

“THE GUNS”

By

Lt J.P. Thompson

To Joe and Martha Thatcher, that Sunday morning started off like any other. For the past year now they had spent every Sunday morning at the flea market, in the same corner every week, selling their relics, old VHS tapes, and a large collection of novels. Joe loads the car and takes one last look around the house. He spies the small stack of vinyl records, dusty in the corner. With hesitation he asks his wife, “Should we bring the vinyl?”

Flea markets are often synonymous with large collections of junk. At first glance, I’m inclined to agree: to my left a middle aged woman is selling a candle holder with two German shepherds dancing around the candle; one of the dogs has only one eye remaining. There is a man in the back with a stunning collection of tins and buttons, with a stack of random National Geographic magazines dating back to August, 1972. Right in front of me an elderly couple are selling what seems to be a lifetime supply of romance novels, a stack of Disney VHS tapes, and a box of vinyl records. It’s the stack of vinyl that catches my eye and draws me over.

A month before this trip I purchased a brand-new record player from the local mall. It’s something I’ve always wanted to have. For a long time I’ve had a deep appreciation for music. My father has been a radio announcer for 25 years, and over time I’ve learned to play a variety of musical instruments. Even though records were phased out by cassette tapes, and made even more irrelevant with the introduction of CDs and mp3s, there is something about the sound of music on vinyl that I just love. In just a few short weeks I’ve managed to build a decent collection of my favourites: Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Bob Dylan, Nirvana, and lots of classical. This particular trip to the flea market has me looking for Michael Jackson’s “Thriller”. Although Thriller was my main

objective, I always keep an eye out for the obscure, as any good collector does. Last week at the flea market I found a priceless gem, an album entitled “How to Train your Dog”. I sometimes wonder if I’m abnormal for picking up a lot of what I do, but then I’m reminded of one of my neighbours, who is so devoted to her gardening that she’ll cover half her lawn with umbrellas when it rains to keep her beautiful flower arrangements dry. I take comfort knowing I’m just as crazy as my neighbours.

I start leafing through the elderly couple’s small collection. A few records are catching my eye, and I start setting them aside. Most of it is Christmas-related, the Charlie Brown Christmas story for example. As I’m nearing the end of their collection, I discover the inspiration for this essay.

Tucked away behind an album of great duets by Conway Twitty and Loretta Lynn (which I also picked up) is an album titled, “THE GUNS – A Centennial Tribute to the Royal Canadian Artillery”. It’s the only military related vinyl in their collection. I pull it out and start to look it over. Pulling it out, I see that it’s in great condition, no scratches. I wonder if it’s ever been played. The elderly gentleman at the table finishes with a customer and notices I’ve pulled a few records aside. “The records are a dollar each” he tells me. Putting on my best poker face I pay him for the vinyls, trying to disguise my excitement. I’m afraid he’ll notice my tremendous interest and like a good economist, jack the price up. Lucky for me he doesn’t pick up on my paranoia, and I hurry home to hear the results of my dollar well spent.

When I get home I head right for my record player. A quick glance at the back of the album cover reveals the fifteen tracks that make up the vinyl. My knowledge of the songs was limited. I’ve been to a few mess dinners before and seen the lyrics for “Screw

Guns” on some of the menus. I recall that I’d heard a young vice PMC lead a choir of mess dinner attendees in the singing of that same song at one particular mess dinner, allowing everyone to indulge in a much needed fifteen minute bathroom break afterwards. As I further examine the record I am impressed with the artwork design that was chosen to contain the vinyl. The front cover is a simple pattern of the artillery’s colors, with the insignia in the center. The inside cover is decorated with a 2-part print of four artillerymen standing by what appears to be a firing M105. The text in the corner is a description of the artillery memorial located on the historical “Major’s Hill Park” in Ottawa. Along with the track listing, the back cover is decorated with artwork of an artilleryman in ceremonial dress about to fire a cannon. Canadian Parliament is seen in the background. The back also states that the vinyl was recorded by the Royal Canadian Artillery Band, under the direction of a Major C.A. Villeneuve.

Not knowing very much else about the vinyl I found curiosity increasing. I decided to embark on a challenging crusade to find out as much information as I could about this historical treasure. I started my search on the first website that popped into my head: E-Bay. It’s not that I would ever consider selling this relic; but that my immediate curiosity had me wondering if there was an accompanying monetary value, perhaps more than the dollar I used to purchase it in the first place. Neither my search on e-bay nor my quick google search turned up anything relevant. Not the best start, less than a day in and I’d almost exhausted all of my resources for finding out more information. I had one more option available that I’d brainstormed: the Royal Canadian Artillery Museum. By calling the museum I was able to get in contact with Clive Prothero-Brooks, who works with the collections that come into the museum. He got back to me via e-mail a few days

later. Despite having a collection of over 400 military vinyls, he did not have the album in question. He did, however, give me some useful information. He wrote, "I am guessing the date of release might be 1971, that would be 100 years from the formation of the RCA in 1871." He wasn't sure on how many vinyls had been pressed, but he guessed not many. He told me about the International Military Music Society (www.immscanada.ca), saying that he used to be a member, and that they might have more information.

Seeing as how my e-bay and google resources had wilted faster than my neighbour's flowers in the frost, I saw no other option than to go forth and try the IMMS. Clicking on their 'contact us' page I sent an e-mail to CWO (retired) Jack Kopstein asking for help. Jack Kopstein delivered. Not only is Jack a member of the IMMS, he is also the site admin at worldmilitarybands.com. Further to that, he's written a book entitled, "When the Band Begins to Play – A History of Military Music in Canada". Needless to say, an essential ally in my crusade for knowledge. He confirmed that the record was released for Oct 20th, 1971, the centennial anniversary of the Royal Canadian Artillery. At the time, the album was recorded in Montreal by the RCA band, the oldest in the Regular Canadian Army, dating from 1899. This particular band, under the direction of (then) Major Charles Villeneuve, was the band that, a few years later, would go back into the recording studio and record all of the national anthems for the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. As the plot thickens I find myself needing more information. I send Jack the track listing and he sends me back a description of just about every track on the album. I discover that a lot of the tracks, for good reason, are deeply rooted within the history of the artillery. A few were initially written to honour British artillery. One folk song was written as a 'trot' song for mounted horseback troops pulling gun carriages.

“Post Horn Gallop” was used as a call to alert all on the gun line that the mail had arrived, an obvious favourite among the troops. The opening track, titled, “A Centennial Salute” was written by one of the band’s own members, G. Pando. As the needle touches the spinning vinyl, history comes to life as a boisterous fanfare erupts into my living room, sounding triumphant, not unlike the opening theme from Star Wars. It only cost me a dollar.

I used to play violin in an orchestra before I joined the military, so I have a certain respect for each instrument, and how one person can bring together all that sound with metronome-like unison. I’m talking of the conductor. Jack tells me about Charles Villeneuve. He was the director of music for the band from 1968-1978, later became the Supervisor of Music of the Canadian Forces, and retired as a Lt Colonel. Although he doesn’t have his contact information, he supplies me with a few leads to follow up on. A few days later I would be rewarded. Lt Claude-Christian Richer from the musical History and Heritage section of NDHQ sends me an e-mail. He has included Charles Villeneuve’s military biography along with a phone number where I can reach his residence in Quebec. From the bio I learn that not only was he the CF music supervisor, but also was the music services adviser for the Chief of the Defence Staff, and the commandant of the Canadian Forces School of Music. After he retired from the regular force in 1984 he remained active in military music, holding director and advisor positions within the cadet music system. He fully retired in 1990 and enjoys spending his winters living in Florida. This is relevant because when I called him he was only a few weeks away from heading south, making me consider pressing a few vinyl records myself, in order to become famous enough to be able to afford the same luxury.

When I dialled the last digit of Charles Villeneuve's phone number and heard it start to ring, everything came together and hit me. This all started as an innocent trip to the local mall on a Sunday. Now I'm calling the man who directed this very band to play the very songs that I hear wafting through my apartment. I went from knowing nearly nothing about the album to getting to know so much more about the culture and history of military music, and the people involved. I'm so full of myself I almost forget that Charles is waiting for me to respond. "Hello?" Best not to keep him waiting; the man wants to get to Florida before the snow hits. I explain who I am and how I got his number, and why I am calling. He is very friendly and more than willing to humour me and answer my questions. We spend the next half hour or so chatting about the album, the band, and his experiences. He tells me that the record took only two to three days to record. While recording, if someone made a mistake, they would stop and raise their hand so that the band could stop and try another take. Some mistakes were able to be covered up through the work of the recording studio. He tells me that the soloist who preformed the "Post Horn Gallop" has since passed away of cancer. The project itself was all funded by the Royal Canadian Artillery, and he wasn't sure on how many copies had been made, but he did pull his out while we were talking. He figured there weren't many out there. Up until 2007 he'd been conducting an orchestra in Florida while living there, but now he said he enjoys his time with his wife, kids, and grandchildren. Finally, he shared a funny story that occurred during the artillery centennial anniversary celebration in Petawawa during the performance of "Screw Guns". The band started playing the tune, oblivious to the fact that the artillery was setting up for a gun salute. Half way through the song a deafening BOOM explodes from the howitzers set up next to the band. Everyone in the band stops

playing except for a lone trumpeter. After realizing what happened the band shares a laugh and joins back in, and finishes strongly together.

My view of the record has totally changed from when I first laid my hands on it. I now have a much deeper appreciation for everything that went into making it, and it feels good knowing that I own a piece of history relevant to my profession, and was fortunate to learn as much as I did. I must take to time to recognize Clive, Jack, Claude-Christian and Charles, without your help I would not have had the opportunity to discover all that I did, so thank-you. Thanks to all who helped me on this endeavour, as I only made mention to the major contributors, there were a few more people behind the scenes that helped steer me in the right direction. I'd like to end with something that Jack Kopstein said to me in his first e-mail. He suggested that I transfer the recording to CD or onto my computer if I had the means, as it is valuable because of its historical significance. It made me wonder how I was able to attain it for less than the price of a cup of coffee. Whether you believe in fate or not, there is no denying I was in the right place at the right time; I've since returned to continue my search for epic vinyl, and I always see that couple selling their treasures, but have never again seen them with their box of vinyl.

-Lt J.P. Thompson