

Veteran recalls war through his art

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He fought in France and Belgium from 1915 until 1918, and survived gas attacks at Passchendaele, and fought at Vimy Ridge and Ypres during all the most vicious fighting campaigns of the Great War.

O'Connor jokes how his dad went overseas in 1915, "leaving his wife and five kids at home— but I figure she must have forgiven him. I was born in 1923."

O'Connor's oldest brother Gordon joined the local militia in 1929, and was on callout in 1939 when he was called to service. He was attached to the Royal Grenadiers, and later the Royal Regiment of Canada, seeing action in Iceland, then to England with the 2nd Division, and was wounded 10 miles out in the Dieppe Raid of 1942. He made it to shore but was captured and interred as a POW (Prisoner of War) from 1942 to 1945. He escaped three times, the last time during a death march across Germany in the dead of winter as the German army was moving the POWs away from the invading Russians.

"Gordon made it to England and looked me up," said O'Connor, "We had a great reunion— I hadn't seen him since he left in 1939."

O'Connor's second brother Herb joined the Royal Canadian Navy in 1942, and was assigned to the Prince Henry, as a stoker. He saw action in the Mediterranean area, as well as the coast of Sicily, Italy, the D-Day landings and patrols along the south coast of France. His ship also repatriated

Greek government officials after the war.

O'Connor also enlisted in 1942, and was shipped to Lachine, then out west to Calgary to wireless and gunnery school.

"I wasn't good at wireless," said O'Connor, "I had trouble with the technical side of things— too many ohms and amps to deal with."

He returned to duty in Toronto, but still wanted to join the air crew. Accepting any duty he could to become part of the air force, he finally got his break in 1944, being sent to gunnery school in Manitoba, and received his wings in 1944.

After a stint in Nova Scotia for commando training, he was sent overseas, to join Bomber Command in England.

"I was given the rank of Pilot Officer and later Flying Officer, and my duties were rear gunner on a Lancaster," said O'Connor, "I had finally made it to the air force."

Being a rear gunner on a Lancaster bomber wasn't considered the safest position on the aircraft, but O'Connor flew five night missions over Germany and in spite of the action, returned unscathed.

"We returned to Yarmouth Nova Scotia after Germany surrendered, and I wanted to volunteer to join Tiger Force (against Japan)" said O'Connor, "But the rest of my crew weren't interested, so another crew said they'd take me on, but as soon as they (the Americans) dropped the A-bomb, the war was over before we

even left."

O'Connor was discharged in 1946, and returned to his art, picking up jobs as a graphic artist.

But the military still held it's appeal and when he moved to Montreal to accept a civilian job, he decided to join the 17th Duke of Yorks, applying as a private, but the army allowed him to transfer his air force commission, and was given the rank of lieutenant.

He joined the Queen's York Rangers and spent time at Petawawa, training to be a tank officer.

"After nine years in the army, I decided I'd had enough," said O'Connor, "I retired from the army in 1958 with the rank of Captain."

He again worked as an artist and in the publishing world until he retired.

In 2000, O'Connor came across an ad in the newspaper, appealing to veterans to talk to school kids.

"It was the Dominion Institute Memory Project, in which veterans were asked to go to local high schools to address the students about war, and how they can learn from it.

Since that time, O'Connor has visited schools to give them his message.

He is a born artist, one who has continually returned to his love of visual media.

But he is much more than that.

He is also a veteran, and one who has been able to marry that love of art with a responsibility to society, in doing so, sending out the message of the horrors of war, but also that oppression is a bad thing, and we should all do our part to prevent it.

Acton man's quest to find uncle's remains reaches an end

TED BROWN
Staff Writer

It was May 25, 1944, and Royal Air Force Halifax Mark III bomber LV905 was returning from an overnight bombing run.

The bomber had set out from Brighton, Yorkshire, England, to participate in an attack on the railroad yards in Aachen, Germany, just east of the Belgium border.

The Halifax was one of 432 planes dispatched by Royal Air Force Bomber Command to bomb the railway yards, for the sole purpose of crippling the German war machine.

The Halifax lifted off from Brighton at 22.50 hours (11:20 p.m.) and successfully completed its bombing run, and was on the return leg of its mission, heading back to England.

As the bomber flew over The Netherlands, it encountered a German night fighter.

During the ensuing aerial battle, the Halifax was shot down, and crashed into a dyke near Hank, The Netherlands.

The impact of the crash separated the rear gun turret from the aircraft, and two of the seven crew members' bodies were thrown out with it, of which only British Sergeant George Herbert Butler could be identified.

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F/Sgt. JOSEPH LEBLANC

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