

Narrator: Len Rissanen (LR)

Company Affiliations: N/A

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Summary: Len Rissanen discusses his father's experience during the 1945 Pool 4B explosion. He describes his father rushing to the site of the explosion to offer help, creating a rope and bosun chair escape for trapped workers, and being awarded the St. John's Ambulance Gold Lifesaving Award for his first response efforts. Rissanen reads the names of the 22 victims of the explosion, and he references some newspaper articles about the incident.

Keywords: Grain elevator explosions; Terminal grain elevators—Thunder Bay; Pool 4B explosion; WWII veterans; St. John's Ambulance Lifesaving Awards

Time, Speaker, Narrative
<p>NP: It is November 30th, 2009, and I am sitting in the common room on Wolseley Avenue and Court. I don't know the name of the building, do you?</p> <p>LR: No, I don't.</p> <p>NP: And I'm beginning an interview with Len Rissanen. I'll have Len introduce himself and tell us a little bit about his history, and then he will spend most of the interview talking about his father's experience with the grain elevator explosion in 1945. So Len, just tell us a little bit about your history.</p> <p>LR: Okay my name is Len Rissanen. I'm the son of Len Rissanen Senior who was awarded the Gold Lifesaving Medal by St. John Ambulance. I'm presently 72. Most of my working experience was out west in Winnipeg. I was only 8 years old when the explosion happened.</p>

My best recollection, shortly after 10:00 in the morning on August the 7th, 1945, I remember my dad when he heard the explosion, he looked out the window and he looked down towards the elevators. My mother thought it was something else. She said, "Oh, it's the Germans have attacked us," or something. But anyway, my dad looked out so he immediately got his better trousers, put them on, and ran down to the elevators to assist as much as he could.

NP: Could he see the elevator from your house?

LR: I think all we could just see was probably billowing smoke. We were quite a few blocks from it.

NP: But you were in Port Arthur?

LR: Port Arthur at that time, yes. On [inaudible] Street.

NP: And the elevator that blew up was the--.

LE: Elevator, I think it was Pool 4B, I think they called it. That's something I have to check. It's probably in here, but I think it was Pool 4B.

NP: Yes. I believe so, too. So you were 8 at the time. Were you sitting at the table as well at the time of the explosion?

LR: Well, what happened is my dad had just come in to have coffee. Because I was young, I probably didn't drink coffee, maybe came in and had a milk or something. I guess he was just about getting ready to go back to work building the house. All of a sudden, this explosion happens. He looks out the window, and as I said, as far as I could see is the smoke and that. So then he immediately, his reaction was to go and see what he could do to help. He ran all the way down there as far as I know. Going down our street and headed over there and tried to assist.

NP: Your dad's history was--. You said he was building a house at the time?

LR: Yes, he was building the house I live in right now. A family home.

NP: And that was his job?

LR: Actually, I guess it was the project. He had never built the house before, so I guess he wanted to build a house to see if he could do it. He did most of it himself with some help. The roof and so on.

NP: Was he a veteran at the time?

LR: Yes, he was. He was in the RCAF [Royal Canadian Air Force]. At that time. he was 31 for age.

NP: So he must have just been back from the war.

LR: Yes. Yes, he was. That's why I was sometimes confused on the date, but yes, he came back probably—I can't remember the exact month—but probably the spring of 1945 because we were building a house in August. So it was around spring. He was a sergeant in the Air Force. Had been in Ceylon, or Sri Lanka, they call it today. I believe he put bombs on the planes, armed them. I think they were Cansos, if I'm not mistaken. The flying boats, anyway. The Canadian version. He had been to South Africa and been in England. He travelled around quite a bit in the wartime.

NP: Then he returned to Thunder Bay to be faced with this big explosion.

LR: Well, yes. It's interesting because when he first came, he was working for the paper mill, the Provincial Paper Mill. He was in the laboratory. Or what do you call it where they do the mixing and different things? Then I think he may have applied for a job with the post office. He may have worked for the post office before. But anyway, he got a job with the post office. So he went over to them and stayed with them until he passed away.

NP: What do you recall of his experience with the explosion?

LR: I remember him coming home, gee, I can't remember now, it might have been in the evening or early evening. I don't recall him--. I remember him talking a little bit about seeing guys in burning wheat up to their waists and trying to get them out of it and get them down where they could be taken to a hospital.

Then he had slivers in his hands from that rope going across. Other than that, I can't recall anything else. I know they were hauling bodies up in pulp trucks and everything. Whatever they had available. There was only two fire departments at that time. A Port Arthur one and Fort William came to help. It was quite the explosion.

NP: I think there were over 20 people killed in that explosion.

LR: Yes, 22 men.

NP: Twenty-two. And you have a list of those. Would you mind reading the names of the people who died?

LR: Sure, I don't mind. I'll read them. I'll do this part. Find articles attached, more in next email. List of 22 men killed in Saskatchewan Pool 5 elevator explosion August 7th, 1945. Some died in hospitals from the effects while some bodies were not found until weeks later in the rubble. First of all, there was Fred. S. Bramwell. He was 53. Lewis Henry Dart, he was 61. Robert Elder, he was around 54. John Farrell was 19, one of the youngest ones. Hans or Harry Fossum, 43, fairly young again. Robert Fraser, 43. Harry Halabiky, 41. Harold Harris, 15. That's the youngest one, I guess. William Henry Hodgkinson, 45. Ross Insley, 46. Steven Kuposila, 16. John MacGoldrick, 60. Robert McCullough, 37. George Mackett, 27. Joseph A. Perrier, 18. Sam Plaskey, 56. Vernon Rogers, 20. Alex Scott, 56. Ernest Sutton, 44. Bramwell Travers, 42. Philip Valley, 34. And Harold Andrew Wick, 15. That's the total of 22 men that were killed in that elevator explosion.

NP: You were talking about your father having slivers in his hands from the rope. What caused that?

LR: I'm not too familiar with that. I guess maybe pulling yourself along. You basically, if the pictures shows it, your feet are over there too because you wouldn't be able to pull yourself along with just your hands it would be too difficult.

NP: So there were two buildings.

LR: Well, yes, and the damaged building is where they had secured a line and that line then, somehow, they shot it over to the other elevator. That was the good one, then hooked it up. Then my dad, to my knowledge, was helping them to set up a bosun's chair. They could work back and forth. So that's the reason he was going across on the line to hook it up, so it would work back and forth.

NP: So they were sending people across from the damaged elevator over to the other elevator. How did they get to the top, do you know?

LR: That I don't know. I don't know whether I read in here that he managed to get in there, and I guess he started looking around for bodies and just went up through the rubble and everything. As I said, once they decided to do a bosun's chair—I believe that Carl Mellerup was the one that probably suggested that idea—I think they got it from one of the ships.

NP: Who was the person that suggested it?

LR: Carl Mellerup who got the silver medal. He and my dad decided, “Okay, yes. Sounds like a good idea.” So I guess Carl would have people assisting him to put people in the bosun’s chair, secure them. Then my dad would work and bring it back. Then they’d have a line that they can bring it back again and load it up again. I guess my dad would have people assisting him to get people down to the ground.

NP: I imagine there were a lot more people in the elevator than just the 22 that died, that there were injured people.

LR: Yes, there was. They didn’t worry too much about the injuries, just about the ones that were killed. So I don’t even know what a normal elevator employs. That would be a dayshift who were working anyway. I’m sure there would have been a lot more than that. Possibly double that. But it depends on where they were at the time, too. If they were on the ground, maybe they wouldn’t be affected although the debris of that could fall and kill them too. So I remember I think they had to warn people to watch out for the debris. But that’s kind of--.

NP: Did you go down to see the elevator after the explosion at all?

LR: Well, I think being the age I was, I don’t think my dad wanted me to go down there anyway. At my age, I didn’t feel there was much I could do anyway. So no, I just I remember the pulp trucks going up Clavet Street, our street, to the Port Arthur General Hospital. They were using whatever vehicles they could—pulp trucks and everything—hauling dead people and injured people and everyone. They used everything that they could.

NP: And tell me a bit about the awards your dad won as a result of his effort.

LR: He got the Gold Lifesaving Medal from the St. John Ambulance. It’s the only one that was given when he was still alive. The other ones were all posthumous in the United Kingdom. It was quite a thing. Carl Mellerup got the silver. My dad was on a couple radio shows at that time shortly after. I’m trying to think. There was Boards Cavalcade I think was one. Seems to be there was another one but--.

NP: Were those national shows?

LR: Those were national shows, yes. Then he got a number--. I think he got a watch from the city. He got a cigarette case, which--. He never smoked. Those two items come to mind. I’m not sure what else he got along with that. It was presented to him, I guess in around the spring or March in 1947 by--.

NP: Which award was that?

LR: That was the Gold Lifesaving Medal that was presented to him.

NP: And is that a Commonwealth medal or is that a Canadian?

LR: No, it sounds like it's presented within the United Kingdom. The Commonwealth because, as I said, he was the only one who received it while still alive. The others were posthumous. It's an interesting thing to know that. So these people, however they got this lifesaving award, lost their life doing what they had to do.

NP: Do you think there--. Did your father ever talk about his experience as the years went on?

LR: About the elevator?

NP: Yes.

LR: Not really. Not too much. I don't recall him--. I never asked him too many questions about it. If he was willing to talk about it, fine, but I never seemed to--. I don't even know whether my mother discussed it with him. It was just something that he just did. He, and of course Carl Mellerup, too, they I guess felt that they were going to do what they could to assist, even whether they worked on the ground to help people. He had been a sergeant in the Air Force, and I believe he was able to carry that rank into the St. John Ambulance too.

NP: So he joined the St. John Ambulance after he came back? Or had he been a member of them even before he went?

LR: That's something that I'm not sure of. He may have been prior to going overseas and then came back and rejoined. I know he had been in the militia before that. I believe it would've been Lake Superior Regiment, I think. Then he eventually went into the Air Force. But he didn't seem to talk very much about it. I guess somehow people just don't think about it. They did what they had to do. And for that, they were nicely rewarded, which is quite an honour. It was quite an honour I guess even to [inaudible], I believe that was one and I'm trying to think of what the other was but it may be listed somewhere in my stuff there.

NP: So did any of this have an impact on your decisions not to work in the elevators?

LR: No. Not really. Not really. I don't know, I just didn't tend to go that way. I was interested in drawing a bit and things, so I went into drafting in high school. At that time, it was called PATCS or Port Arthur Technical Commercialized School. I kind of pursued that end of it. Did some surveying as chain-and-rodman on the pipeline for the Department of Highways Ontario at that time, which is MTO now. Went that way. Then I was posted to Winnipeg in 1964 from Calgary. I was in the Canadian Army at the time, and so I was looking for a job. So I had talked to somebody, finally got a job with Dominion Bridge, started in with them.

NP: You've taken an interest in doing some research on the explosions?

LR: Yes. I think when they first talked about an anniversary about two years ago—I think it was around two years ago—that I thought I'd like to see what kind of information I could find at the library through the microfiche, but I didn't seem to have much success. I couldn't find anything that seemed to jump out at me that said this is my dad, this is Carl, and so on. It's only within the last year that a friend of mine—I guess because the anniversary of the explosion—was working with someone else, a guy by the name of Nicholson, I believe, to come up with some information. So he sent it off to me. He said, "I think you'll be interested in this, Len." And again, I thought very much so.

NP: So how did your friend get involved in--?

LR: It's interesting because I hadn't heard from Albert in, I think--?

NP: Who is Albert?

LR: Albert Nuttal? I went to school with him. He decided to give me a call, and we were talking on the phone and then he talked about some information he had regarding the elevator explosion, and that he had been talking to someone in Thunder Bay, and would I be interested in information about it? I said, "Sure. I sure would." I said, "I was trying to find some information myself."

NP: And why was he interested in it? Do you know?

LR: I don't know whether it was because of the anniversary, maybe it's the connection because he knew my dad had been involved. I forget what Albert's dad was with. Maybe it was the railroad or ship's captain. Anyways, for some reason it just connected somehow. Albert just thought I'd be interested in it, and it was the anniversary or close to the time of when it happened. Well, two years ago roughly. They did a thing on the anniversary of it. So I said, "Sure, I'm interested in it." So I got the stuff.

NP: Do you know who was heading up the interest in the anniversary?

JR: I think he was the one that was digging up a lot of information and giving it to Albert. And, in turn, Albert then did send it off to me. Asked me if I was interested in it and so on. He said, "I have some stuff here maybe you'd like to see."

NP: And so, what did he send you?

JR: Let's see. Well, here's the guys' name, actually. Albert put these things on to tell me. Anyways, Dave Nicholson is the name of the guy down on Government Street.

NP: Okay. Maybe we'll track him down.

JR: This is not too much regarding it. Just kind of referring to the elevator explosion. I guess this is from Albert. This is from Dave.

NP: Do you know if your dad ever kept in touch with any of the survivors' families? Or the people who--.

JR: I don't remember anybody ever coming to my house to my knowledge. He may have went to visit, you know, but I wouldn't have known for sure. Maybe the ones that were injured to see how they were coming along. Beyond that, I don't know. I have a feeling he might have, but just a guess.

NP: All these little stories of history that are stories that slip by and then wouldn't you wish your dad was here now to be able to tell his story.

JR: Oh yes. I hope it'd be close to what I'm telling you. [Laughs] I think he was a pretty quiet man. He didn't want to--. He did what he thought was the best. Oh yes, Albert. I guess he gave my name and stuff to--. Maybe this is from Dave. Anyway, there's a guy in Montreal, Albert, that I went to school with.

NP: Okay.

JR: Then he refers to the various articles in the paper. Talking about Rissanen and Mellerup articles, again, 2008.

NP: Perhaps if you wouldn't mind, we could have a copy of that information as well. If you'd like I can, I don't know whether you want me to make copies and return it all to you. Whatever would be more convenient for you.

JR: Sure. The big thing is--. Okay, well you know the best thing to do? We can collate, put together what we feel you want to have.

NP: Sure. Once we tidy up at the end of the interview, why don't we go through the papers and put them all together. We can add this file to the Voice file.

JR: Sure. I think it would be nice, because it kind of then backs up the story and so on.

NP: Just take a few seconds to think about have you had the chance to say everything that you wanted to say, or is there some other information that you want to have recorded?

JR: Just offhand I would say we have pretty well covered it. Just as a nature old that all I can--. [...*audio skips*] He was involved in working with my dad to help those fellows, those people.

NP: Does he have relatives in town?

JR: I don't--. He did have a daughter. I don't know if she lives in the city here or not. Her name was Carol. I guess she's married and that I'm not sure. I can probably find out for you maybe if I can talk to somebody.

NP: Well, yes, sure.

JR: I'm sure if she was, she would probably want to talk about her dad. She was valedictorian at the high school, but she was a couple years older than me.

NP: Well, I'd like to thank you very much for recording this information, because we hate to lose it, and I know that you're very proud of your dad. He really should be recognized in this project for the work that he did under very difficult circumstances.

JR: Thank you. I appreciate that, Nancy. On behalf of my dad, I'm sure it's going to be welcome.

NP: Thank you so much.

JR: Thank you.

End of interview.

