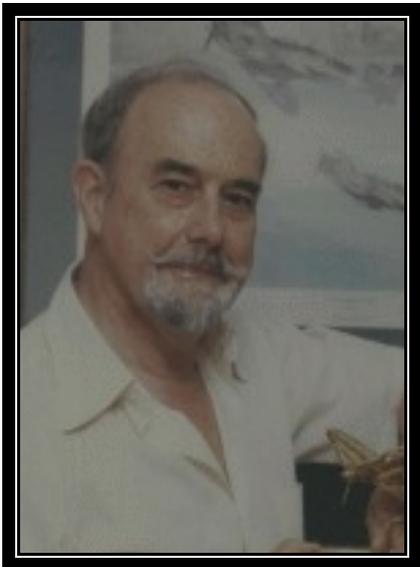


Last Sunday afternoon, in Ilderton, the motorcycle group from the Canadian Army Veterans joined us for our Remembrance service. They are a colourful crowd of people, with their bright red shirts, and their leather jackets, covered in badges and medals – not to mention their absolutely beautiful motorcycles! They lend great dignity to the proceedings. This year they brought with them one of their oldest members, a 97-year-old WWII veteran, nicknamed Tex, who recited a poem that he had written in 1940 when he was a youth in Halifax, working on munitions ships.

Listening to Tex reminded me of Stephen, a very dear friend of our family, who would have been 100 years old this year. He was a Canadian who was at university in England when the war broke out. He joined the RAF, and within a few months was flying Spitfires in the Battle of Britain. He had no end of memories and stories from those days of war, if you could coax them out of him, and he was persuaded to write some of them down. I would like to read to you, in his own words, what he described as his most treasured memory from those years; a story about a group of children.



The Children of Tarfside by Stephen Haley

In the early summer of 1940 I was grudgingly entrusted with a precious Spitfire and sent to a Royal Air Force squadron in Edinburgh. The squadron was split into two flights, and I joined B flight, operating farther north on the coast. We had some time off, and Lord Dalhousie had loaned us his hunting lodge at Invernark. Not being much interested in hunting or fishing, I was delighted to be admitted to a great secret that a couple of the pilots had. They looked like men whom you would expect to see spending their free time in fast cars and loud bars, but their secret pastime was playing hide-and-seek with children.

About a dozen children, aged from 6 to 14, had been sent to Tarfside, near Invernark, to escape the dangers of some of the more vulnerable towns. They had left their homes and families and they were lonely. Every day, we joined them. We played rounders, and tag, and hide-and-seek, and even had competitions jumping over the little rivers. We had picnics. And in the evenings we would climb into an old hay-loft to tell tall tales.

The story of the children of Tarfside spread throughout the squadron, and no training exercise would ever return without first sweeping low, in tight formation, along the glen where the children, standing by the roadside, would wave and shout and jump up and down in delight.

One day, the inevitable happened and we were given 90 minutes to pack up and be ready to move south to join the battle. Ninety minutes later we took off, and as we banked away from the camp, our squadron leader said “Once more lads” and we all banked to starboard and headed for the mountains.

Somehow the children had heard that we were leaving, and as we formed a line and dived one by one in salute, we could see that they had taken white stones and spelled out the words “Good Luck” on the roadway. They stood on the grass, but they were not shouting or waving. They were standing in the form of a cross.

Twenty-four of us flew south that day. Forty days later, only eight flew home.

Those children had no idea how important their contribution was, but Stephen remembered all his life how much it had meant to those pilots. That small act of support and caring from the children mattered more than they could possibly imagine.

Some of us approach Remembrance Day with memories of parents or grandparents who experienced war. Some have their own memories of recent conflicts, and some have relatives who are even now in uniform in hostile places defending our freedom. But our children have neither memory nor contact with wars and conflicts. And we give thanks to God that they don't, and pray that they never will.

The illustration on our order of service today is a picture of a child's hands, holding poppies. Thanks to families and teachers who pass along the meaning and significance of the poppy, our children have the opportunity to know what it means. They are the next generation of people who will both remember and pass it on.

It is important that we remember, and pass along, the stories of what others have done for us. We honour them by remembering; we honour them by passing along that remembrance; and most of all we honour them by passing along that spirit of service.

Amen.