

A bleak Christmas

In love since first sight, they haven't been apart in 65 years until now
By BILL POWER Staff Reporter

SHE PLAYED PIANO at Red Cross dances in Truro during the Second World War. He was a dashing young officer with the Irish Regiment out of Toronto, stationed at nearby Debert awaiting deployment overseas.

Cupid scored a direct hit. And wedding bells rang before he shipped out.

The story of how Gordon and Phyllis Maybee first danced and hummed to each other the melody of Let Me Call You Sweetheart is as endearing a tale as any that came out of the war.

Their continuing infatuation with each other makes the tale of their forced separation in different long-term-care facilities after 65 years together all the more heart-rending.

"Everybody's got affections," Mr. Maybee, 91, said Wednesday of his return to a solitary lifestyle that his family attributes to narrow-minded thinking on the part of Veterans Affairs Canada.

Mr. Maybee, an army captain who put in stints in Holland and Italy before beginning a new life and raising a family with his young wife in central Nova Scotia, is recuperating from surgery and recently joined the residents of Camp Hill Veterans' Memorial Building in Halifax.

Unfortunately, the beautiful teacher and pianist who turned his head — and the heads of others — at a dance in Truro in 1942 has some health issues of her own these days and has taken up residence at Duncan MacMillan Nursing Home in Sheet Harbour, a couple of hours away.

There are no beds for spouses at federal veterans' facilities and the situation frustrates daughter Janet Maybee.

"It is so cruel to separate people at this vulnerable point in their lives," she said during a visit with her father at the Halifax facility.

She said it is unacceptable Ottawa fails to consider spouses as part of the long-term-care scenario for veterans who served overseas.

She has launched her own campaign to persuade Veterans Affairs Canada to be more compassionate with elderly couples.

"This is not just about my parents, but about elderly couples across the country who must contend with this unnecessary isolation at a time when they are least prepared for it," she said.

Ms. Maybee hopes to soon find accommodation for her mother in Halifax so she can at least visit with her husband.

She asked anybody facing a similar situation to write to her at: Janet Maybee, P.O. Box 133, Sheet Harbour, BOJ 3B0.

Stories about separated elderly couples are an unfortunate reality of a system designed to give priority to veterans in need, said Lorraine Gailie, a spokeswoman for Veterans Affairs Canada.

"Health care is a provincial responsibility, except when it comes to veterans, and because she is not a veteran, our hands are tied," she said of the situation facing the Maybee family.

She said there are 80 people, described as those in "urgent need," on the waiting list for chronic, long-term care at Camp Hill.

Another 230 people on the waiting list have circumstances categorized as less urgent.

"We can't change the fact Camp Hill is there for veterans, but what we can try to do is find alternatives," she said.

Meanwhile, after sharing some war stories, Mr. Maybee indicated he has never wavered in his devotion to his wife, now 92.

He suggested, with a smile, one of his first challenges of the war also tested his loyalty as a young husband soon after he was married.

"It was on our way to Europe. We were redirected for a rescue . . . and the ship we rescued was full of nurses," he remembered with a hearty laugh.

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