

My Stories of Remembrance

"The living owe it to those who no longer can speak to tell their story for them." - Czesław Miłosz. Every family has its own unique story. Mine is no exception. It is about two different men, worlds apart, each at the mercy of his own dubious epoch. Neither will ever cross paths, yet, one is inherently responsible for influencing the life of the other in remarkable ways. I, Evan Shvetsov, am one of these individuals, the other is my illustrious great-grandfather, Captain Ivan Babak.

Ivan Ilyich Babak, born in 1919 in Ukraine, was a teacher, and a flying ace. He was credited with 37 aerial victories during the Second World War, distinguishing him as one of the most celebrated pilots on the Eastern Front. He was a part of the aerial force that facilitated the liberation of Auschwitz and continued his service in the army until he was shot down by German anti-aircraft artillery, captured and imprisoned a month before the end of the war in Europe. Once liberated by American and Canadian troops, he resumed service and led his own regiment until 1949, then pursued a career in education.

At the age of 15, my life begins to parallel his. Currently, my rank is Flight Corporal in the 540 Golden Hawks Air Cadet squadron, an organization that promotes interest in the air force and endorses good citizenship in Canadian youth. I initially decided to join this organization at a Victory Day parade where I proudly displayed a sign sporting a photo of my great-grandfather. While I brandished this poster, holding it visibly higher than any other, I wondered if he, too, would be equally proud of me knowing that I would one day follow in his footsteps. This parade also afforded me the opportunity to speak with several veterans in uniform. Their well-worn medals alone whispered stories to me about the memories of victories and defeat that each of these individuals had experienced during their deployment. Their aged and weathered faces spoke volumes about their precarious histories, yet they still managed to greet me with a warm and welcoming smile. I was listening to every word as they disclosed unvarnished chronicles about the realities of war; stories of friendship, of brotherhood and of great loss. I was speechless; their awe-inspiring anecdotes will forever remain indelibly etched in my mind. On this enlightening day, the stories of my own grandfather warmed my heart even more as I listened to the accounts of his fellow soldiers; he will always serve as my beacon of light.

Their first-hand accounts impressed upon me their remarkable tenacity, resilience, and supreme perseverance in the face of the atrocities that they had witnessed and endured. These values are not dissimilar to those that my great-grandfather displayed during the war; although these individuals fought worlds apart, they did so with the same hope in their hearts. However, their victories have to be credited to those who have sacrificed themselves to allow their comrades to carry on. The soldiers that made the enemy retreat did so by standing on the shoulders of their fallen; their names resonated in the souls of those still standing, like a broken record, reminding the fortunate of why they fought. This is the ultimate motivation in both times of war and peace, as those that appreciate the gravity of the sacrifices made by the fallen will continue fighting tirelessly to uphold the moral values that countless have died to achieve.

Remembrance Day is a solemn day dedicated to the acknowledgment, celebration and reflection over the tremendous sacrifices and acts of heroism that were made by those who preceded us in order to protect our freedom and our way of life. With every story told, we gain a more profound appreciation and give reverence to each individual act of gallantry and altruism that shape the collective history of our civilization. On this somber day, we pause to give reverence to those who deserve to be remembered and validated for their authentic acts of heroism on the battlefield. We must acknowledge that the peace that our predecessors fought so valiantly to achieve is ephemeral. As a global community, it is our duty to ensure that the same grave mistakes that were committed by those before us will never be repeated and to protect our liberty that we owe to those who fought for it. As a Canadian, I am fully prepared to serve my beloved country; I am ready to follow in the formidable footsteps of my great-grandfather, Captain Ivan Babak, and carry out my duty with honour. Above all, I am fiercely proud to be Canadian.