

Vet recalls sacrifices amid world turmoil

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Veteran Russell Hubley is seen during ceremonies marking the 75th anniversary of D-day at CFB Windsor in Halifax on June 6, 2019.

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Retired Lt.-col. Russell Hubley

D-day veteran

With the world in turmoil thanks to COVID-19, heightened tensions over race, and bitter partisan politics, one D-day veteran in Nova Scotia is wondering if what they accomplished on June 6, 1944 means anything anymore.

Retired Lt.-col. Russell Hubley, a Knight of the French Legion of Honour, served as a mid-upper turret gunner in a Halifax bomber on that fateful day.

“We went on the operation, and we did not know until we came back and we went into the briefing room that the briefing officer told us that we had just opened D-day,”

Hubley recalled from Camp Hill Veterans Memorial hospital during a telephone conversation Saturday.

“What we went in for was a heavy gun emplacement located inland in France. This was a terrific big gun. This gun could shoot 21 miles across the English Channel. It could shoot up houses, it controlled shipping in the English Channel, and so forth.

“We bombed that gun and 30 minutes after we left the target and came back and were into the briefing room, the briefing officer told us, 'You may like to know, you were the first ones in, and you opened D-day.'”

The invasion of Normandy across the English Channel by Allied forces marked the beginning of the campaign to defeat Nazi Germany in Europe and cost thousands of lives.

“Would you say with the condition the world is in now that we'd done anything?” Hubley asked.

“When you consider what's going on today and how all it takes is two people who could start a massive war again, what did we really do?”

As a Pathfinder, Hubley's mission was to mark targets for the main bombers with target indicators instead of bombs. In a later run, they were told to shoot German ground forces.

The 98-year-old from Halifax still remembers watching the Allied soldiers go in — and the incredible toll they suffered.

“One thing about D-day, the barges could not get close enough into the shore,” he said. “The soldiers who were going in were loaded down. They had their rifles, heavy packs, ammunition and so forth. Some of these barges couldn't get closer than six feet (depth) to the landing beach.

“There was a terrific number of young men who were about five-foot-something tall, who were weighed down with 100 pounds of material, and I'm sad to say they drowned. They could not get in.”

Those troops who were fortunate enough to get to the beach came under fire from enemy machine guns located at key positions.

“And we watched a lot of them be slaughtered, just like anything,” he said.

“It was not very pleasant to watch and see what you saw.”

He recalled only two German planes patrolling the beach, and said the enemy made one pass and then got out of there.

“It was quite a thing to see the battleships and the other ships that were carrying the troops. And the landing craft setting off the coast of France and waiting their turn to come in and drop the troops on the beaches. That was quite a sight. But it sort of broke your heart to see what was happening to a lot of them. And it wasn't till after the war that you really learned a lot about what took place.”

Hubley said he did 60 operation trips in the course of the war. His crew did more than any other.

“I was with 431 Squadron — which is now the Snowbirds — that was the heavy bomber squadron. And after the war, the bomber squadron was done away with.”

When the Snowbirds conducted their Nova Scotia flyover as part of Operation Inspiration on May 3, Hubley stood at the Camp Hill cenotaph.

“And when the Snowbirds flew over, they flew directly over Camp Hill hospital, over the cenotaph. I was to stand there and when they passed over the cenotaph, they tipped their wings in salute to me. As the knight of their squadron, I returned their salute. That was quite a thrill.”

His decorations include the Distinguished Flying Cross, Knight of the French Legion of Honour, Legend of 405 Squadron in Greenwood, RCAF Operational Wing and Bar, Bomber Command medal, D-day medal and more.

“I've always said that any of these things I've got are not (solely) mine. They're all part of my crew members.”

His crew transferred from 431 Squadron to 405 Squadron, the only Canadian Pathfinder squadron placed under the command of the RAF, he said. And he later flew in the legendary Lancaster bombers, taking part in the raid on Dresden.

“From at least 30 miles away, it looked like the sun coming up, bright red in the sky. When we got there, I looked down from my mid-upper turret, the ground was burning white. Buildings

were white where the incendiaries were burning, smoke coming up and fire was coming up.”

He returned to North America shortly after the Dresden raid, shipping back to New York and then by train to Quebec.

“I was at the proud age of 23,” he said.

“That was the end of the war. I came back, I volunteered for Korea, and they told me, 'No, you've done your flying. That's it.'”

Hubley will turn 99 in December. His son, Bruce, has written a book about his experiences called *Pathfinder: The WWII Experiences of RCAF Air-gunner FO Russell F. Hubley DFC, CD*.