



LOCAL PEOPLE Dan Kislenko, gopeople@thespec.com

His remembrance: to be grateful

He parachuted from a Lancaster, was taken prisoner and says he's no hero

Bruce Sutherland is not a man for memories and medals. But one day a year — that would be today — he wears a tiny pin that he earned in the war.

It's a gold bug with ruby-red eyes. To be more precise, it's a silkworm caterpillar.

It used to be that parachutes were made of silk. And all who wear the caterpillar owe their life to a parachute.

Bruce was 23 when that happened. Next month, he will be 89.

He's telling his story on the condition we don't call him a hero. He thinks that word is getting seriously devalued.

"I'm no hero. Most in the service weren't. Some, when circumstances called for it, were very courageous. But most of us just went along doing the job we were trained to do."

Bruce grew up in Beachville, west of Woodstock. When the war began, most of his friends joined the navy. Bruce isn't sure why, but he chose the air force.

Planes were still rare enough then, he says, "that if you heard one going overhead, you ran out to watch it."

Pretty much the only plane he'd seen up close was the one that crashed in a cornfield outside town. He signed on anyway.

They trained him as a navigator. Partway through, he had to be treated for a hernia. An inconvenience, but in hospital he did meet Frances Smith, who after the war would become his wife.



PAUL WILSON'S STREETBEAT

In January 1943, they sent him overseas and started training him all over again. That October he ended up with 622 Squadron at Mildenhall, East Anglia.

Planes went out, night after night. But the missions to which Bruce got assigned were scrubbed, one after another.

"You would prepare all day for a flight that night," Bruce says. "Then the weather closed in. Or there'd be a security leak and everyone in the village knew where we were going before we did."

On the evening of Jan. 27, 1944, the navigation officer called him in. "If you don't fly tonight," he told Bruce, "you're grounded."

"What have I done?" Bruce asked.

"That's just it," the officer said. "You haven't done a thing yet. You're a jinx."

That night, Bruce did fly. The mission — a bombing run over Berlin.

Their Lancaster was a tired one, and they couldn't get it all the way up to operational height. They left



PHOTOS BY CATHIE COWARD, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Bruce Sutherland with photo of himself after he returned from the war in 1945. 'Most of us just went along doing the job we were trained to do.'

with the second wave of bombers, but couldn't keep up and arrived over Berlin at the tail end of the third wave.

They dropped their bombs and pushed for home. About 10 minutes later, the Luftwaffe attacked. They blew the nose right off the

Lancaster. "There was such a gale coming through, I couldn't even stand up," Bruce says.

He pulled himself along the floor to get to the escape hatch.

All that training had never included an actual parachute jump. "But they always said to get

hold of the rip cord before you leave the plane," Bruce says. "I remembered that."

"Then I passed out. When I came to, I was swinging on the end of the parachute."

There was just one other Canadian on that seven-man crew. He turned out to be the only other survivor. It would be days before Bruce met up with him.

Bruce dropped down in bush country. He hiked, unarmed, night and day until he came upon a workers' barracks.

German soldiers soon arrived. So did bread and coffee made from acorns. Terrible stuff.

Bruce got asked lots of questions, but stuck to name, rank and serial number. "I was never beaten or abused."

He spent a year and a half in PoW camps, where the Germans served turnips, potatoes and a rare treat, horse meat.

Bruce arrived home in 1945. He applied for that caterpillar pin, something the Irving Air Chute Company started awarding in 1922 to the select club who had bailed out under emergency conditions.

Bruce married Frances, moved to Hamilton, had a son and worked at Stelco for 26 years.

In 2003, he lost Frances. She died on the 27th of January, the very day he'd been shot down all those years before.

From a black canvas bag, Bruce pulls a magnum of Slaley Reserve Shiraz 1999, a South African wine dedicated to the Caterpillar Club.

Bruce says he won't be the one who opens it. "That's for when I'm gone."

Today he'll mark Remembrance Day at the Warplane Heritage Museum. "But Thanksgiving is my day," he says. "I've got a lot to be grateful for."

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