

Wendi Stewart

Essay – 598 words

Say Cheese

I have my father's camera, the one he took with him to India when he was stationed there during the Second World War. I'm not sure where and when he bought the camera, but I'm guessing he had it tucked into his kit when he ferried a Liberator from Gander Newfoundland to the Azores, to Morocco, to Tripoli, to Cairo, to Iraq, to Karachi India and to Bombay and Nagpur and finally to Calcutta.

The camera was a Zeiss Ikon Nettar, German made. My father kept meticulous and immaculate photo records of his time with the RCAF after he enlisted in October 1940 and learned to fly. Those photo journals captured the sense of adventure of war, the daunting burden of war, the camaraderie created by war, the fear of war and, undoubtedly, the loss.

I like looking at his camera, like listening to the metallic clicking sound when the lens recoils and snaps inside the camera's body. I imagine my father peering through the view finder, centering the image he wanted to capture, shifting his position to remove some distraction from the shot. The world my father saw through his camera was vastly different from the world I see through mine. Or is it?

He saw poverty in India, starving children. He saw the might of the elephants and the splendour of the Taj Mahal. He saw a single Japanese soldier defending a bridge as my father's squadron of Liberators approached, preparing to bomb the bridge to hold back the Japanese, to keep them out of the jungles of Burma. The sight of this soldier was so moving that my father's radio operator, an Australian named Pat Cavanagh commissioned an artist to paint the image captured on film, an image that gave the enemy a face.

My father's camera is no longer functional, or I'm assuming is no longer functional, but I could never part with it. He got his love of photography from his father, my grandfather Frank Ezra Stewart. Grandpa Stewart was the photojournalist in our family, taking photos of most of the notable things his grandchildren were up to, often capturing his favourites, Randy, Robbie and Ricky up to some mischief, and those images made my grandfather giggle. I, too, love photography, though my skill in photography will earn me no laurels.

My father's camera becomes a link, a connection to those who came before. It sits up on the shelf, smiling down at me and I take the camera down from time to time, open and close it and listen to the familiar click. I have some ridiculous digital camera, a Canon EOS 20D that is too heavy with its zoom lens and feels pretentious and ostentatious and all things "ous". I'm getting better at using it, or less bad. I've had it for ten years or so and have only in the past two years managed to take it off its "automatic mode". So that's progress, I suppose.

I like that I am like my father. I want some bit of him recognizable in me, as if that will keep his memory alive. My children never knew him, never knew his extraordinary capacity to love his children, never heard his infectious laugh or admired his blue eyes. But this camera, this piece of technology that he held in his hand and carted around with him to the other side of the world while he quickly transformed from a boy into a man, a transformation that war makes short order of, represents a possibility. I'm so glad for having this camera, his camera.

wendistewart@live.ca