

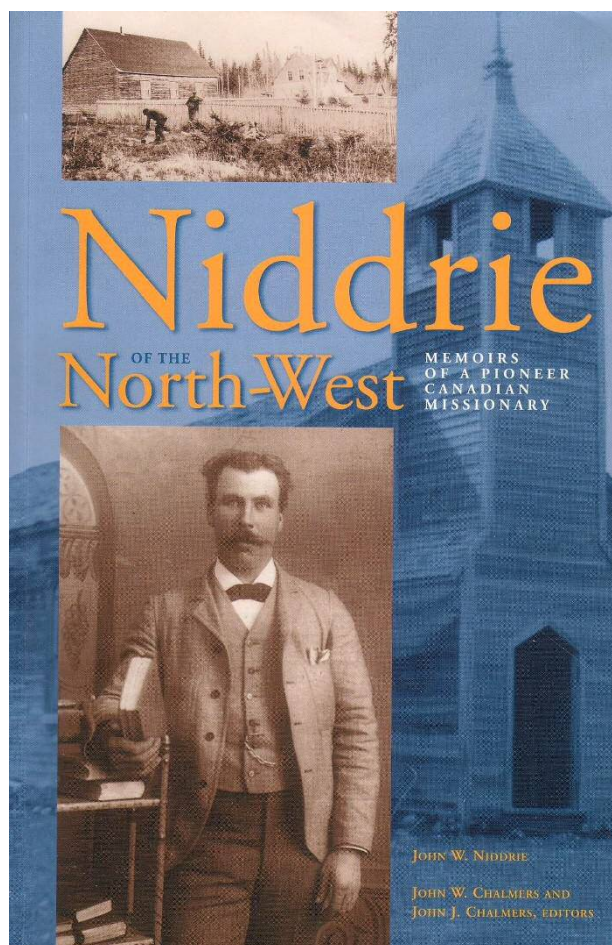
Unlocking, Researching and Sharing Family Stories

By John J. N. Chalmers © 2012

From letters and memoirs, files and photographs, stories have emerged from family archives that have been worth pursuing and packaging to share with others. Old high school yearbooks, diplomas, telegrams and poetry have been among documents used to unlock stories and assemble them for publication.

My late father, John W. (Jack) Chalmers, was a well-known Alberta educator who published some two dozen books that he wrote or edited on his own time while still working at a regular job. His last project was work on the manuscript of memoirs written by my maternal great-great-uncle, John W. Niddrie, born in Scotland in 1863. Uncle John came to Canada first in 1876 with his parents, brothers and sisters. Shortly afterwards his father died of smallpox and John's mother, Jane, returned home with her children. In 1885 Jane came back to Canada with John and his sister, Maria, and settled in Winnipeg. John had studied for the Methodist ministry before coming to Canada. From 1889 until his death in 1940, he worked among native people, first with Rev. John McDougall at the Morley settlement west of Cochrane, Alberta. From 1910 until he died, he was a Methodist missionary and later a United Church minister in northern Manitoba, serving isolated communities such as Berens River, where he spent the last 20 years of his life. In 1938 he began writing his memoirs, a story that ultimately fell into my hands.

As my father's health failed, the memoirs project stalled and Dad worried that John Niddrie's story of early western Canada would never be completed. So I promised I would finish the job. Two weeks before he died in April 1988, Dad did the last of his proof reading, knowing that he wouldn't live to see the book completed, but happy that it was headed for the printing press. In August 2000, *Niddrie of the North-West* was published by the University of Alberta Press.



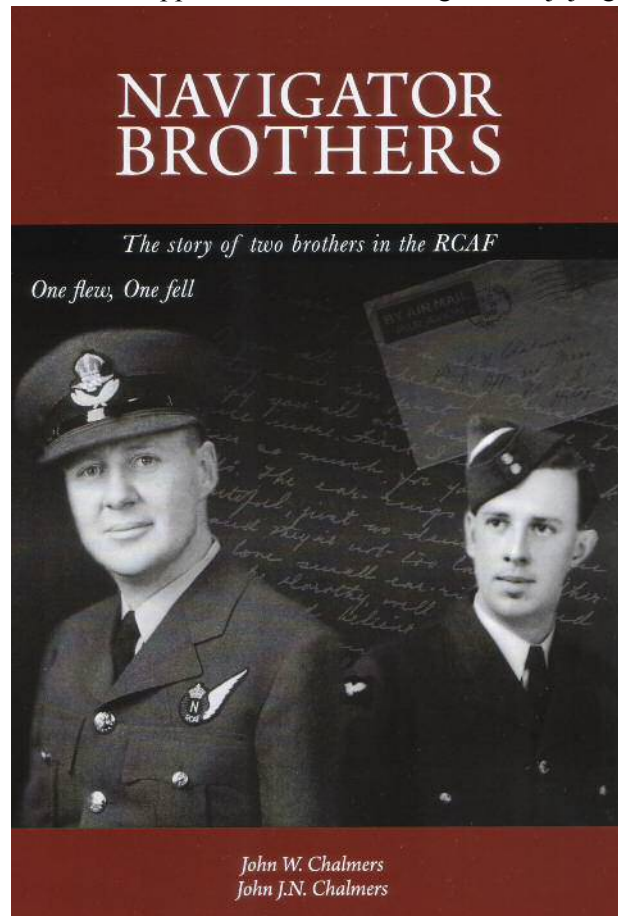
Niddrie of the North-West is based on the memoirs of John W. Niddrie, 1863-1940, shown on the cover of the book.

Knowing the book would be published, as his life approached its end my father said he would leave this world with few jobs undone, one being that he never got around to publishing a small collection of his poetry. In 2003 I completed that task by selecting 60 poems from his files of some 300 that he had written from his twenties to his eighties. Some poems I had never seen before. Organized, illustrated and typeset in desktop publishing software, the work was delivered print-ready on a computer disk to a copy shop. In only a day or two the copies and covers of *Silk Trains and Other Poems*, emerged as a small saddle-stitched book.

An important time for my father in his own life was his service with the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War when he was a navigation instructor based in western Canada. Two of his brothers also served with the RCAF. Herbert was a flight engineer in Canada, flying from both east

and west coasts on maritime patrol. Alfred, the youngest of four sons born to my grandparents, was another navigator. He was killed in action while flying as a Lancaster bomber navigator from England with 101 Squadron of the Royal Air Force, shot down in Denmark by a German night fighter on August 30, 1944.

In 2003 my wife, Linda, and I took a tour in eastern Europe, beginning in Moscow. On the way there we stopped at the small village of Dejbjerg, Denmark, where Alfred and his fellow seven crew



members are buried in the local church cemetery. It is the only military grave there, cared for in perpetuity by local villagers. Several months later, in 2004, among the many files that Dad had left behind, I found five more unpublished manuscripts. One was an account of his RCAF experience. The story captivated me and I began editing the manuscript, researching material and sourcing photographs.

In the garage of my parents' home in Edmonton, I found a suitcase that belonged to Alfred. In it were all the letters he had written home to his mother during the war, as well as other correspondence such as the telegram to his mother saying that Alfred was lost. Some letters to my grandmother were from parents of other young men killed in the Lancaster crash. Official correspondence in the suitcase included regrets from the RCAF and government officials. One small hand-written note of condolence was from the older brother of one of the crew, Cyril Cousin, a special duty wireless operator on their ill-fated bomber, Lancaster LM479. The crew was comprised of four Canadians in the RCAF and four young men from the United Kingdom in the RAF. All eight lost their lives on only their eighth mission.

NAVIGATOR BROTHERS is based on the memoirs of Jack Chalmers, left, and letters from his brother, Alfred, along with other wartime correspondence from their mother, and Jack's wife, Dorothy.

Another discovery was made in the basement of the house when I found all the letters written by my mother, Dorothy, to my father while he was away during the war years. I now realized that I had the story of not one, but two navigators, plus the story of a young mother with three small boys at home. As well, letters from my grandmother both before and after she lost her son, Alfred, helped to provide an account of how the war years affected Canadian family life.

The project doubled in size from my father's original manuscript and emerged as *Navigator Brothers*, published in 2008. It had taken me to a dozen aviation museums across Canada and nearly as many university archives, public archives of cities and provinces, and the National Archives in Canada. I had learned in completing *Niddrie of the North-West* that the pursuit of history is not a chase down a straight path. It is a trail that winds and turns, often leading to small and nearly hidden paths through the maze of historical events.

Through contact with an Ontario weekly newspaper, I located and eventually met Ann (née Wade) MacDonald, the woman Alfred intended to marry when he returned from the war. By e-mail I received notes from Sheila Fraser in England, the niece of Cyril Cousin, who fell with my uncle. In London, Linda and I met Sheila and her husband, David, who served with the RAF during the war.

At reunions of RAF 101 Squadron in Lincolnshire, I met veterans in their eighties who had flown on the same operation in which my uncle had been killed. Following publication of letters to editors and articles in magazines, I was contacted by air force veterans and others who had a story to share. Some of those stories found a place in the book, such as an account by FVictor Burrill of New Brunswick. He survived the war with RAF 101 Squadron as a Lancaster rear gunner, the most vulnerable position in the

aircraft, and had flown with the squadron on the same night that claimed my uncle and his fellow crew members and all the crew of two more Lancasters in the squadron.

Occasionally it is a chance meeting of a veteran or someone of my own generation who has a connection to facts and details that are needed to complete a story. Sometimes it is an e-mail response to the web site I created about my lost uncle that brightens my day. One thrilling surprise came from



Denmark. I had written letters to newspaper editors in the U.K. home cities of my uncle's RAF crewmates, hoping to make a family connection. One day when I opened my e-mail, a letter from Denmark had attached to it a photo of the three-man crew and their aircraft that had shot down my uncle's Lancaster! The writer had received a note from a friend in the U.K. who had seen my letter. The Danish fellow had a particular interest in wartime aviation and sent me the photo to me, the result of his own research.

The last photo of the four Chalmers brothers, taken late 1942. Left to right are Fred; Herb, who flew as a flight engineer, and navigators Jack and Alfred, who have not yet earned their wings.

After editing, researching and additional writing for *Navigator Brothers*, I enlisted the assistance of graphic artists to design the cover and the layout of text and photos. When complete, the book was delivered electronically to Blitzprint, a digital print house in Calgary (www.blitzprint.com). The printer was helpful in telling me how to get the ISBN number for the book and created the bar code for the cover. They also provided the information I needed from Library and Archives Canada to register the book and get an ISBN number assigned. Soon after final checking of a proof copy of the book, the job was done and the books were boxed for pickup.

Another organization that deserves recognition is Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, for financial assistance in publication of both *Niddrie of the North-West* and *Navigator Brothers*. Both qualified as Alberta stories eligible for support. See <http://culture.alberta.ca/ahrf>. Application forms can be downloaded from the web site.

Librarians and archivists manage and care for information, and without exception I have found them invaluable in helping me discover information. Sometimes a personal visit to archives is necessary, but with e-mail and the internet, the search begins at home as I sit at my computer and collect information and photographs from sources near and far. Other times lucky discoveries have occurred in small town museums like Claresholm, Alberta or my father's home town of Virden, Manitoba. In places like that there is no comprehensive and computerized index or inventory operated by a professional archivist or librarian. More likely, one will find a volunteer or part-timer who shares an interest in history, eager to assist in the hunt.

From another writer that I learned how to access military service records at the National Archives in Ottawa. See <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca>. One doesn't simply walk in and ask for the records! Procedure must be followed. Records 50 years after death of the individual become public information, but still need to be requested in advance. For my father's records I had to provide proof of his death and my relationship to him. I contacted National Archives by phone and e-mail and received great help from staff. Several weeks later I walked into the archives building on Wellington Street in Ottawa, asked for a woman who had been of immense help, introduced myself, and was handed the service files of my father, his brothers, and even my own file of my six years with the RCAF Reserve during my high school and university years.

Not all archives have the same policy with regard to getting copies of material. Some require ordering copies of documents or photographs. The National Archives allowed photography without flash

anything I saw in the files. I left with hundreds of digital photographs. At the Provincial Archives of Manitoba in Winnipeg, I had another great experience. I was expected when I arrived and was taken to the files I wanted. Minutes later I was seated at a carrel with my computer and scanner plugged in and allowed without charge to scan the photos I wanted.

Internet and e-mail provide global contact and access to information. I couldn't operate without them. Many resources such as libraries and archives have web sites with contact information. An internet search will find them quickly. Posting one's own web site puts information where anyone can reach it and provides opportunity for feedback.

Recently while working on research about an inductee to Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame, a contact in Las Vegas who knows her way around internet genealogy research was of great help in tracking down details and documents of a First World War navy pilot. He was Canada's first air ace, Redford Henry "Red" Mulock, CBE DSO, inducted to the Hall of Fame in 2010. Married a second time after his first wife died, this accomplished aviator had no children, and has almost no descendants. But my friend in Nevada discovered things not known even to Red's family, all acquired through internet research of sources such as family, church and genealogical records, all delivered to me electronically.

In Edmonton, we have many resources available to us -- City of Edmonton Archives, Provincial Archives, Legislature Archives, Royal Alberta Museum and Edmonton Public Library. On the internet, they can be accessed from anywhere. Other collections such as the photo archives and library of the Alberta Aviation Museum have been of great service. Recently I was working on a story about a little-known chapter in aviation, the arrival of Richarda Morrow-Tait in Edmonton in 1948. She was the first woman to fly around the world. On the internet at www.abebooks.com, a network of used book stores I use to locate and purchase out-of-print books, I located Richarda's autobiography in England. When ordered, it was in my hands promptly. Microfilm newspaper records at city and library archives provided the story of her time in Edmonton.



McDougall Memorial United Church at Morley, Alberta, where John W. Niddrie lived from 1998-1910 and began his work with the church.

Another fine resource for both *Niddrie of the North-West* and *Navigator Brothers* was the Glenbow Archives in Calgary. It has a web site allowing online search without having to make a three-hour drive to check the records in person. While I was working on the memoirs of John Niddrie, the United Church of Canada Archives in Toronto was of great help. A business trip to Winnipeg provided an opportunity to visit the United Church Archives of Manitoba at the University of Winnipeg. Further research was done at the Hudson's Bay Company archives in Winnipeg, conveniently sharing space with the Provincial Archives of Manitoba. Priceless photos and documents relating to my uncle's life were waiting there for me!

An archive collection may have tens of thousands of photographs online, but it may have hundreds of thousands in stock and only a personal search will reveal what you seek. I have often said that with the internet, one can keep going back to the well, because material is constantly being added. One site I have used is www.ourfutureourpast.ca, to search early Alberta newspapers. At another web site, www.newspaperarchive.com, I have searched archived newspapers from elsewhere. Several military-related internet sites were invaluable. For example, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission site at www.cwgc.org provided names and details of the men who fell with my uncle.

In addition to material found in my parents' house, once home to them and their six children, following the death of my mother in 2009 other discoveries were made as the house was emptied to prepare it for sale. There were thousands of family photographs, going back to the 1800's. A box was found containing every letter Mom had ever written to Dad, starting when she was 17. "I chased your mother for seven years, until she caught me!" my father used to say. I knew that he was smitten with love at first sight, and as he approached the end of his life, he told me that he had only one regret. He said he

was hoping to reach his 60th anniversary with Mom in four months, but knew he wouldn't last that long. However, it was obvious from Mom's letters that she was completely enamoured by the man who became her husband.

There are still four unpublished manuscripts in my father's files to be dealt with, and perhaps there is a book to be created from my mother's letters. Even if not, letters and the photographs from my family's history will be treasured, saved and preserved. Perhaps in anyone's family there is a story to be unlocked and shared.

Author note: John Chalmers, M.Ed., is a retired educator and an Edmonton writer. He has served as a member of the board of directors of the Alberta Aviation Museum and is historian for Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame. John may be reached at johnchalmers@shaw.ca.

A footnote -- I could not do the things I do without the internet, which makes wonderful things happen. Prior to visiting my uncle's grave in Denmark, I was in contact with Erik and Jette Engholm who met us when we arrived and toured us around the area. On May 8, 2012 I opened my e-mail and received a note from a Dane named Keld Vinther, whom I had never met. On the internet he had found information about the Lancaster crash and the crew members buried in the local church cemetery, as well as my e-mail address.

He wrote to say that on May 5, 2012, the Lancaster bomber from the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight in England, one of only two Lancasters in the world that still fly (the other is in Canada at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum) had flown over the cemetery in a memorial flypast marking the May 5, 1945 announcement that the Second World War was ended for Denmark. Keld also attached some photos.

I was deeply moved by his letter, his kindness, and the photos he took. Four of them appear below. A hundred local people were at the cemetery to wave at the Lancaster as it made three passes. The grave where the airmen are buried is the only military in the cemetery and is cared for by local people, some 70 years after the men were buried there. A large stone, about seven feet high behind the graves bears the names of the airmen. Four standard military headstones each carry the names of two crew members.



Above is seen the church and cemetery at Dejbjerg, Denmark and the grave of the airmen. Buried next to them is pastor Hans Pedersen, who defied German orders to recover the remains of the airmen and hold a funeral service for them. At right, the local people came out for the flypast of the magnificent bomber, and held up a Union Jack flag as it passed overhead.