

We Remember



# GEORGE'S WAR

By Scott Mercer  
Focus on Scugog

"It's different when you hear it from someone who was there," George Emmerson says after I express my lifelong interest in World War II. Our eyes lock briefly in a knowing but wordless exchange.

I understand.

My WWII was sanitized, even the most graphic documentaries. In movies, I knew the hero would return from his mission unscathed, whatever the odds.

But George's war was real. He never knew if the next day would, indeed, be his last.

Thankfully, George Emmerson's three years in Europe ended in perfect health, and he returned to Port Perry to join his father's insurance brokerage. Now 92, but showing few signs of it, George remembers the war's events – many now 70-odd years distant – with a clarity one would expect for memories of last week's happenings.

No question, World War II altered the course of George Emmerson's life. It did interrupt his career path, yet left him better prepared to eventually assume those responsibilities. It matured him quickly. Indirectly, it even led to his marriage, which remains vibrant decades later. And it left him with wealth of unique experiences, some fond, others painful.

The names of the world leaders who directed the conflict's events – their motivations, deeds, and fates – are familiar to anyone who's cracked a history book. But in truth, unrecorded histories – the day to day actions of, literally, millions of soldiers like George Emmerson – determined the outcome.

That was George's war.



World War II altered the course of George Emmerson's life... as it did thousands of other young men of his generation.

Like many young men of his generation, George Emmerson felt the tug of patriotism and a thirst for adventure with the outbreak of World War II.

"I also wanted to gain life experience, greater 'worldliness.' I joined the Dental Corps as what you'd now call a dental assistant. Spent a year in Canada before heading overseas."

In England, he exchanged his dental assignment for a posting in the Transport Corps.

"There were 10 of us in our outfit. We ran missions to pick up and or deliver goods, men, hardware, driving a variety of heavy military vehicles.

"But initially, we were sent to a water course where we learned to drive large trucks through neck-high pond water. That would prepare us when D-Day came, to drive through rough seas onto dry land."

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REMEMBRANCE DAY



George Emmerson with some of his war time memorabilia.

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Ultimately, this "high-water" training proved unnecessary, as "Bailey bridges" (modular, pre-fabricated bridge sections which could be assembled on site) allowed them to navigate the Normandy shore without having to wade into the beach's 20-foot swells.

"But that was after we were lowered on rope ladders and jumped into the vehicles as they rose on those waves!" he adds.

With the landing at Juno Beach successful, George and the rest of the Canadian force headed inland. The French village of Caen provided his first taste of war's destruction – "dead bodies in flattened streets," he recalls – as well as his initial contact with

grateful civilians.

"I saw a Frenchman digging in the rubble. He had found a carved nativity and gave it to me. Of course, I offered him cash for the souvenir. 'No money,' he insisted, 'Canadians saved my life...my gift to you.'

"I still treasure it."

One of Transport Corps' many duties was the retrieval of soldiers' mail from a central point. These frequent contacts proved useful.

"We used our connections to swap goods. Say someone needed new boots and somebody else had beef – we arranged the trade."

Conditions in George's outfit were looser than many. That freedom could be enjoyable, even profitable.

"Cigarettes were in great demand," he recalls. "Dad sent packages from home, where he'd pay a dollar for 300. We could sell them for 63 cents each.

"You'd think that participation in the black market would land you in trouble," he laughs, "but the military newspaper published current 'offer-ask-sell' prices for cigarettes, just like modern newspapers print stock exchange quotations!"

The outfit's Paymaster maintained a log of soldiers' earnings, the daily pay rate \$1.10. A swollen account from cigarette sales was unacceptable, so George helped design a creative solution.

"When we booked leave, we'd draw out all our money except, say, ten dollars. That withdrawn cash we'd send back to Canada as a money order. When we returned to base with our cigarette profits, we'd tell the Paymaster we'd decided not to go.

"You couldn't return a greater amount of money than you'd taken in the first place, so we spent freely while we were away. We lived like millionaires thanks to those cigarettes. And after the war, I'd sent home enough cash to buy myself a brand-new Pontiac!"

In spite of its apparent perks, life in the

**November 11  
is a day we  
remember.**

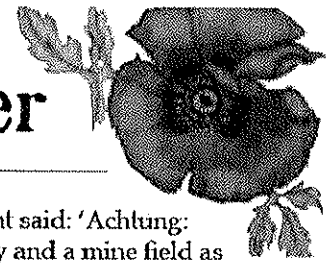
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# We Remember



George sitting on the barrel of a disabled German tank with his buddies.

Transport Corps was certainly no picnic. In fact, it could be deadly.

"Getting lost could get you killed. The roads weren't marked – we used topographical maps getting around – and the trucks' lights were slits just large enough that other vehicles knew you were there. I got turned around one night, got out to scout

around, found a sign that said: 'Achtung: Minen!' Enemy territory and a mine field as well! I retraced my steps and tire tracks very carefully.

"Another time I heard a sharp ping! on the roof of the truck. When I stopped to investigate, I could see blue sky above. There was a metal support on the cab, and that thin strip had deflected a sniper's bullet intended for me."

Facing death on every mission, you'd assume each represented a military imperative. But that wasn't always the case.

"We were sent from Holland into Belgium to pick up a case of booze. Luckily, the Dutch border troops were pretty green, and just waved us through as we returned, or we might've been in trouble and lost our cargo, too!"

War certainly could be hell. Germany's V1's (the so-called "buzz bombs") and V2 rockets may not have reversed the tide of the Allies' advance, but they certainly struck fear into those who witnessed their destruction.

"They'd come every six minutes, day and

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## LEST WE FORGET

*Remembering all who have made sacrifices,  
especially those who gave their lives,  
so that the rest of us could live in freedom.*

*With gratitude...*

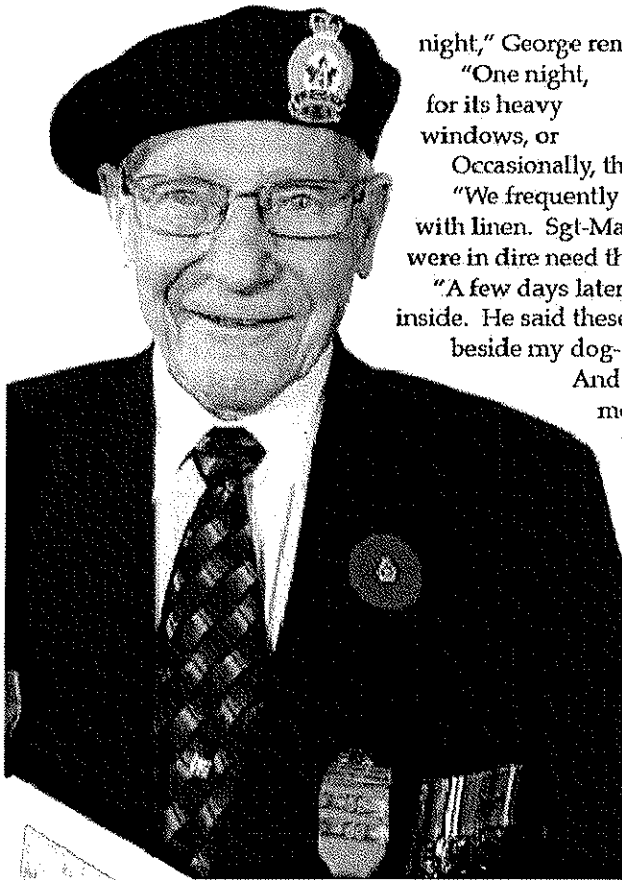


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night," George remembers. "Their concussions could throw a truck forward.

"One night, for its heavy windows, or one exploded just outside our quarters. If it hadn't been blackout curtains, I'd have been hit with shards from the windows, or maybe worse."

Occasionally, the innate goodness of men shone through.

"We frequently slept on the ground, but one of our temporary 'homes' came with linen. Sgt-Major Brophy offered all of it to a local priest. So many people were in dire need then, and we were accustomed to roughing it.

"A few days later, the priest brought us each tiny pillows with a blessed stone inside. He said these would ensure we'd get through the war safely. I wore mine beside my dog-tag.

And you know...? Our whole unit made it back alive. You have more faith in wartime than you might when you have nothing to worry about."

Other times, pleasant – and unanticipated – surprises waited behind a knock on the door.

"One night in Antwerp, standing in the doorway, there was my old Port Perry friend, Ken Jackson. I asked how he found me, and he said he'd made the rounds of the local cafes, and asked the girls working there where he might find 'Jud' (my nickname). We sure had a great reunion!"

George's war would end in Holland with another act of kindness.


"Broph' brought this emaciated Dutchman inside. He'd just been liberated from a work camp and was walking home, something he was in no condition to do.

'Could you find him something to eat?' Brophy asks me. So I did. The guy'd been starved, so he ate that food like an animal would, asked for more. I told him: 'No, you'll kill yourself by eating too much at once. But I'll give you two chocolate bars to take with you. Eat a bit at a time, and you'll have energy the rest of your trip.'

His war experiences would resonate even after George returned to Canada.

"I arranged a reunion with one of the guys, who was living in London (Ontario). His wife's sister was coming to babysit while we went out, and he asked me to pick her up at the train station. When I got there, she was the cutest – and we've been married now 64 years!"

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I dream of giving birth to a child who will ask,  
"Mother, what was war?"

~ Eric Moniam

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**WE WILL NEVER FORGET**

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Echoes from wartime still sounded decades later.

Just last year, George visited an out-of-town furniture store owned by an acquaintance. His casual conversation with a salesperson produced dramatic – and startling – results.

“She overheard I was from Port Perry, and asked if I knew the family she’d married into. Just happened they were cousins of mine.

“That drew us into deeper discussion. She said she’d come to Canada from Holland after the war as a baby. Her father had nearly died in a German labour camp, and decided to emigrate.

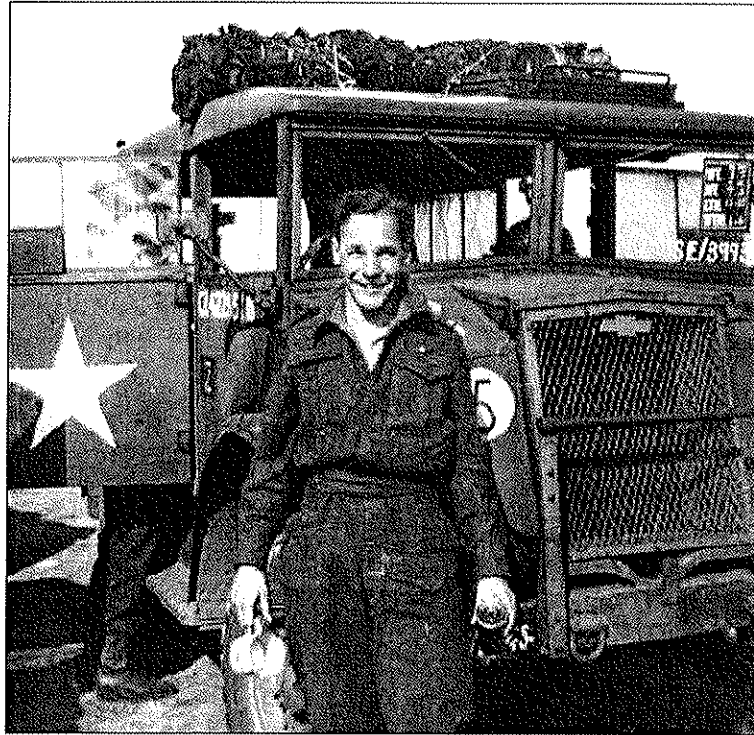
“I told her I remembered many such prisoners making their way home once they were freed, and related the story of the man Brophy had brought in: the meal, the two chocolate bars.

“She started to weep. ‘That was my dad,’ she told me. ‘Growing up, he told many times the story of the Canadian soldier and the chocolate. He said that man saved his life.’

“Naturally, I asked if he was still alive.

“‘Yes, he lives at a nursing home, but just had a stroke. It would be too hard on him to see you right now.’

“Eventually, she took me to see him as part



George Emmerson pictured here standing in front of a HUP truck moments after landing on the beaches of Normandy, France.

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of Remembrance Day services (2013) at the home. He couldn't speak, but I did see a sparkle in his eyes when I talked to him".

George said he returned another day, even bringing him chocolate to try and jog his memory. "It didn't work, but we spent time together. What are the odds we'd find each other all these years later?"

George's war was frightening, thrilling, heart-warming, and occasionally even humorous. He's matter of fact when summarizing the experience.

"If I'd returned to Canada missing an arm or leg, it wouldn't have seemed as 'enjoyable' an experience as some of my stories might make it sound. But I didn't, and over time, good memories overwhelm the bad ones".

"Sure, I saw lots of 'bad' that we didn't talk about today. I don't tell those parts, out of respect for people who lost loved ones."

Not surprisingly, George has strong feelings about Remembrance Day. He's succinct in his explanation.

"Every soldier's a hero. Whatever his job, wherever he is, he never knows – every day – if he's going to die."

George would certainly understand how that feels. After all, he was there.

By Scott Mercer  
Focus on Scugog

*I will always Remember.*

*Thank you.*

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