



Photo by Franki Ikeman

A day to remember

Doris Hope and Bruce Bullock chat while waiting for the Remembrance Day ceremonies to begin at the Ottawa's National War Memorial Tuesday. Hope and Bullock are Second World War veterans.

RCAF veteran shares story of war

By Sarah Robertson

"Then I was given the only choice I ever had in the air force, I could either be a navigator, wireless operator or a bomb aimer."

William (Bill) Robertson is a 93-year-old Royal Canadian Air Force veteran who served in the Second World War. He grew up in Little Italy, Toronto, Ont, and now lives in Belleville.

"I remember it was 1929 and I was going to school. My father had lost his job. He was a shares banker by trade and he lost his job because no one was buying shares in those days."

At the early age of eight, Robertson and his family of seven moved into his grandparents' house while his father found work.

"He was looking for anything he could to make a dollar and I mean literally, if he came home with a dollar a day that would have been something!"

In September 1939, Robertson first heard about the war while he was playing in the schoolyard.

"All us boys were 18 and discussing how we were gonna wipe Hitler off the map. Ya know boys brag."

It was then that Robertson decided that he would join the service. His dad always said however, that education added no weight to your shoulders so you should get as much as you can. Because of this, Robertson decided to complete Grade 13 and apply to the air force when he finished.

"I graduated in June 1940. I didn't have much money. I saw one of my older brothers looking in a window, deciding what kind of chocolate bar he wanted.

I thought, 'Wow, must be nice having enough money to decide what kind of chocolate bar you want to buy.' But I came out and worked for about a year and in March '41, I tried to join the air force but they said I wasn't in good enough health."

Robertson weighed 115 pounds. He wasn't able to play on any sport teams because athletes had to be at least 130 pounds. Robertson started swimming, biking and exercising on his own in an effort to bulk up.

"I went back in '42 and was now a strapping 118 pounds and I found a secret! If I drank a chocolate malted milk I would gain one pound. So the day I was going down to weigh in at medical, I had two milks! They accepted me because I was in better shape."

Robertson tried to be a pilot but thought he had mild colour blindness. He drove a plane simulator, which they called a Lincoln, and landed his 70 feet under ground.

Robertson chuckled, "They didn't think I'd make a good pilot and I kind of have to agree."

That's when Robertson was given the only choice he ever had while in the air force. He decided to be a bomb aimer. Robertson got his wings in March of '43 and a month later he landed in England. Nine of his 12 trips over Europe were to bomb the marshalling yards. This was done because it made it difficult to move troops or material.

"We had to circle around to head home, and this was 25 miles from the German border, and that's when a fighter attacked us."

"The most recent strategy they had was

to fly underneath us. They had their guns set pointing up. He fired up and put one of our starboard engines on fire and he set the starboard side of the fuselage on fire. At that time our pilot was having difficulty flying and he said, 'Jump, jump!'"

It was at that point that Robertson and his crew bailed out of the plane. They did all their bombing at night, so when they jumped they had no idea where they might be landing.

"I knew the plane was gone, so I ripped my chord and I guess you could say I felt a little religious hoping the shoot would open. I was praying!" laughed Robertson.

"The shoot is attached to you like a harness. One comes over your shoulder, one over the other shoulder, one up the groin and so on. There are five straps and just like in the car it clicks in. When you touched the ground, you clicked the thing for a quick release."

"What they didn't tell us is when the shoot opens all the jolt is right at the groin. I'm quite serious about this, although it's kind of humorous, I honestly thought I wasn't going to have any children in the future!" he giggled.

Robertson landed in a field and was able to hide for several hours in case the enemy was looking for him. He tried to sleep but could not and felt a deep loss of freedom.

He wasn't able to write or call home to let his parents and friends know he was safe. He didn't know where his next meal was coming from. He wasn't able to talk to anyone. He was swallowed up by loneliness.



Photo by Sarah Robertson

Bill Robertson, 93, sits in his home on Saturday. Robertson is a Royal Canadian RCAF veteran who served in the Second World War. His plane was shot down in 1943, and he and his crew had to bail out while in the air. Robertson was in hiding for four months behind enemy lines.

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