

THE VETERAN'S VOICE

"We fought our fight, it's up to you now"



James Magill

At the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, 18 year old Jim Magill eagerly volunteered for the Royal Canadian Air Force.

"You had two choices in those days. You could either join up yourself or you could wait for a call. If you got a call up, you were put where there was vacancy or need at the moment, and that most often meant being sent to the army. Myself and three other friends decided we would like to sign

up for the air force. So we went down and joined up and from there, went to down to the depot. We were housed in the big arena full of double tiered bunks and you were assigned bunks alphabetically and so being an "M", I got a top bunk! That was the start of my air force training."

Nearly 80 years later, MSBA had the privilege of meeting with Mr. Magill at his seniors' residence in Winnipeg. During our interview, we had a privileged opportunity to find out more about Mr. Magill's incredible life, his service to Canada, and his thoughts on freedom and local democracy. It was quickly discovered that this 97 year old veteran maintains a mind as finely-tuned as the Halifax bombers he used to fly, marked by an ever-present and ongoing sense of devotion to his country.

As the decades pass, there are fewer and fewer of Mr. Magill's generation, the aptly-named "Greatest Generation", who are left to tell their story and bear witness to the price paid to protect Canadian democracy and freedom.

Rarer still are those ranks of Manitoba airmen, such as Mr. Magill, who won one of the most coveted awards his country could bestow for service in the air force, the Distinguished Flying Cross or DFC.



While close to 5,000 Canadian airmen received the DFC decoration for their wartime service, only 247 Canadians received this honour while serving with the Royal Air Force. Pilot Officer James Magill was one of these rare Canadians. He was granted the decoration by the Royal Air Force on January 19, 1945. Awarded towards the close of the war, this honour recognized a storied and accomplished career on the part of Pilot Officer Magill.

"After training, we embarked at Halifax to go to Britain. When we got on the boat, we had to worry about what would happen to us on the way there given the threat of attack. The scoundrels who loaded us onto the boat suggested that we not sleep! It was a three day voyage over to Britain, so of course we had to sleep. They were only pulling our leg!"

Mr. Magill continued *"We landed at Greenock in Scotland, near Glasgow, and from there took the train down to Bournemouth, which was an air force base. From there we were sent out to training squadrons for crewing up. I, for some reason, was sent up to number four group at Lossiemouth, Scotland. And so I did all my crewing up with the Royal Air Force. All of my training and operations were with the RAF."*

During World War Two, the Royal Air Force's growing requirements for personnel meant that many commonwealth countries, including Canada, became responsible for contributing aircrews to fuel that critical need. Over thirty squadrons with anywhere from 12 to 15 planes each, along their crew, were given by Canada to the RAF during the course of the war. Up to one fourth of the aircrew members serving under Bomber Command were also Canadian. James Magill was seconded to the RAF by Canada as part of this overall contribution.

"Our crew was seven people. I was a bomb-aimer. We had a very solid crew. There was great companionship with one another and we became very effective. Our aircraft was a Halifax bomber. It was a four engine bomber with Hercules radial engines and Buerling in-line engines. It was very comparable to the Lancaster bomber. The Halifax was just as good but of course, but the Lancaster got all the dog-gone publicity! It was a good sturdy aircraft and it got us there and back many times from our base at a village called Burn in the middle of Yorkshire. Ours was the 578 squadron."



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MSBA learned that going “there and back many times” is an understatement. Along the way, the DFC was only one of the distinguished marks of service won by Pilot Officer Magill. Having also been awarded a pair of coveted operational wings, this meant that James Magill completed over fifty sorties (bombing raids) over occupied Europe during WW2. This was indeed a rare record for any aircrew member, especially in light of high casualty rates— which totalled nearly seven per cent of all air force personnel and even higher for those in bomber crews. During the war, the 578 squadron alone suffered a loss of over 40 planes and their crews.



“We were given one week’s leave every six weeks, to rest up before going back at it again. Otherwise, one’s nerves would become a bit jangled. The standard tour of duty was about thirty flights over Germany. We were fortunate that we survived”, stated Mr. Magill.

In total, 249,600 Canadians served in the air force between 1939 and 1945. Of these,

17,034 crew members made the ultimate sacrifice during their service, whether during missions, in training, or as prisoners of war. A total of 28 women and 1,066 ground-crew are numbered among those who never returned home to their families.

But for James Magill, the cause behind the fight remained all important, even at risk of life. *“When we signed up, we knew the country was in dire peril and it needed our support. The call to defend freedom came later, when we realized what was at stake. I talk to some schools and also to the residents here in my building. Central to my talk is freedom. We paid a dire price to preserve and protect the freedom that we all enjoy today and I think that is a very precious gift.”*

On the centennial anniversary of the end of the First World War, MSBA asked Mr. Magill for his thoughts on the meaning of Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae’s famous poem “In Flanders’ Fields”.

In that poem, Colonel McCrae issued a clear call to future generations of Canadians when he wrote “to you from failing hands we throw the torch, be yours to hold it high”.

Mr. Magill discussed the meaning of that “torch” and especially what it means in terms of Manitobans’ ongoing obligation to respect our veterans by protecting freedom and democracy in Canada.

“It is very important for Canadians to hold the torch high. During the war, there was very real danger that freedom would be lost. We were within a heartbeat of Germany taking over Britain and all of Asia. They at that time controlled nearly all of Europe. Freedom became the vital force that said to chaps such as myself ‘you must do something because we cannot afford to lose that’. Some of Winston Churchill’s speeches summed it up brilliantly. He aroused our morale when things were black. We had to fight on and fight on! And so we did, and we won.”

When it came to our further discussion of freedom and democracy, Mr. Magill was unequivocal: *“The right to vote and to exercise free choice, to express one’s opinion, is all important. We should not and cannot tolerate any other way of life.”*

Mr. Magill also shared important insights concerning school boards and local community ownership of public schools.

“I believe absolutely and am convinced that it is essential that we have public ownership of the public school system. At one time, only the church was responsible for providing education. Now we have a public school system where the focus is on providing communities with the opportunity to express their choices and to choose how their kids are educated. That’s where the trustee comes in. That’s where the election of school trustees becomes so dog-gone important. My goodness gracious, the right to vote and choose who represents you remains all important. It is the basis of our democracy and the basis for our freedom.”

MSBA also asked Mr. Magill to look to the future and what it might hold.

“One hundred years from now, I hope that things will remain as they are today in this country. From the Prime Minister to the Premier and right down to school boards in our province, everyone should have the right to vote for and elect their representatives. If the monuments to those who died in service of their country could speak, I am sure they would say, we fought and we sacrificed to protect our rights, freedoms and liberties. We have passed this on to you. Protect it. It is your vital right.”

With great humility and the deference of a man just shy of his hundredth birthday, Mr. Magill concluded our interview with the following observation *“I did my best to ensure that freedoms and rights were protected for future generations. I guess that is a question now best left to your generation to answer. We fought our fight, it is up to you now.”*

A remarkable man with remarkable insights, born of a distinguish record of service to his community and his country, Mr. Magill's service was equally recognized this past spring by the Republic of France. On that occasion, the French government pinned the Legion of Honour, France's highest decoration, upon Mr. Magill's breast. In so doing, James Magill became knighted as a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, a rare sign of respect for a citizen of Manitoba. As we found out, "Sir Jim" as he is now known among his friends and acquaintances, is indeed worthy of the honours paid.

