

REMEMBERING VICTORY IN EUROPE

by Robert Williamson

Due to our preoccupation with the COVID-19 virus this year, the 75th ANNIVERSARY of the 1945 VICTORY IN EUROPE passed inconspicuously except for the Royal Canadian Mint issue of commemorative collectable coins and a new 2020 Two Dollar Victory toonie for your change purse. As this all but forgotten anniversary draws to a close it would be appropriate to recall a childhood related memory of that long ago episode in Canadian history. It came to mind when neighbors on the central Mountain, despite the excessive summer heat in 2020, began closing their windows every evening, not because of a contagious virus or an "ahem" sewage spill but something that to me triggered an unusual Mountain Memory.



Like most boys of the World War Two era, I had a dog that was my constant companion and we would huddle together on the living room couch next to the floor model radio listening to war stories and news reports. I remember how frightening but exhilarating the information about the war from Europe appeared. The drama was reinforced by frequent air raid rehearsals involving my father, a member of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry reserve army and older neighborhood members of Air Raid Patrol (ARP) or wardens as they were known. They were required to exercise their fire fighting and rescue procedures on a regular basis. Dressed in dark blue coveralls, rubber boots, gas masks, steel helmets and carrying axes, first aid kits, flash lights and stretchers, they were an impressive sight. Needless to say the ARP Wardens attracted lots of attention and proved very entertaining for me and my dog, a wire-haired terrier named Perky. (Photos courtesy Williamson family album).

Part of the warden's equipment also included a water bucket and a hand operated stirrup pump for dealing with incendiary devices and fires. Living as we did in the Niagara Peninsula fruit belt, my father put this simple pump equipment, blue overalls and boots to more practical use by spraying protective chemicals on the fruit trees in our back garden. Thus food protection became an unofficial auxiliary feature of ARP's function.

Back in the 1940s, most suburban houses did not have basements, just a crawl space. These areas conveniently simulated the confines of a collapsed or bombed-out structure. The men of the ARP would crawl into such sites to practice rescuing people. I thought they were very brave men because we all knew that crawl spaces were full of spiders, snakes and weird creepy things in the damp semi-darkness of the cramped lattice enclosed area.

One evening, the ARP volunteers with all their kit, carried out a rescue practice under my parent's house. They began dragging all their gear into the crawl space. After a few minutes there were some muffled shouts and the men came scurrying out in haste. I was impressed with the intensity of their effort. It almost looked like a real emergency. Then as the men stood around dusting themselves off and laughing nervously, my terrier started barking and became very excited. Just then out waddled an indignant skunk, very annoyed at the invasive ARP rescue efforts and quite prepared to use its own very effective spraying equipment. Today we face a different set of frightening circumstances also involving safety controls, squirting defensive chemicals and wearing protective masks and clothing.



Mountain Memories by award winning writer Robert Williamson appears monthly for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society. See <Hamiltonheritage.ca> for further information..