

203

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JAMES "JIM" BÉLANGER

(1943 -)

Jim was born (James Patrick Joseph Belanger) in Van Buren, Maine on 5 March 1943. He was the first of the eight children to have been born in a hospital. Phyllis, Richard and Lawrence were all born at home. It is said that Jim was the first "planned" child of the family. The other three were getting a little



older, the business was doing better and Gerald and Irene thought it was time to have another child. It is only conjecture that there might have been any plan to avoid the draft for World War II; anyone with four children was exempt from military service. Jim tells his own story for this publication.

PRE-SCHOOL YEARS

I was born on 5 March 1943 in Van Buren, Maine. I was the first of the family not to be born in the house. By the time 1943 rolled around, the town had grown to a point where a hospital was established in a renovated house. Since many Canadian families made sure they were in the United States when time came for them to deliver a newborn, there was quite a need for a hospital to provide a place for births. It was the custom for many Canadian families to have their children born in the US as, when they reached the age of 18, they could select either citizenship since being born in America automatically makes one eligible for citizenship.

Except for the few stories of experiences others had, I cannot recall anything of significance prior to the age of kindergarten.

SCHOOL IN HAMLIN, MAINE

I was a year younger than most of my neighborhood friends and when they went off to the first grade, I must have felt abandoned. Mom and Dad (Irene and Gerald) decided to send me to school in Hamlin, Maine. I attended a one room schoolhouse where one teacher taught kids in kindergarten through eighth grade. This was the proverbial "one room schoolhouse" and still stands in its original location as of 1997. Since I was old enough to attend kindergarten, sending me was the solution to my being left behind while my friends were all attending school. My Dad operated an Esso gasoline station and garage on Main Street in Van Buren and opened early each day. I would accompany him to work in the morning and the school bus picked me up in front of Dad's Esso station. The ride to school was not long and I made friends on the bus. I remember kissing my first girl on that bus. Sandra Webber would sit in the front seat and I was in the one behind her. The seats were individual, like movie theater seats, and we would press our lips through the crack between seats. Many of us brought our sleds and snow shoes to school in the winter. There was a good hill behind the school which was just great for sliding all the way down to the stream that ran behind the schoolhouse. Seeing that same hill and stream in 1994 makes one realize how large things look when one is young. The hill is barely a slope and the stream seems almost non-existent. I remember the wood stove where we would gather to warm up after having been outside. It was situated in the middle of the room with a rather long metal smoke stack up through the roof. I burned many a woolen mitten on that old stove! In the summer, the older boys would show us how to cut reeds, loosen the outside bark without breaking it and removing the bark. The inner reed would be notched so that, when sliding the bark back onto the wooden reed, it became a whistle.

When there was not school, we often went down to the river to fish. We used these long hollow reeds that looked like bamboo sticks and made fishing poles out of them. We would put worms on a hook at the end of a string, drop the hook into the water with a plastic float on the string and watch for the float to sink. When it did, we knew we had something on the hook and would quickly pull up on the pole. We caught many catfish that way since they were bottom feeders and more apt to be looking for our worms at the bottom of the stream.

When the next year came and I was to be enrolled in the first grade, I went to Sacred Heart School where all of my friends were. Sacred Heart was a coed school up to the eighth grade after which it was strictly a girl's high school and the boy's high school was across the street. My sister, Phyllis, was in her last year of high school at the time and she took me to my first day of school with her. On the first day of school, I was so nervous that I got sick and threw up, while standing in line to enter school. The nuns knew Phyllis was my sister and they called her to bring me home. On the



20-

second day, when all the first day registrations had been taken care of, I came to school again and, this time, made it into the building. Phyllis was still embarrassed from the day before so she told me to stay with my friends from the neighborhood. When the school bell rang to admit the students on that second day of school, I simply followed my friends into class, not realizing that I was actually going into the second grade. The teacher thought I was a first grade transfer from another school and simply waited for the paperwork to catch up. It was not until several weeks later that the school officials found I was in the wrong class. Since I was doing so well, they decided to leave me there and that is how I skipped the first grade. Because I was a year behind in religious training, however, I went to religion class with the first graders during the first half hour in the morning. Did I say religion class in a public school, you might ask. In those days, the schools belonged to the town and were rented to the State of Maine from 9 AM. Before 9 AM, the schools were private and religion was taught. Non-Catholic children (and there was only one) came to school at 9 AM instead of 8 AM. Her name was Linda Harris and the rest of us could not but think how wonderful being Jewish was!

GROWING UP

I must have been quite an enterprising young fellow, as I grew up in Van Buren. I pulled pranks that are remembered by many. I once bought ice cream, at the local drug store, and had no money to pay for it. The store owner had to get Dad to pay for the ice cream and Dad told the store owner not to sell me anything if I didn't have the money for it. The next time I was in for an ice cream, I was asked if I had any money. I told them that I most certainly did and shook what sounded like a pocket full of coins. That was convincing enough for the clerk and I got my ice cream. When it came time to pay, I took two washers out of my pocket and placed them on the counter before making my quick retreat. Dad really gave me a lecture about how a thief was a liar and a liar a thief and he couldn't stand either.

Emile, my Dad's brother, lived close to the center of town and I would visit there often. Emile's wife, Cecile, had her house renovated. I brought my Aunt Cecile a large bouquet of flowers from our neighbor's flower garden to put in her new house. In the flower garden, these flowers were always full of bees. Mike and I often caught bees in glass jars from these flowers. Seeing that the flowers attracted so many bees, it seemed to me that this was a good way to get a lot of bees into Aunt Cecile's house as a prank. I brought a huge bouquet of these flowers to Aunt Cecile, at her obvious pleasure. I waited for weeks to hear of the invasion of bees into that house but never did hear anything about it.

I told Uncle Emile, one day, that Mom and Dad were out of town and Phyllis would not give me and Mike anything to eat. Emile gave me some money for a meal only to meet Dad on the street the next day. Uncle Emile asked Dad how his trip had been. Dad said, "what trip" and then the cat was out of the bag. Uncle Emile never mentioned it to me but must have been amused at the entire episode.

JIM AND MIKE

My brother Mike and I were together a lot in Van Buren. Mike was always tagging along with me in those early years. Mike was 2 years younger and more timid than I was. His hesitating to follow me resulted in some perilous situations at times. Once, when we ran across busy Main Street, Mike hesitated too long and was run over by a car. The driver stopped while the car was right over Mike, who had fallen in front of the car between the two front wheels and, although he was under the car, was never touched by it. I turned back and, while the driver looked under the car to see how

207

much he had injured Mike, grabbed Mike's hand and pulled him out. Off we went, running down the street to the driver's complete amazement.

One day, Mike got a brand new knife and I didn't. I was jealous so I carved Mike's initials in the stair banister at the house with my old knife and let Mike take the blame for it. Then, there was the time when Dad sent me to the Post Office to mail letters. These were the days of the penny post card and letters must have been two or three cents. Anyway, Dad had given me just enough money to cover the stamps for the exact amount of letters to be mailed. Mike and I went to the Post Office and got the needed stamps. I had seen a machine with water in it and a brush type arrangement for wetting stamps and letter flaps. Since it was quite a chore to lick every stamp, I wished I had one of those machines to wet each stamp. I sat Mike on the counter and told him to stick out his tongue. Strip after strip of stamps were wetted by sliding them across Mike's exposed tongue. Two of the stamps got too wet and would not stick, however, so I put them in my pocket. When we were done, there were two letters without stamps! I went to the Postal Clerk and told him that he had shorted us by two stamps. The clerk said he had been watching and knew where the missing stamps were. After a few uncomfortable moments, the episode was made right but the story got back to Dad and I was reprimanded for trying to extort two stamps from the US Postal Department. Once more, I heard the story of the liar and the thief.

A SMOKING EXPERIENCE

One day, Dad had left his wallet out on the table at home. I was fascinated with money and took out a ten dollar bill, thinking Dad would never miss it. I must have been six or seven years old at the time. I was so young that I didn't know the difference between a ten and a one dollar bill. I gathered my friends; Ron Albert, Bob Cyr, Ronald Pelletier, Fox (Vernon) Theriault and a few others; and we went down town to spend the dollar. When we entered Rocky's, a local diner and convenience store, we bought some cigarettes and I handed over the ten. When the clerk gave me several dollars in change, I told my friends he had made a mistake since I gave him one bill and he was giving me more in change. We agreed it was the clerk's own loss and we would put his error to our benefit. I did notice that the clerk went to the phone and I knew he was calling my Dad to tell him I was spending money on cigarettes. Everyone knows everyone in a small town, you know. Well, I thought I would certainly fool this guy and told my friends, in a loud voice, that we would go to the Rexall Drug Store to buy some ice cream. When we got outside the store, I told the "gang" that we would go all the way to the other end of Main Street to the other drug store and skip the Rexall store so that my Dad would not find us. We did this but it was to no avail, my Dad drove up and down the street and found us easily enough. He pulled his pick-up truck over and asked if we wanted a ride. Everyone, except me, said that was a great idea. We all hopped into the truck bed and Dad drove home where he let out my friends and kicked my rear end all the way up the stairs to my bedroom. After about an hour of isolation, I heard my friends outside the window asking me to throw down any cigarettes I had left over. I don't recall if I had any or not but the thought of them being free and looking for the goods just stuck with me over the years.

FIRST BUSINESS

When I was about 11 years old, I went into business for myself. I got a small shoe shine box and, with horse hair brushes ordered through the Sears and Roebuck Catalog Store, set up a shoe shine business. Saturday night was the night for shopping in Van Buren and the Main Street businesses

203
were crowded with the locals and the Canadians who came to do their weekly shopping. I started shining shoes on Main Street but soon found I could not keep up with the demand.

French people, at least in those days, were a very proud lot and had to look their best on Sunday mornings for church. Shined shoes were a must to go along with a necktie, clean shirt and hat. I decided to hire help and soon had a second shoe shine stand set up along Main Street. I found that I needed to look more professional and changed one, then the other, to a wheeled cart with a chair mounted on top where the client would sit while getting his shoes shined. These carts were stored behind Dad's gas station during the week but would get wheeled out for Saturday evening's rush. Only one was used for Sundays. Sunday was a day when people strolled along Main Street with their girl friends, even though stores were not open, and business wasn't bad for the shoe shine enterprise. There were many young Air Force men from the military base, in Limestone, who would come strolling along Main Street on Sundays in hopes of meeting some of those cute French girls.

The two shoe shine carts disappeared, one day, and were never found nor replaced. During the course of this short business venture, however, I had made an arrangement with a store owner (Army Navy Store) on Main Street. In exchange for permission to set up outside his store, I was to give a tug on worn out shoe laces in the hopes that they would break. I would then send the customer into the store to buy a new pair of shoe laces. This paid for the privilege of setting up in the center of all the activity.

RIDING THE BIKE

I was a fast learner! When Dick and Pete taught me to ride a bicycle without training wheels for the first time, I learned too fast. Dick, Pete and I were at the top of McKinley Street which had quite an incline heading toward Main Street to the gas station. I had learned how to balance on two wheels without training wheels and was ready to go for my first solo ride. Dick and Pete aimed me toward the bottom of the hill and they let go of the bike. They thought I would go about ten feet and fall off. When that didn't happen, they started yelling for me to stop as I headed for Main Street. It seems everyone forgot to go over the stopping procedure before the solo ride and I yelled back that I didn't know how to stop the thing. I headed straight for Main Street but, at the very last minute, turned left into the gas station's yard and headed straight for the open doors. In those days, car lifts were not common. This was the day of the "PIT" which was a concrete depression in the floor at one end. The mechanic would go down the steps and be under the car which was driven in to straddle the PIT. This is where I was headed, straight for the open pit which had to be six feet deep! Seeing the open doors coming up fast, I swerved again and hit right between the two open garage doors. This happened to be where a display of tires had been set up and into the tires I went, bike and all. Well, those tires didn't sit still! The stack was disrupted and tires started rolling down the front yard into Main Street of Van Buren. Cars were swerving to miss the rolling tires while I was picking myself up from the ground. Did I catch hell over this one? No, but Dick and Pete sure did!

GRADE SCHOOL

There are a few teachers who must have remembered me for quite some time. There was one particularly strict seventh grade teacher who had absolutely no sense of humor. I had a good friend named Jim Dumont who came from a potato farming family. Both Jim and I were always pulling practical jokes and decided to pull one on the teacher. She had the habit of disciplining students by having them sit on the floor next to her desk during class. Jim and I often occupied this place of distinction. One day we brought a foam rubber cushion, used in the bottoms of potato barrels to prevent

bruising of the potatoes, to class. When told to assume the sitting position, Jim Dumont ran up with a broom, swept the area clean and I set the two cushions down for a softer sentence. The classroom students had a much higher appreciation of the event than did the teacher. On April 1st, of that year, Jim and I prepared a skit. We came into class, just late enough to have all the other students settled into their seats. Jim Dumont had two hats behind his back and I had a broom behind mine. I read a script out loud. It went, "April fool, go to school, tell your teacher she's a fool. If she hits you with a broom, take your hat and leave the room." I took out my broom and swatted Jim Dumont with it, we then each put on a hat and strolled out of the room. Needless to say, we were not welcomed back into the class that day.

I read a lot when I was in grade school. I would sit on the couch and read all kinds of books. You could not get my nose out of a book. Mom got used to my reading and she never heard a peep out of me during those times. When Mom got reports from school that I was misbehaving and pulling pranks, she just could not believe it was me. She just assumed teachers were mistaken between Mike and I and she would give Mike the lectures.

Walking home from school was a process we don't much see today. After class let out, those of us who didn't ride the bus marched home in a group. This was very much military fashion where we were all in step and marched two abreast. To cross the street, we needed street guards who would stop the traffic. These were called school "patrols" and being one of the "patrols" was quite an honor as it gave one supreme power. The patrols would go out into the street, stop the traffic, allow the procession to go by and then would run up to the front again. As a patrol, you got to wear this white belt and shoulder strap which came across your chest. It was quite impressive and being on the patrol meant you were one of the more mature. When I became one of the prestigious patrols, I took my job very seriously and this didn't help my popularity much.

MOVE TO CARIBOU

When it came time for the Bélanger family to move to Caribou, Mom was worried that I might have difficulty in changing schools in mid year. Since I was going to be in the eighth grade and she did not want to take the chance that I might have to repeat it, should I find it more difficult in Caribou, she decided to send me to a private school. There was a school with a good reputation at which some of Mom's friends were sending their sons. This school was in Sharon, Massachusetts and it was run by a religious order of brothers. Feeling secure that, with a graduation certificate from the eighth grade, I would have to be placed in freshman class at Caribou High School, Mom sent me to private school for a year.

I adapted well to the surroundings and stayed in this school for my eighth grade education (as if I had a choice). This is where I first saw television in operation, since there had been none of that in rural Van Buren. I went to school and back to Van Buren, for the holidays, by taxi. A Van Buren cab company (Rudie Cyr) would take several youngsters to respective private schools in Connecticut and Massachusetts several times a year.

In 1956, I enrolled at Caribou High School and took the College Technical Course of studies. I guess I wasn't challenged, in school, and my grades were not what they might otherwise have been. During my high school years, I joined and was active in the Colombian Squires, a boys' group sponsored by the Knights of Columbus. I was never active in sports but worked at a local super market bagging groceries. I purchased a 1949 Plymouth sedan, super deluxe model, and got to know, as well as be known by, most people in town. I had purchased this car from my brother Pete for \$100. Pete had bought it in Georgia for \$90 while stationed at Fort Benning. I later traded the car for a

210
301

souped up 1951 Ford which I stripped of all chrome trim and painted it all white. My best friend, Sheldon Corrow, and I dated many girls in that old Ford. My older brothers had taken the engine apart and done a complete motor job on it so it would run just fine. Sheldon and I dated these two sisters in Fort Fairfield and had made enemies of their former boyfriends. One day, on the way back from their house, my car wouldn't run right. At 40 to 50 miles per hour, the car would stall out. I finally got the car to my Dad's garage and my brothers (Dick and Pete) tore the engine apart. We found the cylinders clogged up with sugar and thought sure that the jealous boyfriends had either poured sugar or Coke in the gas tank. After more investigation, however, we found a leaky head gasket had allowed anti-freeze into the crankcase and the sugar in the anti-freeze had caused the problem. The car already had two motor jobs and senior year was drawing to a close so I sold the Ford.

During my high school years, I was not the average student. I did not participate in any organized sport, which was required for graduation. Even participation in after school basketball qualified as a sport for graduation credit. The boys at school were divided into teams and these teams played each other in intramural contests. I did not attend the games with the team I had been assigned to and this became a problem with the administration. They notified me that I had to participate if I intended to graduate with my class. I was working every day, after school, at the grocery store and needed the money to be independent. I reluctantly attended the next four games with my team and they never even put me in to play. Being tired of being a bench warmer, I informed them that they either put me in the game or I wasn't coming back. Now, you have to realize that the only basketball I had ever played was in the physical education classes. In these classes, the class was split into the more gifted and the less gifted students with each playing on their separate halves of the basketball court. Since this had been my only experience until my first play in a real game, I had been primed to make the honest mistake which was about to happen. I got into the game, got the ball and ran to the end of the court where there were no players to stop me from making a basket. I made the basket on the first try only to find out that it really did matter on which end of the court you were. The team voted to allow me to work at the grocery store and the administration counted the one game as my participation in a sport for graduation.

In high school, we had a choice of two school activities during the noon lunch hour. If you didn't want to drive around town playing Elvis music on your car radio or hang around the outside of the school you could participate in a daily dance in the gym or watch a movie in the auditorium. I was one of the group of students who ran the projector for the noon movies. We played the three stooges and other short movies of the day. I earned my "C" letter for my sweater by being in the Projector Club.

During high school, in addition to working at the "Graves Red and White Supermarket", I belonged to the Columbian Squires, attended record hops at the Presque Isle National Guard Armory almost every Friday night and dated a very few girls. The girl I dated the most, and fell in love with, was Helen MacDonald. I was a good friend of her brother, Peter, and Helen and I had a good healthy relationship. We were so proper, you would think we were abnormal even in the standards of those days. I attended a church function where the girls had prepared a box lunch and us guys had to bid on them. Well, I got all the money I could gather up and bid on Helen's box lunch. By the time the bidding got to 25 cents, I was not sure I was going to be able to get it so I upped the bid to the entire amount I had, 50 cents. I guess that scared the other bidders away and I got to eat the box lunch with Helen. After that, we went to the record hops together but then straight home. Helen was the type that would go to confession if she thought ill of someone.

When it came time for our senior prom, I went to Helen's house to pick her up. She came down the stairs in this blue gown and I waited in her kitchen with the corsage. Her father announced that

he and Iris (Helen's mother) were going out that evening and Helen had to stay home and baby-sit. Clem was like that, no warning and strict as hell. Well, you can imagine how disappointed Helen and I were. Brother Peter came to the rescue and he stayed home to baby-sit so Helen and I could go to the prom. In those days, some Juniors were allowed to attend the Senior Prom and Peter was one of those. He called his date and explained the situation and gave up his evening for his sister and me. When Peter's Dad found out that Peter had stayed home to baby-sit for Helen, he kicked Peter out of the house. Peter came to my Dad's garage and told him about his problem so my Mom and Dad took him in to our house for a week while my mother spoke with his parents to try and settle the problem.

Helen and I dated rather steady for the last two years of high school. I used to pick her up at home in the morning for school. At first I had my 1949 Plymouth Super Deluxe and then the 1952 Ford. We grew very fond of each other but the relationship never became one of those "hot and heavy" items that were common for high school aged teens of that time. When I left for the Navy, I had no idea what was in store for us except that I intended to return home and continue dating Helen. After I came home from boot camp, I found Helen had enrolled in a convent! She stayed for seven years but eventually returned home never having taken her final vows. She was a school teacher in Caribou for several years, married Brian Thibau of Fort Fairfield and had children of her own. We remain good friends and Sandy and I see her at class reunions, when she attends.

US NAVAL CAREER

I graduated from Caribou High School in June of 1960. At the age of 16, I had signed up to join the US Navy. I waited until my 17th birthday, in March 1960, then graduation in June and six days later I was in Navy Boot Camp at Great Lakes, Illinois. I joined with my high school friend, Galen Violette, who happened to be Sandy's (my future wife) cousin.

After completion of basic training, I was stationed at Great Lakes while waiting for the start of an electronics school and Galen was sent for training in Florida as an aircraft electrician. While waiting for school to start, I worked as a Yeoman (secretarial duties) where the typing skills I had picked up, at evening school, during high school, came in handy. During basic training and during the course of my schooling, I had continued to correspond with Sandra St. Pierre, Galen's cousin from Van Buren, whom I had met during high school. We kept in touch until I got stationed at Bainbridge, Maryland for the Naval Academy Prep school. I entered the course of studies, at Great Lakes, for becoming a Fire Control Technician. This was an electronic course of studies which led to work with radar equipment which controlled the firing of guns and missiles on naval ships.

During the course of studies, which lasted until the end of April 1962, I applied for the US Naval Academy program. Every year, applicants from active duty were allowed to apply to attend the Naval Academy at Annapolis which afforded another method of entry besides the congressional appointments. Not knowing the status of this application, I volunteered for submarine service duty and was sent to New London, Connecticut for submarine training after I graduated from electronic school. My duty assignment, after submarine school, was to be the USS Nautilus, the first nuclear powered submarine.

I reported for duty at New London and visited the Nautilus. Before I could get into the course of studies, however, I received orders to report to Bainbridge, Maryland for the US Naval Academy Preparatory School. This was a college prep school in all respects. Although attendees were from all branches of the service, most were either Navy or Marine Corps members. Classes were taught by civilian as well as military teachers in a full year course which culminated in everyone taking the

212

college boards. 7,000 enlisted personnel applied for entrance to the Naval Academy, some three hundred were picked to attend the prep school and about 80 went on to the Naval Academy. During my year at Bainbridge, I kept in touch with and often saw Sandra who had graduated from a school in Boston and was employed by the Bureau of Weapons in Washington, D.C. Sandy and I started dating, for the first time, during that period.

When I left prep school and went to the Naval Academy, at Annapolis, the dating had to stop, temporarily. Midshipmen were not allowed to be or to ever have been married and the regiment was so strict that no dating was allowed during that first year. There were a few visits by Mom and Dad when relatives were allowed when I got to see Sandy, "my sister"!! The strict regimentation was not to my liking, I had never liked to study anyway and the goal to be married soon took its toll. My worst subject, in high school, had been chemistry and that reared its ugly head at the Academy. My grades were below acceptable levels in this subject and, at the half year mark, I came up before a review board. When the review board asked if I wanted to repeat first half chemistry during the second semester while taking second semester chemistry too, I wondered where they were coming from. If I had not passed first semester chemistry, how could they expect me to pass second semester? Knowing that my answers to their questions would ever influence my future applications to any officer program, I wanted the board to record my leaving without prejudice. I told them I did not want to remain at the Academy as it was simply not my calling. When they asked what my calling might be, I told them I wanted to go to the seminary to be a priest. This was a very effective statement and allowed me to leave and return to active duty in March of 1963. Now, Sandy and I could be married!

Sandy had attended grade school and high school in the Van Buren school system. She was in the same class as I was and also graduated in 1960. From high school, she went on to school in Boston for two years and then got a job in Washington DC in the Bureau of Weapons, Navy Department. That is when we started seriously dating which led to our marriage on 27 July 1963.

My mother was against my marriage to Sandy for all the right reasons. She felt that we were too young and that our attraction to each other was possibly based on the fact that we came from the same home town. She thought we were simply lonely and that having similar roots made us feel at home. That, she thought, was not reason enough for a long term relationship which marriage represented. She was probably right on both counts but she overlooked our commitment to each other and to what we had committed ourselves to. Our determination and loyalty to each other won out over all obstacles.

Sandy grew up across the street from one set of grandparents and just down the street from the other. She had the advantage of knowing her family heritage much more than some of us. Her father's side, the St. Pierre side, is fairly easy to trace. Her mother's side of the family, however, is much more difficult. The Tilley side of the family holds onto its secrets. There was a Tilley who came across on the Mayflower and there are records of Tilleys elsewhere in New England but the link to Harriet's side of the family has not yet been found.

The story is that Harriet's grandfather, William Henry Tilley, was adopted by Elie Dionne and Helene Lagace, a family in the Island Falls area of Maine. In the late 1800s, many orphans came to the United States and those that could not immediately be adopted were placed on trains heading to other parts of the country. Many such orphans ended up in Aroostook County Maine and were adopted by local folks. It is surmised that William Tilley was one of these Irish or Scottish immigrants who ended up in the Island Falls area. We end up at a dead end in the Tilley line here as the origins of William have yet to be determined.

MARRIAGE

213

Sandy and I were married in July of that year (1963). I had been stationed on a super fuel tanker, the USS Neosho, at Norfolk, Virginia and Sandy soon got a transfer to the Bureau of Weapons offices there. I had been promoted to the rank of non commissioned petty officer third class before going to the prep school and my duties aboard ship were not too demanding. The highest ranking petty officer in my division was a second class petty officer and I soon attained that rank myself. The Neosho carried 11 million gallons of fuel. We had 7 million gallons of black oil, 3 million gallons of aviation fuel and 1 million gallons of jet fuel. Our mission was to refuel aircraft carriers and other smaller tankers, while out at sea, so they wouldn't have to pull into port for fuel. We ran to different places to load up on fuel and then out to sea to pass that on to other ships. The Netherland Antilles were a favorite fueling spot for us and we had a good time whenever we went to Curacao. It took three days and night to fill us up at the fueling piers and we were free to do whatever we pleased while that happened. Since this was a civilian pier, we had no military duties except to keep watch on the ship. Most of us went off to town until this got boring. We bought a bunch of local beer and went to the beach to play ball. The different divisions, on the ship, formed different teams and we played until we were too drunk to hit the ball.

Just prior to our marriage date, the Neosho was sent on a good will trip to New Orleans. It took us eight hours up the Mississippi River to get to New Orleans. Because we had a deep draft (about 35 feet when full), our hull was deep under water. We stirred up mud for eight hours, all the way up the river, and could never slow down or we would get mired in the muck. When we got to New Orleans, I was assigned duty as a Shore Patrol. This wasn't bad duty and got us ashore more often than our shipmates. We were there about a week before leaving for more sea duty. While there, I received letters from Sandy telling me all about the wedding plans. She did the entire planning by herself and I just made it home in time for the wedding. My mother and her mother flew down and they stayed with Lillian, a cousin of my mother's in Maryland. Besides these three relatives, the only attendees at our wedding were our friends from the ship and from Sandy's work. We had a choice of going home and having a bigger wedding or getting married in D.C. and going on a honeymoon. We opted for the honeymoon to the Pocono Mountains and stayed at a honeymoon resort called Mount Airy Lodge. We went there again for our 25th anniversary and it sure wasn't the same! Our honeymoon, including round trip plane fare and all the gifts we purchased, cost us \$57.00 per day. That was a lot of money, at that time, but we felt it was worth it.

Sandy stayed in D.C. for a while after the wedding until we could move to Virginia. Sandy and I lived in a large but cold apartment in Portsmouth, Virginia. until we purchased a mobile home and moved it to Chesapeake, Virginia. While living at that apartment, we had a salesman call on us one day to sell us insurance. He said it was funny that he didn't know us since he was from Connecticut and that was so close to Maine! Well, we made him feel right at home and asked him to put out his papers on our coffee table in our cold living room. We told him we had to run an errand while he was getting his papers ready and we would be right back. Sandy and I left him in the apartment and after we returned from the movies, he was gone and never did come back.

We had no laundry facilities at the apartment and had to go to a Laundromat down the street. There was a long way and a short cut to get to the Laundromat. We could either go down to Main Street and over or cut through the black neighborhood. Several times, when taking the short cut, we experienced prejudice first hand. Being from northern Maine, we had not been exposed to racial prejudice like Virginians had. People on their porches, along the short cut route, would yell across

214

the street to each other asking if they smelled something funny, as we walked by. This was enough to get us to take the longer route along Main Street.

Sandy was much better off in the mobile home while I was out at sea than she had been in the apartment. I attended several schools in Virginia Beach and it was while I was attending one of these that President John Kennedy was shot. Sandy and I were sure the Naval Forces at Norfolk would be called to action and we got ready for another long separation. This did not happen, however, and I soon found myself re-enlisting for a second four years. Jimmy was on the way and there were promised schools in Great Lakes if I re-enlisted. Re-enlistment bonuses were not in effect then and one stayed in because they liked it or they were promised something that would lead to promotions. A class "C" and class "B" school meant a sure promotion to First Class Petty Officer and I took them up on that. What else could a 21 year old with one child on the way do anyway?

Sandy and I (and the house trailer) left the Norfolk area and embarked for new horizons at Great Lakes. Since Sandy was so close to delivery, we readied ourselves for any possibility en-route. We had newspapers in the back seat and I was ready to perform a delivery along the road. I guess nothing scared us then or maybe we were so foolish as to think we could handle anything. Jimmy was only born after our arrival at Great Lakes, however, and we stayed there until Sandy got pregnant with Julianne. It was during this term at Great Lakes that my brother Mike went through boot camp. Boot camp has two "liberties" when the recruits are allowed off base. The usual trip is to Milwaukee or Chicago. Because his brother was stationed there, Mike was allowed a few other weekends off to visit and spend some time with us.

After this class "B" school I received orders for more school and, this time, we went to Vallejo, California. After this class "C" school, I was stationed there for maintenance of a radar system. Since we had been the first class to go through this school for a new height finding radar, we were kept on to help others go through the course by working on the equipment at night. Classes of students went to school during the day and we worked third shift taking some of the problems introduced into the system by accident or on purpose by the students and instructors. This made the equipment ready for the next day's class.

While stationed in California, Sandy and I enjoyed the state's beautiful Sacramento Valley, its wineries and even visited Sandy's brothers in Washington State. We met the Ross family in Vacaville and became good friends with them. Ray Ross had been stationed at Limestone Air Force Base and married Gisele Madore from Van Buren. They lived in Vacaville, California which was close to Vallejo where we lived. Spending time with someone from back home for us young kids was a good feeling and we have remained friends with Gisele after Ray passed away. Ray had been employed by the Vacaville prison facility and had tried to get me to go back there after I got out of the Navy to serve as an instructor to the inmates, teaching electronics.

Military pay was meager, at best, so I worked other jobs to help make ends meet. I knew some electronics and thought that getting experience in TV repair might be a good thing. I went to every TV shop in the Vallejo area and offered to work for them, at no charge, for the experience. I told them I had my own meters and tools but that didn't convince anyone. Nobody would hire me and they all cited insurance coverage as the reason. I then looked into becoming a Fuller Brush salesman and did that for about a year. That was a tough business and I swore I would never again sell door to door. I would call on a customer, sell them product and then, when I came back two weeks later to deliver it, they didn't need it any more or didn't have any money. I used to work at the navy base from 11 PM to 7 AM, go home and sleep from 8 AM to 2 PM and then sell Fuller Brush all afternoon. That still gave me evenings with my family before going to work again. During that period, I

215

was on the maintenance staff for the computers. Having already graduated from the first class for this system, we were kept there to repair the system after students had been taught on them all day. The instructors would inject problems into the system for the students to find. Many times the problems were not found or other problems were caused by the students and we had to find them and fix them every night before the next day's class. It is hard to believe but, we had the first computer that calculated height of the target which was acquired on radar. Other radars could tell the range of the target but ours could also tell the height of it. In order to do that, the computers in the radar system had to do a "square root" calculation. We had equipment banks about six feet tall and 19 inches wide full of electronics and it took three of these to do a square root calculation. Remember that the next time you do a square root on a wrist watch calculator.

These were the days of the first computers. California had always been a leader in computers and electronics which sets the scene for the following. Computers generated heat and the California nights were much cooler than the days. We had these huge yellow bugs which would come out at night seeking a warm place. They looked like a bumble bee without wings and were probably ten times as large. Their backs were covered with a hard covering so that, when they crawled under the door cracks along the floor, their bodies would rub on the door and make a noise. Well, these bugs would come into the buildings and crawl into the computers to keep warm. We had to open the cabinets and make sure we found all of them and removed them. If you ever wondered where the term "debugging" electronics circuitry came from, you now know. No joke!

We almost made it to Disney Land once. The day we were to leave, Sandy got real sick and we stayed home. We were to go to Anaheim and stay with Rob Roy's family from Van Buren as they were related to my mother. We never did make it because, soon after, we got transferred again. It was during this time that Juli was born and Sandy was pregnant for our third child. It seemed that Sandy's pregnancies generated shipping orders and, this time, we got transferred to Bath, Maine, for work prior to the commissioning of my new ship, the USS Biddle.

BACK TO MAINE

On the trip back to Maine, from California, we went through Canada in order to come down from the top of Maine into Van Buren. Thinking we had plenty of money to make it home, we set out with our US Savings bonds. Well, we found out that you can't cash in US Savings Bonds in Canada so we had to stretch whatever cash we had which meant no money for lodging. We had just enough for gas and food until we hit the United States border. We crossed the border into Fort Kent, Maine with an empty tank of gas, five dollars in cash and two \$25 dollar US Savings bonds. This was quite a sight, two small children, nine months and nine days apart, a pregnant wife and a husband who had been driving for two straight days without sleep.

In Bath, Maine, housing was hard to find. We considered sending Sandy and the kids back to Van Buren to stay until the birth of Jennifer but finally opted to stay together no matter how hard times were. We ended up renting a small Cape Cod type house on Pleasant Street in Brunswick, Maine where Jennifer was born. I did my military duties and worked at a gas station, across the street from the house, pumping gas and fixing flat tires for extra money. One day while pumping air into this huge truck tire the tire came off the rim and blew me half way across the parking lot. I had trusted the pressure gauge, which had malfunctioned, and had put in more air than the tire could take. I was lucky to be unhurt and was much more careful in the future.

When the ship's construction was completed, it was sent to Boston for it's home port. We arranged for military housing at Fort Devens, Massachusetts since housing there was plentiful. The

316

army soldiers that had occupied the housing units had been mostly all shipped off to Viet Nam. I car pooled, with others from the ship, from Fort Devens to the Charlestown Navy yard daily. The USS Biddle went on underway training for six months to Cuba while Sandy stayed with the children. Sandy found it a hardship to be alone without family and also without a driver's license. She soon made arrangements to go to Van Buren and take her Maine driver test so she could at least get around the military post to do her shopping. Her father came down to escort her home. Sandy loaded the kids in the car and took off for Maine following her Dad (450 miles), no driver license and very little driving experience! When she got to Maine, she failed the driver test and stayed home another week or so and took it again before she passed.

My experience in Cuba was quite different from what it had been in my prior naval experience. We followed Russian ships going in and out of Cuba, this was the "Cuban Blockade" era. We had many training exercises where we simulated war games, being rammed by another ship and many other possible real life situations. I can remember this 600 foot ship rocking over to one side when we simulated being rammed. It was scary and I had no idea how they could move so much metal so fast in a simulation. I later found that this was caused by heaving a hand grenade over the side. Since you can't compress a liquid, when the hand grenade went off, it pushed water rapidly in all directions making it seem like the ship was rammed on the grenade side.

One day when we were approaching this Russian ship at full speed, I was in the missile room working on the launcher mechanism. Although I had no ability to load a live missile from the missile room onto the launcher, I did have the ability to load dummy missiles. I called up two dummy missiles and loaded them on the launcher and started exercising the launcher. When the "old man" (Navy slang for the captain of the ship) saw this he almost panicked thinking the Russian might take it as an act of aggression. You can't tell the live missiles from the dummies by looking.

After the ship was done it's Cuban duty, we went back to Boston before being sent on an "around the world" tour. This tour would take us by Viet Nam and qualify all members of the crew for Viet Nam service medals. When it came time to decide to re-enlist or get out, I started looking for work in the Southern NH or Boston area. Looking for jobs while still on a ship is very difficult. Everyone wants you to come in for an interview which is difficult. My letter writing put me in touch with a company I had heard about in Nashua, New Hampshire. They were hiring people in my military line of work so I applied and was guaranteed a job upon my discharge from the Navy. At my interview I was told to "get out and come back and we'll see". I told them there was no way I was getting out unless I had a guaranteed job. With a family of three young children, I was not taking any chances. Sanders Associates finally guaranteed me a job at \$135 per week and I took it.

Just before my release from active duty, I was transferred to Boston where I did some administrative work. That Yeoman training 8 years before came into play once again. I typed up the discharge papers for others getting out and was one of the few in the military that gets to type out their own discharge and pick the date. On 11 October 1967 (Veteran's Day) I was discharged from military service and soon was at work at Sanders Associates in Nashua. Prior to actually being released from active duty, Sandy and I had purchased our first home in Nashua, with the help of the VA housing loan program. This did not require a down payment and that was the only way we could ever have purchased our first home. We paid \$14,000 for it and had no idea how we would ever be able to make the payments of \$130 per month, including taxes.

CIVILIAN LIFE, AT LAST

217

I worked for Sanders four years during which time I got promotions from engineering technician to engineering aid to supervisor and finally to the position of company engineer. When I first started at Sanders, I was involved in a research and development group where the engineers designed circuits and we would build the prototype. The prototype usually didn't work the way the engineers had thought it would and it was up to us engineer assistants to try different things, in conjunction with the engineers, to make the thing work. I soon was promoted to head up the test department which tested these boards we had built and were now in the manufacturing process. With promotions, I ended up heading up the entire test department for the F-111 project with three shifts of technicians and three shift supervisors working for me.

I was so busy and good at handling stress that, at one time, I had two secretaries. One of them was simply to answer my phone. I can't recall much about one of them except that her name was Lucille, she was older than I was. Lucille had been in the manufacturing department as an assembler but always wanted to get into secretarial work. She had taken some night and correspondence courses so I gave her an opportunity to work in that field. She did well on the phone except when she had to put someone on hold. More often than not she would ask the person to wait, hang up the phone and "then" press the hold button!

I often worked the different shifts so that I could relate to the problems which were shift related. It was hard to understand the frustrations expressed to me by the different shift supervisors so I would work a week on each shift every once in a while. This not only brought out the problems which I could correct but allowed me to get to know all the people who worked on these shifts. Doing this also made me popular with the shift workers and they showed it when I needed them to meet deadlines or work extra time when needed.

During this time, I had started repairing radio equipment and television sets in my basement at home. I had one of the technicians working at Sanders who helped me get started on my own. Bob Huckaby was on the second shift and he would work in my basement fixing TV sets during the day. When I came home from work, I would take up where he left off and work in the evenings. I enjoyed the challenge of this hands-on experience.

Working for a large defense contractor has its ups and downs. When a project is in full swing, they need you 100 hours a week but when that project winds down, they lay off or try to find you employment elsewhere in the company. When the F-111 program started winding down, I had to be the one to lay off or find other employment for the 60 technicians in my department. Of course, the last to go was me! I found a job in the test equipment department but, in order to maintain my salary level, they classified me as a company engineer. I was asked to design test stands and I did that rather well as long as I was designing blocks which were to perform a function. When it came time to come up with the actual circuits to fill the blocks, I found out first hand what Peter's Principle was. Having been promoted to a level of incompetency, I decided it was time to make other arrangements.

The part time business had grown considerably and it took most all of my spare time. I felt it was time to think about doing this for my primary occupation. I started looking for a place where I could not only live but run a business full time. The residential area of Seminole Drive was not the place to expand into a full time business. I looked all over Nashua and eventually found a place in Hollis which was in the Residential - Business zone. This would allow me to move my family there and operate a business too. Although the house was far from being as nice as the one we had in Nashua, I decided to make the move to Hollis and start my own business.

218

Being salaried at Sanders, I got three months severance pay and used that to get started. I don't know, today, how I ever had the nerve to make such a move. I started repairing television sets and stereo equipment. Because we were just starting out, we could not afford health insurance. This was quite a risk since Jennifer had been so sick in Nashua with asthma and allergies. Thank goodness these didn't flare up in Hollis. We operated the business and it grew steadily. Because the electronic industry is so prone to change and reductions in cost, I had to adapt my business constantly to stay ahead of the game. Having started in radio repair, we soon switched to televisions only and then to stereo equipment and finally to two way radios.

SELF EMPLOYED

Times were not easy and there was the usual borrowing of money to finance the business, going without pay during the bad weeks and the eventual re-mortgaging of the house to give the business some needed cash and equipment. The children grew up, attended Hollis schools and went on to leave home and have lives of their own. The business name was soon changed to Beltronics, Inc. from Bélanger's Electronics and, at the time of this writing, is still an active business in Hollis specializing in sales and service of two way radio equipment. From 1971 the business went from about 300 square feet of space to over 3,000 square feet. At one time, Beltronics employed 14 people but then down-sized during the late 80s to five. The business went from selling and servicing radios to TVs to Stereos and finally to Two Way Radios. In 1997 the business is planning on the next move to keep up with business trends in electronics.

During that time, we not only ran the business but were deeply involved with 4-H with the kids. Even though Sandy and I worked very hard and long hours, the business being next to the house meant that we saw the kids more than we would have if we had regular jobs. With the kids, we raised chickens, goats, sheep, pigs, beef cows and even had a milker. In addition to that, the kids really got into horses and we had some of our own as well as boarded some. I tried to teach them the economics of living and they took care of boarded horses to pay for their own. They each had their own checking accounts at a very young age.

When we moved to Hollis, the children were just starting to speak English as they had always spoken French. I did service calls during the day while Sandy kept the shop open and then I would work until about two in the morning fixing TV sets before crawling into bed. I was on the road again in the morning so that I could be at my first service call at eight. The kids would often come to the shop and be with us during the day and evening.

ACTIVITIES

As a young military man, at Great Lakes, I had joined the Knights of Columbus but had never been active until I joined again in 1995. During those years after my discharge from active military duty, I became involved in many different activities. I served as an Auxiliary Police Officer in Nashua for two years before we moved to Hollis. I served as a Special Police Officer in Hollis for 17 years after leaving Nashua. I was so involved in Hollis life that I closed my shop on Wednesdays so I could act as the police prosecutor at the Nashua District Court. Since our court date was every other Wednesday, on the odd Wednesdays I would patrol the town forest on horseback. This was not only an excuse to act as a police officer but to enjoy the summer outings. I served as a volunteer fireman in Hollis from August 1971 to March 1997. The department had a small retirement recognition at their April meeting for my twenty five and a half years of service. I was a cub scout troop leader, a volunteer 4-H leader for some 14 years, served on the Board of Directors for the Hillsborough

219

County Fair for nearly ten years and continue to actively participate in the activities of the fair. I served as a school board member for six years, as a Hollis selectman for six years and as the planning board chairman for three years.

Through the years I served as the Nashua area president of the NH Electronics Technicians Association and also served as that organization's state president for several terms. Being a part of that organization led me to become a Certified Electronics Technician where I was voted Technician of the Year at a National Convention. I was a certificate administrator for the CET organization which allowed me to administer CET exams for local persons wishing to become CETs.

I not only operate my electronic sales and service business but also am a partner in a mini-storage business with 80 units. I started a black powder muzzle loading business which lasted three years and operated a freelance paralegal business. In connection with my two way radio business I acquired a partner and we organized a business of electronic repeaters for the two way radio industry. I later bought out my partner in this business and continued to operate it as a sole proprietorship called Horizon Communications. Due to the ever changing demands of the electronics industry, the business I started in 1968 is still undergoing changes to remain viable in the economy of the day. At this writing, we are investigating pursuing more work in the audio and sound re-inforcement area as an alternative to the ever changing, ever cheaper two way radio industry.

Sandy and I now live on 32 Plain Road but continue to own our original Hollis home at 17 Proctor Hill Rd where our daughter Jennifer lives with her husband Mark. We also own a duplex apartment building next door to the Hollis Police Station where our daughter Jayne lives. I still wonder if going into business for myself was a good move especially when I consider how I will ever be able to retire with any kind of retirement income. If I had chosen a different road, however, it is most certain that my family would certainly have turned out differently. Lord knows what that would have been like so, we should not look back but go forward and live with our decisions.

Sandra Colombe St. Pierre

Sandra was born on 12 October 1942 in Van Buren, Maine, the daughter of Leo J St Pierre and Harriet Tilley. Sandy grew up with two older brothers and a much younger sister. Bill was the oldest followed by Clayton and then Sandy. Sandy had a brother named Bruce who died at the age of one. Then Susan came along later and was Sandy's young sister.

Sandy attended grade school and high school in the Van Buren school system. She was in the same class as I was and also graduated in 1960. From high school, she went on to school in Boston for two years and then got a job in Washington DC in the Bureau of Weapons, Navy Department. That is when she I started seriously dating which led to our marriage on 27 July 1963.

My mother was against my marriage to Sandy for all the right reasons. She felt that we were too young and that our attraction to each other was possibly based on the fact that we came from the same home town. She thought we were simply lonely and that having similar roots made us feel at home. That, she thought, was not reason enough for a long term relationship which marriage represented. She was probably right on both counts but she overlooked our commitment to each other and to what we had committed ourselves to. Our determination and loyalty to each other won out over all obstacles.

220

Sandy grew up across the street from one set of grandparents and just down the street from the other. She had the advantage of knowing her family heritage much more than some of us. Her father's side, the St. Pierre side, is fairly easy to trace. Her mother's side of the family, however, is much more difficult. The Tilley side of the family holds onto its secrets. There was a Tilley who came across on the Mayflower and there are records of Tilleys elsewhere in New England but the link to Harriet's side of the family has not yet been found.

The story is that Harriet's grandfather, William Henry Tilley, was adopted by Elie Dionne and Helene Lagace, a family in the Island Falls area of Maine. In the late 1800s, many orphans came to the United States and those that could not immediately be adopted were placed on trains heading to other parts of the country. Many such orphans ended up in Aroostook County Maine and were adopted by local folks. It is surmised that William Tilley was one of these Irish or Scottish immigrants who ended up in the Island Falls area.

SANDY SAYS:

I remember how I loved to rock and rock. I rocked in small rockers or large huge rocking chairs like my Grampy Tilley owned. I even rocked myself right off the second story landing once and got up unhurt.

My Dad was a plumber who worked for the union which meant he was gone from home five days a week and home on weekends. My Mom was a full-time Mom. There were three of us - my two older brothers (Bill and Clayton) and I were just a year apart - and this kept Mom pretty busy. When I was five years old, I got another brother named Bruce. He was a beautiful healthy baby - until the age of 4 months. One morning he didn't seem to feel well and was not his cheery bubbly self so Mom went for help. I held him until her return, but he went into a deep coma and never awoke. He was gone before Mom could return with help. I shall never forget it - he was a little angel in my arms and God came to get him.

At the age of 9, I got a new baby sister and we called her Suzanne. Every time she cried, I cried too. I was afraid she would die too, but she lived and was my best pal. I "dragged" her with me everywhere I went. She was a very good little kid.

I had lost the fear of losing my baby brother until my first born came along. He reminded me so much of my brother that I was overly cautious with my baby Jamie but he was healthy and I finally healed. The birth of my other three children was easier and I found out babies are strong and don't break!

Growing up with two older brothers was a pain and a blessing. At first, they were a nuisance and always in the way, but as we grew up and became teen-agers I had special protectors and bonded with my brothers. They were very good looking so, needless to say, I had a lot of friends among the female population.

We all grew up with three sets of grandparents. My Mom's parents (Grammy and Gramp Tilley) lived across the street. Grammy Tilley made the best homemade chocolate cake you ever tasted. My Dad's mother (Grammy St. Pierre) lived one street over and she made the best molasses cookies in the world. Then there were my great grandparents (Memere & Pepere Michaud), my Grammy Tilley's parents who lived in the biggest and "bestest" house ever! It had two sets of staircases and you could go up the formal staircase, cross over the length of the house and come down the back staircase into the kitchen. They also had this pantry that housed trunks of old clothes. I could play

221

"dress up" all day in these old silk and velvet dresses and hats. I was in my glory in that old house until it was torn down to make way for a new modern ranch house.

I attended Champlain Elementary school which was divided into a left side for boys and the right side for girls. After entering the school, the nuns would clap a signal as we marched to our respective classrooms. That was the accepted practice in those days.

I remember when dial telephones were introduced in Van Buren. We lost our three ring system and "shared line". Then came television - those were the big times and modernization was upon us.

In High School I was in an all girl school. The nuns were Sisters of the Good Shepherd and taught us along with a few civilian teachers. The Marist priests taught the boys across the street in the Boy's High School. The girls had no sports program because our school had no gym. The boys had sports - they used the American Legion Hall Gymnasium. That hall was also the place where we held all our basketball games and dances.

I have many wonderful memories of growing up in Van Buren such as the old swimming hole, the lake, old home days, minstrel shows, potato picking season as well as many aunts, uncles and cousins who resisted the urge to "move away" from Van Buren during the exodus to Connecticut and other industrialized areas. Van Buren was a great, warm and safe place to grow up in.

When I graduated from High School in 1960, I went on to school in Boston, then to Washington DC to work and one can pick up my life's story by reading the chapter on Jim Belanger with whom I have been married for 35 years.





USNA - "66"



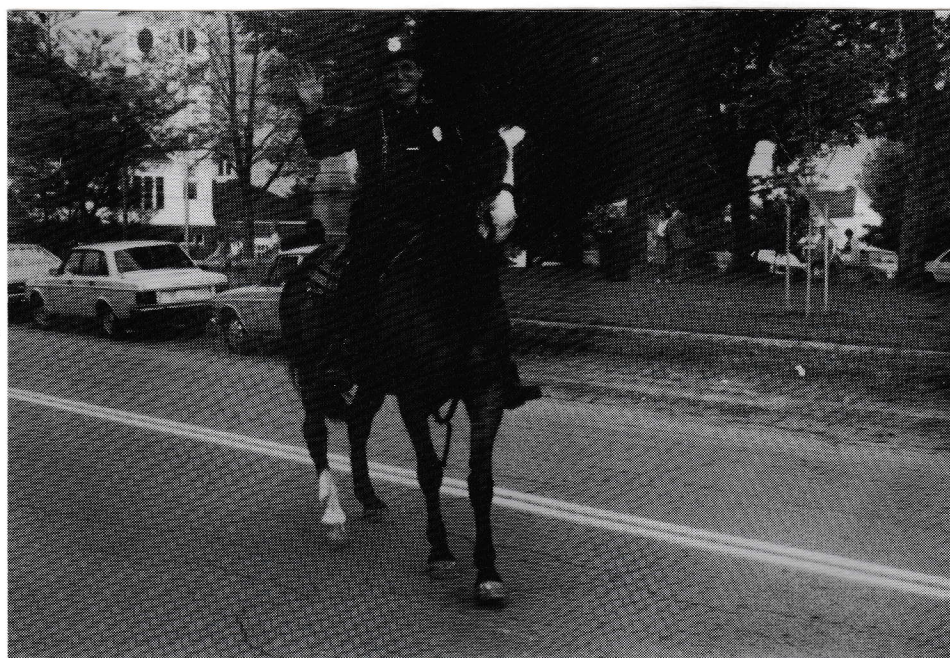
BLUE KNIGHTS



FIREMAN JIM



BELANGER REUNION
QUEBEC CIRCA 1988



MOUNTED POLICE OFFICER JIM