

For Insert November 3, 2004

MY SOAPBOX
BY
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Hi Fellow Seniors:

This is the second column about November 11th and of the men and women who fought in World War II. It is really important that these stories are kept alive in the minds and hearts of children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. The acts of brave men and women should not be relegated to the attic as they are a part of history, our history and should be protected. The men and women who paid the supreme sacrifice should never be forgotten, but the Provincial and Federal politicians do not see it fitting that a 'special day' should be held in their honour. The two men I interviewed for this article are now residents of Kensington Village where they are enjoying quieter times.

My first interview was with Squadron Leader Victor Stuart who started out as a Flying Instructor on single and multi engine aircraft. He was posted to Alaska where he flew the Beaufort commonly known as the Flying Stone and the Ventura. He was then transferred from B.C. to India and the Cocos Island. There were two official Canadian squadrons called the Dakotas and their job was to support the British Army in Burma.

He flew Liberator Bombers as part of the R.A.F. Over 50% of the bomber crews in the R.A.F. were Canadian. They bombed Java, Sumatra and Malaysia. They also dropped supplies into prisoner-of-war camps located in Sumatra and Malaysia. He and his crew heard the V.E. celebrations over the radio in mid August 1945 while still stationed on the Cocos Islands. He said the biggest problem they encountered was flying during the monsoons.

I asked Victor what experience has stayed with him all these years and he told me "We were flying in a Liberator bomber and lost an engine during a bombing run and started to lose altitude over the Indian Ocean. We had a full load of bombs, one in particular was very large. We couldn't activate the release switch to dump the load of bombs as we were pretty sure we were going into the Ocean and wanted to get rid of our cargo. One of our crew went to where the doors were open and hanging on by his fingertips, jumped up and down to get the bombs to release. He was successful with all the bombs but the large one and could not get that to release. He and his crew were pretty sure the end had come when they finally got the stalled engine activated and pulled back up. We returned to base to get more bombs."

Victor maintains they were "The Forgotten Air Force" and the Burma Bomber Association will be holding the 60th Anniversary of the end of the Japanese War this year. I'm sure you were not forgotten by the people you helped such as the prisoners of war once the war ended. Victor stayed in the Air Force until he retired.

My second interview was with Warrant Officer Ralph Maintrize who as a lad from St. Mary's enlisted at age 18. Basic training at CNE ground in Toronto soon led to self defence training in Trois Riviere and then on to Bombing and Gunnery School on P.E.I. They were taught to strip down and reassemble 303 Browning machine guns, skills that they would need as air gunners on the Lancaster Bombers. He was then sent to Halifax to take a seven day zig-zag trip of the Atlantic to Greenwich, Scotland. Then on to a holding station in Gloucestershire. A few days after arriving there, we were awakened at dawn by the roar of aircraft engines – D.Dday had started. The sky was full of Dakota aircraft towing 3 gliders each. The parade kept up all day long.

Ralph was then sent onto to Lossiemouth, Scotland where he met the fellows he would be flying with then on to Elgin where training was done in twin engine Wellington Bombers, affectionately known as “Wimpys”. Their training included – high level bombing – navigation – air to air machine gun firing – evasive action from fighter attack and gun camera. After training was completed they were sent to Lincolnshire, England where they were attached to the R.A.F.'s Group 5.

Ralph flew twelve missions over Europe including Giessen, Royan, Munich, Politz, Gravenhorst, Bohlen, Hamburg, Wesel, Nordhausen, Pilzen and Brussels. When I asked Ralph what stood out in his mind during the war years he told me as follows:

“My fifth trip was to Politz where we were to hit oil stores. Our flight route went from the North Sea to Denmark and Norway to the centre of Sweden. We turned south to the Baltic Sea and on to Politz. The trip there and back took 10 and a half hours. The direct route across Germany would have been faster but Intelligence had word the Germans were expecting us and so we took the northern route. While flying over Sweden, the Anti-aircraft on the ground gave a display of fire that came out in a V for Victory and I've never forgotten that.”

There are numerous tales to be told by these two veterans as well as many others, and the heroic acts that became their normal life. They never thought of themselves as heroes, just doing their job. I asked them what they thought about before a mission and they both told me they were fatalists and were ready for whatever happened.

The time I spent with Victor and Ralph was not long enough and I plan on going back one day to hear some more tales but for now I would like to say THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES and for sharing your time with me.

Bye for now.

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