

## PROLOGUE

I was born in Gaspé in the family home of my mother who was a descendent of John LeBoutillier, one of the early residents of the Gaspé Peninsula. His great granddaughter, Gertie, my mother's unmarried sister, lived there until she died in 1984 when the house was sold to become a Bed and Breakfast and tourist attraction. As a child we would summer there with our cousins, and on rainy days, Aunt Gertie would often send us to the attic to play among the boxes of old toys, uniforms, dressmaking mannequins and assorted paraphernalia the attic contained.

My birth occurred on one of these summer vacations so I never lived in Gaspé and rarely returned as an adult. However, when I finally did take my own children to the family home, I suggested they view the "treasures" of the attic. It was while playing in the attic that my eight-year-old son discovered a Ganongs chocolate box containing his Great Uncle Leo's letters from the Front in World War I.

To our astonishment, Aunt Gertie entrusted the letters to our family. For the next 45 years my wife and I dutifully made sure they were never left behind on our rather frequent moves from house to house during our long life together. We would occasionally open the box and read one or two but there seemed little connection between Leo's life in the trenches in the First World War and my experience in the Canadian Navy in WWII. As our own children knew nothing of war, there seemed little reason to read the entire box but we still honoured Aunt Gertie's trust in me to keep and preserve the letters.

It wasn't until my wife and I decided to visit the Normandy Beaches on the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Allied Invasion that I thought of visiting the Canadian Monument at Vimy where Leo had fought. We stayed at an old Hotel in Arras, and with our adult daughter, who resides in Switzerland, we visited the trenches, battlefield and "no man's land" at the Canadian site of Vimy.

It was a gloomy, rainy day when we walked the same ground on which Leo had fought and suddenly we began to feel his presence. We immediately returned to our Hotel, quickly brought out the random sample of his letters we had thought to bring with us and began to read.

In this setting, under these conditions, the letters came alive and spoke to us as though he were there. We were hypnotized by his words and impressed by his writing talent. He seemed to talk to us over the years about his personal experience as a Canadian soldier in a war that continues to defy explanation to the average Canadian.

Shortly after returning to Canada my wife said to me "You have to write Leo's story" and thus this book began.

My first thought was to survey other family members who might have photographs or memories of Uncle Leo. This activity was rewarded with an incredible outpouring of interest, support, letters and pictures.

My initial helper was my sister's son Tim who found in his mother's basement several letters and who helped organize and enter some of this manuscript into the computer. Further family research involved the enthusiastic participation of many of the surviving nieces and nephews, some of whom had, like Aunt Gertie, saved the letters written to their mother or father from Leo.

Leo's brother Bert's son Charles is still a resident of Gaspé and he and his son Matthew continue to operate C. S. LeBoutillier Insurance there. Charles and his wife Betty as well as their son Steven in Toronto and niece Ann in Calgary provided some of the most informative and poignant of the letters included in this book.

They also provided an article that appeared in *Rod and Gun* magazine in 1910 written by the aspiring author sixteen year old Leo. He turns out to be an excellent writer who's writing and publishing career has had a 97-year pause but is now being revived in this book.

The project has resulted in the extended family renewing contact with each other largely through the efforts of Winifred Emmett of Montreal who hosted a family gathering to talk and reminisce about Gaspé summers when we were young. It seems as if Leo's letters have had the same effect on others as he did in person where he was acknowledged by all who knew him as a kind, and loyal friend respectful of and respected by others.