

Local News

Remembrance: Russell McKay's adventures in flying – and landings

Tom Spears • Ottawa Citizen

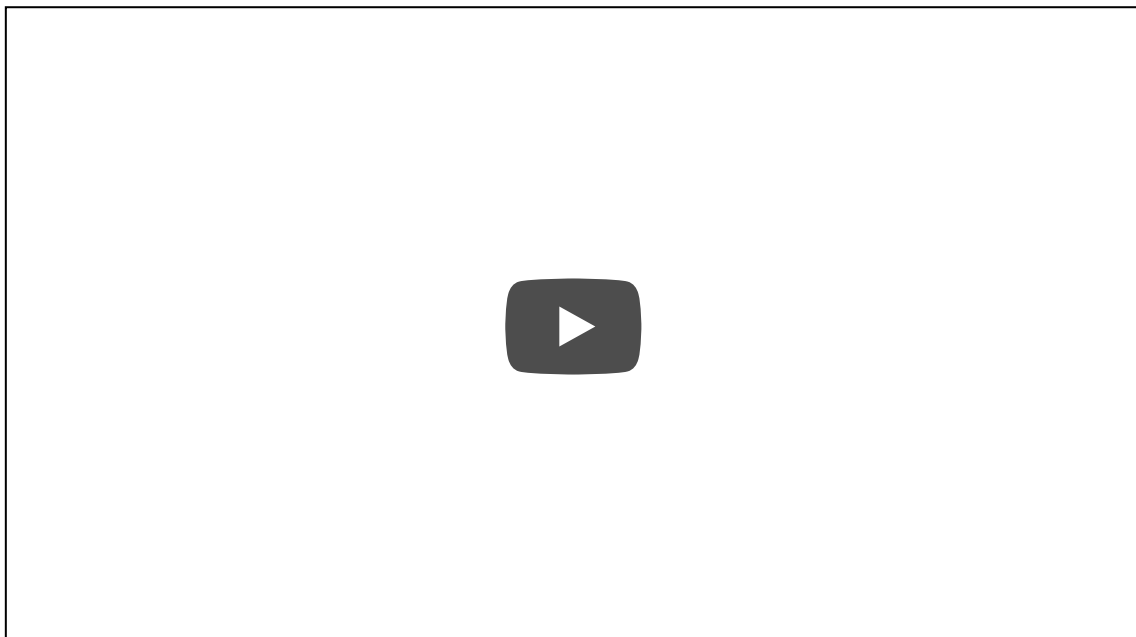
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Flying officer Russell McKay, left, is photographed receiving a Legion of Honour award from French army general, Hervé Gobilliard, president of the Société of the members of the Légion d'Honneur, at a ceremony at the Canadian War Museum Saturday. PHOTO BY DARREN BROWN /Ottawa Citizen

Russell McKay was at Nepean High School when the Second World War broke out, and he signed right up — a kid so green that he packed his skates to go to war.

In his years in the Royal Canadian Air Force he landed first in one ocean, and then on the wrong side of another one.



On Saturday, he became a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur, one of 16 veterans of the war honoured by France in a ceremony at the National War Museum.

McKay learned early that landing is sometimes as big an adventure as flying.

Take the first time, ditching off the coast of Nova Scotia.

“We were lost over the Atlantic,” he said. As a new crew on coastal patrol searching for submarines, “we didn’t know where we were and spent a long time.” Low on fuel, they spotted land but couldn’t reach it.

“We went down into St. Margaret’s Bay,” near Halifax. “It was either get down or crash. We were doggone lucky: Fishermen came out and picked us up.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW



Flying officer Russell McKay is photographed after receiving a Legion of Honour award from the French government during a ceremony at the Canadian War Museum Saturday, November 8, 2014. McKay completed 38 missions over Europe and was awarded his Operational Wings. Ottawa Citizen

He heard later that the Bristol Bolingbroke had stayed afloat for a few hours — longer than anyone expected a light bomber to last — but he didn’t stay to watch.

“Cold? Oh my God, I can remember it to this day, it was so cold. Freezing. It was Oct. 27, 1941.”

“I wanted to get in the front (pilot’s) seat. I was young and when you’re young you’re adventurous.” He was 20.

He trained as a bomber pilot and flew out of northern England with 420 Squadron. He flew 38 missions over Europe, including one on D-Day bombing German gun emplacements and bridges.

“I landed the first heavy bomber on the Normandy beachhead,” McKay recalled. It sounds heroic but it wasn’t planned.



Flying officer Russell McKay is photographed after receiving a Legion of Honour award from the French government during a ceremony at the Canadian War Museum Saturday, November 8, 2014. McKay completed 38 missions over Europe and was awarded his Operational Wings. PHOTO BY DARREN BROWN /Ottawa Citizen

His group had flown in a raid on Stuttgart, and a high wind had blown them off course leaving them south of where they wanted to be — over France, not England.

Low on fuel, they had to find a place to land quickly. McKay decided he didn’t want to cross the English Channel and risk running out of fuel over water a second time. It was about 5:30 a.m., the light just coming up, and he was looking for an airstrip on the narrow strip of France controlled by the Allies in June of 1944.

“I was hoping,” he said. When he found it, “it was a strip where they had put down corrugated steel. It was for fighters, just a little wee strip for fighters in about a five-acre field. It’s a real miracle I was able to get down.”

His Halifax bomber used every inch of the strip but he got down safely.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

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That was about three weeks after D-Day. “The front lines were about three miles away. We just came over the front lines. When we were going out on our raid the whole front line was red. They were shelling, but when we came back it was quiet.”

There were no other landing incidents quite like those two but he did two tours and says that “every op I was on was an adventure.”



Flying officer Russell McKay, left, is photographed receiving a Legion of Honour award from French army general, Hervé Gobilliard, president of the Société of the members of the Légion d'Honneur, at a ceremony at the Canadian War Museum Saturday. PHOTO BY DARREN BROWN /Ottawa Citizen

McKay didn't talk about the war much after coming home, but has opened up about it in recent years, especially because he wants his grandchildren's generation to know what it was like. He's 95 now.

“I did two tours and at the end of it I never got any citation or anything. And to get this is a tremendous honour because it put me a little but in the limelight after a long, long spell.”

French ambassador Philippe Zeller called the 14 Canadian and two free Polish veterans “the last witnesses of those youth engaged in a pitiless war against barbarity and Naziism. How can we not be moved while remembering your courage, the courage of the young fighters that you were, in the early morning on the beaches of Normandy, and Provence, and in the skies of France?”

The veterans included tank crew members, a Spitfire pilot who served in Malta and North Africa before Europe, a Pole who escaped the Germans twice and returned to fight, an artillery lieutenant who fired at German shore positions



Afterwards the men and their families sipped champagne in the lower hall of the museum where tanks and artillery are displayed.

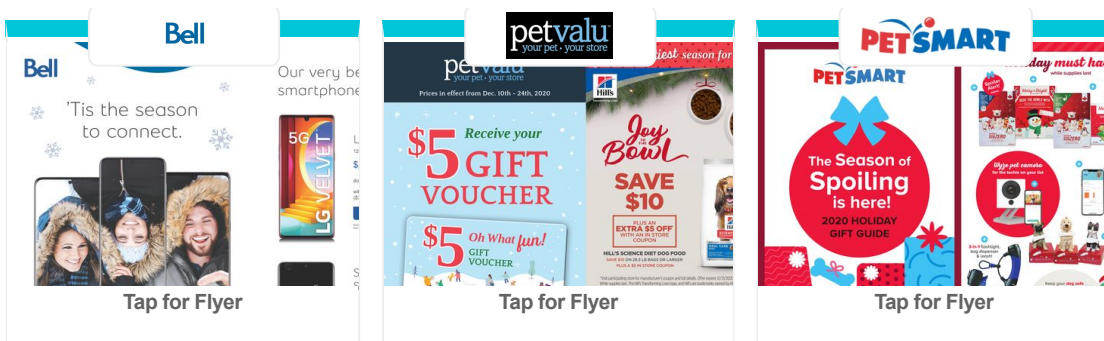
McKay concluded: "I need a beer in a pub."

tspears@ottawacitizen.com

twitter.com/TomSpears1

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