

# FAMILY, FRIENDS, MILITARY MOURN HUMBLE VETERAN

*Hurwitz survived German prison camp after ship torpedoed in Second World War*



**BILL BROWNSTEIN**

As is so often the case, not many family members or friends were aware of Harry Hurwitz's harrowing ordeals during the Second World War.

But they quickly became aware when a group of Canadian navy reps from Ottawa paid homage to Hurwitz with a special presentation at his Ste-Anne's Hospital residence Sept. 3 honouring his service.

Ever the stoic, Hurwitz, who died Sunday at 99 after a brief bout with pneumonia, took it all in stride.

"We were all so touched with the honour, but he was such a humble man to the end," his daughter Debbie Hurwitz said. "He simply wanted to serve his country during the war, like so many other unheralded veterans."

Hurwitz didn't talk much about his service, but, when pressed, the Lachine native remembered almost too vividly his experiences. Until his death, he had been one of only two Canadian navy vets still alive who had survived the sinking of the HMCS Athabaskan off the coast of France on April 29, 1944.

Their destroyer had been hit by a German torpedo.

After trying to battle the resulting inferno, Hurwitz, covered in oil, jumped from his sinking ship.

"With all that oil on me, I worried I'd catch fire, but that probably saved me from freezing to death in those waters as I was clinging for dear life to this empty barrel for what seemed like forever," Hurwitz said in an August interview.

That was but the beginning of his woes. Although 128 Athabaskan sailors perished that night, Hurwitz and fellow survivors were plucked from the frigid Atlantic waters by the Germans and soon dispatched to a PoW camp near Hamburg. He was the only Jew among the survivors; he had the presence of mind to change his name to the more Christian-sounding Hurwitz when he was checked into the camp.

"They would have executed me for sure right away had they known I was Jewish," Hurwitz recalled. "But I managed to stay alive there for a year until the British liberated us, just a few months before the end of the war."

Prior to the sinking, Hurwitz had narrowly escaped death on the Athabaskan after surviving a ferocious aerial assault from German Messerschmitts.

As his daughter noted, Hurwitz, a Golden Gloves boxing champ in his youth, was "one tough cookie." He was also most determined in his quest to join the Canadian war effort.

Born the 10th of 13 children, Hurwitz — who quit school at 14 to support his family during the Depression — was 18 when he tried in vain to enlist in various branches of the military before getting into the navy.

Following his liberation, Hurwitz returned to Montreal and worked as a salesman for nearly 55 years. He and his late wife, Libby, had three daughters (one of whom died), six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

A small graveside funeral took place Wednesday, but, due to the pandemic, was without Debbie's sister Darla, who is in Israel.

"There has been such an overwhelming response to my father's passing from every relative we have, from friends and from the military," Debbie said. "I cannot begin to talk about all the superlatives pouring in about my father."

"My father never sought or expected any kind of adulation. He just did what he thought he should do. Circumstances were out of his control, but he survived because he had a strong will. Yet what he went through was so incredible."

He said he could only imagine what kind of hell my father went through. He also said people today just don't appreciate their veterans or understand their sacrifices.

"The sad reality is most people seem to take our vets so much for granted. We owe them everything."

"With COVID-19, Remembrance Day this year will be particularly tough for the vets."

Hopefully, people will remember and rally to the cause with donations."

Until two years ago, Hurwitz was a familiar figure selling poppies outside supermarkets.

"He was among their top sellers," Debbie said. "He had always been such a great salesman, but especially for a cause he so cherished."

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**Harry Hurwitz**

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