

Robert Bisset

Introduction

This account starts with Robert Bisset's daughter, long-term Canadian resident Pam Honore, wishing to ensure that artefacts in her possession relating to her father were given to the appropriate repository.

Pam Honore
Alberta, Canada,
9th April, 2021

Dear Alastair,

My school friend Pat MacLeod dropped off my father's mementoes to you, and you kindly copied me on your response.

I will try to fill in what you want to know, but your note gave me information I did not have:

I did not know Dad had skipped a year at school, (you said "I've checked subsequent years annual reports, and surprisingly his early success was not repeated, but that may have been because he was promoted to a higher class") if that is what you mean in the letter. I would like to be sure of that. As a retired teacher I believe it is a bad move for a child to skip a year.

I did not have his war records, though our daughter, now married and living in Edinburgh, has a box of medals (my paternal grandfather's and my father's) left to her as his only granddaughter because the four grandsons seemed not to care about them as children, and she always looked them over with interest whenever we visited from Canada. This decision was my mother's and now of course the said grandsons are a bit miffed about it.

My father, like most men who went through WWII, rarely mentioned his experiences. My parents married on Sept 1st, 1939 and he was called up on the 3rd. They were on their honeymoon at Carfraemill and returned from an afternoon walk to find the proprietrix of the hotel weeping into her apron and announcing to Dad that he had been called up. He was in the Royal Artillery and served as an anti-aircraft gunner in the South near Shrivenham until the Normandy Landings, when he went over to Arranches and fought his way with his men through France from there. I am unsure where they ended up. It was great to learn that was elevated to Major in '43, for I have just had a studio portrait of him copied for his grandchildren and told them I thought it was for his elevation to Major that it had been taken in '43, so I had figured that out correctly. After the War he was posted for a long time in Luneburg overseeing matters in that area of defeated Germany. I was born in 1941, and I really did not know him until I was five years old.

His younger brother Alexander James Ramsay Bisset (born probably March 1914, and always known as Ramsay) also served (Seaforth Highlanders) but was taken prisoner at St Valéry and was moved around after escaping several times, till he was dumped in Colditz, where he spent the rest of the time among high-ranking officers planning escapes. I would love to know if Uncle Ramsay's WWII record shows up at RHS.

The King Gillies connection I recall as something Dad mentioned when he saw my first Latin grammar, saying that it was written by his Rector. I loved that book and was delighted by the letter from King Gillies to Dad. I took a degree in Classics and taught Latin and Greek at St George's in Edinburgh before emigrating to Canada in '68. So when I saw the report card in Latin it was a big thrill - and I imagined it must have been just par for the course back then. Is that right? Did all the boys get such lovely report cards?

Doctor King Gillies may just possibly have taken a little extra interest in Dad and Uncle Ramsay because they had lost their own father in 1919, courtesy of WWI.

It has taken this long to find these things because when my mother died in 2010, I went over to Scotland to assist my sister with clearing out the house. She didn't want any of the old documents, so I parcelled them all up and brought them home here to Alberta, where they have sat all this time. We were moving house in 2010 and somehow I just didn't get around to the stuff from Mum's house till this year, when I began to think of the things my own three children will have to go through at the end of our lives. So I started shredding and throwing out paper - and found

this little trove. I suppose the pandemic and enforced leisure time to fill were really the drivers here. It's an ill wind....

I hope this is all you want (it may even be too much), and I am really happy to know that some record of my dear father is lodged where it belongs and will last.

Thanking you for your interest,

Sincerely,

Pam Honoré

AA to Pam

15th April 2021

Many thanks for your fine account of your father's life. We will treasure your account, and it will form a permanent part of the archive and the published history. It will be good to acquire as much archival information and support as possible, and to this end the 'studio portrait' of your father, and the medals which are with your daughter in Edinburgh are two items for which scans or photographs would be important. Also, might it be possible for you to provide some detail of his life after the War? Perhaps you could merge some more of your personal history into the account. Are you happy for the three documents you sent to be published? I note the vellum certificates are referred to in the 1926 and 1927 prize lists as 'First Class Honours Certificates'.

We also intend to make a feature of all seven players in the 1934 Melrose sevens winner's photo. I've now identified all of them; six have service records which will form part of the story, while D. Murray (David Murray) doesn't, but found fame later - see <https://www.ecurieecosse.com/history>.

I'm not sure if I have already reported that one of the other members in the Rugby team was the subject of an enquiry within days of my receiving your envelope from Pat Macleod. Thomas Sutherland Brotherstone is sitting just in front of your father. His great niece contacted me, wanting to know more about his school life. He was Captain of Rugby, Cricket and School in 1931, and joined the RAF, spending time in Canada according to his Roll of Honour entry which I've also attached. Sadly, he was killed in a flying accident at Prestwick Airport in December 1944. We have researched and obtained a number of documents which we have shared with that family.

Moving class. Apologies for my English - you would probably award me 'FG-' (Fairly Good minus was a usual Royal High School 'apologetic accolade') for that. I might have said "...he was promoted to a higher class in the same year, which would have placed him among a better standard of pupils, thus making prize-winning more difficult".

Alexander James Ramsay Bisset I've attached his Roll of Honour entry. Neither of the brothers won academic prizes in later years, but Robert won a Gymnastics prize in his 5th (and apparently final) year in 1930. I don't have the 1931 Annual Report to check Ramsay's attainment in his final year. Given that he was stated to have been captured in 1940, was that at Dunkirk? Sad that he had to endure so many years imprisonment in Germany, but if as you said he ended up in Colditz he had clearly spent a lot of time planning escape. You mention his birthdate as 'probably March 1914'. Can you please advise the exact date of your father's birth?

Latin in report cards - sadly I didn't win any prizes at school, and have never seen any other examples like the ones you sent. Although Classics was still an important subject when I was at school (I left in 1962), I suspect that its influence was waning. Report cards were pretty mundane, and certainly contained no Latin references. In the 2020 Annual Report where all prize-winners are listed, there is an attempt at Latin, but the writer manages to confuse 'Dux Proxime' and 'Proxime to Dux'. Until recently, the term 'Proxime Accessit' was also used. There was however a Dux of Latin last year; this is the oldest named award - The MacGregor Prize (1794).

Your comment about parents not recounting their wartime experiences resonates with me; my sister only recently told me that my father (who died in 1997) talked to her about his being posted to Antwerp in an administrative role late in 1944. He had suffered toothache, and had been sent to a dentist in the centre of the city, was examined, and asked to return the next day for treatment. When he did, he couldn't understand why he couldn't find the building; that was because it and several nearby had been obliterated overnight by a V2. The following extract explains the situation well:

Shortly after the beginning of the V2-offensive and the liberation of Belgium in September 1944, the first V1's and V2's fell on Belgian territory. The real start of the V-terror in Belgium was the first V2 that fell on Antwerp on October 13, 1944. From October 21 V1's were also launched on the city. In November a new offensive began on Liège and Antwerp. The deadliest V-bombing in the first period happened on November 27, when a V2 hit the busy Teniersplaats in Antwerp. 159 people died, of which 29 were allied soldiers. The deadliest day in the V-history was December 16 1944. On that day the Germans relaunched the V-offensive on Antwerp and Liège. One of the V2's fell on the Antwerp Cinema Rex, where almost 1000 people were watching a western movie. 567 people died in the deadliest bomb impact in the Second World War.

One can understand why he didn't want to talk about it.

I'm very much looking forward to assembling the various components, and will make all of them available in confidence to the contributors prior to publication, should permission be given.

All the very best
Alastair

Pam Honore
16th April 2021

Dear Alastair

You have many questions - and I will answer them eventually to the best of my knowledge. Of course, since I left my native shores when my father was only 56, I have big blanks about his later professional life, but my sister can fill these in due course. I saw her this morning on Facetime, and the first job was easy: she went through her pile of rugby pictures and gave me the info on them: all of them are of full teams, no more sevens that she could find so far.

Here goes:

1. A team picture taken in Belfast, not dated, with Dad as Captain.
2. A school 1st XV from 1928-29.

The other 7 are all FP teams – 1930/31 through 1938/39 (missing 1933/34)
(On another point: Uncle Ramsay was born March 28th, 1914, or so we both think.)

Yours,
Pam

Sunday 2nd May 2021

Hi Alastair

My sister and I have come up with a list of Dad's employers over the years. He was a CA and worked always in the brewing business as Secretary or Director to various companies, namely these: Bernard's, Jeffrey's, Tennent Caledonian, Carling and Bass Charrington. He took early retirement at 59, not for any medical reason but to show an example of what he thought was a good idea. He had always fancied running a country inn, which he managed to get as part of his retirement agreement. It was a tied house, THE BLUE BELL in Alston, Cumbria. My mother was a trained caterer, so that worked well until 1977, when he had a dreadful brain abscess that very nearly killed him and left him in hospital for months. The after-effect of that was that one of his great skills - orienteering - was lost, and he frequently could not find his way around places he knew well. My parents moved up to Haddington in late 1978 or early 1979 to an easier property on one level. Nature had not finished with Dad yet, because, after a lifetime of being hale and hearty - I never saw him miss a day of work - he was diagnosed with ALS. This was really terrible for him, since he had always been so active. He gradually lost the ease of movement he had always enjoyed, but to the end he could get around on elbow crutches. He lived for twelve years that way, only to die of a stroke in 1991. My mother always felt the diagnosis was wrong and thought something sinister had entered Dad's brain while the abscess was being drained. I suppose she based that idea on the unusually long time that he lived with ALS!

This is just a short account of Dad's post-war life. I hope it is what you wanted.

Sincerely, Pam

Monday 20th January, 2022

Dear Alastair

I have read with delight all that you so kindly sent me and found (as an editor of my own writing and poor typing) three errors. Maybe they can be corrected by you. *Done, AA – 11 01 2022.*

Three more things:

1. Dad's brother Alexander James Ramsay Bisset was always known as RAMSAY, never James.
2. I think you wanted Dad's birth date: 11 September 1912
3. I may have found a way to get the Belfast picture to you through Pat MacLeod. Stay tuned.

Thank you for your patience. We've been getting our bathroom renovated during COVID and at 36 degrees below zero: bad timing makes things much more inconvenient than they should be. (at last after 3 weeks the temp is more liveable)

Wishing you a much better 2022,

Pam

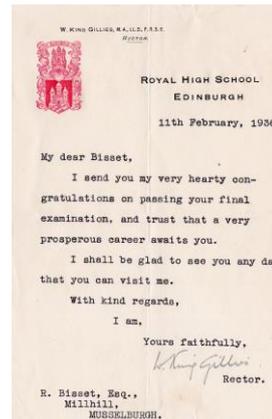
Photos



R Bisset 1931 Commendation for Science and Geography



R Bisset 1932 Commendation for History and Maths



1936 February letter from Rector King Gillies offering congratulations on passing his final exam (CA?)



R Bisset, back left in the photo of the winning 1934 Melrose team



R Bisset 4th from the right in the back row of the 1933-34 FP XV



The Blue Bell Inn, Alston, managed by Robert and his wife in retirement from 1969 to 1977



1939 Ulster tour, RHS versus Knock RFC, Robert Bisset Captain



1938-1939 1st FP XV - Robert Bisset Captain