

# Obituaries

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LAURENCE STORY, 87 » VETERAN, CHEMIST, BUSINESSMAN

As a mail censor for the Edmonton Fusiliers, he volunteered for a mission described as dangerous. He didn't know he was joining an American-Canadian commando unit that would come to be called The Devil's Brigade, precursor to the Green Berets

## The accidental Devil

BY FRANK B. EDWARDS

As a young soldier in search of adventure, Larry Story traded a desk job for the hot, dusty hills of Montana, where he trained to become an elite soldier in the Devil's Brigade, whose daring exploits in the mountains of Italy in 1943 inspired a Hollywood blockbuster.

A native of Holden, Alta., 125 kilometres east of Edmonton, Laurence Arthur Story was once described by his father as an athletic and inquisitive youngster "interested in anything that would take him off the farm."

His chance for escape came with his 18th birthday at the end of Grade 11 when he joined the intelligence section of the Edmonton Fusiliers in 1940.

While working as a mail censor in the regiment's New Westminster headquarters, he intercepted a notice requesting volunteers for a dangerous mission and decided to sign up. He didn't know he was joining a joint American-Canadian commando unit, the predecessor to America's present-day Green Berets.

The First Special Service Force was conceived by Britain's Louis Mountbatten as a unit capable of destroying the Nazis' heavy water facilities in Norway. Initially, about 1,800 men, divided into three regiments, were assembled in Helena, Mont., and given six months of intense training to turn them into elite fighters. Chosen for their physical fitness and intelligence, most came from cold weather locales and were used to spending time outdoors. They were a rugged assortment of farm boys, loggers, miners and trappers.

Each day started with a run through a three-kilometre obstacle course. Competitive 100-kilometre marches through local foothills with heavy packs were commonplace.

Like everything else, Mr. Story's parachute training was compressed. He and his comrades earned their wings in one week after just two jumps from C47 aircraft before moving on to martial arts, demolition, mountaineering and ski instruction.

In a KCTS-Seattle television interview in 2007, Mr. Story recalled the long hikes: "The day began at dawn and finished at sunset. It was kinda tough going because there was blood running out of the toes of your shoes. ... Some of the guys passed out and the stronger guys just picked them up."

The FSSF was a binational melting pot whose shoulder badge was a blood red arrowhead with USA across the top and CANADA down the spine. Each four-man tent in the rudimentary camp held two Canadians and two Americans to ensure quick bonding. Mr. Story and the other Canadians adopted American uniforms and weapons, but were denied the higher pay levels of the U.S. troops.

The original Norway mission was deemed suicidal and cancelled in December, 1942, so the intense training continued. In February, young Sergeant Story got a break from mountain ski treks to take intelligence courses; his marks were the highest in his battalion.

The commandos saw their first action the following summer when they attacked Kisko, a Japanese-held island in the in the Aleutians, 1,700 kms off the coast of Alaska. The Japanese, however, had abandoned it just prior to the amphibious raid, so no shots were fired and the FSSF's first parachute assignment was cancelled.

Well-trained and equipped, the "Forcemen" finally saw battle in southern Italy in late 1943 when 600 members captured a German stronghold atop Monte la Difensa by scaling the sheer backside of the 1,000-metre mountain at night. Their audacious attack was celebrated in the 1968 film *The Devil's Brigade*, starring William Holden.

Mr. Story detested the film. He told a Vancouver friend,



Laurence Story as a young soldier, and below, later in life. His special forces unit was immortalized in the movie *The Devil's Brigade*, starring William Holden. Mr. Story hated the movie, and never talked much about the war.



**The day began at dawn and finished at sunset. It was kinda tough going because there was blood running out of the toes of your shoes. ... Some of the guys passed out and the stronger guys just picked them up.**

special-forces history buff Gerry Shaw, that only the portrayal of the actual battle was accurate. The rest "was fantasy," including the suggestion that the soldiers were mostly criminals and misfits.

Mr. Story's role in the la Difensa mission was to resupply the assault force, carrying impossible loads of ammunition and 50-pound water tanks up the steep slope - and wounded soldiers down. Casualties were high and it took six to eight men to carry a single stretcher over the rough terrain, according to fellow veteran Charlie Mann of Prince Rupert, B.C.

On Dec. 10, 1943, Mr. Story received a field promotion to lieutenant and was given command of the platoon he had led as a sergeant.

Soon after, his regiment took the lead in an attack on Monte Majo during the Allies' push toward Rome. The initial fighting in the early hours of Christmas morning 1943 involved knives and bare hands, as machine-gun outposts were silenced before the main attack. The shooting became so intense that the Forcemen ran out of ammunition and had to use captured German weapons despite being unfamiliar with them.

After two months of heavy casualties, the FSSF was given a month off in Naples before joining the campaign against the coastal city of Anzio. To demoralize Germans defending the nearby Mussolini Canal, the Forcemen engaged in weeks of stealthy night raids, blackening their faces and leaving red arrowhead calling cards on the German dead that warned "Das Dicke Ende Kommt Noch!" - the worst is yet to come.

Mr. Story later explained the brigade's Black Devils' nickname to a reporter. "A German diary that was cap-

tured said these black devils are all around us and we never see or hear them."

On June 4, 1944, the FSSF led American liberation troops into Rome, where they were ordered to capture and hold important bridges across the Tiber River. According to Mr. Shaw, Mr. Story's first bridge assignment ended with a bit of ill-advised larceny. After his platoon captured three enemy vehicles, an Italian approached him with a wad of cash, insisting that he needed the trucks for his business. After much argument, Mr. Story eventually took the cash and shared it among his men. When rumours of the transaction reached a senior officer the next day, Mr. Story was told to investigate.

To save itself from court martial, the platoon had to buy the trucks back from the unhappy businessman who initially resisted the offer until Mr. Story threatened to arrest him.

Later that summer, during skirmishes in the French Riviera, Mr. Story was wounded in the hip by a German grenade. A few months later, the Black Devils were disbanded because of high casualties and changing military strategy.

Mr. Story described the moment in his KCTS television interview. "It was very, very sad because we had no idea that it was coming. They just formed us up and asked the Canadians to step forward. So we stepped forward, formed ranks and marched off." When the Americans were told to close formation, they refused, preserving the gaps left by their departing friends.

By December, 1944, Mr. Story was a paratroop instructor in Aldershot, England, although he had only jumped from a plane twice. Years later, as he prepared for his first

### LEST WE FORGET

Starting today, and continuing through Nov. 11, we remember veterans of the Second World War on the Obituaries page. They survived the war and rebuilt their lives, often repressing the horrors they had witnessed. They may have succumbed to illness and old age, but their courage and their valour flourish. To those who fought in that great bloodletting from 1939-1945 - and those who stand on guard at home and abroad today - we owe an enormous debt of sacrifice and remembrance.

civilian flight, he joked with his daughter Jude that he was nervous because his normal practice was to leave the plane before it landed.

By Christmas 1945, he was back in Canada. He rushed to New Westminster to marry Jessica Scott, whom he had met during his stint there with the Edmonton Fusiliers. After completing a final year of high school, he moved with wife and new baby to a campus trailer park for veterans at the University of British Columbia where he earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry.

Mr. Story was a talented chemist and chose a career in the paint industry. He explained his reasons to his daughter years later. "In the Depression," he said, "you had to buy paint to keep everything whole because no matter how bad things get you always need paint."

The uncertainty of the Depression years in Holden made him cautious, and he stayed with Walker Brothers and Glidden Paints until retirement in 1980. During his career, he created several patented processes for the company, including a chemical to seal the ends of fresh-cut lumber.

He next worked at Synkoloid Co. of Canada, a drywall manufacturer, which he and some partners had bought in the 1970s. He retired from that job in 1995.

Mr. Story did not dwell on his wartime experiences but they touched him deeply.

Says Ms. Story, "He was a good provider, but the military left an imprint on him. He was a bit hard line. ... When you talked to him on the phone, it was brief. He was 'over and out.'"

Mr. Story attended FSSF reunions every second year. In 2005 at the 59th reunion, the U.S. army recognized the Canadian members of the brigade by awarding them the U.S. Combat Infantryman Badge that their American comrades had received 40 years earlier.

Mr. Story told the Calgary Herald's Theresa Tayler, "The Americans got it, why shouldn't we? It's something to be very proud of."

In his later years, his life centred on his friends at the Vancouver Golf Club, a New Westminster social group called the Gyro Club and his family. When he was no longer able to golf, he occasionally socialized on the fairways in a golf cart.

He died on Oct. 10 after a long illness.

"He was a helluva fine guy," remembers his FSSF friend Jack Furman, 88, of Vernon, B.C. "Of course, we all were."

There are 106 Canadian Devils still alive.

### LAURENCE STORY

Laurence Arthur Story was born June 26, 1922, in Holden, Alta. He died Oct. 10, 2009, in New Westminster, B.C. He was 87. He leaves his wife Jessica (Scott), daughters Jude Story and Terry Lee Aguilar, sister Lila Harrison, and brothers Ronald and Kelly.

» Special to The Globe and Mail

BERNERD HARDING, 90

## WWII pilot went back to Germany to find his lost wings

He had buried them after being captured

BY NORMA LOVE CONCORD, N.H.

Bernerd Harding was a Second World War pilot from New Hampshire who went on a quest to find his buried pilot's wings in Germany 65 years after his B-24 bomber was shot down.

He died on Tuesday of prostate cancer at his at his home in Milford, N.H.

Mr. Harding never found his wings during his September trip to Germany, but was given a bracelet belonging to another American airman shot down to return to the family.

Later that month, he was a passenger in the Witchcraft - the last B-24 still flying. He sat in the cockpit behind the pilots in a 30-minute flight from Laconia, N.H., to Manchester, N.H.

Mr. Harding knew then his cancer was progressing and that it would be his last landing.

He had said that his last mission in the war - the 14th of his military career - was incomplete without one more landing. September's was "close enough," he said.

"It was fun. It was worth it. It's history," he said after the flight.

Mr. Harding was a 25-year-old first lieutenant on a mission to bomb Bernburgh, Germany, when his B-24 was shot down on the way back to his base in England. Fighters crippled his plane, forcing him and his crew to bail out with their parachutes.

Harding waited for the others to jump, then turned and saluted a German fighter pilot for not blowing up the plane with men inside.

The B-24, nicknamed Georgetown, was shot down a month after the D-Day invasion of Normandy, on July 7, 1944. One member of the crew was killed. The others - including Harding - were taken prisoner.

Mr. Harding had parachuted into a freshly cut wheat field, barely missing a barbed wire fence. Three farmers, two with pitchforks and one with a gun, captured him and herded him into a cellar in Klein Quenstedt, a village southwest of Berlin. Fearing reprisals from villagers for being a bomber pilot, he buried his pilot's wings in the cellar floor.

He returned to Klein Quenstedt two months ago to search for the wings with villagers' help.

He didn't find them, but a resident gave him a silver bracelet recovered from the body of a Jack H. Glenn on the same day Mr. Harding's plane was shot down. The bracelet was later returned to Mr. Glenn's family in Anchorage, Alaska.

After Mr. Harding's flight aboard the Witchcraft, the bomber's owner, the Collings Foundation, presented him with a new set of pilot's wings.

Mr. Harding grew up in Long Island, N.Y., and was stationed in Manchester, N.H., during the war before shipping overseas.

He returned to New Hampshire after the war and did construction work.

» The Associated Press



Bernerd Harding in the cockpit of the Witchcraft, the last working B-24, in Laconia, N.H., in September.

JIM COLE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS