Exemplar A:

“Tale Worth Telling”: Donovan Ross:

I was born on December 26th, 1914 on King Street in London, Ontario. My mother died when I was born so I was adopted when I was only three days old. I went to live a few miles northwest of London in Beechwood, Ontario, where my adoptive parents had a farm, raised animals, and grew crops. I was an only child and when I was still quite young, my father went off to fight in the First World War. He was killed, leaving my mother to raise me alone.

I went to a one-room schoolhouse in Beechwood, and then we moved to Ailsa Craig, Ontario. I continued going to school there until I was twelve years old. That’s when I quit school to work at Harold McNaughton’s garage near Ilderton, Ontario. They fixed cars and other vehicles there, and eventually I became a mechanic.

I went through the Depression and it was hard. You couldn’t buy anything and you couldn’t find a job – it was awful. You were lucky to make five dollars a month During the first few years, I worked at anything I could do – mechanic, welder, or whatever – anywhere I could get a job.

In 1934, I started working at the psychiatric hospital in London. I had applied there the year before, when I was nineteen years old, but they wouldn’t accept me because I was too young. The following year, they called me and hired me to work on a ward. Later, I became a supervisor.

I continued working at the hospital until about 1940, when I was drafted into the army. I trained as a nurse in the Medical Corp, which is where I got my RN. After basic training, I went overseas on the Queen Mary. When we arrived in Britain, I was sent to Aldershot, England, and then was posted all over the place for a month here and a few weeks there. They kept us moving all the time.

I finally ended up in north Africa for one or two days, then crossed the Mediterranean and went to Italy, where I worked in a hospital for a while. We went to Capri, then the south of France, then up through France into Belgium, Holland, right up to the front line at the German border. I had worked all the way north, nursing the wounded. Being in the war didn’t bother me – I’m a calm person and it didn’t upset me. I forget all the places I’ve been and all the things I did during that time. We couldn’t keep a diary in case it got into the wrong hands and revealed secret information.

I was back here in Canada when the war ended. I had spent three and a half years in the army. Once I was discharged, I went back to the hospital in Ontario and continued working as a psychiatric nurse until I retired.

I met my first wife, Anne, through people at the hospital. She and I married and lived together in a house on Hale Street, which I had bought long before we met. We never had children and, unfortunately, Anne died.

My second wife, Margaret, was my next-door neighbour. We became friends and began seeing each other. After dating for a couple of years, we got married.

By the age of fifty-seven, I could afford to retire. I had built enough of a pension between working at the hospital and time spent in the service. Once I was retired, I worked on the house when it needed it and looked after the yard. Other than that, I took it easy.

Long before I came into Parkwood, I applied for a room for both Margaret and me since we’re both veterans. We’ve both lived here for about ten weeks now. I sold the house on Hale Street last year. I had bought it way back when for fifteen hundred dollars and sold it for a bit of a profit.

Having been a nurse myself, I like to keep the nurses here at Parkwood in their place! Really, though, I don’t think I worry them at all.

Exemplar B:

“Tale Worth Telling”: Norma Cloney:

I was born on October 18th, 1921, near Morewood, a small farming district between Ottawa and Cornwall in Ontario. I had a brother who was seven years older than I was and a brother and sister who were twins and were seven years younger.

One of my earliest memories is of a time when I was very young and my parents took me to the Ottawa exhibition. At the end of the night, there were fireworks, which I had never seen before. I was terrified. I had no idea what was happening it was something you just didn’t see on the dairy farm where I grew up. I’m still not particularly fond of fireworks.

Our farm had about twenty or thirty cows. My brother and I used to operate the milking machine, and I knew how to drive the horse. It was a very healthy life and I enjoyed it, and I had a sense of adventure and wanted to get away to see different places.

The farm was about a mile from Morewood, and I went to public and high schools there. The town had a bank and a few stores, but it was a very small place. In grade thirteen, I quit because I thought I wanted to do more with my life. By then, war had been declared and a few of the boys had already joined the army.

I ended up working in a munitions factory in Brownsburg, Quebec, which I found exciting. Several girls from my school were already working at the factory, so my cousin and I decided to get a job there too. At certain stages of production, the ammunition would need examining, and my job was to do the final inspection on the bullets we were making.

A girlfriend of mine from high school was working in Montreal, Quebec. Her father was in the air force and had been posted to that area, so when her parents moved there, I tagged along. When I arrived, I got a job with Montreal Locomotive Works, where they built tanks. It was a huge factory – I’d never been in a building that large. I wired carburettors and that sort of thing and wore coveralls like everybody else. I found it suited me better than living on the farm.

I worked in the tank factory for about a year and then I joined the navy. My girlfriend thought it would be a good idea to join up, and I thought what have I got to lose and I joined up too. We went to Galt, Ontario for our initial training, where we learned how to follow orders and how to cooperate. I can’t say I was enthusiastic about basic training, but I knew it was only temporary and I’d eventually be shipped to another location.

After a few months, they sent me to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where I lived in the Wrens (Women’s Royal Naval Service) block. Over the course of a couple of years I did general duty in the cafeteria serving meals and then worked in the lab at the hospital in Stadacona, Nova Scotia, where I used an autoclave to sterilize test tubes and various equipment. One day I was in the lab and a message came through that I was to report to the regulating office. When I got there, they told me I was on UK draft, which I meant I was going overseas. They gave me embarkation leave, a bit of time to go home and visit my parents.

When I was in Halifax, it would sometimes be crowded with navy personnel because they were assembling convoys in Minus Basin and everyone was waiting to board a ship. Then when the convoy left, they would all be gone and there would be fewer people around. The streets would be nearly empty and it felt very odd.

When I went to Scotland, it was on the Mauritania and, because it was December, the seas were very rough. We had just cleared the harbour when I became seasick and I remained deathly ill until we reached Britain. We celebrated Christmas aboard the ship, but I was so sick I don’t recall much of the trip. We had some air force people on board, and I remember they built the most beautiful Christmas tree out of cardboard cartons.

I woke up one morning and there was no motion, everything was quiet and I realized we had arrived. It was extremely foggy and the first thing I saw was a little sentry box on the dock. As the fog lifted, we could see the green copper roofs of the buildings. We actually landed in Liverpool, England, but they put us on a train and took us to a navy base called Lindores in Greenock, Scotland.

We went to our barracks, which had been the home of a shipbuilder. It had been a large estate with beautiful grounds and a circular driveway, and an old gatekeeper was still there to fix the furnace and look after things. The estate had greenhouses at the back that had been bombed, a couple of ancient cars in the garage, and all kinds of bicycles.

Scotland was great! There were about fifty of us stationed in the house. I was general duty and did everything that needed to be done, such as dishes, dusting, running messages, or whatever. The young Scottish girls were so friendly and couldn’t do enough for us. We used to make meals for the gatekeeper, who was used to rationing and thoughts our meals were wonderful. We all spoiled him. He was a nice old chap and very grateful – he just kept thanking us.

One day I went to the post office, and they told me I had a letter and it was bad news. I recognized the letter as one I had sent a sailor I knew, a very, very good friend of mine. Being in active service, we didn’t need to use postage stamps and on this particular letter, there was a blue sticker where a stamp would normally be. Underneath the sticker it said “Lost at Sea.” Unfortunately, my friend went down on the Athabaskan, off the Bay of Biscay. A torpedo sank his ship and I don’t think there were very many survivors. Apparently, another ship had attempted to rescue the survivors from the oily, burning sea, but it could only do so much and then it had to get out of there. I felt so saddened by the news.

I managed to travel a bit when I was on leave. I went to Glasgow and Edinburgh in Scotland, Belfast and Dublin in Ireland, and to London in England several times. I liked London but it was a little too much – too many people, too much traffic – but we had some good times, believe me! There were so many service people there that they were about all you saw. We’d stay at the Beaver Club, a Canadian hostel with dormitories. I remember being there once and the movie theatre across the street was showing The Lost Weekend.

I was in Scotland for about a year and a half and then the war ended. We remained in our house for a few more weeks and were somewhat isolated, so we didn’t get a lot of news, but we heard about the riots in Halifax, which really surprised us. On VE Day, the restaurants and liquor stores in Halifax apparently closed and, naturally, the service personnel and civilians wanted to have a drink and celebrate victory. The sailors felt they deserved appreciation for their icy North Atlantic trips, and when they were unable to celebrate with a drink, rioting, looting, and destruction followed.

Next, we heard about the atomic bomb in Japan and we couldn’t believe it. Then reports started coming in about the concentration camps in Germany. Learning about the death camps was such a shock! We just couldn’t comprehend it.

It wasn’t long after the war that we sailed back to Canada on the first available ship. I came back on the Empress of Scotland, which was the old Empress of Japan renamed, a real tub. Again, it was in December and we hit a bad storm. Some of the portholes broke and the glass injured a few air force people, who then had to have surgery. I was sick as a dog again and slept through it all. I just wasn’t meant to be a sailor.

I went home to see my parents and then to Brockville, Ontario to rehabilitation school. I completed a commercial course there and then went back to Montreal for a couple of years and worked for Bell Telephone.

I had met Joe Cloney in Halifax before I went overseas; he was in the navy too. We got together after the war and continued to see each other when I moved to Montreal. Eventually we got married and had three children, which kept me busy and gave me lots to do. We moved to Kitchener, Ontario and also lived in Stratford, Ontario for a while, which was where my husband was born. Then we wound up in London, Ontario where Joe worked as a bartender at the CPR Hotel – now the Ceeps, a very popular hangout with the university crowd. Joe and I separated more than thirty years ago. He was here at Parkwood for a while and passed away about a year ago.

After Joe and I separate, I went to work for London Print, a printing and litho company. When is closed, I worked for Lawson and Jones Lithography until I retired at sixty-five years old. By then I had bought a house and had two grandsons, so that kept me busy. Then two more grandsons came along, and then two great-grandsons, and within a week or so I will have a great-granddaughter.