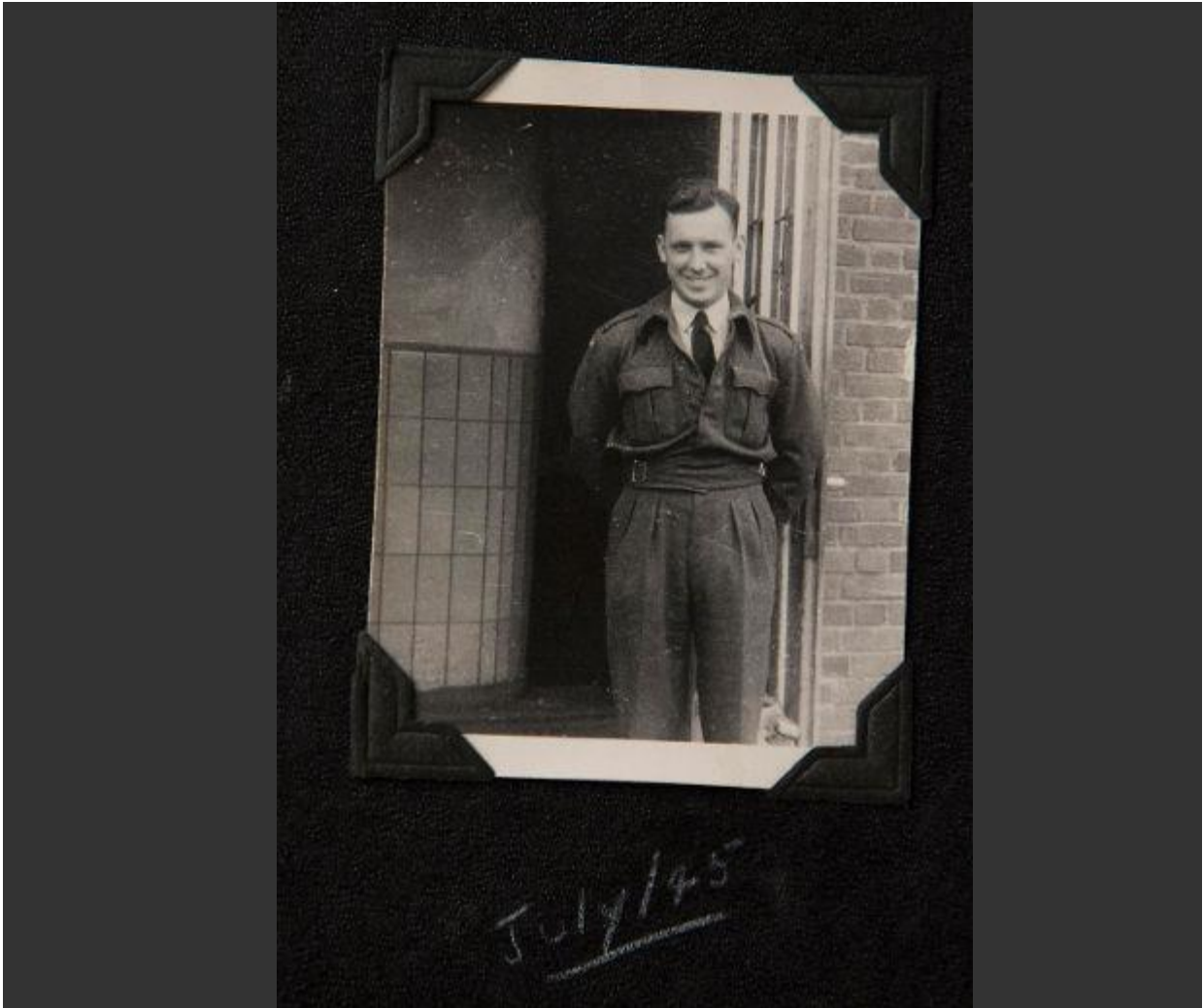


Remembrance Day

War memories still sting for veterans at Perley Rideau

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Terrible memories of Suffering

Dishes out bad memories

Fighting to Keep our Freedom

Very emotional Day

Thank God I was able to go Home

What Does Remembrance Day mean to you?

The Corvette ship

All the Hellis that died

It meant the end of the war











Ottawa's largest assembly of surviving veterans of World War II won't be found among the pomp and circumstance of the parade routes, or standing alongside the dignitaries at an emotionally-charged tribute at the National War Memorial this Remembrance Day.

Instead, they'll be marking the occasion at home.

The Perley Rideau Veterans' Health Centre is home to 250 veterans from World War II and the Korean War, and each year hosts a Remembrance Day ceremony of its own, where 800 people are expected to attend on Nov. 11 in honour of their service.

It's a special place in our city -- nestled in the Alta Vista neighbourhood, near the Ottawa Hospital and the Canadian Forces Health Care Centre -- and the stories contained within its walls could fill volumes.

A recent ceremony at the beginning of Veteran's Week saw 11 of the home's residents invested into the Order of St. George, each of the nominees regaled with tales of their wartime exploits.

There was 89-year-old Maurice Bilodeau, raised in Lebreton Flats as one of 16 children, enlisting shortly after his 18th birthday and serving in the infantry, where he would later call himself a "lucky boy" for having been shot at five times, and having a bullet glance harmlessly off his steel helmet, but escaping the war with no physical scars.

There was 94-year-old Frank Cauley, a navigator with the RAF who was the only survivor aboard a warplane that crashed into the Bay of Biscay, spending three long days bobbing in the ocean on an inflatable dinghy, vowing "to live his life for others if (his) was spared."

He made good on the promise, and was awarded the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal for dedicating his postwar life to community service.

There was Gatineau's Mervin Jones, 91, who answered a call for French-speaking servicemen, and was among the first Canadian paratroopers to land behind enemy lines in occupied France on D-Day, tasked with protecting the eastern flank of the Allied invasion force streaming across the Normandy beaches.

And Tony Golab, 95, who was twice shot out of the sky while flying reconnaissance missions over enemy positions and taken in by Resistance fighters in Italy.

Staying with the RCAF after the war ended, "Golden Boy" Golab also starred for the Ottawa Rough Riders, and was inducted into both the Canadian Football Hall of Fame and Canada's Sports Hall of Fame, and the Order of Canada.

There was Jack Watts, 95, and his war bride Norma Watts, 93, who celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary together at the Perley Rideau.

But as the war stories flowed, there was an especially poignant moment that brought the entire room to a hush, as the Order of St. George moved into the portion of the investiture ceremony where names were read aloud of each of the Field Knights and Field Dames who have passed away since last year's ceremony.

The middle-aged son of one of the veterans, visibly moved by the significance, said in a hushed tone, shaking his head, "There are so few still with us."

So few still with us. So few remaining from an era that produced the 'Greatest Generation,' and so few first-hand opportunities left to hear those stories from the people who lived through such an unimaginable time.

People who take such pride in regaling any who would take the time to ask.

People who are living testimonials to the importance of remembrance.

And people for whom remembrance is more than a once-in-a-year event on the calendar.

"I remember the fellas. My memory always goes back to the fellas I was with," says Leslie Bowley, 97, clear-eyed and sharp as a tack as he reaches back 75 years into the memory bank to recount those days of glory, and the days of horror.

"There was one fella, looked very much like I did. I was supposed to be working in the signal office, and he wanted to work the afternoon shift and I would take his shift for him. They got bombed that afternoon, and he got killed. I should have been there."

Bowley recalls at least five brushes with death, when he should have been the one to fall on the battlefield in place of a comrade.

"I was stationed with 2nd Brigade Signals infantry, and when they landed in Sicily, Ralph Devlin was going up the beaches at Sicily and he was killed. If I had been there I would have been with 'Dev,' there's no doubt about it.

"Five times I should have been killed, but I was somewhere else, so here I am today, and they're not. And when I think of these guys, they were only kids, you know. Only kids.

"I was 28, I was the old man of the unit.

"Little Teddy Burns used to sit on the side of the bed and cry his eyes out, 'I want to go home, Lessy. I want to go home.' 'I'd say, you can't go home, you're here... I never knew what happened to him."

His voice trails off, but never falters.

"I wouldn't take a million dollars to see what I saw, and I wouldn't take a million dollars to see it again."

Still, Bowley takes pride in recounting his old war stories around the Perley Rideau, moving into the long-term care wing six months ago with his wife Hilda. And the nurses and attendants all see it -- the sparkle Leslie has in his eye each time he looks her way.

He'll never forget the moment they met.

Hilda worked with the Women's Auxiliary of the Royal Air Force (WAAF), and stationed in the English seaside town of Eastbourne, which by 1942 had been bombed to bits by hit-and-run squadrons stationed in occupied France.

She vividly recalls the the day the bomber command centre took a direct hit, and she had seconds to escape to the boardwalk before the building collapsed into rubble.

"It was November 1942, and my chum and I went and sat at a table," Leslie recalls.

"And this WAAF (group) came along and asked if they could sit at the other end of the table. I said sure, and she sat down and I said, 'That's for me.' "And that was over 70 years ago, and there she is," says Bowley.

Born in Liverpool, Hilda had been boarding with a family in Eastbourne, and after she met Leslie, she made sure the handsome Canadian soldier would be welcome at the family home.

"That became my second home," Leslie recalls.

"It was a great life there, and we had a lot of fun, and did a lot of things you wouldn't do ordinarily.

"We went back there to visit about 10 years ago and the little boy, who was only about 10 years old then, was now retired. Time marches on."

One of his favourite war stories goes something like this:

"Most of these fellows would have been (spending free time) playing poker, but I'd always go help in the kitchen... Our chef went back to England on leave and they asked me to take his place until he got back. Not much doing in the Signal Corps at the time, so I went to help out in the kitchen, and he never came back. So I ended up in the kitchen, and when I got my discharge (after the war), they classified me as the cook."

Bowley had actually served as a signalman -- working the telephone lines and eventually with first-generation computers -- supplying the frontline with communication with the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals.

He and his unit were under constant bombing threat as they followed the frontline, and had "a lot of close calls, because we were the nerve centre, and if you knock out the army's nerve centre..." Still, spending time stationed alongside infantry units, he would hear the occasional taunt.

"They'd say, 'You're a soldier, where's your gun?' Well, we all carried guns. But I turned in the same five rounds of ammunition at the end of the war that they gave me at the beginning of the war. I never used them."

Bob Hanley, 94, doesn't mince words when it comes to Remembrance Day, and he doesn't hesitate to weigh in on the debate over whether to turn the day into a national holiday.

"I don't want Remembrance Day to be a holiday," he says.

"If it was a holiday, the kids would just take it off and go and play. I think we should use that day for people to go into the schools and teach these young people what remembrance is all about."

Hanley still remembers -- with precision clarity -- each of the wartime events that won him the six service medals he wears, including the Normandy Campaign Medal he earned during that fateful Allied invasion that finally turned the tide of war.

Hanley was an engineering officer in charge of the maintenance of a fleet of Spitfires, so he knew in advance that a major operation was underway, but even he couldn't have been prepared for what he witnessed in the early days of the June, 1944 invasion, then known only as Operation Neptune.

Hanley was briefed about getting his planes battle-ready a week before the invasion, "So I knew exactly what was going on. And you did not disclose that to anybody. But we knew the operation was coming." The problem was, there was a shortage of help, so Hanley recalls having British schoolchildren helping out in everything from small jobs to refueling airplanes.

"We had a terrible storm come up, and there was doubt whether the invasion could start. But the storm let up a little bit, and we knew that we were going to go, because we got the message to put the invasion markings on the aircraft - that was a white strip around the wings -- so we were told to put them on, and we worked our little butts right off." Hanley was overseeing 16 pilots at a time, sending up sorties (aerial combat missions) every day, with two aircraft at the end of the runway at the ready at all times.

Initially, the engineers bunked with the pilots -- most of them still fresh-faced kids -- but "during the invasion we were losing three or four pilots a day, so we had to move into our own rooms. It was just too hard."

Finally, six days into the invasion, Hanley was flown over in a Dakota DC-3.

"I was able to see all across the channel, and there were thousands of ships. It was just a fabulous sight to see. You can't imagine what it was like. And you could see the army moving further into the shore.

But the Germans held us back for some time, and we also had a terrible storm roll in. And we ran out of food. We were eating hardtack (ration biscuits) for almost two weeks.

"Once we got through, well, the front started moving."

Hanley was in Paris two days after the liberation.

"It was absolutely fabulous. We had a Jeep, and we drove right down to the Arc de Triomphe, and as we drove in, that whole area filled up with people. It's hard to imagine that just a Jeep would cause that, but the people were just so happy," Hanley smiles.

Hanley snapped photos -- which he keeps lovingly to this day in a black bound photo album -- as the Allies continued their advance through Belgium, Holland, and Hanley made his way all the way to Hamburg, where Allied soldiers were helping themselves to all sorts of souvenirs.

But not before passing through the infamous Belsen concentration camp, which had been hastily vacated by the Nazis only days before the Allies arrived to find 60,000 prisoners -- most half-starved and suffering from a typhus outbreak that had killed 35,000 prisoners -- alongside the unburied bodies of 13,000 people, mostly Jewish prisoners.

Anne Frank had perished there months earlier.

"We left from Normandy, we kept moving, went through Paris, up through Belgium into Holland, and we were advancing pretty fast. And then there was Belsen..."

His expression changes.

"But I won't talk about that."

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