

THE VETERAN'S VOICE



Douglas MacEwan

Our interview began with the same question that MSBA has asked to all other veterans, in connection with the Veteran's Voice project:

Given the symbolism of the "torch" that is referred to in the famous First World War poem "In Flanders' Fields", how important is it to yourself, as a veteran, that Canadians continue to carry that torch and hold it high?

The answer received from Dr. Douglas MacEwan, was unlike any other.

As a young medical student at McGill University following the Second World War, Douglas MacEwan felt an intimate connection to this poem - written by Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae 27 years earlier.

"You have to realize that the Medical School at McGill, where I was a medical student, was where McCrae himself had graduated before the outbreak of the First World War. So I walked the same hallways and corridors where he had walked. There was a stained glass window at the school, with the words of his poem written on the panels of that window and featuring many poppies. So I saw that every day when I went to medical school," recalled Dr. MacEwan, now at his home in Winnipeg.

When taking time to reflect at this stained glass memorial, which commemorated one of Canada's greatest poems, Douglas MacEwan was not however, just recalling the sacrifice of the generation before. That generation that went to war from 1914 to 1918, and which had also included his own father. He was also remembering the sacrifices made by his own generation between 1939 and 1945.

For Douglas MacEwan, the answer to the question regarding the importance of continuing to bear the torch was therefore very clear: *"it is very, very important for all Canadians to remember the sacrifices made for their freedom, and to protect that freedom."*

Like many others of his generation, Douglas MacEwan enlisted as soon as he became eligible, joining the air force in 1943.

And like thousands of other airmen, Dr. MacEwan's journey during the war took him through training across several of the small towns and communities in Canada that served as stations for the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. Between 1939 and 1945, it is estimated that 131,500 personnel were trained in Canada under the Plan, the largest air training programme established during the Second World War.

"Every member of an aircrew had to know something about their own position but we also had to know about what the others did as well. That was just in case something happened to someone else and you had to step in to fill their place. On every crew there was of course the flying officer or pilot, but we also had several others, a co-pilot, an observer, a navigator, a bombardier, and two gunners, one in the rear of the plane and one who manned the guns below the wings of the plane. I myself was trained to be a navigator."

Once the basics were learned, including take-off and landing, bomb-aiming and navigation, and how to parachute out of a plane, Dr. MacEwan was transported overseas to England in 1944.

"When we arrived, I fully expected to be posted to bomber command. But when we got there, there was a surplus of airmen who were taking part in the bombing raids over Germany. So they asked me to join the flying patrols that were taking place over the Atlantic Ocean instead."

Douglas MacEwan was therefore posted to a flying patrol squadron under what was known as Coastal Command.

"We were responsible for patrolling the Bay of Biscay between England and France and also the coasts of Britain located between



Ireland and England across the Irish Sea. There was a lot of submarine traffic in that particular area. Our station was located at Devon in England. You have to understand that the main focus of our missions was anti-submarine warfare. The German u-boats (short for untersee boots or submarines) were sinking countless ships before they could deliver important supplies to Great Britain right at the end of the war. It was our job to catch them before they preyed on any of these vessels and prevented their supplies from reaching England."

During the entire course of World War Two, countless engagements between allied and axis forces took place during enemy attacks on cargo ships operated by the Merchant Marine. This collective defence effort came to be known as the Battle of the Atlantic. The toll on Coastal Command during the battle was high: 2,060 aircraft were lost and 5,866 aircrew lost their lives. During their operations, Coastal Command inflicted many enemy losses included 212 u-boats sunk and 500 German transport vessels sunk or damaged.

Thankfully, for Douglas MacEwan he was not numbered among these many casualties, although he remembers a very close call - but not so much for him and his crew. *"During our night patrols, we had to turn on a big spotlight that was located on the underbelly of the plane. That helped us to identify what was floating on the surface of the water, before we would release depth charges from of the aircraft. One time, our radar picked up the outline of a ship so we turned the spotlight in its direction. We typically flew at about 1,000 feet above the surface, so we lowered altitude to about 100 feet and it was my job to then look through the scope to see what it was and report back to the bombardier before he released our payload. Imagine my surprise when I saw some angry Irish fishermen waving their fists at us. I guess our light had scared the fish away!"*

For Douglas, the closest brush with death surprisingly came not in the air but on land instead.

"When I was undergoing further flight training at Cambridge after first landing in England, the threat from German V-1 and V-2 rockets was everywhere. I remember that one V-1 rocket crashed not far from our base while I was there. Something went wrong with the cone or propeller and so it crashed into a nearby field, with its nose buried in the ground and its tail sticking out above the surface. But you could hear them coming several miles away, they had a distinct buzz or whistle to them as they flew overhead. The V-1 bombs killed about 20,000 Londoners and damaged many buildings. When I was there, the Germans did not conduct as many direct bombing raids over England, as they had during the earlier part of the war. They sent the rockets over instead."

Thankfully, the element of danger did not last very long: following completion of his training by 1945, Dr. MacEwan now jokes, *"I flew only a couple of missions before the war ended, so I like to say that the Germans ended the war because they were too scared of what I would do to them once I was in Britain!"*

With the war at an end shortly after, Douglas MacEwan returned home to Canada, beginning studies in medicine in Montreal. *"We learned a lot during our studies about what the war had done to those who saw combat", recalls Dr. MacEwan. "About half of those who served in Hong Kong were from Winnipeg but the others were from the Royal Rifles of Canada, which had been based in Montreal. There were many Hong Kong vets who passed on in the years following the war. I had one friend whose job it was to perform autopsies on those men as they arrived in the hospital at McGill University. He was utterly shocked by what the hardships and starvation they suffered, during their time as prisoners, had done to them."*

Having finished his undergraduate medical studies, Dr. MacEwan went on to specialize in the field of radiology. In 1966, he moved to Winnipeg to take on duties as Manitoba's Chief Radiologist at the Health Sciences Centre. For many decades, Dr. MacEwan provided critical diagnostic service to the people of Manitoba through this important role. It was a career devoted to helping people pursue health and life rather than the death experienced by too many of his generation.

Following his retirement, Dr. MacEwan has continued to give back to the people of Manitoba, as a philanthropist, a patron of the arts, and also volunteering as a trustee with the Winnipeg Public Library. Douglas MacEwan's passion for books and reading has continued nearly into his hundredth year. During MSBA's interview, he placed his latest read onto the table.

"Here is what I am reading now and I feel it is related to the importance of what freedom and democracy means, given the 100th anniversary of the end of World War One" stated Dr. MacEwan, as he laid the book on his dining room table. The subject of the book was Hitler's rise to power.

"In my lifetime there were three terrible men, Hitler, Stalin and Mao Tse-Tung, and they together killed about 75 million people. Some people say that democracy is failing, so they become disengaged because of lost hope. Others similarly become disengaged because they feel there is improper political leadership. Others mistakenly believe that things are going to be just fine, so they become disengaged. But when you look at the troubles around the world today, it would be very easy for another Hitler, or Stalin or Mao to rise to power because people have lost interest. Participating in democracy is important at all levels, local, provincial and national, to make sure that there are checks and balances all the way through."

Given the importance of democracy and freedom on the 100th anniversary of the First World War, MSBA asked Dr. MacEwan if he fully understood what he was fighting for when he enlisted in 1943.

"I certainly knew what I was fighting for when I enlisted. As a World War One veteran, my father was very upset when the Second World War happened. The exact same towns and places that he fought for were once again occupied by Germany. That didn't sit right with him. So it became up to us to take up the fight once again. We didn't really know anything about the holocaust though. We only discovered the full extent of what Hitler had done after the war was over. But I will say this: anti-semitism did not just exist in Europe. I remember that in my own class just before

the war, a young Jewish kid had come over from Europe before the war, as a refugee. There was a great deal of discrimination that he experienced from our fellow classmates even after arriving in Canada. That was what I was fighting against."

There is a saying that the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing. Every Canadian has a great deal to remember this November 11th because of those good men who, like Dr. Douglas MacEwan, chose to confront the very worst hatred and intolerance, even at great personal risk. It is to us that they now pass their bright burning torch, for us to hold high.

Lest we forget



Douglas' Thoughts on the Importance of School Boards and Funding Public Education



As an homme d'affaires who remains very much current on local and world events, Dr. MacEwan concluded our interview with a few thoughts on the importance of the role of school boards. "Education is very, very important. Much of the government's finances and activities are in fact directly related to education. They have got to maintain highways and things like that but education is something you can't cut because of our children and their future. You can postpone many projects but you cannot postpone providing children with a good education. Our children ensure our community's economic prosperity."

Dr. MacEwan then went on to reveal an important detail concerning the wellspring of knowledge from which he shared this important perspective. "My uncle was Clifford Clark. He taught me a thing or two about public finance."

Like many other Second War veterans, Douglas MacEwan grew up as a child of that era that came to be known as the "Great Depression", when a stock market crash in 1929 caused many people around the world to lose their savings, while also leading to the loss of countless jobs. This left many people out of work and homeless and is often considered to be one of the major causes for the start of the Second World War.

Unlike most teenagers who grew up during those years however, Douglas MacEwan was offered a firsthand and intimate understanding of what had led to the depression and how Canada came to recover from it.

This was because Douglas MacEwan's uncle, more than any other Canadian, is widely recognized as the chief architect of Canada's financial recovery from those devastating years, while expertly managing Canada's purse during the demanding war years.

As the Deputy Minister of Canada's Federal Finance Department for close to two decades, Clifford Clark took Canada down the path to economic stability and recovery. Among his significant achievements was the establishment of the Bank of Canada. He is also recognized as the author of the important family allowance program that continues to benefit millions of Canadian citizens today.

Having served his country faithfully during some of its darkest years, Clifford Clark also argued strenuously against introducing wage controls following the First World War. He recognized that government budget recovery would only be possible if citizens had the financial means necessary to contribute to economic growth and stability.

For Dr. Douglas MacEwan, a proud Manitoban and World War Two Veteran, these realities remain just as relevant now as they were then. "School trustees are there to ensure that the government does not forget that. It is important that our trustees ensure that our public education system continues to be well served."

