

Centennial contributions

by BROCK WEIR

Growing up as a kid with comparatively weird and varied interests, I often felt my peers looking at me somewhat sideways.

Shuttling back and forth between my parents' homes in elementary school, I'd shoulder no shortage of ribbing, both good and bad, for some of the stuff that travelled with me, such as a selection of favourite VHS tapes of movies my peers had never heard, or t-shirts reflecting the same.

My taste when it came to the Valentine's Day cards we were forced to deliver to all and sundry in our homeroom classes for reasons which are still unclear ran pretty conventional, but my Halloween costumes reflected a bit more variety.

Among my costume hits and flops were an inflatable pumpkin number; a scraggly witch with green face paint, a tribute to Margaret Hamilton, of course; Uncle Fester of Addams Family fame; Count Dracula; a doctor, and Beetlejuice. Aside from the pumpkin and doctor, pop cultural touchstones all but one costume in which I took particular pride was a coarse-textured blue jacket with evocative gold-coloured buttons.

In this, my Grade 3 year, I decided to dig through the mothballs and don my grandfather's Royal Canadian Air Force Uniform, one which he proudly wore from the start of the Second World War through to his capture as a Prisoner of War in 1941, and back again after V.E. Day.

It had laid in mothballs all but forgotten until a year or two beforehand when I happened upon it at my grandmother's house, inspiring all sorts of questions. Some the answers were bits of information I'd already picked up here and there. They were fragments of a full story I'd never be able to flesh out myself due to his death several years before I was born, but having this tangible piece of history in my hand made everything seem more immediate and powerful.

In retrospect, it probably wasn't the best idea to wear something this fragile to school, especially during recess, and indeed a couple of those gold winged buttons needed to be re-affixed when I got home that day, but the pride I had in wearing it amid a sea of ghouls, ghosts, and goblins was very real.

Age, of course, brings new perspective and this was very much the case as I came to see as we all do the realities of war as shared by the people who lived through it, but that pride was still there on Monday as I observed commemorations marking the centennial anniversary of the founding of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

Today, as we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Royal Canadian Air Force, I join Canadians to pay tribute to generations of Air Force members who have dedicated their lives to defending our peace, freedom and prosperity, said the Prime Minister in a statement to start the week. In times of war and peace, members of the RCAF have shown unwavering courage. The Second World War marked the first significant challenge for the RCAF, with over 200,000 Canadians joining the Air Force to fight against tyranny and fascism. Since then, generation after generation of Canadians have served from Afghanistan to the Arctic. The RCAF's contributions to the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD), NATO, the Canadian Space Program, and the United Nations peacekeeping operations demonstrate its enduring commitment to service. Here at home, the RCAF has supported Canadians by delivering disaster relief, including during last year's devastating wildfire season.

In February 2023, the RCAF launched the Royal Canadian Air Force Strategy to help build a more agile, integrated, and inclusive air and space force that can face tomorrow's challenges. By investing in the professional and personal growth of RCAF members, we are giving them the tools they need to achieve excellence at home and abroad. Our people are our number-one priority and are the foundation upon which we build the RCAF. On this centennial occasion, I invite Canadians to learn more about the RCAF's many achievements and to take part in activities celebrating this milestone anniversary. My heartfelt gratitude goes out to the families who

have stood behind RCAF members over the last century, sharing in their sacrifices and triumphs. To all Royal Canadian Air Force personnel, past and present: thank you for your service. Your dedication, courage and selflessness have kept ? and continue to keep ? our country safe.?

Learning about the RCAF's achievements is essential, as branches of our Canadian Armed Forces often fly under the radar until they are needed ? as is learning about the RCAF's present and what the future might have in store for it.

But, if you want to look back at achievements that are firmly in the books, there's no easier time to do it.

It was nearly a decade after I first dusted off the uniform before the internet was in a place where it could help me fill in some of those aforementioned blanks in my grandfather, Bill Parr's war story.

Enter the Flight Safety Foundation, which proved to be an invaluable resource in fleshing out the stories that were part and parcel of my oral tradition, including his last flight ? over Scandinavia before being captured by the Germans and sent to a Prisoner of War camp. ?The aircraft was in the German smoke screen and was being fired at by what seemed to be every single weapon in the immediate vicinity,? they shared. ?Reg Williams shouted that Tirpitz had been swung round 90 degrees. The Canadian Pilot, Johnny Roe, calmly told his crew that they would go round again and have another go. Almost immediately there were sounds that indicated the aircraft had been badly hit in several places. Bill Parr, the Tail Gunner, shouted to Johnny the Pilot to try and make it to Sweden. However, Roe must have been aware that his aircraft would not make it that far and ordered the crew to make for the ?rest' positions and prepare for a crash landing. At this, Reg Williams immediately jettisoned the mines that they were carrying. ?The aircraft crash-landed in flames near the small farms, Elverum and Sørmo, just east of Lake Movatnet coming to rest in a small wood. The Canadian Pilot, Johnny Roe had escaped from the front of the aircraft, and had met up with Parr on the Starboard side of the aircraft. Both men were relatively unscathed after the crash and they set off together in an eastward direction hoping to reach Sweden. Two brothers, Gudmund and Petter Trætli from Trætli Farm recall assisting two airmen that night who had badly burnt hands. They helped to bandage the wounds and also gave the airmen food before giving them directions for the Swedish border. It's most likely that the airmen assisted by the Trætli brothers were the Canadians, Johnny Roe and Bill Parr.?

Pride, indeed.

To him, his crew, his peers, the generations that took wing since and those waiting for their chance to take to our skies, thank you. Here's to another century!