

# Honouring a true hero

*Dan McCaffery - September 2020*

Sarnia lost one of its true heroes recently.

Bill Mandeville's death went unnoticed by the local media, which is a shame, because he was a man who should not be forgotten.

I had the honour of meeting Mandeville more than a few times because he was a good friend of my father. In fact, the two served together during the Second World War. Both were Lancaster bomber tail gunners.

Being a tail gunner was a thankless job. You had to sit in a partially open turret for up to nine hours at a time. During winter, flying at 20,000 feet, the temperatures outside often hovered at -50 F or colder. On more than one occasion, Mandeville once told me, his oxygen mask literally froze to his face.

But the cold was the least of it. German fighter pilots usually attacked the bombers from the rear and they aimed at the tail gunner, knowing if they took him out, it would be easy to finish off the Allied plane. During the height of the fighting, few tail gunners survived a tour of operations. In fact, you had to fly 30 missions before you could go home and the life expectancy was 17.

Mandeville joined the Royal Canadian Navy at age 17 by lying about his age. He got caught and was sent home. But a year later he was back, this time enlisting in the Royal Canadian Air Force.

I interviewed him in 2013 for a Remembrance Day article. I found him to be an exceptionally modest man, reluctant to toot his own horn. In truth, he didn't think he deserved any special attention.

But Mandeville was a hero. In training, he survived a number of close calls, including one in which his bomber crash landed in a field. On another occasion his plane caught fire in mid-air. The whole crew might have been killed if not for the fact that the bomb aimer fought the blaze with an axe and fire extinguisher.

Flying combat missions over Germany he twice encountered Nazi fighters. Once, he spotted a fighter and called out a warning to his pilot, who dived away, losing it in the dark. On another occasion a German jet attacked the bomber next to Mandeville's.

Then there was the flak. He flew through some intense anti-aircraft fire.

There was also the danger of being hit by falling bombs from other Allied planes. With as many as 1,000 planes attacking a target at night, it wasn't unusual for a plane to be hit by bombs from another aircraft flying above it. There was also the very real risk of being killed in a mid-air collision with either an Allied or German plane. Those dark skies were exceptionally crowded, making every mission dangerous.

Just getting home after a raid could be difficult. Once, when thick fog made it impossible for Mandeville and his buddies to land at their airfield, they were diverted to another station in Wales. The pilot was not familiar with the place and, in the dark, just missed ramming headlong into a cliff.

Mandeville and his crew took the war directly to Hitler, bombing the dictator's "Eagle's Nest" chalet and SS guard barracks in the Swiss Alps. A bomb from Mandeville's plane actually hit the guard barracks, which housed fanatical Nazi storm troopers.

Bill returned home after the war, becoming a successful husband, father and grandfather, among many other things.

As I say, he didn't consider himself a hero at all. But in all due respect to Bill, he was wrong about that. As a teenage boy he stood up to Hitler and, along with millions of other Allied servicemen, literally saved the world. If that isn't heroic, I don't know what is.



