

Three Westlake brothers died just days after D-Day

By Bill Rea

Bolton resident Gary Westlake has three good reasons to keep Remembrance Day in mind; namely his three uncles who were killed in France in the days following D-Day.

Westlake was the speaker at An Afternoon of Remembrance at the Albion-Bolton branch of Caledon Public Library Monday. Thomas Lee Westlake, 29, and Albert Norman Westlake, 25, were riflemen with the Queen's Own Rifles, and they both died June 11, 1944. Westlake said it's unlikely they knew that their youngest brother George, 23, of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders had been killed June 7.

The three were among eight brothers born between 1911 and 1920, including Westlake's father John, who died in 1977. Westlake said his uncle Thomas was the athlete of the family. "It was said he could run faster backwards than most people could run forward," he remarked.

George married a girl named Vera in December, 1941. He enlisted in the summer of '42 and sailed for England that October. Westlake said Vera lived with his family while George was away. He also said George's letters indicated he was very homesick. He said Thomas joined up in August '42, and Albert, "ever the ladies' man," joined the following April.

The three brothers found themselves in landing craft June 4, '44, ready to be part of the first wave on Juno Beach D-Day. Westlake said the Canadians landed and made their way inland, gaining more ground than anyone else. But they ran into opposition in the form of divisions of young fanatics, commanded by a Kurt Meyer.

"They were young boys of 16 or 17 years of age," he said.

The Germans took prisoners and executed them. Westlake said that's how George died. Meanwhile, the Queen's Own Rifles were surrounded by the 12th SS Division.

"Tony and Albert died in each other's arms," he said.

Westlake also said Meyer was eventually convicted of murder and was sentenced to life in prison. He served eight years in New Brunswick, then was transferred to a prison in Germany for two years before being released. He eventually became a beer salesman, died at the age of 51 and there were thousands who attended his funeral.

Westlake said his father never talked much about his dead brothers.

In 1962, a 20-year-old Westlake quit his job and with a friend, hitchhiked around Europe. He eventually found the graves of his uncles, with the help of an elderly lady who gave him directions, and a man in a black Mercedes who gave him a ride, and then took him to his home for food.

"There's no doubt in my mind some one was watching over me that June day," he said. "I stood in utter solitude in the holiest place I have ever been."

In 1984, Westlake said he started working on getting the memory of his uncles recognized and honoured.

"I just wanted people to talk about them and remember their sacrifice," he said. "What happened to them is real, not fiction."

He first approached the City of York, where the brothers grew up. He said officials there listened to his presentation, but didn't get back to him. But in 1996, then Mayor Frances Nunziata was able to get a park rededicated Westlake Memorial Park.

He also spoke of the formation in France of Westlake Brothers Souvenir.

"It's an absolutely incredible association," said.

Westlake also said that while life goes on, the loss never really goes away.

He said his aunt Vera lived with his family after George died. She moved out in 1947, and eventually moved on and remarried.

There was little contact for about the next 40 years. Then he said his mother bumped into Vera at a bus stop.

Vera later took ill with cancer and Westlake took his mother to see her in the hospital. While there, he said Vera asked him to leave so she could talk to his mother alone. His mother came out of the room crying, and on the way home, she said Vera told her she was still in love with George.

He added she died within the hour.

