

Lives Lived

ALTON LANGILLE

Second World War pilot. Born in Sydney, Cape Breton, June 8, 1918; died of congestive heart failure on May 2, 1997, in Halifax, aged 78.

HANGING on the wall of Alton Langille's room at the Veterans' Hospital in Halifax, there was a photo of him taken early in the war, at the controls of a single-engine training aircraft. Grinning, self-assured, pugnacious and in his element.

From the moment he first saw an airplane flying, Al wanted only to be a flier. Flying was his passion, and the Second World War was his moment. The war was the central event of his life, the time by which everything else was measured and tasted. The war would not leave him. Or perhaps he could not leave it.

Volunteering for the RCAF, he received an unprecedented 100 per cent in navigation school at Portage la Prairie. It was said that he could even fly the crate the plane came in. He had to argue his way out of being kept there to teach — Al Langille was never intimidated by authority in any shape or uniform. By 1941 he was in England, seconded to the RAF as a bomber pilot, disliking the snobbery and condescension toward the Canadian "colonials."

On June 25, 1943, his plane was heading over Holland on its way back from a target in Germany when it was hit in the wing by fighter-plane bullets. Alton turned back toward land, and except for the rear gunner, the crew bailed out safely. But Alton, blown out of the aircraft, unconscious and with no memory of parachuting down, suffered a broken pelvis, shoulder, neck and back. Neglected by German medics in an Amsterdam hospital, he was paralyzed from the neck down until found by an American prisoner-patient, a chiropractic student, who worked on him until he was back on his feet. Al was then sent to prison camp, Stalag Luft IV in Germany.

His wartime comrades remember a man whose presence it was impossible to ignore — his dominating personality, charm, resourcefulness and truculent gutsiness. Vern White of Cobourg describes Alton with "his head propped over on one shoulder" when he arrived at the stalag, joking about his condition. Cy Grant, the navigator at the time of the crash and later a well-known folk singer in England, remembers that Al made a radio (against regulations) in prison. In January of 1945, with the Soviet army approaching, the prisoners were given 30 minutes notice to evacuate the camp. Al and another man built a large sled out of a wooden bunk for his group to transport their kits, blankets and food for the long, cold, forced march west.

Back in Cape Breton, a man whom Alton taught to fly a private plane said that it was a marvellous experience when he took the controls: "He was at one with it. He flew it like a bird." But no commercial Canadian airline would employ him because of his injuries.

He lived most of those postwar years in Baddeck, N.S., at first running a hotel, then as county postmaster. He turned his drive to endless civic activities — he was variously in charge of Emergency Measures for the area, chairman of the Village Commission, president of



Alton Langille about 1941.

the Canadian Postmasters Association, and a volunteer with the fire department, the sea cadets, Sunday school, even the nearby Gaelic College. And there was his sideline as local photographer for the Cape Breton newspaper. He married Judith Williams, a gentle, warm woman, and they had four children. Yet one had the feeling with Alton that the years since the war were an anticlimax, a postscript.

It wasn't only when he was telling his wartime stories — which he often did, though never tediously because he was a great raconteur — that there was something about his style which made one expect to hear a 78 rpm of Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw or maybe Vera Lynn playing in the background. And the other guys, the crew, the buddies, all young, cool and keen, waiting somewhere for the skipper to show up.

Alton's last 18 months were spent in the Vets' hospital. His condition had made it impossible for his second wife Peggy (Judy died in 1988) to look after him. Models of Lancaster and Wellington bombers hung from the ceiling of his wonderfully chaotic room, crowded with wheelchairs, visitors, a desk overflowing with tools and things he was fixing for himself or other veterans.

As president of the Veterans' Council, he pushed to improve the facilities for men whose dependency on the institution made them reluctant to protest. He campaigned successfully for partition walls in the rooms; he agitated about the bland food, the nursery hour of the evening meal, the lukewarm precooked breakfasts, and he succeeded in getting the bus adjusted to take a greater variety of wheelchairs. He went down fighting.

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