

The Personal History Behind *The Paris Apartment* By Kelly Bowen



Figure 1: Kelly's great-uncle

From as far back as I can remember, history— and especially the history wound through the branches of my own family tree— has always been a source of fascination for me. As such, I am often the recipient of “old things” found in relatives’ basements and attics, an eclectic array of items boxed and marked with a label that always reads “For Kelly.”

A number of years ago, one of those boxes that came into my possession contained the diary of my great-uncle, Private Percy William Shields, killed in action on the battlefields of France on September 9, 1918, age 25. In his diary, Pte. Shields wrote in great detail about his wartime experience, offering the reader a vivid glimpse into what he endured during WW1.



Figure 2: Kelly's grandfather Harry

Twenty-two years later, both my grandfathers would serve in WW2, in the RCME and the RCAF respectively, and while they were lucky enough to make it home, they didn't keep a diary. Nor did they speak at all about their experiences, not to their children and certainly not to their grandchildren. The subject was off limits and it was as if those years had never existed.

Except they did exist, of course, and even if my grandfather did not speak of them directly, he did share his service in the RCME with me in a way that I didn't recognize until I was much older. By the time I was ten, I could read radio schematics and identify and solder the correct capacitor, resistor, or transistor into place. Together we rebuilt a hulking '38 RCA Victor and a pretty '42 Northern Electric, the latter which he presented to me for my thirteenth birthday.

Those hours fueled my fascination with radios and their many uses during the war, and I found the stories of the individuals who relied on those radios to send vital and clandestine information back to the Allies riveting. The fictional characters of Sophie Seymour and Estelle Allard in *The Paris Apartment* are based on the very real lives of Pearl Witherington Cornioley, Virginia Hall, Christine Granville, Nancy Wake, Josephine Baker, and Andrée de Jongh.

In 2018, I stumbled across the story of a Paris apartment found locked and untouched since WW2 when its owner, Mme. De Florian fled the occupying Nazis, never to return. I became transfixed by the questions that discovery provoked, and the similarities that were reflected in my own family tree. What makes people choose to either share or keep private an experience that so drastically impacts their life? Is it better to share such an experience in detail with those left behind the way my great-uncle did in his diary? Or is it better to leave the past sealed, sharing only aptitude from those years, the way my grandfather did with me?

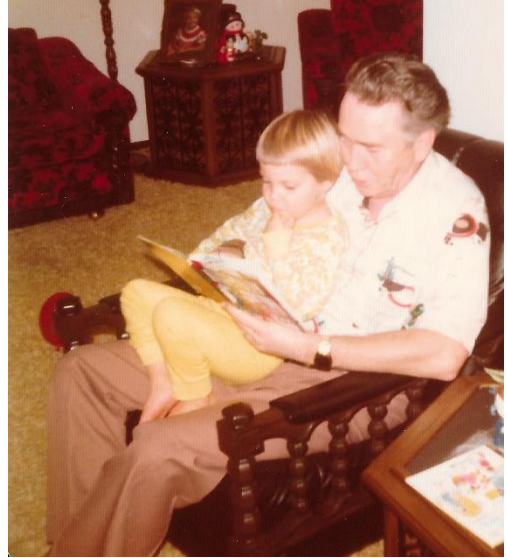


Figure 3: Kelly and her grandfather

There is no right or wrong answer to any of those questions, and the characters in *The Paris Apartment* must make their own choices, for their own reasons.

And for those who come behind, for those lucky enough to uncover the sacrifice and the courage of the generations before them, do those reasons matter?

Perhaps.

And perhaps not.