

Second World War veteran recalls ‘a lot of close calls’

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By [Erin McCracken](#)

Robert Henley gently turns the black paper pages of his photo album, and fondly thumbs the sepia-toned images that are as clear as his memories of the Second World War.

“That’s an airplane smashed. You saw lots of those,” he said.

Images of downed planes, burned fueling trucks, barren streets of war-torn Paris, France and emaciated bodies of concentration camp victims depict some of the nightmares Henley witnessed.

But there were also happy times, evident in the smiles that spread across the faces of Henley and his fellow fresh-faced young airmen who stare out from the photographs.

“If you’ve never prayed you pray at that time. Somebody heard me. Maybe St. George,” he said with a smile. “There were a lot of close calls.”
- Robert Henley, Second World War veteran

“I was not supposed to (have a camera), but I did. I had it sent (by my mother) in a food box,” he said.

The 94-year-old, who moved into the Perley and Rideau Veterans’ Health Centre with his wife Terri earlier this year, left his family’s wheat and cattle farm in Harris, Sask. outside Saskatoon to join the air force at 19 in 1939.

Like the other dozen veterans who were invested into the Order of St. George at the Perley and Rideau Veterans’ Health Centre on Monday in recognition of their service to Canada, Henley saw the horrors of war as a young man in his 20s.

He lost friends in the fighting.

He worked around the clock overseeing his men as they patched up Spitfire airplanes and sent them back into the skies over Europe.

He ran for cover as searing hot shrapnel fell down from the sky like lethal rain during the Normandy campaign in 1944.

“If you’ve never prayed you pray at that time. Somebody heard me. Maybe St. George,” he said with a smile. “There were a lot of close calls.”

And like many of the veterans who survived the battles and came home to their families and the country they fought for, Henley doesn't describe himself as a brave man when faced with one adversity after another.

When he first received his order to join the fighting overseas, Henley didn't feel scared or nervous.

"I was happy. There were other people who would've liked to have had it, but I got it," he said. "You could see the world. You don't expect to get killed. You don't even think about that. At least, I didn't."

During the invasion into Normandy, France, Henley remembers flying across the English Channel on a Douglas DC-6 transport aircraft.

"When we crossed the ocean in order to get to Normandy, you looked down from the airplane and there didn't seem to be any space left," he said. "The whole area was filled up with ships. It was the most remarkable scene I've ever seen in my life – to see, for 50 miles across, there were ships, ships, ships.

"And you can imagine every ship has got so many people. It was absolutely fantastic."

As his aircraft came in for a landing, Henley could see the beaches of Normandy. The ground troops had quickly disembarked from transport boats to move inland to push back the enemy forces.

Henley's aircraft landed three miles in from the beaches where a makeshift landing strip had been set up on a farmer's field.

He and his crew didn't have long to wait before the British Spitfires came in for repairs, refueling and to reload their single cannons and six machine guns with ammunition.

Ground crews never knew if a pilot would return. Henley said three or four a week didn't come back.

"You get to know somebody and then he doesn't show up. You say, 'Hope to see you,' and that was it. What can you do?"

"If you don't like it, there's no place to hide. You do your job."

No one slept much during the Normandy campaign. Henley said he remembers pulling in 23-and-a-half-hour days.

"There were times we didn't sleep at all," he said of working around the clock during the invasion, which launched on June 6, 1944 and continued until that August when the Allies broke through France and moved into Belgium.

“I was right there,” Henley said. “War is not a pleasant thing when you’re in it. As long as you come back, that’s the main thing.”

His eyes become red with unshed tears at the memory of his older brother, an army captain, who was leading troops into battle in Italy when he was killed by a sniper’s bullet. He was due to return to Britain the next day.

When word came that the war was coming to an end, there was little celebrating where Henley was stationed in Hamburg, Germany.

“It was not like in the cities,” he said. “We knew it was over before it was over.”

Happy tears also spring to his eyes when he thinks back to the day he returned home a changed man after years of overseas service.

“It was fantastic,” he said.

His parents, brothers and sisters and the family’s neighbours all gathered around him at the train station.

His younger sister Alice who had been just 14 years old when he left home had become a young woman of 17.

“You could hardly recognize her,” he said wistfully.

Henley knows many of the war stories will be lost to younger generations as veterans pass on, taking their memories with them.

For that reason, it’s crucial for remaining veterans to share their experiences and their reasons for wanting to help defend Canada, he said.

“It’s important to pass this on,” said Henley, who retired from the air force as a major in 1969. “That (veteran) has been in a special place for everybody.

“You would not be here if not for us.”