

[Page 69 - "Lofty" MacMillan: A Taste of His Life From His New Autobiography The Boy From Port Hood](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 71](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1996/12/1

Get Lofty a double rum. And right there that promise that I made that I would never take a drink in my life again hit me just like that I said, "No, please, just a ginger ale or a Coke or some? thing." They brought that in. That was the test. Right there. John David was 87 days in the hospital. He had a body cast. His leg had been broken, and he was left with a scar on his forehead. They totally spoiled him when he was at the General. The first morning he came home, he didn't want porridge: "I'm not eat? ing that. That's it," and he's sitting in the high chair. I said to my wife, "We must have got the wrong fellow. They must have sent the wrong guy home. I'm going to go to the phone and call the hospital to see what mistake they made. This is not the fel? low that left here." Oh, he was spoiled rotten. As I started to dial, I heard, "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" And I said, "What, I'm on the phone." "Daddy, I'll eat that after all!" So he stayed home. I never took a drink from the day he was born and haven't taken a drink to this day. I kept that promise, and I'll keep it till I die. Of course, I missed it, but I had the gift that I was looking for. So why throw it away? The conditions in the mines were terrible. There were between 150 to 200 men working there. But we still had to have a strike just to get a washroom. The company finally agreed to set up 90-gallon molasses puncheons, fill them with water, and hook up a steam jet, so that when the miners came up, they would have a place to wash or shower, and change into dry clothes. Before that, they would come up wet and go home wet. Some of them lived a distance out in the country, two-and-a-half miles. Their pants were frozen before they reached home. I saw how unfairly the miners were treated. The company didn't always credit the men for the coal that they had sent up. Come pay day, when the miners received their envelopes, they were short on their tonnage. Now, six or seven tons at 40 cents a ton is not much money today, but it was in those days and also represented a lot of hard work. I remember when Clarence Fraser was killed. I was on the boiler that day. I was 19, and Clarence was the same age. When the bell rang ten times and the hoist slowly rose, we knew that somebody had been killed. He had been struck by a fall of stone out of the roof, and it flat? tened him. My brother and the other miners washed him. I went in the wash house right next to the boiler room and saw the men crying, as they washed the coal off him. The minister and a member of the union went out to his parents' at a little place called Dunmore. It's an odd thing. That morning after he had left home for work his mother had turned to Clarence's father and said, "Oh my God, I've got an awful feel? ing something is going to happen to Clarence today." When the minister of the United Church went to the house, she came running out the ldoor and said, "Was he killed?" gj'rhouse were the first words she said. ""The minister said, "Yes." That was the sad part about mining. Terrific Don Maclsaac, he got it during the explosion at the coal face. It drove a pit lamp into the side of his head. To see a man black from coal dust and coming out of the mine dead. We will always remember it. After the turn-of-the-century there had been many foreigners working in the mines. Six were killed in the mine at Port



Hood. There was a fa? ther. Black Sandy MacDonald, his son and a neighbour killed in a mine shaft. The danger was there all the time. When you went down in the morning, you didn't know if you were coming up. We might as well have been at war. Afterwards, when I was in the navy and we'd leave Halifax on the HMCS Charny, we never thought about the Germans. We knew that their subs were out
69