

## **A Vine Canadian War Story**

Lloyd Lovo was not a tall man. Both his appearance and character remain firm in my mind, even though it's now fifty years since last seeing him: a sturdy man with a stocky build; pleasant, cheerful features; a great sense of humour; down to earth; calm by nature; and above all, a decent human being. Lloyd joined the Canadian Army early in the war as a private soldier. He finished the war as a field officer: Major L. Lovo, 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Armoured Brigade. Following the war Lloyd opted to work for the Alberta Liquor Control Board (ALCB) as a clerk, a significant drop in rank. I met Lloyd twenty five years later, when I spent a brief time with the ALCB. By then Lloyd was the Director of Operations, which to those who knew him would have come as no surprise.

When coffee break came around Lloyd would often join us at our table, rather than sit with his fellow "brass". "Us" were the younger lads, junior management in our mid to late twenties, or a year or two past thirty. He seemed to enjoy sharing time with us, and the feeling was certainly mutual. We invariably learned from what he had to say, and on the rare occasion we might even pry a "war story" from him. They were fascinating tales, all pretty much non-violent because Lloyd preferred to stay away from that side of things. One of his stories stood out above all others, however, for it was not only humorous, it also demonstrated the Canadian soldier's ability to adapt under appalling conditions (er, sort of), and as such was well worth the telling. The "action" took place in a vineyard in Northern Italy. The time was the winter of 1944/45.

The weather that year was especially bad: cold, icy, wet and miserable. Both the Allies and the Germans found themselves bogged down and movement was next to impossible. The

Canadian regiments, along with their allies, settled uneasily into fixed positions. Lloyd's tank squadron found itself occupying a vineyard blessed with several large wine vats, each full of the current year's crop. The regiment immediately set about the regular business of war: fortify defensive positions; mark out fields of fire; initiate communications; set up the unit's HQ; establish supply lines; and of course, sample the wine—not necessarily in that order. The rich, ruby liquid was not long past the bubbling stage so vintage was a nonissue; nor, as it turned out, was taste. The wine was quickly declared wanting; or, to quote Lloyd, "It was bloody awful." Nonetheless, as many a Canadian soldier knew, once wine is fermented, it contains all the alcohol it will ever have—and soldiers hate to see waste...

Lloyd never did detail his role in what followed, but being a major and in charge of a tank squadron, well, you know what it is that rolls downhill, and none of it seems to have done any rolling. Besides, the sergeants and corporals doubtless had the wheels of production already turning on the time-old basis of don't ask, just do, and deal with problems later. One of the Sherman tanks, likely the oldest and most war-torn, was driven alongside the closest wine vat. The attached REME unit (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers) was likely called on to re-rig the cooling system: the cobweb of tubes and piping needed to construct a still, with maybe a pressure gauge or two added for safety. The tank's anti-freeze was readily flushed out, and in very short time a steady flow of red wine was piping through what remained of its innards. A good deal of tinkering and tightening would have been necessary to get the right balance, but whatever it took, the tankmen were soon operating a viable distillery. The steady flow of high proof moonshine that eventually dribbled through the tubing was sufficient to supply the entire squadron.

Lloyd mentioned the tank was given a name. It was a definite ‘she’, but since it has long been forgotten I took the liberty of rechristening her Lucy. The name is only one letter away from ‘lucky’, which was probably how Lloyd’s men felt once the “hooch” began trickling through in quantity—a quantity that soon became a quandary. Success breeds success, but too much success often creates problems. The squadron’s thirst was readily slaked, and it was not long before a glut appeared on the market. Lucy’s engine was constantly running, being the most practical *modus operandi*. Her endless, throbbing rumble was interrupted only by oil changes and a modest level of servicing. After all, once a distillery is successfully operating it’s a darn shame to shut it down, the more so when there is no end of raw material...

The supply of moonshine continued to grow as production out stripped consumption, causing a buildup in inventory. Some of this was stored for future use of course, for no armed forces unit knows when it will move out, so such a reserve was actually a necessity. Not only that, on a day to day basis there was always a possibility the operation might blow up in the unit’s face, so to speak, either literally or due to orders from above. However, as the inventory continued to build, there seemed little choice but to dispose of surplus product, preferably at a profit. The tank crews set about finding a market.

On one flank were the Americans, and on the other flank were the British. A steady supply of moonshine was soon being traded with both. A balanced supply and demand was eventually established, and operations continued to purr along through the rest of winter without a hitch. Then, around February of ’45, the inevitable happened: the regiment received orders to move.

On the positive side, the squadron had “got away with it” and in fine style, so there were few regrets. There is never a good time to call a halt to success, granted, but if an operation is a tad on the sticky side, it’s always best to get out when the going is good. The remaining inventory was distributed where it would do the most good: amongst the regiment. As to Lucy, most of her removable parts, other than those involved in the makeshift still, had been cannibalized over winter, right down to the steel treads. Anything of value that remained REME stripped from the hull, and placed in stores. Eventually, only one problem remained: what to do with what was left of Lucy? Now a broken wreck, only one choice remained.

One of the regiment’s Shermans rumbled into the compound, and the gunner solemnly drew a bead on Lucy’s weathered hull. A single explosion rang out and it was over. According to Lloyd, Lucy was accounted for as destroyed in action. Which, and you’ve got to love the English language, was sort of true. After all, over winter she probably saw more action than any other tank in the regiment.

That should have been the end of the story but for two events that took place, one immediately, and the other many years later. Every tale should end with a twist, and looking back I can still see the lop-sided grin on Lloyd’s face as he told us of an ironic side benefit to Lucy’s busy winter. This occurred when the regiment HQ issued orders to move.

During those long, hard months both the German and the Allied soldiers had been busy carrying out the usual tasks that generals like to order, when facing each other in static positions. Both sides regularly dispatched patrols to assess each other’s defenses, snatch prisoners, and even launch an occasional attack in strength in the hope of getting lucky. During this process, it

was sort of noticed that the Canadian troops based in and around the vineyard received noticeably less attention from German probes than other units on the flanks.

This odd sense of wellbeing was confirmed when Lloyd attended an orders group where an Intelligence Officer was giving a situation report (sit-rep). Part of his duties had been to interrogate German prisoners captured during the various winter operations. One of the gems gleaned by Intelligence was that enemy probes deliberately tried to avoid the area close by the Italian vineyard, because it was a well-known fact that the Canadians kept a Sherman tank warmed up and ready to go twenty four hours a day—they could hear its engine running!

The second occurrence took place on Remembrance Day, nineteen ninety five. I had been asked to give the annual remembrance address to the Westlock Legion, a speech of about twenty minutes (I was then a captain in the Canadian Armed Forces Reserve, and when possible the Legion liked to find someone in uniform give the speech). As part of the content I told the story of Major Lloyd Lovo and his “spirited” Italian command, in an effort to show the ingenuity of the Canadian soldier under improbable conditions.

Once the speech was over, one of those coincidences occurred that surprises a person, the more so because Westlock is a town of slightly less than five thousand people. The uncle of my accounting business partner, a man called Ian McIntyre, approached me with a question. “What did you say the name of that tank commander was?”

I repeated Lloyds name and rank and Ian, looking very pleased, said, “He was my commanding officer.”

Now to be honest, I had always wondered whether or not Lloyd’s stories, particularly this one, may have been slightly, well, I guess embellished is the word. However, Ian confirmed the

tale as true, and then told another story that Lloyd had never related; and looking back, nor would he have, for it was about Lloyd himself. You see, as already mentioned, he never really told stories that were about his own combat experiences. They would always be about events shared with other soldiers in his regiment, and the escapades and scrapes in which they found themselves.

And Ian's story? It seems that Lloyd was struck by a piece of shrapnel, causing a head wound. He refused to go back and get the wound treated, but his CO insisted, giving him a direct order to report to the field hospital. He wasn't away that long, but when he returned it was to find that his tank had suffered a direct hit, and the entire crew was killed.

You just never know, do you?

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