

We remember our local heroes



By Mike Pickford

While it has been more than 70 years since local resident Fred Heber returned home from the horrors of war, the memories imprinted upon his mind remain as vivid as if they occurred yesterday.

A son of old 'Cabbagetown' in Toronto, Fred was just a boy when the threat of war loomed in the late 1930s. In the midst of The Great Depression, Fred remembers well just how bleak his prospects appeared upon leaving school. Then it came. War was here. The young boy immediately became a man, not that he really had a choice.

Fred enlisted in Hamilton alongside his childhood friend, Tom Morris. He remembers that first night, proudly puffing his chest out in his new uniform. Ready to protect his family and fight for his country. The pair were soon sent off to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Within days they were on a boat. The destination was Liverpool.

He doesn't recall the boat ride. It must have taken a couple of weeks at least. The only thing that sticks out in his mind is the constant bobbing of the waves. The heaving of his fellow soldiers who couldn't deal with the treacherous tide. Then they arrived in Liverpool and, in Fred's own words, all hell broke loose.

'We didn't know what we were getting ourselves into. We landed in Liverpool and the Germans started to bomb us,' Fred said. That was 1941. If you know anything about the Second World War, that was the time that Nazi Germany really started to take a strangle hold on Europe. They were determined to break British spirits. It just so happened that Fred and thousands of other Canadians got caught up in the mess.

He never stayed anywhere for too long. Within a day or so, Fred and the rest of his 12th field regiment were dispatched to Sussex, the southernmost county in the UK. There they were handed broomsticks, not guns. They were expected to carry them around everywhere, as if to create the illusion they were always packing.

'There wasn't enough equipment to go around. We had one 25 pounder (gun) there on site and that was it,' Fred noted.

Their job wasn't necessarily to fight in the war at that point. Fred and his buddies were doing everything from building temporary shelters to raising animals. More than anything though, over that three year period in Sussex they were preparing themselves, both physically and mentally, for what was to come.

No matter how much training they did, absolutely nothing could prepare them for what happened next. Fred was one of the thousands to participate in the Normandy landings, storming Juno Beach on D-Day. He closes his eyes, as if to try and block the memories from reappearing before him during our interview. He tells how he hopped off his boat into the shallow waters, dozens of his friends, people he had spent the last three years of his life with, close behind. It was a frightening scene. Bullets rained down on the Allied ranks as the Germans tried to prevent them from moving inland.

'There was no time to do anything, we just had to keep moving fast, pushing forward,' Fred relays. 'All my buddies? I lost quite a few of them on that day.'

Eventually, the Allied forces were successful in their attempts to push the Germans out of Normandy. That pattern continued as the Germans retreated even further, first turning around and leaving France behind, then doing the same with both Belgium and the Netherlands.

'Within a year we had pushed the Nazis all the way back to Germany. I was in some pretty big battles. There was a fight in Cannes, France. Then we pushed on to Falaise Gap. That was a bloody battle,' Fred remembered. 'A lot of people died on both sides there.'

The Battle of the Falaise Pocket lasted 10 days between Aug. 12 and 24 in 1944 and was considered to be the decisive engagement in the Battle of Normandy. While the battle itself was won, it came at a monumental cost. With the Allied forces lined up on one side of the gap and the Axis powers on the other side, Allied bombers flew in low ready to take out the enemy. Only they didn't take out the enemy. They took out their own.

"I had made my way up into a lookout spot in a nearby church. It was a good spot to shoot at the Germans. Then we heard the planes, the big boom. They flew really low and started dropping bombs everywhere. We were lucky, we didn't get hit but the Polish division to our left took the brunt of the bombing. It was a massacre," Fred said.

On what was a particularly hot day, Fred distinctly remembers the haunting combination of blood and burning filling his nostrils. He couldn't escape it. To this day, he still looks noticeably uncomfortable when describing the scenes. After Falaise Gap the Allies pushed the Germans east. When Sept. 2, 1945 finally came around, Fred was just across the border on German territory. It still brings a slight smile to his face when he looks back on the day the war was won.

He spent two weeks in Germany following the Nazis' surrender before flying back to Canada. Once all was said and done he had spent several years in Europe in the thick of the action. Upon his return to the relative calmness of Toronto he didn't quite know what to do with himself. He got together with his friend Tom Morris regularly, who had also returned home. He spent time with his family and eagerly searched for work. Eventually, he landed a gig with General Electric, the company he would spend the next four decades representing.

Fred has been married twice, first to Vivian, with whom he had four children, and later with Mavis, who he eventually retired to Orangeville with. While he has been awarded several medals for his efforts during the war, Fred, or Sir Fred as he should really be referred, has also been awarded the Chevalier – the third level in the Order of France. According to Chris Skalozub, President of the Orangeville Legion, this medal is the highest medal awarded by France and has been awarded to everyone that served on D-Day and fought on Juno Beach.

While he is something of a celebrity at the local Legion here in town, Fred has always kept to himself, choosing not to share stories of his time overseas. It was something of a surprise then when Princess Margriet from the Netherlands paid Fred a visit in Goderich earlier this year. She specifically sought an audience with the veteran, wanting to personally thank him for all he did during the war. "She was a nice woman. Easy to talk to," Fred said.

With the recent death of his close friend Tom Morris, Fred is now the last man standing in the phantom 12th field regiment. At 95-years-young, the local war hero, who lives at his Orangeville home with Chris Paquette, a retired member of the Canadian Navy, is happy just to be able to share his story and make regular visits to the local Legion.

"This is a great place, Orangeville. It's a nice place to live and the Legion is a good place to meet people. Make friends," Fred said. On this eve, eve of Remembrance Day, Lest We Forget the sacrifices made by Fred and thousands of others as they fought to protect the world from Nazi rule. For those that fell, we will remember them.