



Gladys Audrey Yvonne Denison

1908-2008

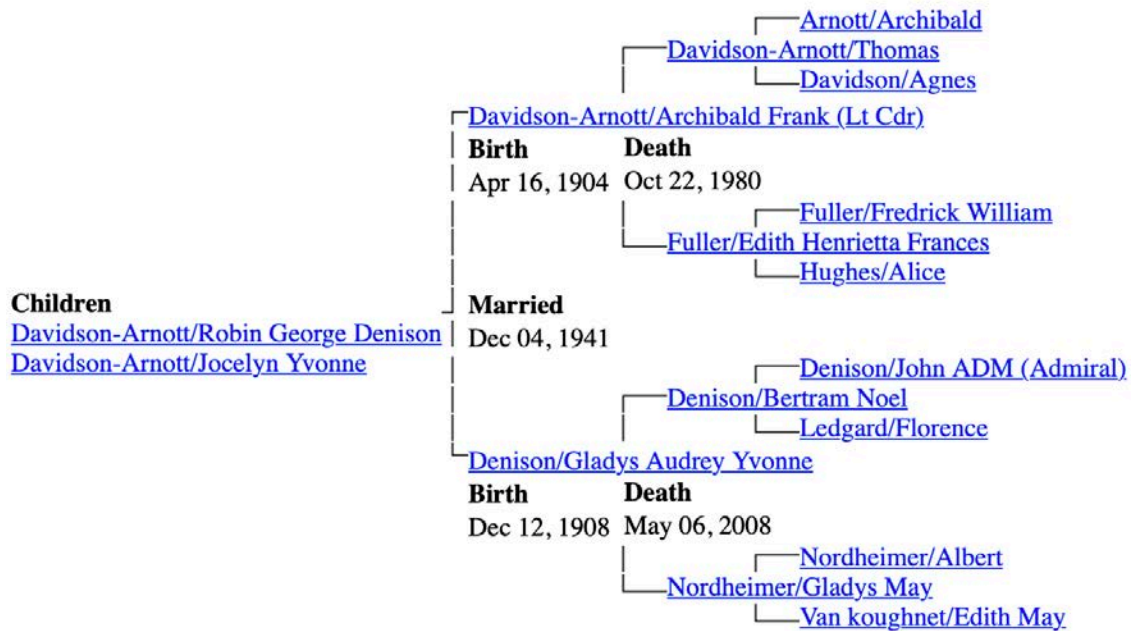
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Foreword

This is the story of our mother Yvonne Denison and particularly of her activities in the Censorship branch of British Intelligence during World War II. While we have taken background information from a variety of historical sources, the story told here comes mainly from Yvonne herself. Some of it comes from stories she told us and also conversations with her that were recorded by her granddaughter Julia Davidson-Arnott during two summers spent living with Yvonne and Jocelyn in London. We also had access to a conversation recorded by a local historian in London and to notes made by Lindsay Zier-Vogel about Yvonne's experiences during the first World War. In addition, we have been able to work from letters and postcards that she wrote to her mother, as well as those written by other family members.

Family background

Gladys Audrey Yvonne Denison was the only child of Bertram Denison and Gladys Nordheimer. She was always known as Yvonne and liked it in part because it was the name of one of her favourite Aunts, Gladys's sister. Her grandfather John was an Admiral in the Royal Navy by the time she was born. He was one of the 12 children of George Taylor Denison II and Mary Anne Dewson. Six of the seven sons went into the army, either the Canadian Militia or the British Army in Canada, and they achieved a reputation and some notoriety, as the 'Fighting Denisons'. John, however, chose to go to England and joined the



Royal Navy as a cadet in 1867, eventually rising to the rank of Admiral after a highly varied but not particularly distinguished service during a period of extended peace. Yvonne later described him as very competent, but not brainy like Bertram. John married Florence Ledgard in 1878 and they had 5 children, with their first dying soon after birth. Bertram was the third child and one of two surviving sons. Yvonne saw quite a lot of her English Denison family while she was growing up, as well as her Ledgard Great Aunt Mary who was also Bertram's godmother.

Bertram Denison was extremely intelligent in addition to having his fair share of the Fighting Denison spirit. He was born in 1883 and followed in his father's footsteps, entering the Royal Naval College HMS Britannia in 1895 and graduating in 1899. At the age of 16, he served as a midshipman in the naval brigade in the Boer War in South Africa. He fought at the Battle of Belfast in the Transvaal in 1900 and was Mentioned in Dispatches. Chronic seasickness persuaded him to give up on a naval career and he joined the Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (KOYLI) as a Lieutenant in 1902. In 1906 he was seconded to Canada as an adjutant in the Royal Canadian Regiment at the Stanley Barracks in Toronto. This was a time when the Denison family were prominent members of society in Toronto and Bertram was introduced to Gladys Nordheimer, possibly through her brother Victor who was also in the army. They were married in a lavish ceremony at St. James Cathedral, Toronto, on October 2, 1907. The couple returned to England in 1908 when Bertram rejoined his regiment and Yvonne was born in London on December 12, 1908.

Bertram served with his Regiment in Ireland 1908-1911 where he was the Adjutant. He was admitted to the Staff College in 1911 and later served several assignments for the war office because he was a first class interpreter in French and Italian. Yvonne remembered a little of her time in Ireland and England, and also Bertram's posting to Padua, Italy in 1913. When war was declared on August 3rd, 1914 Bertram soon rejoined his regiment which formed part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to France and took part in the retreat from Mons. The KOYLI was part of the II Army Corps that took a stand around the small French town of Le Cateau to try to halt the German advance on Paris, and to buy time for the French and British armies to regroup. In heavy fighting on August 26th the regiment lost about two thirds of its men killed, wounded or captured. Bertram was badly wounded, and later made a prisoner of war. He died of his wound on September 15. After the war Yvonne received a postcard that her father had written to her on the night before the battle.

Childhood in London

After Bertram's death Gladys decided to stay in England rather than return to Canada. They moved to London in late 1915 and briefly lived with relatives in a small cottage in Knightsbridge. In 1916 Gladys leased a Georgian terrace house in Alexander Place a few hundred metres away in South Kensington, close to the museums, to Harrods and easy access to the shopping in Knightsbridge and central London. The house has been in the family ever

since. During the war Gladys and Yvonne survived bombing first from Zeppelins and later Gotha bombers, often taking shelter in the basement of the nearby Empire House.



Among visitors to the house during this time was her Uncle Victor Nordheimer. He had come to England in 1916 with his regiment, the Royal Canadian Dragoons, and was training to go to the front in France. In a letter to his father, Albert Nordheimer, in November 1916 he told of spending a weekend with his sister Gladys, and Yvonne:

It is very nice seeing her & little Yvonne who is a bright child & a great pal of mine now. She reminds me so much of Bertram in manners and speech & seems to have his unusual brain. Gladys is bringing her up splendidly & she is high-spirited & hard to control sometimes, but a charming child in manner and appearance.

The house at # 7 Alexander Place which has been in the family since 1916

Victor visited them once in July 1917, after he had spent time at the front. During an air raid when they were sheltering in the basement of Empire House, Yvonne remembered holding his hand and telling him not to be frightened. The next year she wrote in her diary that they were expecting Uncle Victor again, but he did not come. They thought he might have been delayed, but later received the notice that he had been killed in fighting on March 30, 1918. Because of food rationing and the continued bombing, Gladys and Yvonne rented a house for a year, from March 1918, in Sidmouth, Devon. Yvonne went to school there and she loved her time in Sidmouth. However, after the war ended, they returned to London 1919 because Gladys missed the shopping and social life.

When they were back in London Yvonne returned to Glendower, a nearby public (i.e. private) school for girls where she was in the upper school. She later went to Glyn House boarding school in Kent where she played tennis and golf in addition to her studies. She completed her Matriculation with Honours. After that, she spent two terms at a finishing school in Paris from October 1926 until May 1927. There she became fluent in French, learned to cook, visited the theatres, and had a good time.

In October 1928, she came on a trip to Canada and ended up spending nearly 6 months over the winter. In Toronto she stayed with her Aunt Yvonne and her husband Lexie Martin at their house on Poplar Plains Road. She traveled with a new wardrobe to go to parties, debutante dances, and going out in the evenings to ice rinks where she danced the 7-step and waltzes. There must have been some activities with all her Denison cousins, but we do not have any records of this. Back in London she joined the Ladies Carlton Club which was affiliated to the Conservative Party. In the General Election of 1935, she worked closely with William (Bill) Astor on his successful campaign to be the MP for Fulham East. He was the son of Lord and Lady Astor, two well-known members of the British aristocracy and both very prominent in the Conservative Party.

In 1934, 1936 and 1937 Yvonne and Dorothy Furze, a friend she had met through politics, went on motor tours in Europe. They mostly visited France and Germany, but in 1936 they drove as far as Hungary, traveling through Austria and Czechoslovakia on the way. In Germany she was able to practice and improve her German and the holidays helped her to understand life in Germany which she saw first-hand. Both of these would come in very useful later when working in the censorship. Not long before the war started the government asked for photographs taken in Germany to help in case of war. Some of the photographs that Yvonne kept in her diary of these trips are missing because she sent them off to answer this call.

Wartime England

Her mother Gladys had remarried in 1925 to Colonel George Draffen. He was a professional soldier who had been severely wounded in the hip during World War I, but continued to serve in Intelligence between the wars, and through World War II., Yvonne was very fond of him. In 1939, as war clouds built over Europe, it may have been he who instigated her connection with MI 7, the branch of British Intelligence that, among other things, was responsible for the activities of the Censorship. The Censorship Office had been established during WWI with the aim of catching spies and preventing them from sending information by mail, preventing information being inadvertently transmitted by careless individuals, and collecting information in letters from neutral and enemy countries. It had been disbanded after the war ended. As preparations for war began in 1939, steps were taken to organise recruitment for a similar body if war were to be declared and Yvonne volunteered for it. She was interviewed and vetted before war was declared. It is likely that, in addition to her

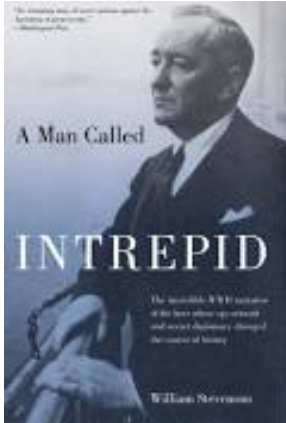
language skills, her connections to the military through her father, grandfather and step-father, would have made her a very low security risk. She took steps to brush up and improve her German, and learnt to read the Suetterlin script, a particular form of handwriting which was taught in German schools between 1915 and 1941. This would be essential to reading handwritten letters coming out of Germany during the war.

Yvonne was called up at the start of the war in September, 1939. All the censors had to sign the Official Secrets Act which prohibited them from talking to anyone about what they did. Yvonne took this very seriously, as did all of the censors. She never talked about her role until more than 30 years after the war ended when much of the story began to come out with the release of many of the documents from the war years. At the end of 1939 she was sent to Liverpool where the main operations of the Censorship in the UK were located. They were housed in the 'Pru' – the headquarters of the Prudential Insurance Company. The Building had been requisitioned because of the number of people who could work there, and because it had a solid basement that would make a good bomb shelter in the event that Liverpool was bombed.

In Liverpool she had the title of Deputy Assistant Censor and was in charge of a 'Table'. This was, in fact, two long tables with 30-32 people working on opening and reading letters. Many of the letters consisted of a single sheet of flimsy paper written on both sides, first horizontally and then vertically, and finally around the edges, all of which made them difficult to read. During this time the letters were mostly from Europe, including a number from Jewish families in Germany, and occupied countries, trying to get their families in America to get visas to permit them to travel to the United States.

She was in Liverpool for about nine months and then was sent back to London and put in charge of a group of censors reading the first letters to come out of Norway since the German invasion. The invasion of Norway began on April 9, 1940 and ended with the final surrender in northern Norway on June 10th. The first batch of letters came from Norway after the German occupation. She had about 15 censors working under her who were all Scandinavian and, while she did not read any of the Scandinavian languages, from her experience in Liverpool she could determine what information that they were reading was likely to be useful.

As the Germans overran Holland and Belgium and much of Northern France, Churchill replaced Chamberlain as Prime Minister on May 10, 1940 and he immediately took steps to expand intelligence operations and to persuade President Roosevelt to provide as much support for Britain as possible while remaining neutral. He appointed William Stephenson as the Head of the British Security Services and established his headquarters in New York in order to facilitate communications between Churchill and Roosevelt, and to ensure a safe place away from German invasion. Stephenson was a Canadian, a veteran of the first World War, a scientist, business man and above all someone who had worked on the side gathering



Intelligence to be fed to Churchill. With the code name Intrepid, Stephenson took over responsibility for the operations of British Intelligence in the west and it was he who negotiated with Roosevelt and the head of the FBI, Edgar Hoover, for Britain to censor mail from the US and other countries flying through Bermuda to Europe as well as those transported by ships calling at Bermuda. The US did not set up their own Censorship until they entered the war after the bombing of Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941. When there was a call for volunteers to go to Bermuda to set up operations there Yvonne was in the first group to sail for the island.

Bermuda and Trinidad 1940-1941

At the end of August, 1940 France had surrendered and the Battle of Britain was raging in the skies above England. On September 7 the Germans began to bomb London during the day, marking the start of the Blitz. Yvonne remembered a night when the skies over the east end of London were red as fires started by bombing during the day continued to burn. Yvonne departed for Bermuda on September 11, 1940 aboard a Peninsula and Orient (P&O) liner the RMS Orbita. It was one of the relatively fast ships that were used to transport personnel across the Atlantic without being in a convoy. She sensibly included in her baggage a bicycle because cars were generally not allowed on the island and so everyone walked or cycled.



Princess Hotel (pink building) Hamilton, Bermuda

At the height of the war there were 700-800 personnel involved in the censor and wireless activities in Bermuda. These were concentrated in the Princess Hotel which was requisitioned early in the war. Some of the guest rooms were also used to house the staff. Yvonne was actually housed in the nearby Bermudiana Hotel which was also requisitioned.

Bermuda was vital to the transport of air mail between the Americas and western Europe. Pan American Airways had established weekly flights between New York and Europe

in May 1939 using Boeing 314 Clipper flying boats. These were 4-engined planes designed to take a small number of passengers in comfort and large volumes of air mail over distances of more than 2000 miles (3200 km). The flying boats were especially suited for crossing

oceans because they could land in places where there were no suitable runways on land. With much of western Europe at war, flights between New York and Lisbon in neutral Portugal were a critical connection between the Americas and both sides of the conflict in Europe. Mail from South and Central America (via Trinidad), as well as Canada, could be transported to New York for onward transfer or to Bermuda. Bermuda was a key refuelling station for the onward flight via the Azores to Lisbon. However, headwinds on the return flight, especially in winter, resulted in a change to the southerly routing through Portuguese Guinea and across to Belem in Brazil, Trinidad and on to Bermuda. to take advantage of the NE trade winds.



Pan American Boeing Flying Boat
“Yankee Clipper”

When a flying boat landed at the base at Darren Island sacks of mail would be unloaded and brought across to the Princess Hotel where they would be sorted quickly to pick out ones that might be of interest. This might be simply to gain intelligence by reading what people in Germany or occupied Europe were saying to relatives or business partners in the Americas. They might also be ones that were transmitting messages between spy networks set up in the US, Canada and key countries such as Mexico, Brazil and Argentina where there were large German communities. Letters that were of interest were opened and there were people whose job it was literally to steam open the envelope in such a way that it could be sealed again for onward transfer without any evidence that it had been opened.

In particular, the British were concerned about the passing of information about ships and convoys going to England from New York and the east coast of Canada, as well as efforts to prevent aid from the US being directed to Britain. The communication might be in some form of code inserted in an otherwise innocuous letter, or they might involve invisible ink or microdots. The latter were tiny photographs that were made to look like punctuation marks, or ink smudges, and could be read under a microscope. Before the entry of the US into the war there was no censorship of mail in the US and so Bermuda was key to uncovering spy networks there. As Head of Table, Yvonne’s job was to oversee the operations of the censors reading the letters, to help with reading ones in German, and to be on the lookout for any evidence of communications from spies. Anything that needed much greater attention was photographed so that it could be examined later. In general, the mail was sent on quickly so as not to provoke suspicions, though occasionally it was necessary to keep the original for a few days. The Bermuda censors did uncover several spies operating in the US, and it was their finding of invisible ink in several letters that ultimately led to the uncovering of the “Joe K” ring run by German Military intelligence which sent reports on convoys and shipping in

New York as well as plans detailing the defences of Pearl Harbour. Yvonne recalls finding both microdots and invisible ink in several of the letters she dealt with. She also opened one letter that contained drawings and a description of the engine that powered a Messerschmitt fighter. It took two days working with an engineer to translate everything because she did not know the English names for many of the parts.

In mid-February, 1941, she volunteered to go to Port-of-Spain, Trinidad to help with the Censorship operation there, likely because they needed a German speaker. Trinidad was becoming more important as a refueling stop for Pan American clippers on the southern return route from Lisbon through Portuguese Guinea and Belem, Brazil. It was also a refuelling stop for Panair do Brazil, the Brazilian subsidiary of Pan American, which had planes flying up the east coast of South America from Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil en route to the US. Because of the large German populations in those three countries there was quite a lot of mail travelling in both directions between Germany and those groups. Among the letters that Yvonne read soon after she got to Trinidad were some from sailors off the German 'pocket battleship' the Admiral Graf Spee. The ship was damaged in a battle with British cruisers on December 13, 1939 and later scuttled in the estuary of the River Plate just off Montevideo, with most of the seamen being interned in Argentina.

In Port of Spain Yvonne found accommodation in a house where Edie Davidson-Arnott lived. Her son, Archie was a Lieutenant in Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve serving on a Royal Navy sloop operating out of the base in Trinidad carrying out patrols up the islands. When he



Archie at the naval base,
Trinidad, 1941

discovered Yvonne in the house where his mother lived he was immediately interested, and the two of them seemed to have hit it off very quickly. Edie later remarked to her grandson that she knew it was serious when Archie told her he was going to take Yvonne for a walk in the Savannah (a large park in Port of Spain close to where they were staying), because; "Your father never walked anywhere in the hot sun if he could possibly help it".

They soon became engaged and had started to plan their wedding in Trinidad. Yvonne then had to travel to Bermuda in order to resign her position. She did so by taking one of the five Canadian National Steamship Lines 'Lady' boats which sailed from Halifax to Bermuda and on to the British colonies in the Caribbean, including British Guiana. She then had to take the same voyage back to Trinidad. The voyage was apparently successful because news of the forthcoming wedding was published in a notice appearing in the Globe and Mail on

June 25, 1941. However, Archie was promoted to Lieutenant Commander and transferred to Curaçao in October 1941 which necessitated a change of plans.

Curaçao 1941-1945

The three Dutch islands of Curaçao, Aruba and Bonaire lie just off the coast of Venezuela and nearby Colombia. During World War II they were extremely important to the war effort because of the existence of two large oil refineries, one on Curaçao and the other on Aruba that had come into operation for about ten years. They both refined oil from the Maracaibo oil field in nearby Venezuela, that was brought out in very small, shallow-draft tankers capable of entering the shallow lagoon where the oilfield was located. The refineries produced fuel for motor vehicles, aeroplanes and ships, and supplied a significant portion of the total petroleum products available to the allies. Archie's primary responsibility was as DEMS officer. This referred to 'Defensibly Equipped Merchant Ships' which were allowed by International Law to carry a gun on the stern for defence. He supervised inspection of the ships when they came into port to ensure that the gun worked, that they had sufficient ammunition, and that the naval ratings in charge of the gun were properly trained. He was also tasked with routing ships sailing both independently and in convoys.

Yvonne was able to get a flight from Trinidad to Curaçao and arrived in time to help with the arrangements for the wedding there. It took place on December 4th, 1941 in Fort Kerk (Fort Church) located within Fort Amsterdam on the east side of the entrance to the deep-water harbour of Willemstad., the capital city of Curaçao, Following a small reception, they went off for a 3-night honeymoon at the Piscadera Beach Club – reduced to two nights because Archie was recalled immediately news was received of the bombing of Pearl Harbour.

After the wedding they moved into rental accommodation in the town close to the sea, and later to a small house right on the beach in the district of Punda, east of the harbour entrance. Yvonne was able to do a few bits of work in the first 6 months, and after that she became secretary to the British Security Officer in Curacao working out of the British consulate. As Yvonne put it, "That was a position of security. I couldn't even tell my husband what I was doing". So, once again Yvonne was working in intelligence for William Stephenson and the British Security Services in New York. Much of her work consisted of decoding wireless signals



Wedding photo on the steps of Fort Kerk

from British Security agents in Caracas and other parts of South America, and then sending the information by coded letters to New York and to offices in places such as Panama. Some of the information related to the activities of German agents in Caracas. Quite a lot of the intelligence that Archie used in convoy routing came originally from information collected by the British Security Service in England and Bermuda from wireless intercepts as well as the Censorship activities, though Archie had no knowledge of this at the time. It would have been suitably filtered and distributed by the British Security Officer to the Dutch, British and US naval detachments operating out of Curaçao.

Life on the island was fairly routine and, while there were some items in short supply, there was no real rationing, no bombs and plenty of opportunities for food and drinks in restaurants and in the US and Dutch naval officers clubs. There were also a few bits of excitement to break the routine. One morning there was a loud explosion close to their house which turned out to be the sinking by a German submarine of a small US escort vessel just outside the harbour. It was close enough for it to be run up on the beach nearby before it could sink, but several of the officers, who Yvonne and Archie knew, were killed. On another occasion, a seaman who had murdered the captain on one of the merchant ships was handed over in port to the Security Officer, who brought him to the Consulate. The Security Officer then left him alone with Yvonne in their office for fifteen minutes while he went out to check with members of the Consulate Staff as to what should be done with him. Yvonne later said that she was not too happy about being left alone in a room with a murderer. Clearly, she felt that it was not in her job description!



There was a lot of typing in the job and she was not very good at that, especially when it came to producing the original and three carbon copies. No printers or photocopiers in those days! By the end of the war they had accumulated a lot of paper in their filing cabinets. On VJ Day (Victory over Japan – August 15, 1945), after a bit of a celebration, she had to take all those files and burn them in a steel drum in the courtyard. Very little remained of security operations after the war and no medals were given out. Acknowledgement of Yvonne's services came in the form of a simple letter signed by Stephenson himself.

Letter from William Stephenson

After the War

When war ended the naval operations in Curaçao were wound down and Archie was demobilized. They returned to Trinidad at the beginning of February, 1946 and later sailed to England where Archie met Gladys and other family members for the first time. In July of that year Yvonne became pregnant and so they decided to stay on for the birth. The winter of 1947 was extremely cold, fields were frozen, food was scarce, and rationing was still very much a part of everyday life. After the birth of Robin in March 1947 they returned to and moved into a house in the hills above Port of Spain. Jocelyn was born in 1949.



Yvonne escorting the Princess Royal (Sister of George VI) in her role as Guide Commissioner, Trinidad, 1960. At left is Lady Beetham, wife of the Governor of Trinidad & Tobago.

As the children got older, Yvonne became very involved in the Girl Guide movement in Trinidad & Tobago, eventually becoming the Assistant Colony Commissioner.

In 1966 Jocelyn went to college in England where she completed a four-year program in Hotel Keeping and Catering and then returned to Trinidad. At the same time Robin started university in Toronto, married and did not return to Trinidad.

In the 1970s violence in Trinidad began to reach a level where they decided to leave the island and return to England to live in the house on Alexander Place following the death

of Gladys. Archie died in 1980. Yvonne travelled extensively after that with Jocelyn, including visits to Bermuda and Curacao. She continued to play bridge until a few years before her death in 2008, a few months before her hundredth birthday. The ashes of both Archie and Yvonne are buried in the cemetery of St. John's on the Humber.

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