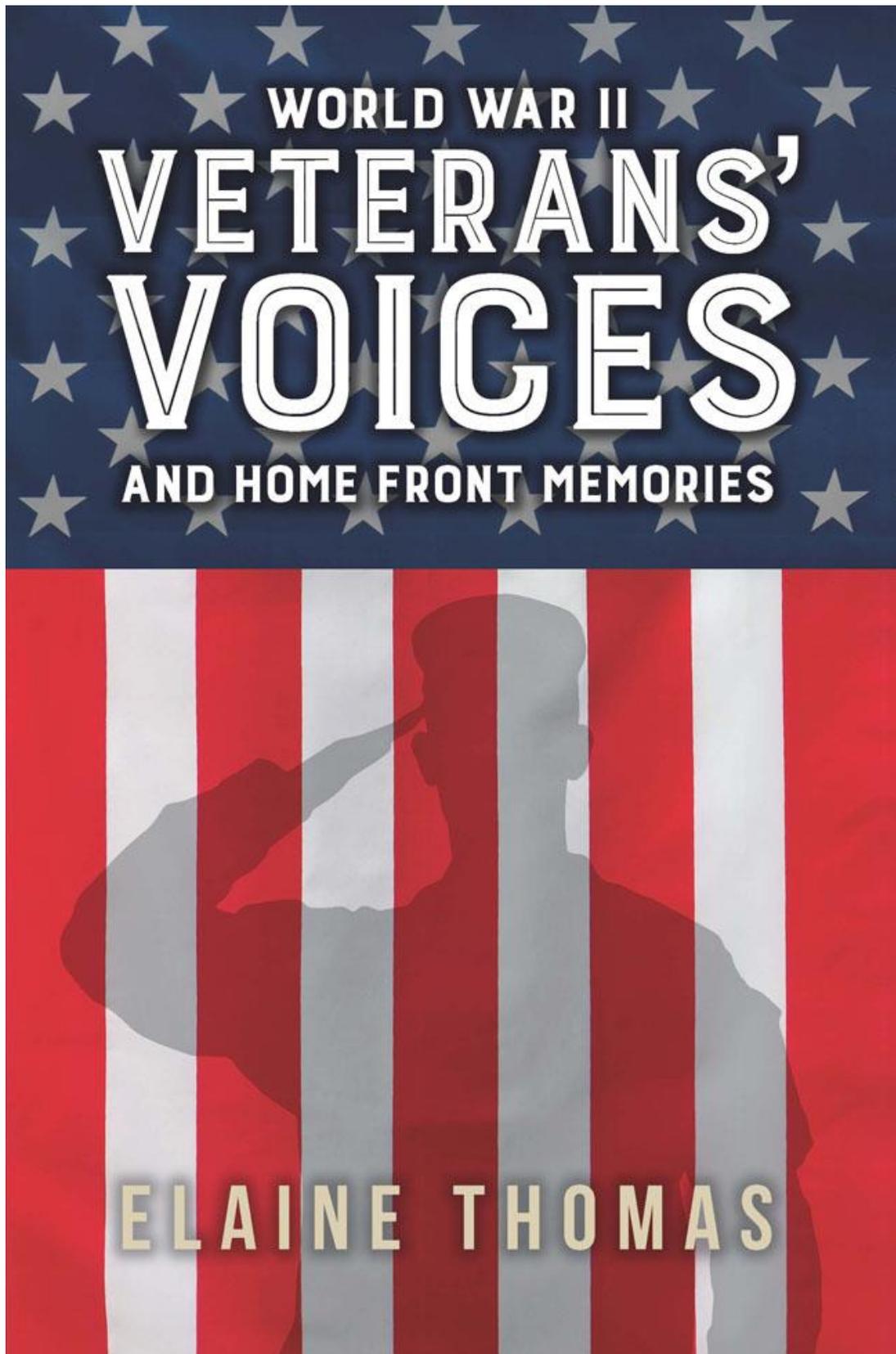
An award-winning non-fiction writer, Elaine spent decades both as a corporate public relations professional, and an independent communications consultant and business writer, before returning to her niche — storytelling.

The author of several books and many special publications, Elaine shares the memories of those who reside in small towns and rural communities in feature articles and her newspaper columns. Elaine and her husband, Emil, live on a farm in Central Texas.

Her award winning new book, titled [Veterans' Voices and Home Front Memories](#) was released in 2018. It recounts the first-person stories of 63 veterans and female civilians, all with ties to Fayette County, Texas. The book features more than 100 photos and illustrations.

Following Winston's example, Elaine and Emil are donating profits from book sales to an endowed scholarship at Blinn College in Schulenburg, Texas.

Read more about Elaine by clicking here: [Elaine Thomas](#).



Elaine's compilation of memories from the Greatest Generation is available from Amazon in Canada by clicking here: [Veterans' Voices and Home Front Memories](#).

It's available on Amazon United States by clicking here: [Veterans' Voices and Home Front Memories](#).

(Note from Elinor: I had the pleasure of reading this book and it is crammed with fascinating personal stories from veterans. I highly recommend it!)