

strafed the belly of Dad's plane, hoping to explode the bombs in the bomb bay. That night he was the bomb aimer, positioned in the nose of the plane. He was hit in both legs by the machine gun fire, but miraculously no bones were shattered. I try to imagine the terror and confusion of someone lying bleeding and in pain, waiting for comrades to come to his aid in the darkness, waiting for someone to find the plane's first aid kit, bandages and tiny ampoules of morphine while under enemy fire. If I had the chance now, I'd ask him to tell me how it was.

In 1980, four years before he died, Dad went back. He was disabled and confined to a wheelchair by then, but nothing would deter his determination to revisit Yorkshire.

We drove through English countryside on a perfect June day, past cattle grazing in the fields to the airfield at Tholthorpe. It was as though we had stepped into the opening scene of *12 O'Clock High* — the old Hollywood film about bomber crews. Five years after the war was over, the character played by Dean Jagger returned to the deserted airbase where he had served.

As he looked around, lost in memory, the drone of planes grew louder and the film flashed back to the war years. I could imagine my father thinking much the same way as he sat in his wheelchair on the runway, almost 40 years after he'd been stationed here.

Grass and weeds grew through the cracks in the concrete of the old runways. Some metal quonset huts remained, stuffed with bales of straw. The little control tower, where the ground crew would wait, binoculars trained on the sky, anxiously watching for the return of the planes, still stood.

My father's remembrance

continued from page 1



I took Dad's picture in front of it; a lifetime had passed since he'd been here, since he was one of the young faces in the old black and white photos that we keep in a cardboard box in the basement. Who were the young faces in those pictures, I wonder now? How many of them are still alive?

On Remembrance Day the Legion places red paper poppies on the graves of those who served. We stand at Dad's grave with a member of the Ladies' Auxillary and a tall Mountie, dressed in red serge who salutes as we place the poppy.

A handful of people attend the service in Stouffville Cemetery, standing before the collection of little white crosses which commemorate the veterans, as wreaths are laid and the Last Post is played.

There are few veterans left now and each year they grow more frail, but still they march proudly to the memorial in their crisp navy blazers, poppies on their lapels, despite the bitterly cold November wind. The rest of us stand by in winter jackets, waiting for the speeches and poems to be over.

This Remembrance Day, let's think about what it meant to be in your early 20's, an ocean away from friends and family, cold, hungry, and afraid — not knowing if this mission, whether it be on land, sea, or air, would be your last. Let's think about what it meant to volunteer to serve and, if necessary, die,

so that others in your time and for generations to come, could live in freedom. Could any of us today honestly say that we would be willing to do the same?



WILF AT WAR - Flyer Wilf McWhinnie at top with "Sweet Sue", a Lancaster in which he was a frequent passenger; he could stand at full height in the nose. At right in the picture above, Wilf poses in front of a Warwick, used in air-sea rescue. It carried a boat which could be dropped by parachute to ditched air crew.

Photos courtesy of Jill and Kevin McWhinnie.



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*** These statistics are compiled by IMS, an Independent Research Company using Toronto Real Estate Board Data ***

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