

The paradox of war

By Skid Crease

We are taught as children to be patriotic, to defend our flag and our values and our culture against 'them' . . . the others who may have flags and values and cultures different from ours.

My father, an RCAF Hurricane fighter pilot, was shot down over Lilliers, France Oct. 13, 1941. The farmer who rescued him buried his parachute hid him in his barn, and said, 'In the morning, I will drive you to the Resistance, but if I am stopped by the Germans, I will have to say you are in the back of my truck.'

The next morning they were stopped, fortunately by a group of German pilots who recognized that my father was a Flight Lieutenant and gave him the preferential treatment due an officer.

My father was taken to a nearby chateau that had been occupied by the German Air Command for their pilots. The Luftwaffe controlled the skies over Europe at that point in the war and were feeling supremely confident. He was escorted to a lavish bedroom, his uniform was taken, and he was left alone. Hours went by, lots of time to think about the rumours he had heard about the atrocities at concentration camps and he wondered if the same was in store for him.

Instead, a young pilot appeared at his door returned his cleaned uniform and invited him down to a dinner in his honour. When he arrived at the banquet table, all of the Luftwaffe pilots stood and gave him the full RAF salute, then seated him with their officers. He was in shock.

When dinner was served, they rose again and toasted him, and then all of the young German pilots peppered him with questions: 'Does everyone in Canada canoe?? 'Do you all play hockey?? 'Are the winters really so full of snow?? For them, Canada was a mythical land of coureur de bois, voyageurs, and epic wilderness. They talked all night.

The next morning an army truck arrived to take him to the first of a series of POW camps. All the young German pilots came and saluted him again before the truck pulled away.

It was the memory of that experience that helped him survive the next four years as a POW.

'You see, son,' he said, 'if we had met under any other circumstances, we would have just been a bunch of young men wanting to know more about each other's lives. We could have even become the best of friends. That is what a war does to people - it destroys the humanity of nations.'

Let us remember with equal honour all those who sacrificed their lives in the name of their country's flag - and never again tell our children the great lie: 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' - How good and glorious it is to die for your country.