

LIFESTYLES

Tracking the escape

WWII veteran's daring journey remembered through book

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When Gary DeMone finally saw the crater, he was both overwhelmed and impressed that it was still there.

Standing among the corn stalks, DeMone lowered his gaze and peered down into the conspicuous depression.

The surrounding land was tilled, yet weeds and bulrushes had crept in. It was sacred ground, the locals had said, and they vowed to never touch it.

DeMone spent 54 years thinking about this moment. He didn't know what to expect. Pacing in and around the crater, he kicked away at some dirt and then he found something.

He picked it up and in his hands lay a piece of worn metal – an artifact. He tried again and found another. They were among the final remnants of a wreckage defined by years of war.

Two people had died at the spot. Another was captured and spent three years at various camps across eastern Europe. The fate of the other remains a mystery.

But there was one who escaped: A Canadian; a lone soldier sneaking his way through enemy territory aided by people willing to risk their lives for his.

That man was Gary's uncle.

Sgt. Harold Edison DeMone, a Bridgewater native, enlisted with the Royal Air Force (RAF) eager to play his part in WWII.

He originally wanted to be a pilot but resorted to a position as gunner because he was colourblind.

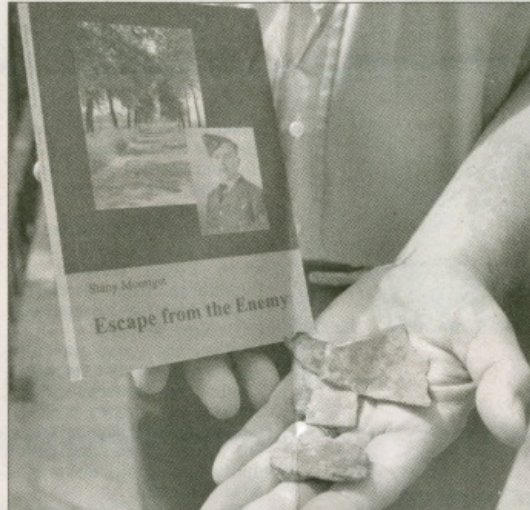
On June 2, 1942, Harold took part in a nightly raid across Essen, Germany, when his bomber was shot down by a fighter plane over Belgium.

He managed to jump out of the burning plane and parachuted into Mechels Broek in the area of Mechelen, Belgium, about 25 kilometres northeast of Brussels. The plane crashed near the Town of Perk, just south of where Harold landed.

Growing up, Gary developed a tremendous interest in his uncle and even flew planes himself for over 40 years. He knew about Harold's time in the war, how he was shot down and escaped through Belgium, but the elder DeMone was forever quiet about some of the more intimate details.

"He was very, like most veterans were, very tight-lipped about his activities," said Gary. "Which just further aggravated me because I really wanted to know a lot of information that he had."

It wasn't until Harold passed away in 1989 when Gary truly began to see the full scope of what his uncle went through.



MICHAEL LEE PHOTO

Gary DeMone holds up a few pieces of metal found at the site where the plane his uncle Harold, a WWII veteran, flew in 1942 crashed along with the book written about his escape through German-occupied Belgium.

He read notes from his uncle's diary detailing what happened and gathered hearsay from various family.

He learned his uncle found a farmer who offered food and civilian clothes. Harold then tread his way through the Belgian countryside and eventually found refuge at the Horckmans brewery in Humbeek. He hid in the attic and at night, would peer out a single window to watch German soldiers pass by.

Today, Gary understands the effect an event like that could have an individual's psyche.

"It tends to change your personality a bit and the roles he had to play to survive and escape leaves an impression on your mind."

Harold later received help from the Comet line, a Belgian resistance group that aided Allied forces trapped behind enemy lines. The group is named after the route it took through Belgium, France and Spain to help soldiers escape to the U.K. Harold would be the first Canadian to use the Comet line and throughout the war, many members of the group were killed for their efforts.

"It's a very deadly business trying to help people escape," said Gary.

Using forged documents, the Comet line worked to get Harold undetected all the way to Gibraltar, Spain, akin

to what might be seen in a spy flick.

"It was literally a James Bond movie back in the 40s," said Gary.

Finally, after more than a month of hiding, Harold landed on a ship to Scotland and his military career came to a close.

Harold was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal by King George VI and was recognized by the city council in his hometown of Bridgewater.

Then a few years ago, Gary stumbled on the name of a Belgian author, Stany Moortgat, who had already chronicled Harold's story in a book titled "Escape from the Enemy." Moortgat came across Harold's name from the brewery owner and spent two years writing and researching. He learned about the Comet line and even contacted Harold's daughter, Heather, and nephew, David. The photos and articles they provided depicted Harold as a war hero who was praised for his daring escape. Gary felt honoured knowing someone who never knew Harold and had never been to Canada, let alone Bridgewater, decided to take the time to write about him.

"I think some people you can just tell that they're very reputable and I got a good vibe from him and told him that I'd like to visit the crash site and retrace the steps."

In September 2014, Gary finally took those steps.

"Standing next to the hole where my uncle crashed, the airplane crashed, left an impression on me," said Gary. "The most impressive thing to him, however, was the "true kindness and nature of the Belgian people."

"The very fact that we come back and even thank them for some of their contributions, they just light up."

But most news stories, while interesting at the time have a short shelf-life.

Gary isn't looking to make any money from this venture, having printed the English version of the book himself, but he hopes to someday give a donation to the DesBrisay Museum in Bridgewater and pay royalties to Moortgat. Nevertheless, Gary said his uncle would be proud knowing someone had enough interest to share his story of survival and the lengths others took to preserve it.

"Too bad it didn't happen sooner," he said with a laugh.

Earlier at the crater, Gary remembered something strange happening.

Just as he took a photo, a plane flashed by. A mere coincidence perhaps.

Then, while walking along the road, his wife noticed a pair of flowers growing on the shoulder – two poppies tucked between the stone and asphalt.

"And that was the only flower we saw in the area."