

Miracle rescue at sea gave Ottawa veteran his life's purpose

Andrew Duffy, Ottawa Citizen 05.16.2014



Frank Cauley, 93, miraculously survived an eventful tour of duty in the Second World War. He was the sole survivor of a plane crash and rescued from his dinghy after days in the ocean; on another occasion, his float plane, peppered with shrapnel, managed a successful landing after the crew filled the holes with gum. He's now one of the first residents of the Perley and Rideau's new \$43 million apartment building, which includes subsidized units and units for people in the early stages of dementia. He was photographed April 16, 2014. Photo by Jean Levac/Ottawa Citizen For Ottawa Citizen story by CITY Assignment #116757

Jean Levac / Ottawa Citizen

Alone in a life raft for three days on the North Atlantic, Frank Cauley was down to his last flare.

If there was no ship around to see it in that night's sky, he had little chance of ever being rescued. So Cauley, praying feverishly, made God an offer of sorts: let him survive this ordeal and he'd spend the rest of his life helping others.

More than 70 years after that fateful evening in February 1943, Frank Cauley continues to abide by his promise.

Now 92, Cauley volunteers at the Perley and Rideau Veteran's Health Centre. He's also a regular guest speaker at Ottawa high schools.

"I've never regretted a moment of volunteering," says Cauley, who recently moved into the new \$43-million Perley Rideau seniors' village with his wife, Barbara.

Cauley has volunteered for dozens of organizations, including the Salvation Army, the United Way, the Boys and Girls Club, the Kiwanis Club, the Dominion Institute and the Canadian Automobile Association. He has chaired the Red Shield Appeal and has sat on the board of the former Grace Hospital.

"I could never turn people down," he says.

In fact, he was volunteering at a horse show — even though he’s deathly afraid of horses — when he met Barbara, who was ring steward at the event. They’ve been married for 62 years.

“I’m lucky,” he says.

Frank Cauley’s luck was sorely tested during the Second World War.

The son of a senior civil servant, Cauley grew up in Sandy Hill. He enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1940.

“Everyone wanted to be a flyer in those days and I was no exception,” he says.

Cauley had excelled in mathematics at St. Patrick’s High School so RCAF officials steered him into navigation. After training courses in Toronto and Trenton, he graduated as a sergeant navigator in 1942 and was sent overseas on the MS Batory, a Polish ocean liner. The soldiers slept six to a room.

Cauley was posted to RAF Station St. Eval in Cornwall, England, where he began a series of anti-submarine training flights. He was part of a five-man crew assigned to a two-engine Whitley bomber, an aircraft known as “the flying coffin” for its notoriously cold, cramped conditions.

On the crew’s fourth practice run over the Bay of Biscay, as the pilot brought the plane over the water to simulate a low-altitude search, the Whitley’s port engine failed. The plane pitched hard into the ocean.

Cauley, who had never learned to swim, was the only crew member to escape the shattered Whitley before it sank. He jumped into a life raft that had popped from the plane’s wing then cut the rope that tied the dinghy to the sinking aircraft.

Cauley suddenly found himself alone in a small rubber boat 140 kilometres off the coast of Spain. He drifted for three days and survived on emergency rations of crackers and chocolate. Each night, he’d send up a flare whenever he heard a plane overhead. His chances of being rescued dimmed with each passing hour.

“I was asking myself, ‘What did I do wrong? What happened?’” he remembers. “And I made my peace with God. It’s not the same when you’re facing death: I really learned how to pray.”

On his third night, Cauley sent up his last flare, which was seen by a passing British destroyer. The ship plucked Cauley from the ocean that morning.

“I wanted to hug everybody,” he says of his moment of deliverance.

Cauley’s luck held during his two tours of duty, which included 30 bombing missions over Germany. Once, after dropping bombs on Berlin, his Lancaster crew came under attack from a German Junkers JU-88 night fighter. In a desperate bid to escape, pilot Robbie Robertson put the Lancaster into a steep dive, dipping just below the oncoming fighter. The JU-88 broke off the chase.

More than half of all RAF Bomber Command crews perished during the war, victims of enemy planes, anti-aircraft flak, bad weather and mechanical failures. As Cauley says, “You were lucky if you made it through.”

After his tour with Bomber Command, Cauley joined the RCAF’s 422 Squadron in Northern Ireland to take part in coastal patrols. On the morning of March 10, 1944, he plotted a course — he can still remember the exact co-ordinates, 52° 35’ N, 20° 19’ W — for the last known position of a U-boat stalking an Allied convoy.

The RCAF crew was in a Short Sunderland flying boat, and after four hours in the air, they spotted the U-boat on the surface. The plane dove steeply to put itself in an attack position as the submarine turned hard to face the threat with its stern-mounted guns.

The Sunderland flew low over the water for a strafing run and dropped six depth charges while trading fierce gunfire with U-625's conning tower.

The boat submerged but surfaced within minutes, dead in the water. It sank about an hour later as the surviving crew scrambled into life rafts. (They would perish that night in high seas before they could be rescued.)

Meanwhile, the crew of the circling Sunderland had problems of their own: their amphibious plane had been shot full of holes. The biggest one could be patched with an on-board repair kit, but what to do about the dozens of smaller ones?

Acting on the orders of the pilot, the men chewed their rations of Wrigley Spearmint then pushed their gum wads into the bullet holes. The pilot took the plane up to 10,000 feet to freeze the sticky handiwork.

Frank Cauley's luck — and his gum — held fast when the plane put down in Northern Ireland's Lough Erne that evening.

After the war, Cauley went into the civil service, then sales. He eventually launched his own business, Cardinal Institutional Sales, that supplied food staples to local firms. He married Barbara in September 1951, and together they raised two children, Glenn and Kathey, in Navan.

He never forgot the vow he made in a drifting life boat: Cauley sought to help people both as a volunteer and public servant. He was a two-term councillor in the City of Gloucester and spent nine years as a trustee with the Carleton Board of Education.

For his community service, Cauley has been awarded the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal, the Governor General's Caring Canadian Award, the Ontario Bicentennial Medal and the United Way's Community Builder Award. There's also an Orléans street, Frank Cauley Way, named in his honour.

He never did learn to swim. After the war, Cauley tried to teach himself at the YMCA, but he'd panic in the deep end and kids would make fun of him. At their home in Navan, the Cauleys built a pool for their children, but Frank didn't push his luck by trying to swim again.

"I bought a little dinghy and I'd just float around with a beer in the thing."

aduffy@ottawacitizen.com