

# Vet reluctantly shares WWII adventure as aircraft mechanic

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Kincardine News

Keith Armstrong of Ripley didn't think anyone wanted to hear his story from the Second World War.

But for the airmen who flew the Halifax and Liberator bombers he repaired as an airframe mechanic in Canada and Great Britain from 1942-46, it was a matter of life and death. Armstrong acknowledged that point during a conversation with *The Kincardine News* last week leading up to the Nov. 11 Remembrance Day ceremonies in Kincardine and Huron-Kinloss.

Armstrong's story is one far removed from the combat roles of the Second World War, but is instead a look at a vital support role for the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and Royal Air Force (RAF) whose bombardment of Axis-occupied Europe has been recorded as vital to the Allied victory in 1945.

But Armstrong maintained that he didn't do much, but by the end of the conversation he'd revealed how his adventure had taken him around the world, united him with a distant relative, allowed him to meet new friends, learn new skills, experience tragedy first-hand and have some odd stories to tell decades later.

Leading Air Craftsman (LAC) Armstrong, now 89, left high school early to work in Hamilton as a teen, after growing up in Bervie, where his parents owned the General Store. He earned his welding and sheet metal ticket and secured a job building nacelles for Avro Anson twin-engine multi-role planes at White Canadian Aircraft. Armstrong said his job and skills allowed him to bypass service for a time, but deep down he wanted to enlist.

"All my buddies were in the services



Armstrong smiles for a photo with his belongings while on furlough (temporary leave) outside his parent's store in Bervie before heading overseas in 1944.

and I didn't feel right that I got to stay behind," said Armstrong.

So without letting his employer know, he signed up for service at a Hamilton recruitment office on Nov. 22, 1942 at the age of 19. The recruiters immediately picked up on his trade skills, which disappointed him initially from what he envisioned his wartime role as.

"I wanted to be a pilot, but they said they needed airframe mechanics, and I don't think I was smart enough to be a pilot anyways," he said.

His training saw him travel to Guelph, Galt, Toronto, St. Thomas and Brantford where he built up his skills over two years in maintenance roles at air fields being used to train RAF pilots and crew members.

"I had one instructor tell me 'Forget everything you learned in school, we do things our way here,'" he said.

Armstrong said he saw plane crashes and miracles, where in one case an aircraft made a "hard landing" and bounced 50-feet into the air, but was still okay to fly. He recalled how an aircraft crashed near Armow in a field, in a case where one of the "best test pilots around" was able to get it back into the air after bouncing it over a fence before takeoff.

"There were some minor crashes and bad ones where some guys made some bad mistakes," he said.

One accident that came to mind claimed the life of his childhood friend, Mac Alexander of Bervie, who he heard had died out west in a midair collision after the two aircraft were circling and observing the scene of another crash minutes earlier.

His chance to serve overseas came after he heard there was a posting looking for volunteers for aircraft maintenance and flight mechanics in Britain.

"Once I heard I dropped everything, my tools were left out, and ran like the devil and wound up the second last man on it... they needed 20," he said. "I was lucky to get overseas I figured. My wife didn't know that at the time though."

In 1944 he boarded the troopship *Isle de France*, with a crew of 1,000 and 10,000 passengers to cross the Atlantic on what was known as the third largest troopship at the time, Armstrong said. Servicemen's bunks were stacked like crates, with little room for comfort.

"It was so cramped, when you went to bed at night you had about a foot of space around you

with the bunks as high as the ceiling," he said.

He landed in England and Armstrong said since they didn't know what to do with them, they were sent to different stations around the country. He received commando and unarmed combat training and said he'd never been so fit in his life.

"I could run five miles no problem and I felt like I could pull trees out of the ground," he said.

His time in Britain also saw him deal with a bout of pneumonia, which spurred a humorous, but disturbing rumour at his air base that caused him a detour when he was well enough to return.

"There was a rumour that I had died, so when I got back my stuff was gone and my bike was the only thing left because it was chained to a post... oh and my dirty laundry," Armstrong said. "I didn't know the station very well, so I went to look for someone who knew where my stuff was."

He found an officer who allowed him to explain his "sad story" and a guy offered him up a space until he got his problem sorted out. While searching, he also bumped into a distant relative, Jack Armstrong of Nanton, Alberta, which Armstrong said was an odd coincidence.

For a time he was stationed at RAF base Linton-on-Ouse with the Thunderbird Squadron 426 #6 Bomber Command, where he switched from maintenance to flight maintenance and preparation. When asked what condition the aircraft returned in, he said many Halifax bombers came back "shot up and full of holes," and it was their job to repair "everything but the motors and electronics."

"It was interesting, but you did get most of your excitement at night when you went to the pub," Armstrong laughed.

He recalled a tale of one friend who was a very poor driver on his bicycle after the pub. One night, his friend proceeded to ride in a circle, before slamming into Armstrong's front wheel, bending it into a 'C' shape.

"I had to bend it back into shape with my knee and ended up spraining my ankle riding it on the way back," he said.

That same night they wound up at another "big party" at the First Aid hut upon their return, where the medical officer gave him a broomstick and had him flip it upside down as a makeshift crutch. The next day on "sick parade" to explain why he was unable to work, his commanding officer wanted to know



who's fault it was that caused the injury.

"And I said I'm not saying anything," he laughed.

Armstrong also experienced some moments of tension in Britain. In one case they were forced into an air raid shelter over threats of a German attack. In another case a German aircraft made a flyby near a post office, where an Allied machinegun nest above the building opened fire.

"Near the end of the war, there was one day when the sky was just black with aircraft heading over to Germany," he said. "We saw them all the time, but that one day it was really something."

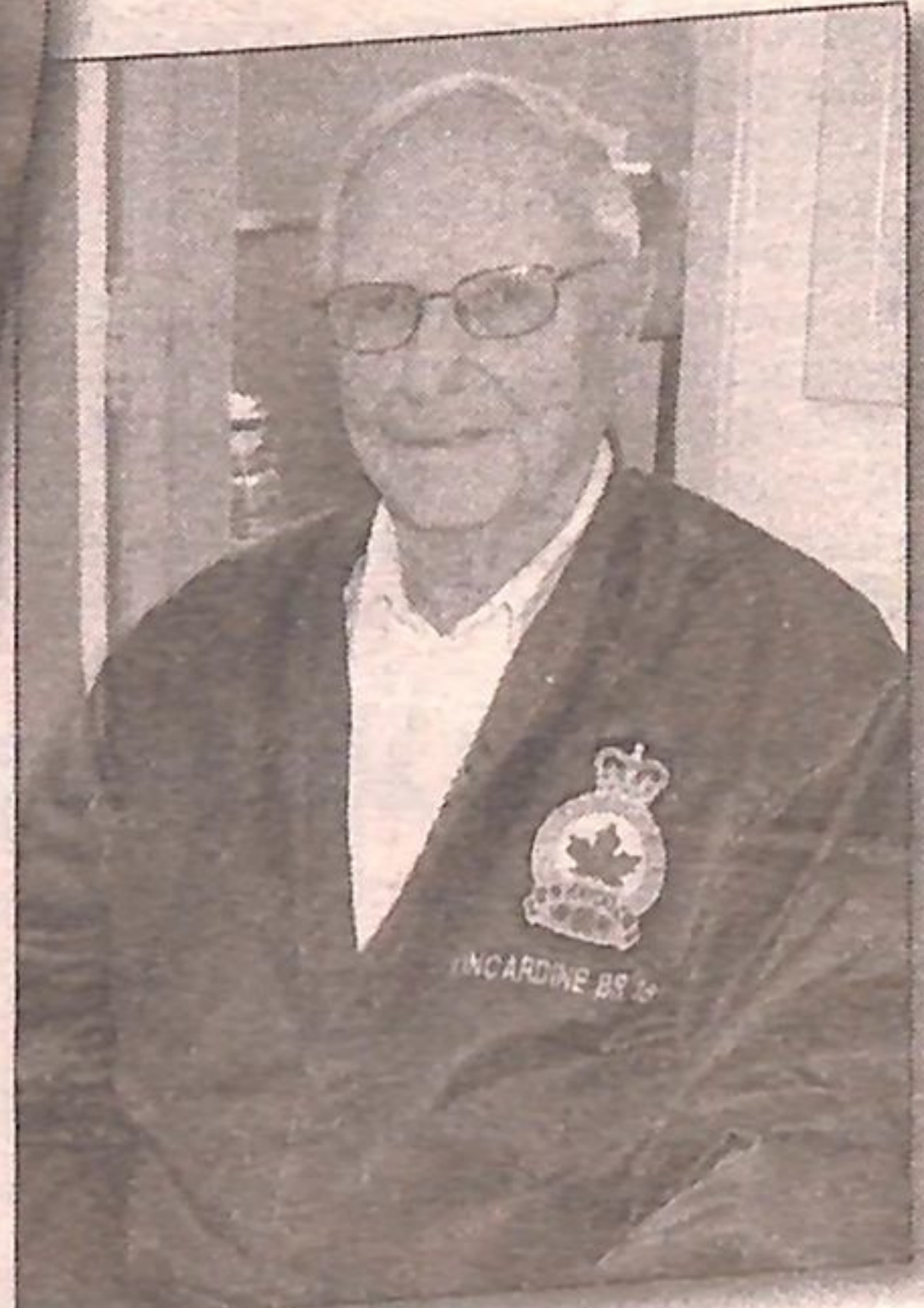
After the war in late 1945, as a show of "appreciation" to ground crews across Britain he was one of the few from his squadron selected to join a transport aircraft on a repatriation trip with 25 soldiers from Tempsford, England to Karachi, India (now Pakistan), with stops in Tripoli, Libya (one day), Cairo, Egypt (three days) and Iraq. At one point during the flight the pilot gave him a blast while he was pacing back and forth in the plane, as his weight was throwing off the autopilot, he laughed.

"I really did get to see a lot of the world," he said.

Armstrong spent New Year's Eve 1945 and a few more days in India, before heading back to England via Palestine.

He flew back to Canada in May 1946 on a Lockheed Hudson via Scotland and Iceland. Armstrong said his closest call came during the trip home between Iceland and Goose Bay, Labrador when the

Keith Armstrong, 89, of Ripley, was an airframe mechanic in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) from 1942-1946. Armstrong worked on Halifax and Liberator aircraft in Canada and Great Britain. Below: Leading Air Craftsman (LAC) Keith Armstrong was 19 in this photo, taken in Brantford in 1942 (TROY PATTERSON/KINCARDINE NEWS)



Hud-

son crew asked them if they wanted to fly down low to check out some icebergs.

"The tanks went dry and the motors started to stutter," he said.

Armstrong said the crewman quickly pulled open the door, dropped down on his knees and opened the reserve fuel tank valves that were carried on board before the plane stalled.

"It happened so fast, it wasn't until we landed that we realized there was a chance we wouldn't have made it back," he said.

A member of the Kincardine Legion Branch 183, Armstrong says he remembers his friends who served each Nov. 11 and has taken his turn laying the wreath for the branch during the Remembrance Day ceremonies over the years.

He was disheartened to see many people, at times, repulsed by military service during his years at Stelco Steel from 1959-1986, but he still has faith young people would again heed the call of the nation if needed for its defence.

"I have to think if war broke out and we were in it, people would step up," he said.