

# People in the war years really cared

I have come up with some items that bring back memories and voices from the past.

A few months ago, a young colleague of mine was heading off to Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) with his wife and children to teach school there.

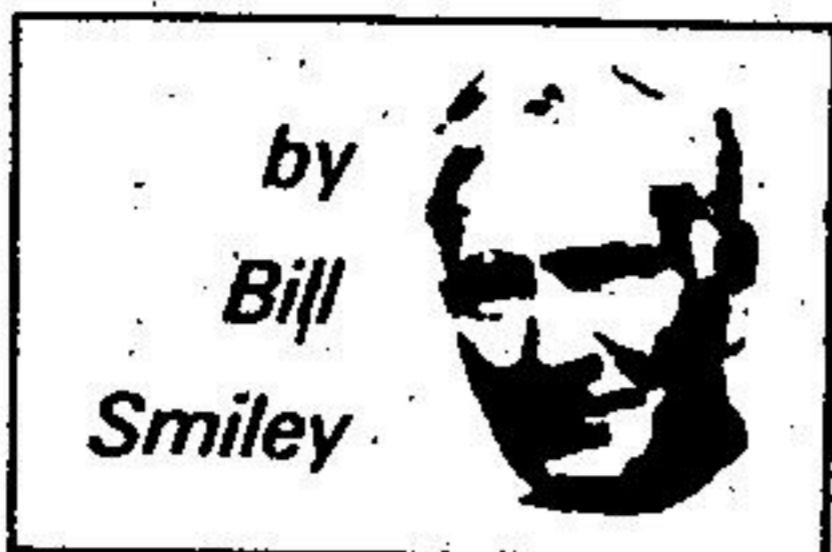
They didn't know a soul in that part of Africa. I had a thought, which occurs every so often. "Mark," I told him, "I have an old war-time friend who lived in Rhodesia. I'll dig up his address, and maybe he can at least give you some tips on life there."

So I went up to my old prisoner-of-war log book, and there it was. Unfortunately, Don McGibbon lived in Bulawayo, not Salisbury, to which Mark was posted. However, I gave him the address and a note to my old friend.

There was every likelihood that he was dead, or had moved, or had got out of the country, as so many white Rhodesians did when a black takeover seemed inevitable.

And the other day, while I was having lunch, a member of our staff was reading a letter from Mark's wife. It turned out that they'd been sent to Bulawayo, not Salisbury. She described conditions, pretty grim—curfews, house searches for insurgents, and so on—and the letter said: "And we're going for a picnic on Sunday with Bill Smiley's old air force friend."

You could have knocked me down with a Spitfire. I hadn't heard from Mac since



1945, when we were both incarcerated in prison camp. We'd been on the same Typhoon wing in Normandy, where I knew him slightly. He'd been shot down shortly after I was, and, joined by a wounded Australian, Frank Land, we wound up as a trio doing a train journey all over Germany: first to a camp occupied by British and New Zealand veterans of Cyprus, then to an interrogation centre at Frankfurt, then off on a long haul across the war-torn country to a prison camp, where we wound up in the same room in barracks.

One forms pretty close associations under trying circumstances. We did. I had a lot of respect for the Rhodesians I'd met: their courage, their cheerfulness, their lack of swank. And, of course, they were only colonials, so we Canadians could needle them about that. Mac was one of the best of the best.

As if that weren't enough to start the juices of memory flowing, my wife, while cleaning out drawers and boxes, came across a cache of ancient letters and pictures that I'd forgotten existed.

There I am, Leading Aircraftman, Smiley, at 21, black hair, white teeth (the

opposite of the present), wedge cap tilted to one side, dashing moustache, cocky as only a young fellow can be when he knows he's going to be a fighter pilot.

And there I am again, on a prison camp identification card, complete with numbers and fingerprint, soon after I'd been shot down, looking bewildered and anything but cocky. And another photo, at another camp, front and side view, looking 10 years older, stubble of beard, mean. And finally, a photo taken soon after release, sporting the magnificent handlebar moustache I'd grown in camp.

There's a picture of Freddy Wakeham, Canadian, Eric Necklen, New Zealander, and self, in front of our tent in Normandy. I am the only survivor. And another one, both leaning against a Spitfire's fuselage, of two of our gang, a motley crowd, when we trained in Shropshire to take off and land Spits without killing ourselves. Jacques Van der Perren, Belgian, and Singh Thandi, Indian Air Force.

Van escaped when the Germans invaded Belgium, made his way through occupied France, got over the mountains into Spain and was thrown in jail for six months. He was eventually released, got to England, joined the R.A.F., and was shot down and killed on a mission not far from his home town in Belgium.

Singh Thandi went back to India. I heard he was killed flying Hurricanes in Burma. We were closer than most brothers.

The only one of that crowd left is Jack Ryan of Toronto. The others were from

half the countries in Europe, and from all over the then British Empire.

Here's a letter, written to my mother, from Casajus Pascal, postmarked M. Stammlager XI, Deutschland. It's in French. Part of it: "Ici mon ami Bill, votre fils qui actuellement dans mon stalag..." and so on. He told her I was en parfaite sante (in perfect health) and tried to reassure her. How good of him. I don't even remember him, although I knew a number of French POWs. He ends by saying, in French: "I hope that he himself will be able to write you soon." Why couldn't I write then? Who was Casajus? Must dig into the memory cells.

And on they go. A letter from my squadron leader describing my last mission, and holding out hope. A letter from a chap in Florida to my parents. He listened every night, on his short wave radio, to lists of Allied prisoners announced by the Germans, and had caught my name and home address.

And a happy, happy telegram, marked Sans Origine, and Important, from 64 Squadron: "Happy to inform you that your son F O Smiley W B T is safe and well as prisoner of war. Letter follows.

A letter of commiseration from my college president, when the first "missing" report went out. Finally, a letter from a chaplain in England: "So happy to be able to welcome and chat with your son, on his safe arrival in England." Dated May 25, 1945.

People in those days really cared. And I've only skimmed the surface.



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