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JACK RHIND  
SECOND WORLD WAR  
VETERAN

Since 2006, and right up until just before the pandemic reached Canada, Jack Rhind visited dozens of schools and community groups, sharing his stories through the Memory Project, a program by Historica Canada. CHRISTOPHER KATSAROV/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## REMEMBERING THE 'INDESCRIBABLE' BRUTALITY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Jack Rhind fought at Monte Cassino and other gruelling battles of the Italian front. While he's proud of how he and his comrades rose to the challenge, he wants people to know of the devastation he saw

JASON KIRBY

At 101 but not looking a day over 80 as he moves briskly about his brown-brick Rosedale home sporting a swoop of thick white hair, Jack Rhind draws a straight line from everything that has unfolded in his life back to a "significant, casual decision" he made as a young university student in 1939.

That decision was to follow a friend into the artillery stream of the Canadian Officers' Training Corps, rather than one of the other army services such as infantry, signal corps or engineers. It was an impromptu choice that would define not only Mr. Rhind's time on the front lines in the Second World War's fierce and bloody Italian campaign, but also his eventual rise to the crest of Corporate Canada.

For many residents in this exclusive Toronto neighbourhood of Victorian homes, lush trees and winding streets, Mr. Rhind is a fixture. He grew up in Rosedale only a few blocks from where he now lives, and can be found every day strolling nearby parks.

Like for so many others over the past two years of the pandemic, such excursions have offered an escape from the confines of home for a centenarian with an abundance of energy still to spare. Mr. Rhind was forced to give up downhill skiing in Collingwood, on the shores of Georgian Bay, when the resort there closed, though he switched to cross-country skiing and plans to hit the trails as soon as the snow is deep enough. His bi-weekly bridge matches also had to be abandoned.

But COVID-19 brought an end to another activity that motivated Mr. Rhind in recent years. Since 2006, and right up until just before the pandemic reached Canada, Mr. Rhind visited dozens of schools and community groups, sharing his stories and the importance of remembrance with schoolchildren through the Memory Project, a program run by Historica Canada, the non-profit best known for its Heritage Minute Canadian history ads.

"A hundred thousand Canadians were killed or injured, families where their father, their son, or their husband didn't come back, so we shouldn't just forget all that," he says in an interview, echoing his message to students. "But it's not just a case of remembering the sacrifices that happened in World War I or World War II. A lot of Canadians come from countries threatened by war and there are threats of war all the time around the world. We need to remember how stupid and unnecessary war is."

In 1942, after graduating with his commerce degree from the University of Toronto, Mr. Rhind was called up as an officer. The following year, he and 93,000 other Canadians were dispatched along



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with troops from Britain, the United States, France and Poland to Italy, which British Prime Minister Winston Churchill perceived to be the "soft underbelly" of German-occupied Europe.

It proved to be anything but. In a liberation campaign that lasted nearly two years, the Canadians spent seven harrowing weeks dug in at the foot of Monte Cassino, a rocky hill 150 kilometres southeast of Rome, while an endless barrage of enemy artillery rained down from on high.

As a lieutenant in the 11th Canadian Army Field Regiment, Mr. Rhind commanded four 25-pounder field guns and 35 men.

"They were all these mature guys from different backgrounds and different areas and here was this young officer commanding them, but as we fought we bonded," he says. "I was so proud of my guys."

Mr. Rhind is a meticulous record keeper. To this day he still has the dog-eared maps he used to calculate the line, range and angle of sight for each volley of artillery. In later years he wrote an autobiography detailing his extraordinary life for his family - at latest count, three children, six grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

But above all, during the war he kept journals of the action around him and the exploits of his gun crews, admittedly ignoring his commanders' orders not to keep diaries lest they fall into enemy hands. Mr. Rhind's own words best capture the casual brutality that marked each day of the war.

April 25th, 1944: Got out to inspect the result of last night's shelling. Discover that the shell that woke me up had landed three feet behind our command post.

May 11, 1944: Suddenly the silence is shattered by a deafening roar and the sky is lit up by the flashes of hundreds and hundreds of artillery pieces of all sizes. ... The pandemonium is indescribable. The valley is lit up like daylight and the air is filled with the swish and whine of shells.

Aug. 24, 1944: I am writing this sitting in our slit trench C.P. [command post] We are all feeling the heat more than any day yet. Sweat dripping off my face though I am sitting perfectly still and am half in the shade. Major Macintosh (our battery commander) killed by shrapnel.

Sept. 28th, 1944: Am woken at 0030 hrs by a peculiar crash and a yelling 'Someone's hurt. It's at #2 gun, sir, man's leg off.' Christ, what a night for this to happen. The mud is ankle-deep and the wind is lashing the rain down in a stinging fury. Get to #2 gun and find the boys putting Collins on a stretcher.

There were moments he knows his life could have taken a deadly turn. One day when Mr. Rhind was scrambling up the hillside to scout artillery targets, a Polish officer hollered for him to stop before he turned a rocky corner. A German machine gun was hidden there. "If he hadn't stopped me, I wouldn't be here today," he says, before punctuating the story, as he frequently and self-effacingly does, with "Blah, blah, blah, you've heard enough crap" or "You don't want to hear all this."

Mr. Rhind's darkest memories though were the stretches when he was alone in his command post at night, lying beside his charts, instruments and communications equipment.

"There were snakes and worms and rats all around you, but worse than that I could hear the shells landing all around me," he says. "When you're with a group of men, you're scared, but

you're busy with them and your guns and your calculations. When you were alone it was just you listening to the whistling noise as the shells came in."

There were other moments, however, when the war could seem almost surreal. Once the Allies pushed north past Rome, which both sides had agreed not to shell, Mr. Rhind ventured into the capital city while on leave. Visiting the Vatican, he wandered into a small side room only to find Pope Pius XII there. "I was in my uniform and he saw me and I thought he was going to toss me out," Mr. Rhind says. "Instead he put his hand on my head and blessed me, and that's why I was so lucky and survived the rest of the war."

In the year after the success of the Italy campaign, Mr. Rhind was transported north to the Netherlands where he joined with Allied troops helping to liberate towns that had been under Nazi occupation for four years.

At last, in September, 1945, he shipped home to Canada.

Moments after Mr. Rhind was discharged at the corner of University Avenue and Dundas Street, a man emerged from the cheering crowd and approached him. It was Major Davies, the First World War vet who had taught the artillery training program that Mr. Rhind's "casual decision" had led him into at the start of the war. Major Davies (Mr. Rhind doesn't recall his first name - he only ever called him "sir") offered Mr. Rhind a job in the investment department at the life insurance company where he was a top executive.

Over the years, Mr. Rhind climbed the ranks at the company. It was where he met his wife, Elizabeth, better known as Dibs (she passed away in 2003) before he eventually became president of Confederation Life in the late 1970s and early 80s. He also sat on the boards of Ford Motor Co. and Campbell Soup Co., among others.

Mr. Rhind has slowed his pace in recent years, but the pandemic has arguably done more to temper his activities than age. An avid tennis player, he admits he eventually stepped away from the court because he felt his reduced speed wasn't fair to his doubles partners. Yet friends are quick to point out that after a disappointing match at the age of 99 prompted Mr. Rhind to swear off the sport, he was back the next week getting lessons from the club pro.

In addition to his daily hikes around local parks, Mr. Rhind regularly walks to Summerhill Market for prepared meals. He's such a fixture there that staff signed an oversized card for his most recent birthday in May.

Mr. Rhind's return to civilian life was smoother than for many others who returned from battle in Europe traumatized. Still, he found closure 20 years after the war's end on a trip to Italy with his wife. They rented a car and, following his old maps, drove to Monte Cassino, a place that had once been the scene of so much devastation.

The lush green fields, trees in bloom and well-kept farmhouses he found made him think he'd read the map wrong, until a farmer guided him to one of his old command dugouts. "When we left that place I looked back and said, this is the way God meant it to be. It's so stupid that we wrecked it all."

### REMEMBRANCE DAY POEMS

THERE WILL STILL BE HOPE  
BY EVELYN SMITH

As we cry into our family's arms  
we think of those we lost.  
I say, "We will be fine,"  
not meaning it from my heart.  
You try to comfort me, but it won't work.  
The only words I am able to say are:  
"There will still be hope."

It feels like a nightmare,  
and that I can not unsee.  
We look back on all the memories,  
while we see the sorrow faces in the room.  
All of us are crying, as we never felt this pain,  
but one of us (that is I) stood up and said:  
"There will still be hope."

Evelyn Smith, 8, is in Grade 3 and lives in Toronto. She wrote this poem last week and says she was inspired by her teacher reading *Prayer for the 21st Century* and *In Flanders Fields*.

THE GARTH GUN  
BY GARTH PAUL UKRAINETZ

There's a hilltop in Powys  
Where the river Wye wanders  
Sleepy village of Erwood  
You're the aim of a gun  
  
Solemn prayer for the homeland  
Pouring tears, crying sister  
Dearest brother, sweet Christopher  
In the mud of the Somme

Thru the barrel a vision  
Barren garden awakens  
But the soil remains hardened  
Planting seed cannot start  
  
O, the cannon long waiting  
For thee Wales, righteous wailing  
Turn this sword into plowshare  
With the force of thy heart

Garth Paul Ukrainetz, 55, lives in Edmonton and calls himself the poet of the Blackmud Creek. He has Welsh roots on his mother's side. The Garth Gun is a German field howitzer that stands in commemoration of the end of the First World War near the village of Erwood in Wales. It was obtained from the War Office by the sister of a local soldier who died in the fighting.