

Memories still vivid

Dan Rycroft was saved by kindness of French underground

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Twenty years ago, Dan Rycroft would not have been able to talk about the war.

To talk about it at the time, the Grande Prairie man might have stayed a couple of minutes and then quickly left. His wartime memories were just too vivid.

It wasn't until 1985 when his sister and wife convinced him to tell his story that he wrote it all out. He didn't write it to tell what he did, instead he wrote it to let his family know what others did for him during the dark days of the Second World War.

Sheltered by the French underground in a small village in the Ardennes region, families risked their lives by hiding Rycroft from the Germans posted in the area.

"If you asked me today what is the thing in my past that I remember most, it's this. It isn't my marriage, it isn't my family. The other things come back and they're the most important things in my life, but if you were to ask me what I remember most about the past, it's this. No matter how hard you try not to, it's there," said Rycroft.

"Every day that I was there for 16 days, their life was in danger. But they would have been quite satisfied if I had stayed there, they didn't want me to go back home. They were absolutely marvellous people."

He was hidden in the home of



Dan Rycroft today, and in the centre of the right-hand picture with the family that saved his life, Robert and Germaine Bouquit.

Photos: Kevin Crush/ submitted

A flight sergeant in the Royal Canadian Air Force and a tail gunner in a Lancaster bomber, Rycroft took part in the invasion of France. The night before D-Day, he was part of a top secret mission flying specialized bombers whose only aim was to jam German radio.



Europe until a mission on the German city of Russellheim on Aug. 25, 1944. On their return to England his bomber was shot down, crashing into the Ardennes. Going down, flames were coming up from Rycroft's feet

aircraft. He tried to bail but couldn't get out the window. Basic survival instinct told him to try something that was never part of his training: he threw his parachute out the window, letting gravity and wind rip him

RYCROFT

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When he regained consciousness, he safely parachuted into a forest but had to cut himself free from the branches, falling 50 feet and breaking his first lumbar vertebrae and a couple of ribs. Seven of Rycroft's friends died in the crash while the only other survivor, Mickey McLeod, was captured and spent the rest of the war in a PoW camp.

In blinding pain, Rycroft knew to stay in the woods meant either being found or torn to pieces by wild pigs. In a desperate journey, hobbling on a branch, he limped for miles while avoiding German patrols along the roads until he finally came across a group of teen boys. Once they realized he was Canadian, they dragged him to safety.

That night, he was taken to the nearby village of Belleville and into the home of the Bouquits, leading members of the area's French underground.

Holed up in the attic overlooking the main street, he didn't know at first just how much the Bouquits were risking by hiding him. Just 40 kilometres away, a family was killed by the



Dan Rycroft, second from left, returned to Belleville in 1986 to visit with Robert (at left) and Germain Bouquit as well as the doctor (in the blue jacket) who helped nurse his injuries. Photo: Submitted

It was looking through the cracks that Rycroft put aside his hate for the Germans. Practically ignored by their own country in favour of the SS divisions, the regular German soldiers were in horrible conditions. From his vantage, Rycroft watched as they went door to door begging for any food the villagers could offer.

"The thing that hit me the worst was you could see the tears streaming down their faces, the tiredness and the desperation in their faces. When you're 19, 20 or 17 years old, you

spent the war hiding a young Jewish girl.

Rycroft spent another couple of weeks in Belleville recovering from his injuries but he knew he had to go home. On Sept. 26, the entire village turned out to say goodbye to him before Robert escorted him to an American airfield in Reims, where he would catch a flight home. He has always felt on that day he was leaving family behind.

"Suppose you left your parents and you knew you were never going to

Germans for hiding an Allied soldier and the same would happen to them if he was discovered. Making it more perilous, some villagers sympathized with the Germans and could have ratted him out.

'AFRAID'

"I was afraid, but I never even thought about myself after a certain time, it was always for them because I knew what was going on," said Rycroft.

Chances were taken. The French had recovered the bodies from the wreck but had a tradition that family or friends must be at a funeral. They wrapped him up and took him to the funeral in full view of the Germans. Another time he went to mass to give a postcard to the priest so it could be sent home, with a cloak hiding Rycroft's full uniform.

During the daytime he could peer out cracks in the shutters and watch the village. The villagers were polite to the local soldiers but never friendly with them. At times, the black-shirted SS would march through and a nervous quiet would fall over the village.

don't hide that very well. It catches up to you," said Rycroft.

"I didn't hate them because I realized they were doing the same thing I was. It took a while because I had just lost my friends and my crew, but then I realized that this is something they're not to blame for. It helped me an awful lot because I quit hating, which has probably helped me all through my life."

For two weeks, Rycroft watched the goings-on. He knew he had a home to go back to, but he wondered what the Germans had to go back to.

The Allies were pushing forward and soon the Americans reached Belleville. A counter-offensive briefly brought the Germans marching through again but then they were gone forever. The village celebrated.

Out in the streets with the rest of the villagers, Rycroft learned the Bouquits weren't the only ones who risked their lives hiding people. Another family in a nearby village had

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— *Dan Rycroft*

see them again; this was the same basis."

For years, Rycroft kept up sending Christmas letters to the Bouquits but he lost touch in the late 1960s when during the FLQ years the gov-

ernment confiscated letters to and from France. He thought the Bouquits had stopped writing.

In the 1980s, the granddaughter of the Bouquits contacted him because she wanted to improve her English. He wrote back and found the Bouquits alive and well. In 1986, Rycroft went back to Belleville to visit the people who had risked everything for him. He even slept in the same room he had been hidden in. Waking up, the first thing he did was look out the unshuttered window.

Sixty-one years removed, Rycroft is now able to talk about his experiences, even spending part of Thursday telling his story to schoolchildren.

He can do it now because he wants people to know what strangers did for him.