

ONWARD, CHRISTIAN'S SOLDIER

From military man to United Church minister, this WWII veteran shares his most meaningful moments on and off the battlefield.

BY ASHLEY MILLER



AS HIS MIND DRIFTS BACK TO THE DAY he left home to serve King and country 75 years ago, Wesley Oake's eyes fill with tears. Sipping tea in the living room of his Gander, NL home, he recalls the melancholy scene that played out in his family's house as he prepared for the long journey overseas and all that awaited him there.

"I was about to leave and all my sisters and brothers were in the living room crying. Dad was on the couch in the kitchen; he was crying," recalls a soft-spoken Wes. "I looked over at Mom and she said, 'Wes, my dear, I want to pray with you.' So I went over, she was in the rocking chair, and I knelt by her knees."

The mother of six, whom Wes refers to as a "saint" for her caring, God-fearing ways, reached for her Bible and prayed aloud for her son's safety.

"She finished and I kissed her. I didn't know how I was going to get out through the door with the lump in my throat," recalls Wes.

He carried that prayer with him throughout his three years at war, believing that God would see him safely home. Looking back over his long life now, Wes believes his Saviour has seen him through much more since then – including travels behind the Iron Curtain, jumping from an airplane, and the loss of two children.



Wes and Myrtle, married for 70 years, hold a photo of Wes taken during his service in the Second World War. Ashley Miller photo

WAR & PEACE

The 95-year-old was born and raised in Beaumont on Long Island in Notre Dame Bay, where he says there was no road, no electricity – and most certainly no money. He cried upon quitting school after Grade 8 to join his father on the water, hauling fish with a hook and line in bleeding hands. A few years later, the Oakes moved to nearby Robert's Arm, where his father cut wood for Bowater's. They were hard, sometimes hungry, times – but Wes going off to war represented a whole new kind of hardship for the close-knit family.

After weeks of travel from Robert's Arm (by dog team, train and, finally, troopship), Wes was deposited in Liverpool, England, and began training for the Royal Artillery. He saw first action during the battle of the

Sangro River in Italy in '43.

But rather than dwell on the atrocities of war, the battles and the bloodshed, Wes prefers to remember the few fleeting, but profound, moments that transcended those daily horrors.

One of those moments could have cost him his life. As Wes explains, in 1945 he was with a group of soldiers billeted in tents on a large farm field near Naples while their guns were being refitted. Out of action, but never out of danger, the men took turns guarding the camp.

"Our orders were always that if you see somebody approaching our area you had to shout 'Halt!' three times...and if they didn't stop you would shoot them," says Wes. It was a straightforward command, but while on guard duty one night, Wes

disobeyed the order.

"I saw this person come out of a cave that wasn't far from where we were, and I watched and they were coming towards me. I realized then that it was a woman," says Wes. "I shouted in Italian language and English, 'Halt!' She didn't stop; I did it three times and she never stopped. By this time I was supposed to disable her, shoot her, but I didn't."

Wearing rags, the desperate civilian finally stopped at an oil drum the soldiers had been using for a garbage bin, and dug into it for scraps of food. Instead of reaching for his gun, Wes reached for his emergency rations. He recalls the woman smiled and accepted the offering, and they hugged before she headed back the way she came. Wes says he'd hoped no one had witnessed his transgression, but minutes later the military police arrived and arrested him.

The following day he was brought before the lieutenant-colonel, where Wes says he prepared himself to be imprisoned or shot – the ultimate punishment for disobeying a military order. Wes explained to the officer that he couldn't bring himself to shoot the woman, partially because the sight of her had reminded him of his mother back home. As Wes stood at attention, awaiting his sentence, something remarkable happened.

"He looked at me, never said nothing, and the tears were coming down his face," says Wes, tracing his cheeks with his fingers. When the emotional officer finally spoke, Wes recalls, "He said, 'Gunner Oake, I'm thinking of my

mother now.'"

With that, no charges were laid and Wes was a free man.

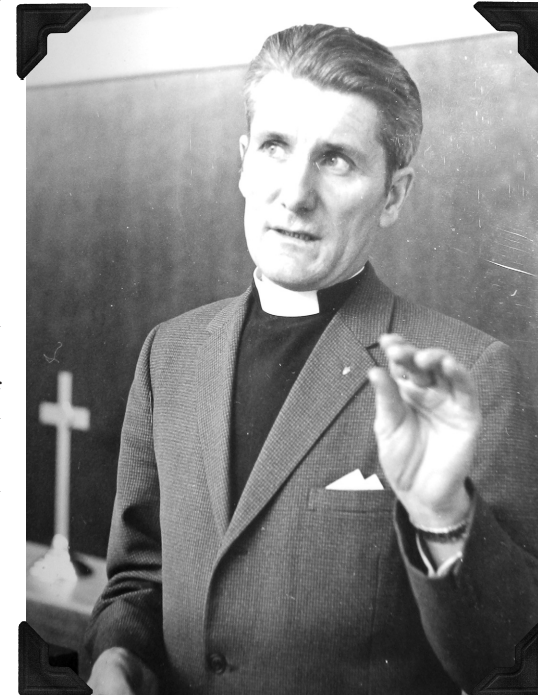
"That's about the most, in a sense, beautiful thing that happened to me in the war," he says.

It was one in a series of experiences that stirred Wes's soul during his time as a member of the 166th Newfoundland Field Regiment.

MILITARY TO MINISTRY

It's clear that Wes saw many of his wartime experiences through the lens of faith – faith in God, and in his mother's prayer.

"A lot of people thought that I was a chaplain when I was in the war, ministering to the soldiers," says



With only a Grade 8 education, Wes returned to school at age 39 to become a United Church minister.



This portrait of Rev. Oake is now prominently displayed in Gander's Heritage Memorial Park. Ashley Miller photo

Wes. For the gunner with a Grade 8 education, nothing could have been further from the truth – but during a Christmas Day service, held in the bombed ruins of an Italian church, all of that changed. The service ended with a rendition of “Silent Night,” sung by a Sergeant Gallagher of St. John’s.

“He was a beautiful singer, angelic voice,” recalls Wes, adding the experience reduced many of the military men to tears. For Wes, it was an especially pivotal moment.

“That’s when I promised God that when I got back home I’d prepare and go in the ministry,” he says – a dream his mother held for him from the time he was a youngster.

And whether by faith or by fluke, Wes did return safely home after fighting to the war’s bitter end. In ’45, Wes was part of the final battle that won the war for the Allies. When victory was finally theirs, Wes recalls hundreds of thousands of servicemen – navy, air force and army, hailing from all over the world – gathered together in a large field.

“The international chaplain...said that everyone would pray now, out loud in your own language, The Lord’s Prayer,” says Wes. “That was something I’ll never forget, or anyone else that was there. There’s no way in explaining that, hundreds of thousands praying in their own language.”

Six months later Wes returned home, the war behind him.

But as it turned out, more battles lay ahead.

LOVE & LOSS

One year after returning from duty, Wes wed his sweetheart, Myrtle – now his wife of 70 years – and they eventually built a house in Glenwood. The pair had fallen in love before he left for war, as teenagers in Robert’s Arm.

In the ensuing years, however, Wes did not pursue his religious aspirations as he’d promised in war-torn Italy. Instead the couple were busy caring for their three young children while operating Wes’s Groceries, Wes’s Chips (a drive-in canteen) and a chicken farm besides. And then tragedy struck.

“We had an accident and Darryl was killed on the highway, right in front of my eyes,” says Wes, choking back tears as he speaks about the tragic death of his six-year-old son. “That’s when the bottom fell out of our world.” It was dealing with this unimaginable grief that finally spurred Wes to fulfil what he refers to as his calling.

With his wife’s blessing (for which Wes remains grateful to this day), the couple closed their businesses and moved to New Brunswick, where a 39-year-old Wes began studying at Mount Allison University. The family (which rounded out with two more children) eventually moved on to Nova Scotia and Kentucky, USA, where Wes continued his education. He was ordained in 1965 at age 43, and spent the majority of his career preaching in Ontario.

His ministry eventually brought him back overseas. In 1971 he travelled to a divided Europe as a member of the Christian Peace Conference – an international movement founded in an effort to alleviate the growing political tensions that rose up in the war’s aftermath.

“I travelled behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War days, went to Germany, Russia, Poland and all these countries,” says Wes. “It was Christians meeting and having dialogue with communists.”

He gave the conference’s closing speech, to several standing ovations, one of the highlights of his years in the ministry.

Recent years have brought more ups and downs.

At age 92, he attracted the attention of the media when he skydived from 10,000 feet to raise money for



At age 92, Rev. Oake sky dived from 10,000 feet in Nova Scotia’s Annapolis Valley, raising more than \$35,000 for Gander’s Heritage Memorial Park.

Courtesy Patricia Oake

Gander’s Heritage Memorial Park. Hoping to raise just over \$9,000, his high-flying adventure garnered more than \$35,000 in donations. He leaned on his faith then, too, assuring himself moments before the tandem free fall that “if He takes us up or down, it’s going to be all right,” recalls Wes. Today, he is an honorary patron of that park, where a portrait of him is prominently displayed.

Two years ago, life dealt Wes another blow when he buried a second son, Terry. And most recently, his wife took ill. Refusing to see her institutionalized, Wes now spends his days tending on her.

Through it all – the highest of highs and the lowest of lows – his faith has not wavered.

“Growing old is a state of mind, that’s all. I’ve had illness and sickness just the same as anyone else. But I always knew that God was looking after me, and he was going to take me through,” says Wes. “And I still do today.” ☑