

Captain John Graham Wilkin, MC

In place of a nominating document, we are sharing Captain John Graham (“Jack”) Wilkin’s autobiography, written in 2000. His own account of his life, service, and contributions provides valuable insight into the qualities that make him a Leader and Trailblazer within RCEME.

**Autobiography
Of
John Graham Wilkin
(called Jack)
Born: March 25, 1919
At Paris, Ontario, Canada**

**A Millennium Project
January 1, 2000**

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1. Introduction

For many years, I have assumed that one day I would produce a short autobiography setting out the highlights of my background, activities, accomplishments, and recognition. However, I could never seem to get started. I finally decided to make it a millennium project for the year 2000, and began work.

The portrayal that follows is based on memory, and on an examination of a lifetime accumulation of recorded information. I believe that it is reasonably accurate.

2. Ancestors

My Grandfather Wilkin's name was John. He was a successful farmer in the vicinity of Aberdeen, Scotland. He married Helen Cockburn, also of Aberdeen. They had four sons - Jack, Tom, Albert, and Fred, and three daughters - Mary Ann, Lily, and Laura.

Their son, Thomas George Wilkin, my Father, was born on January 13, 1885. He assisted with the farming, raised horses, and illegally hunted pheasants and rabbits on the Laird's estate nearby.

In 1903, Dad emigrated to Canada, and worked at Oak Park Farm, located near Paris, Ontario. He brought horses over from Britain for sale to Canadian buyers, one of whom was John Penman, a millionaire factory owner in Paris. He hired Dad as his coachman, and later his chauffeur, and maintenance man for his buildings and equipment.

Penman owned a large private island in Lake Rosseau, Muskoka. Dad accompanied the family to the island for several weeks each summer, to run and to maintain the various boats, and the buildings and equipment.

It was on one of those summer visits that Dad met a young woman named Mary Finlay Graham Bunyan. She also had emigrated to Canada from Scotland (the Glasgow area). Mary was employed as a maid on the island next to Penman's. They met at the Royal Muskoka Hotel nearby. They were attracted to each other, had a whirlwind romance, became engaged, got married, all in short order, and settled down in Paris, Ontario. In quick succession they had two daughters, whom they named Helen Mary, and Laura Margaret, and the writer - who was born on March 25, 1919.

3. Early Years

In the days of my youth, there were no television sets or computers to entertain children, and so, in groups, we made our own fun and games, including:

- playing in the neighbour's barn with his children
- swimming in the polluted Grand River
- climbing and diving from the abutments of the overhead train bridge
- playing in Walter's Woods (only a half mile away) - building forts, and tree houses

- raiding the neighbour's fruit orchard
- skating on the Grand River
- skiing on the long steep hill down to the river (using skis made from barrel staves).

This kind of fun was interfered with by having to do such things as:

- household chores
- gardening, and lawn cutting
- looking after about 100 chickens
- feeding them, collecting the eggs, cleaning the hen houses

The weekly allowance for the above work was ten cents. This was sufficient to cover the five-cent admission to the Saturday afternoon movie matinee, and the five-cent charge for a bucket of popcorn. The first show that I remember seeing was called "Wings" - an aerial warfare movie - in sound! Also popular were the serials on Cowboys and Indians. Fun!

I spent a lot of time building model airplanes, from balsa wood and paper covering. I became quite skilled at it, and received many compliments.

I loved automobiles, trucks, and machines. I was first behind the wheel of a car at age eleven, using a six-inch-thick, firm cushion behind me so that I could reach the pedals. Dad taught me, and did a good job of it (back roads only, and very disciplined). I was driving regularly before I was old enough to get my licence at age sixteen.

Because of my love of cars, one summer I worked in one of the local garages without pay, just to be near cars and mechanics. As a result of this experience, I was offered a job, the following summer, by the owner of another garage. He paid me five dollars a week, to pump gasoline, and to grease cars. I was on my way!

My favourite event was to go to Penman Isle with my Dad, and live in the cottage assigned to him there, and eat in the kitchen of the mansion, with the staff. I played in and on the water, and used the row boats, and drove the putt-putt (a double-ended row boat with a one-horsepower motor in the middle). Yes, these were the good old days!

4. Education

I attended Paris Public, and Paris High Schools through Grade 13. My marks generally fell in the low seventies, well behind my sisters. I enrolled in the School of Practical Science, at the University of Toronto. I lived in residence at Knox College for the first three years, and at home in Islington, Etobicoke, for the fourth year.

In September 1939, World War II broke out, and Canada declared war on Germany and Italy. I wanted to join the Army, and “do my bit” for King and Country, and take part in the great adventure. Besides that, my friends were doing so. Dad (wisely) counselled continuing at university until graduation. He also advised that financial assistance would cease if I didn’t!

Dad won out, and I had to content myself with summer militia training, and enrolling in the Canadian Officers Training Corps (COTC) at university, where I was assigned the rank of Corporal.

In the second half of my fourth year, I seized the opportunity to enroll as a probationary 2nd Lieutenant, in a training programme for potential tank commanders in the army, at Camp Borden. I was accepted, and told to report in February 1941. What to do now, about my university degree?

I went to see the Dean of the Engineering Faculty. He examined my record, and commented that it was not that great, but he would see what he could do, in view of the noble cause that I was pursuing! The department approved of my being granted the degree of Mechanical Engineer. I came down from Borden to receive my diploma with the rest of my class, in May 1941.

Well, I had gotten through my theoretical training!

5. Military Service

When I went to Camp Borden, on February 3, 1941, as a potential tank commander. I came across two senior officers who were previously members of the U. of T. Engineering Faculty staff. They were setting up an armoured division workshop. When I told them what I was doing there, they said that I should be with them in their new shop, for which my engineering training made me well suited. I agreed, and they pulled strings and had me transferred to them in the Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps (E).

I served almost 5 years in the RCOC(E), and its successor the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (RCEME), as 2nd Lieutenant, Lieutenant, and Captain. We were the mechanics of the Army - doing recovery, maintenance, and repairs for tanks, trucks, guns, and. all other equipment. I served 10 months in Canada, 24 in England, 16 in Italy, and 9 in Belgium and Holland.

I was awarded the Military Cross, for my performance under heavy fire, on December 20, 1944, at the Fosso Munio (river) crossing, in Italy. For the better part of the day, I was co-ordinating efforts to get tanks across, and remove anything that bogged down and blocked the way. I do not believe that mine were “heroic” actions, but just those of a person doing his best under trying conditions. The medal was presented to me by King George VI, at a November 13, 1945 Investiture, at Buckingham Palace, in London, England, on my way home after the war. That event was certainly one of the highlights of my life. It was a memorable occasion.

Additionally, by the King's Order, my name was published in the London Gazette, on January 10, 1946, as mentioned in a Despatch for distinguished service (officially termed the MID).

I arrived back in Canada in December 1945, and was discharged from the Army on January 4, 1946, and placed on Reserve Status in case of future requirement for my services (which did not occur).

The military phase of my life was interesting and challenging. It forced me to accept responsibility and accountability, and to grow up in a hurry. It was a strong influence on the moulding of my character and my personal characteristics.

A 1946 photograph in uniform, war medals, and citations, are mounted in a large picture frame (Further detailed information and congratulatory messages are contained in Appendix B1.)

6. Family

In 1946, a chum and I went to Muskoka for a one-week holiday at the Royal Muskoka Hotel, on Lake Rosseau. This was the hotel where Dad had met Mom thirty odd years earlier! There I met an attractive young lady named Elizabeth Lorraine Tyrer, from Toronto.

Lorraine was the Canadian born daughter of Elliott Golden Tyrer (of Toronto) and Elizabeth Belle Jacobs (an American from San Francisco area, U.S.A.). Elliott was managing a gold mine in Atlin, Northern British Columbia, for A.R. Koffman, a wealthy footwear manufacturer in Kitchener, Ontario.

Belle didn't like the north country, and eventually returned to California. Lorraine accompanied her, and took much of her schooling there, coming north to Atlin for her summer vacations. In due course Elliott and Belle were divorced, and Lorraine settled down in Toronto with Elliott, and his second wife, Muriel McCusker of Vancouver.

I succumbed to Lorraine's beauty, her charm, and her personality. In due course, I asked her to marry me. However, the matter was a bit more complicated than expected. It turned out that I had competition from an American Marine back in San Francisco! Being on sight here, was an advantage for me, and Lorraine eventually decided in my favour, and accepted my proposal.

After a fairly extended engagement, we were married on October 30, 1948, in Knox College Chapel (Toronto), by the Rev. R. Douglas MacDonald, my sister Laura's husband. Thus began a happy marriage, which lasted forty-eight years.

The result of this marriage was three fine sons, Bruce, Dave, and Rick. They took their schooling in Etobicoke, and graduated from secondary school as Ontario Scholars. They went on to college or university, and advanced training thereafter. They married fine women, Deb, Linda, and Barb, who collectively gave birth to eight children:

Christopher, Stephen, Mitchel, and Justin

Victoria, Allison, Stephanie, and Jennifer

Bruce is a Nuclear Physicist, with Atomic Energy of Canada. Dave and Rick are Consultants with firms specializing in computer software. I am proud of these sons, and their accomplishments.

My sister Laura graduated from the University of Toronto in languages. She married the Rev. Doug MacDonald, did some teaching, and raised four children - Mary Ellen, Rory, Greta, and Angus.

My sister Helen, graduated as a nurse from Toronto General Hospital. When World War II broke out, she immediately signed up as a Nursing Sister (Lieutenant) in the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, and went overseas in 1940. While in England, she met and married Lieutenant Arthur E. Cannon, of Quebec City. He was subsequently killed in action in Sicily, and was buried on the Mediterranean Island of Malta. Helen never remarried.

Mother died on October 26, 1966, at age 75, and Dad died on January 11, 1975, at age 90.

7. Business Career

When I arrived home from overseas, in December 1945, I enquired of the Professional Engineering Association if they knew of any jobs for which I might have a suitable background. They suggested Ontario Hydro, as it had an opening for which I might be qualified. I applied, was offered a job, accepted it, and started work on January 8, 1946, four days after discharge from the Army.

The job was that of a Junior Engineer at the Bloor Street Machine Shop in Toronto's west end. That shop was the storage, supply, repair and maintenance base for all of the construction machinery, equipment and supplies used by the Construction Division in the building of the new generating stations, during Hydro's postwar expansion.

New equipment such as trucks, bulldozers, power shovels, air compressors, and boilers, were purchased and shipped to new projects from this shop. Between projects, equipment and machinery were returned for repairs, overhaul, and storage, until required at the next job site. This was work which I enjoyed, and for which I was well suited.

In May 1950, I transferred (on promotion) to the Construction Division Head Office group, as a Works Engineer. That job involved the planning and co-ordination of construction activity on new hydraulic power developments. It included arranging for the necessary staff, equipment, and materials for the field forces.

Three years later, in July 1953, I was asked if I would like to join the Personnel Branch, as Job Evaluation Officer, responsible for establishing the salary classifications for clerical, technical, administrative, and professional jobs. As this would be a promotion, a challenge, and an opportunity for broader experience, I accepted.

In 1955, a decision was made to replace the existing evaluation and classification system with more modern techniques. I was promoted to the position of Supervisor, Wage and Salary Administration and placed in charge of developing, and co-ordinating the implementation of the new systems.

Over the next 24 years of my Hydro career, I had a number of broadening and increasing responsibilities for the compensation function, including those of Manager of Salary Administration Services, and Manager of Salaries and Benefits. The latter position added responsibility for pensions, life insurance, and health insurance for all staff.

In January 1965, the Federal Bureau of Classification Revision, of the Canadian Civil Service Commission, asked that my services be made available, on a part-time basis, to advise on the development of a new salary classification system covering clerical jobs in the Civil Service. Between January and June 1965, I spent three days a week in Ottawa, and two in my Hydro office. During the summer and fall, I assisted in a number of training seminars for that organization. In 1966, I conducted a training seminar, as a consultant for the Civil Service.

Throughout the last 20 years in Personnel, I was rated as an excellent performer, and was paid at the upper end of the pay scale. I was absent on sick leave for only 22 days in my 33 years of service. I couldn't afford to be absent!

On April 1, 1979, I took early retirement from Hydro, at age 60. My life over the previous 24 years had been busy and hectic - made even more so by "community" activity (see section 9).

I wanted to relax a bit more, and have more time with Lorraine, and for hobbies and recreation.

Overall, I enjoyed my career at Hydro. It was interesting and full of challenge. I worked with a lot of good people, from the top of the organization to the bottom. I had to deal with both management and unions, and frequently was caught in between.

After retiring, I did part-time consulting work in the compensation area, over a five-year period. It kept getting in the way of my "community" work, and my rest and relaxation, and so I gave it up.

8. Recreation and Hobbies

During my business career, I jogged 3 or 4 times a week, for years. Eventually, I found that jogging on sidewalks and paved roads was too hard on the leg joints, and so I changed to 3-mile walks, with Lorraine, 3 or 4 days a week. We also began serious swimming in the indoor pools in the apartment, and condominium buildings in which we lived. Lorraine was an excellent swimmer, and for many years we enjoyed it. By the age of 75 or so, I had to give it up, as the clavicular joint in one shoulder started to deteriorate.

When the boys were young, we enjoyed taking them on three-week summer vacations, at various Ontario summer resorts. We particularly liked the Lake Muskoka area, and Dyke's cottages, just south of Port Carling. All of us liked the water, and we decided to try boating. It had great appeal, and before we knew it, we were launched on an activity that would go on for thirty years.

Our first boat was a 14-foot, Peterborough, plywood hull boat, with a 35 H.P. motor. We kept it on a trailer, which we towed behind our car to many launch sites. This was an open boat, with only a windshield to duck behind to avoid spray coming from the bow. We "outgrew" that boat, and bought a 17 foot, Crestline fibreglass craft, with a 50 H.P. motor, and a small day cabin forward. This one was too big to keep at home, and so we joined the Toronto Humber Yacht Club (THYC), which was just 5 minutes drive from our home in Sunnylea, Etobicoke.

As the years went by, Lorraine and I got into boating in a serious way. We moved up to a 21 foot, Grew, fibreglass boat, with a 115 H.P. inboard motor, and a small cuddy-cabin forward. We could sleep aboard it overnight, but could not live aboard.

A few years later, we moved up to boat number 4. It was a 26 foot, Carver, 8-foot beam, fibreglass boat, with a 250 H.P. inboard engine, and a small, but fully equipped cabin amidship. This was a great boat for two people to cruise on Lake Ontario, and we did lots of that.

One year, we went to the Toronto Spring Boat Show to buy a few pieces of nautical equipment. That was a mistake! Lorraine got aboard a 29 foot Chris Craft, 250 H.P., fibreglass, cruiser with a 12-foot beam. It had a large spacious, fully equipped cabin with a double bunk bed forward, and a private rear cabin aft. The whole boat was beautifully finished, and had everything that one could ask for. She exclaimed, "I love it. I love it". After three days considering why we needn't, and shouldn't give up a perfectly adequate 26 x 8 boat, we owned boat number five, a 29 x 12 one.

Now we had the ideal boat to live aboard, and cruise all summer, and we did just that - except when we had to return to port, far too often, for social or family events. We really turned into "boating bums". The boat was ideally named "Wanderlust". It was too big for the Humber Yacht Club location, and we joined the Mimico Cruising Club, located on Lake Ontario.

With our last two boats, we cruised all over, and around Lake Ontario, up the Trent Waterway twice, up the Rideau Canal, and down the St. Lawrence River. What a relaxed, carefree life! But all good things must come to an end, and this one did - after thirty years of boating. Because of increasing costs, advancing age, and an impending move from the Toronto area, we sold our baby, and Lorraine cried when it left the club. (See page 63, for pictures of our boats).

As consolation for our loss, we agreed to use the money saved each year, to pay for an annual trip aboard an ocean-going cruise ship. We did that for four years. Our first one was a fourteen-day Mediterranean cruise visiting Spain, France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece, and several east Mediterranean island ports. In subsequent years, we took two Caribbean cruises, and one cruise through the Panama Canal. These were most enjoyable. Boating in whatever size boat was certainly our favourite pastime.

9. Community Contribution

I was always a contributor to the organizations with which I was associated. I had drive, dedication and thoroughness. If a job was worth doing, it was worth doing well.

While with Ontario Hydro, I did a lot of work with, and for, outside organizations. I was a guest speaker, and conducted compensation seminars for such organizations as:

Personnel Association of Toronto

American Compensation Association

Industrial Relations Management Association of British Columbia

Personnel Association of Greater Winnipeg

Canadian Electrical Association

Canadian Civil Service

In my spare time (and some of Hydro's), I worked for a number of community organizations. Three noteworthy examples are set out hereunder:

While with the Toronto Humber Yacht Club (THYC), I was treasurer in my first year, and commodore in my second year. For the rest of the time, with the club, I performed such seasonal tasks as doing dock layouts, assigning boats to docks, preparing the winter storage layouts, and supervising the haul out, and the launching of boats.

When we began boating, we decided that our three sons should learn to swim properly, and so we took them for swimming lessons. David turned out to be a natural in the water. We enrolled him in the Etobicoke Municipal Aquatic Club (EMAC). I often took him to training sessions and practices, and rather than just sit in the stands watching, I became involved in the club operation. That led to eight years of work for the Canadian Amateur Swimming Association (CASA). I served two years on EMAC Board of Directors, as Meet Manager, and then Vice President. I moved up to the provincial level, and spent four years in several positions, including President, of the Ontario Section CASA. This was followed by two years on the National Executive of the CASA.

After retiring from Ontario Hydro, I joined the Toronto Chapter of the Electrical and Mechanical Engineers Association (my army corps association). It wasn't long before I was asked to do a couple of minor jobs on the executive committee. This resulted in my becoming vice chairman, (for two years), and then chairman (for two years). As past chairman, I set up a drive to increase the chapter membership. Over three years it increased from 65 to 110.

As a result of that success, I was asked to launch a similar drive as Recruiting Officer for the National EME Association. I agreed, and in three years, the national membership grew from 225 to 365. In all, I spent 18 years working for this association, in one job or another.

10. Elder Years

At age 75, I decided that I had made enough contribution to community, or volunteer organizations, and that I would henceforth be a "supporter" and cease being a "doer". Accordingly, I withdrew from the last of the committees on which I had been working.

Early in 1996, Lorraine and I, having conducted a thorough search in a number of mid-sized cities in southern and eastern Ontario, bought a recently built condominium suite in Waterloo. That was to be the place in which we would spend the rest of our time together. We set up a social, recreational, and entertainment programme, and began enjoying our "complete retirement" life style.

On February 8, 1997, however, catastrophe occurred. Lorraine had a sudden massive hemorrhage in the brain, and died within hours, at age 70.

Lorraine had been a wonderful wife and companion. She was loyal, devoted, and dedicated to her family - always putting others ahead of self. I loved her, and I miss her. Without her assistance and support, I would never have been able to accomplish what I did in life.

A year of living alone, and looking after myself, made me realize just how much I had lost, and what a hopeless provider and housekeeper I was. I therefore, searched for a suitable full-service residence that would meet my needs. I found it in Park Place Manor, in Aurora, just two kilometres from son Dave and family. I sold the condominium suite in Waterloo, and moved into Park Place, on March 24, 1998.

11. Looking Back

I reached the age of 80, on March 25, 1999, in reasonably good health physically, and with full mental capability.

As I look back, I conclude that, except for the demise of my lovely Lorraine, it has been a pretty good life, overall. It has certainly been busy, exciting, challenging, and far from dull. The most memorable events were meeting my King, meeting and marrying Lorraine, and the arrival of my three sons.

I believe that I made substantial contributions to Ontario Hydro, my country, and its residents. I put all I had into whatever I tackled, and received adequate accolades and recognition for my efforts.

I now hope that successors reading this autobiography find it to be of some interest and value.

If that be the case, my effort in producing it, will have been justified.

Have a Good Life.

April 1, 1999

The Award of
The Military Cross
to
Captain John Graham Wilkin
Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
Officer Commanding, 53 Light Aid Detachment
attached to the
2nd Canadian Armoured Regiment
Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians)

On the 20th of December 1944, two recovery tanks of the 53rd Light Aid Detachment, attached to the 2nd Canadian Armoured Regiment, Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) were detailed to provide recovery resources at the FOSSO MUNIO crossing.

An assault bridge was to be launched and the recovery tanks were to be the first across the bridge was launched, but before taking the tanks across, Captain Wilkin, commander of the 53rd Light Aid Detachment, went forward on foot and examined the bridge and found that it had been launched at such an angle that it was impossible for tanks to use it. He immediately informed the engineers who completed a fill with an armoured bulldozer. Throughout the bridging and filling operations, the crossing was subjected to a heavy concentration of enemy shell, mortar and machine gun fire, to such an extent that two M10 self-propelled guns, one D6 bulldozer and one tank were destroyed within a radius of two hundred yards of the bridge site.

Owing to the heavy concentration of fire that was brought to bear on the crossing and beyond, it was decided to put fighting tanks across first to assist the Perth Regiment. A troop of tanks was ordered to cross. The first two succeeded but the third tank bogged down in the fill, completely blocking the route and preventing any further crossings.

Captain Wilkin taking stock of the situation realized that the immobile tank could not be moved by his recovery tank. He therefore arranged for the use of a nearby armoured bulldozer. He then dismounted from his recovery tank with two of his men. They went forward on foot under heavy fire, dragging with them the heavy recovery cables, securing them to the stranded tank and the armoured bulldozer. He then directed the winching of the vehicle clear of the crossing.

In the face of intense enemy shell and mortar fire for some thirty minutes, Captain Wilkin acted with gallantry and without thought for his own safety and by his efforts was directly responsible for clearing the crossing and ensuring the passage of the supporting arms which were essential for the holding of the Perth Regiment bridgehead.

Canada Gazette, No 8, 1945