

FINDING MEMORABLE STORIES

By Robert Williamson

Readers may wonder where this writer finds memorable stories. The inspiration for this one began when my mountain community choir started its Spring Concert preparation. The music included ballads from the 1944 era such as: "White Cliffs of Dover", "We'll Gather Lilacs in the Spring Again" and "I'll Be Seeing You". They were a token of remembrance for the **75th Anniversary** of a world-changing event on June 6, 1944 called **D-Day**.

That music recalled a memory of my uncle, Mel Webster, a British 6th Airborne veteran, who spent his declining years in Hamilton Mountain's Macassa Lodge. But on D-Day his flimsy glider crash-landed in Normandy while bringing supplies and equipment to the paratroopers who had earlier jumped into the predawn darkness to protect the invasion's vital eastern flank along the Orne River.



Photo courtesy Battlefield-art-dot-com

Then, fellow historian, Robin McKee, related this story to me of a family friend, John Copland. Born on December 15, 1919 he lived on Mount Hamilton's Alpine and Cliff Avenues. Approaching his 100th birthday, he is one of those rare veterans of D-Day who is still with us. He enlisted in the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) in Hamilton. Eventually he became a Chief Petty Officer (CPO), ERA (Engine Room Artificer) or mechanic and was assigned to the Minesweeper HMCS Thunder.



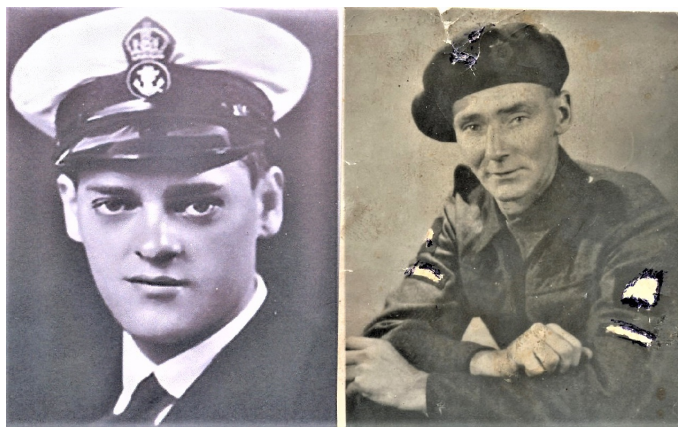
DND photo Minesweeper HMCS Thunder 1944

One hundred and seven Canadian ships involving 10,000 officers and men joined the massive D-Day invasion armada, including 16 Bangor class minesweepers. For the invasion there were 10 flotillas of minesweepers, each flotilla composed of 10 ships. There were five landing beaches and each beach required two swept channels clear of mines. Thunder was assigned to the Royal Navy's 4th Flotilla responsible for sweeping lane # 4 to Omaha Beach where American forces were landed.

At 5:30 p.m. on June 5, as darkness fell, ten flotillas of sweepers headed south for the coast of Normandy. For most of the night, CPO Copland was on duty in the engine room and saw very little. However, the next morning, June 6, he came on deck and will forever remember the awe-inspiring sight of hundreds of ships, the air vibrating with noise, the sky filled with droning aircraft bombing the enemy while transports, like the C-47 Dakota at Warplane Heritage, dropped paratroopers and towed hundreds of silent gliders to their drop zones. The 6th Airborne sent in 256 gliders. One of them carried my uncle to Ranville in the Orne valley. Thus these Hamilton Mountain men from their different vantage points had a unique perspective of how Hitler's Atlantic Wall was breached. Remarkably, after clearing hundreds of mines on a forty mile front, not one minesweeper was lost. On the other hand, few gliders were salvageable from rough landings.

On June 25, (D+19), HMCS Thunder, as part of the Royal Navy's 4th Flotilla, cleared mines around the Cotentin Peninsula to facilitate the heavy bombardment that eventually opened the essential Port of Cherbourg. CPO Copland participated in this operation that was critical to outflanking the enemy at the Falaise Gap and driving them out of Normandy.

With victory in France assured in September 1944, my uncle's airborne unit was recalled to participate in Operation Market Garden, well documented in a film and book entitled "A Bridge Too Far". Because of transport delays he was unable to participate in the Arnhem misadventure, in Holland, a circumstance that probably saved his life.



John Copland (left) and Mel Webster are shown as they would have appeared on D-day 1944. Their stories, now told, make us aware of their service on that memorable day.