

September 1, 1939 marked the beginning of the most cataclysmic conflict of our planet's history. 60 million people, soldiers and civilians would lose their lives over six years of combat – combat on a scale never seen before, and hopefully never to be seen again. Together, my parents' families contributed eight young men to the conflict. Those who stayed home, the wives and siblings of those eight did not escape the war's reverberations. My family members went through hardship, gained countless stories to tell, some found new loves, and one gave all he had, killed in 1944 by a German bomb.

My relatives who fought in the war declined to talk about their experiences when they returned – they did not want to bring back memories they would rather forget. Thus my relatives who have since died have taken their stories to the grave with them. This essay will be an attempt to piece together written and oral anecdotes, memoirs, letters, and service records to form some picture of how my family contributed to the war effort, and the effect it had on my family's development.

Beginning on my mother's side of the family. The King family were career soldiers of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC), dating back to 1904 when H.B. King joined the RAOC.¹ He was not in active service at the beginning of World War Two: it was his two sons, Bill and Frank, that would represent the family. Between the two of them, they fought in nearly all theatres of combat where the British Army was involved.

Frank's story begins a month after the war's opening, when he was posted to HQ of the 2nd division of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in Belgium.

¹ Tim King, Letter to Jane King, March 18, 2005.

Until May 1940, that front was calm: the “Phoney War” they called it, the period of quiet on the Western Front while Hitler snapped up Poland, Denmark and Norway.² But the invasion of the France and the Low Countries was inevitable, and in May 1940, the Wehrmacht drove through Ardennes and trapped the BEF against the Channel coast, caught between the Army Groups of von Rundstedt and von Bock.³ The scene was set for a massacre, but on May 24, Hitler halted the Wehrmacht⁴ and gave the 300,000 men of the BEF, 30,000 French soldiers, and Frank, time to evacuate back to Britain.⁵ Back in Britain, Frank was commissioned as an officer in Yorkshire, before being sent back to combat in 1941 with a posting to HQ 1st army in North Africa, tasked driving East from Algeria to link up with Montgomery’s 8th Army and drive Rommel out of Africa from Tunis.⁶ The end of fighting in Africa meant Frank returned to Britain, this time to prepare for the greatest amphibious invasion ever seen: Operation Overlord. Frank, now a Captain, was working for HQ of the British 2nd Army under Dempsey, which included all forces landing at Gold, Juno, and Sword beaches.⁷ Once ashore, the Allies expanded their beachheads, broke out of Normandy, and began pushing the Germans out of France, back to the Rhine, and eventually into Germany itself.⁸ But Frank did not stay in Europe for more than two months. He transferred to an entirely different part of the world: India.

That the British Army needed troops at once in France and in India highlights just

² David Gibbons, A Timechart history of World War II, (London: Worth Press, 2003).

³ Len Deighton, Blitzkrieg, (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1979), p. 292.

⁴ John Toland, Adolf Hitler, (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1976), p. 609.

⁵ Deighton, p. 295.

⁶ Frank King, Letter to Jane King, March 13, 2005.

⁷ Richard Natkiel, Atlas of World War Two, (North Dighton: World Publications Group, 2001), p. 173.

⁸ Natkiel, pp. 177-179.

how widespread the war was. Frank would not return to England until 1947, serving the post-war years of 1945-1947 in Indonesia.

Bill, my grandpa is no longer alive today so his story is less certain. Bill left England in October 1938, posted as an Assistant Sergeant in Jerusalem, where he was when the war broke out. He would stay in Israel until March 1942.⁹ After serving in Israel, he did not return to Britain: he proceeded to fight all over the Middle East: his service records show that from March 1942 to June 1943 he was in Syria, Iraq, Persia, and Egypt.¹⁰ On July 10, 1943, Bill joined the 5th Infantry Division in Operation Husky: the invasion of Sicily and the opening of the Italian campaign.¹¹ They landed in the South-east corner of the island and fought heading north along the island's eastern shore, taking Syracuse, Augusta and Catania.¹² He stayed with the 5th as they crossed the Straits of Messina and moved up Italy's Western shore to Auletta on September 19. While serving in Italy, (we are unsure of the date or location) Bill had one of the most memorable experiences of the war and its story has become a cherished part of family history. He and another officer were searching through an Italian villa with their pistols, sneaking behind doorways, worried their might be hostile forces stationed there. And indeed there were. Behind one door were 20 heavily armed Italian officers. Luckily enough, they were more interested in surrendering than fighting. As the 20 were handing over their weapons, one happened to mention that there were another 200 soldiers behind the villa who were also wishing to surrender!

⁹ Record of Service since Date of Enlistment: HW King, (1961).

¹⁰ Record of Service since Date of Enlistment: HW King.

¹¹ Natkiel, p. 110.

¹² Natkiel, p. 110.

This was a bit of a problem for my grandpa, having to deal with 220 Italian troops almost single-handedly. I'm not sure how they managed it, but it all turned out well, and my uncle still has a sword that the commanding officer surrendered to him that day.¹³ The 5th then advanced through the mountainous middle of Italy to the heavily defended Gustav Line.¹⁴ But Bill did not make it there: in December 1943, some soldiers who had been away from home for extended periods of time were allowed to return.¹⁵ Bill, having been away from his new wife for more than 5 years, was one of the lucky ones allowed to return to England, where he would spend the rest of the war.

My dad's family was a family of second-generation farmers outside Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. John, Vic, and Stan, the 3 eldest boys, all joined up as they came of age. The Canadian Prairies were the site of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, (a program for training pilots in Canada – the skies over Europe were not safe for learning pilots)¹⁶ so the three of them naturally joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. Of the three, Stan, the youngest, is the only one alive today. He could join only in 1942 and spent a long time in training to be on an air crew, so he never saw much action in war. He has written an extensive memoir of his stories, in contrast to my relatives who did fight, who were far more reluctant to speak of their stories. The war was a great adventure for Stan and Vic: a chance to go overseas, make new friends, fly planes, and help battle against Hitler – all in the most glamorous branch of the military. The war also

¹³ Jane King, Personal Interview, March 17, 2005.

¹⁴ Natkiel, p. 113.

¹⁵ Jane King.

¹⁶ BCATP, Accessed March 20, 2005,
<<http://www.ualberta.ca/EDMONTON/CONTRIB/airmuseum/aambcatp.html>>.

introduced Stan to his future wife. He met Margaret Rennard while stationed in England, and like so many others, brought her back to Canada at the war's conclusion as a "war-bride"¹⁷. Coming from England to a farm in the still-developing Canadian West must have given Margaret second thoughts about what she was doing. There weren't even flush toilets at the farm! "Snow storms, dust storms, thunderstorms, mud roads, mosquitoes and mice, grasshoppers, gophers and skunks, and the night howls of a coyote would all be part of a new experience. How would she accept the changes?"¹⁸ Her love for Stan stayed steadfast despite the undoubtedly stressful relocation, and they were married in 1947, and are closing in on their 60th anniversary.

Stan was not my only relative to meet his future wife in the war. Indeed, it is not surprising that so many people fell in love during the war. War is a time when young men and women spend long periods of time together, often away from home. It is a time of stress and excitement, of glamour and uniforms, where love will easily blossom. Frank was the other person who fell in love during the war. After the D-Day invasion, while at an Allied hospital in Bayeux, in Normandy, Frank met Mary, a nurse there.¹⁹ It was because of Mary that he transferred to India. Her hospital unit had been relocated to a hospital in Calcutta. Not wanting to be separated from her, Frank requested to be posted to India. Miraculously enough, he was posted to a unit not 14 miles from Calcutta,

¹⁷ www.CanadianWarBrides.com, Accessed March 22, 2005.
<<http://www.canadianwarbrides.com/intro.html>>.

¹⁸ Stan Beck, Tell it like it was, (Saskatoon: PrintWest, 2000), p. 157.

¹⁹ Frank King.

when he could have ended up anywhere in India! In February of 1945, they married in India, and stayed happily together until Mary's death.

But war is not all marriages and adventure. War is a terrible phenomenon. An estimated 60 million people lost their lives in World War Two, including 42,000 Canadians.²⁰ Those who survived often lost everything through bombing or pillaging. There was rationing, hardships, and sacrifices. My family's tragedy occurred on October 12, 1944. John Beck, the eldest of the family, was killed in a German air raid. John was also a member of the RCAF, but he was a ground crew member: a mechanic. It seems terribly ironic that the brothers who actually flew planes escaped the war unharmed, and the two active combatants on my mother's side also survived, but the one who did not fight, John the mechanic, was killed. This shows how war does not discriminate between its victims. Everyone is in danger of losing their life, and no one is safe. Vic, Stan, Frank, and Bill were the lucky ones. Leading Aircraftman John Beck was not so lucky. He was working on a Spitfire at an Allied airfield near Grove, in Holland, when a German bomb hit the Spitfire, killing him instantly.²¹

These are the five family members whose wartime experiences are best known by me. But the others who took part also deserve mention. On my mother's side, her Uncle Idris trained young men to operate tanks, while on my father's side, John and Sandy Robson fought in the Canadian Army. They are from Edmonton, so I would guess that they joined the Loyal Edmonton Regiment, and thus may have been involved at Ortona in Italy, but this is only speculation.

²⁰ [Canada In WW2](http://www.canadianbattlefieldsfoundation.ca/foundation/canada_in_ww2.htm), Accessed March 22, 2005.

<http://www.canadianbattlefieldsfoundation.ca/foundation/canada_in_ww2.htm>

²¹ Beck, p. 102.

Those who stayed at home did not escape the war either. My mother's mother joined the Land Army in Britain. In Canada, my father's father, too young to go to war, had to do extra work on the farm to make up for the absence of the three eldest. When the others returned home, he found it hard to get a job since employers preferred hiring veterans.²²

Last fall I had the privilege of attending the Remembrance Day Ceremonies at the National War Memorial in Ottawa. It was a profoundly moving experience. It was quite a cold day, so I was huddled up in sweaters and coats but was still extremely cold. Then came the parade of veterans, wearing simply their uniforms. I was put to shame. They weren't even shivering! I, a young man with thick clothing had chattering teeth while these brave men, at least 60 years my senior, were wearing far less clothing but were pictures of perfect serenity. More than anything else in the ceremony, this showed me just what an effect the war had. These men were not cold either because they had experienced much worse or because their emotions were overriding any banal concerns of whether it was cold or not. My respect for these men, already high, skyrocketed with that realization.

Since my relatives talked so little about their experiences, I never really thought of them as veterans. I know now more of what they did, and what they went through. In my mind's eye, I picture them standing there at the War Memorial on November 11th, a cold wind blowing across the square, and no, they aren't shivering either.

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