

The Survivor

by Tony Beckwith © 2006
www.tonybeckwith.com

MY UNCLE IVOR WAS A BOMBER PILOT in World War II. I wasn't even born then, of course, but I heard about it later on, when I was a boy, and the thought of what he'd done made me swell with pride. He was one of a band of gallant young men of British descent, living in Argentina, who went north to volunteer their services to the Allies in those dark days of the mid-twentieth century.

Ivor enlisted in Ottawa in 1940 and went on to fly for the Royal Canadian Air Force. He served with the 432 Leaside Squadron and the 419 Moose Squadron, doing two tours of duty and seeing action in the Middle East. His citation for the Distinguished Flying Cross—awarded for “outstanding ability, cool determination, and devotion to duty”—noted that he had completed many successful missions during which, “under a quiet and determined manner” he had been “an inspiration to his crew.” And he came through it all without a scratch, which I thought was amazing. Was he so lucky, I wondered, because his name was embedded in the word “survivor”? I put that question to his younger brother, my father, who in his usual patient way said that he couldn't be sure but would think about it.

Like most mothers, mine would stoop to anything to get me to eat my vegetables. She'd say, “Carrots are so good for you; if you'll eat them you'll grow up to have good, strong eyes, just like your Uncle Ivor!” For years I had a mental image of him flying his plane and chewing on a carrot, winking at me and saying, “What's up, Doc?”

After the war, Ivor took his family to Canada and settled in Toronto, which seemed such a long way away from Uruguay, where my family lived. But every year, on my birthday, he'd send

me a card shaped like a wallet, stuffed with crisp, green Canadian dollars. I know for a fact that throughout my childhood I received other birthday gifts, some of which no doubt cost my parents large sums of money, but the only ones I still remember—as clearly as though they'd arrived this morning—were those dollar bills from my Uncle Ivor.

The years passed and I grew up. No, actually, I just got older. I left home and went out into the world, chasing dreams and moonbeams and shooting stars. Bit by bit, totally involved in my own life, I drifted from my roots and, without even realizing it, lost touch with my extended family. Then, one day, long after my father had died and I was middle-aged and living in the United States, my Uncle Ivor came to visit. Now in his late seventies, he piloted his car, on a solo mission, all the way from Toronto to Texas. “Family is important,” he said. “The older generation is dying off, and I'd like our family to stay connected.” He wanted me to come to Canada, to establish a bond with his son that would survive the inevitable passing of the patriarch.

So, one freezing January, Lillian and I flew to Winnipeg and kindled a friendship that has—thanks to an easy and mutual compatibility, email, and low-cost phone calls—blossomed and grown stronger every year since then.

As a result, I've been able to enjoy sending, rather than receiving, birthday dollars to my cousin's children, an experience which feels like coming full karmic circle and fills me with a most remarkable sense of peace.

The re-establishment of this particular family connection has, in turn, led to a renewed interest in and communication with other long-lost members of my tribe, all of whom are a source of immense joy and strength to me now, in what I think of as the autumn of my days. I am deeply grateful to my Uncle, for he was the catalyst who made this happen.

On June 15, 2006, my Uncle Ivor passed away peacefully in his ninetieth year. In his son's words, “He will be remembered as the kindest of men, gentle in demeanor, always putting others before himself.” I would add that he was a most generous man, and never more so than when he gave me the gift of family. ★



Flight Lieutenant Ivor C. Beckwith, DFC