

My Ross

Ross Johnson joined the world on September 7th, 1922, with his English speaking parents Fredrick and Elsie Johnson in Montreal, Quebec. He had blue eyes and brown hair. Through his childhood, Ross was an active athlete participating in such activities like swimming, skiing and gymnastics which contributed to him breaking his ankle at the age of nine. At the same age, Ross also contracted Scarlett fever which would have been quite a serious illness at the time but he was lucky enough come out of it with no life altering affects. Having grown up in Montreal and completing primary and secondary school, Johnson went to the University of McGill for the purpose of taking the Commerce program they offered, most likely to follow in the family footsteps of being a business man. Starting in 1940, when he was 18, Ross joined the Air force Reserve while still at school but then had to leave McGill in mid-1942 to eventually become a pilot in the RCAF. When observed by military doctors during scheduled checkups and physicals, one of the physicians stated, "Highly intelligent youngster, very keen to be a pilot in emulation to his father who was a pilot during the Great War." Others noted that Ross was a quiet boy who gave a favorable impression. Why did Ross leave McGill? Was it just to follow in his father's footsteps or was it to impress a girl that had his heart or maybe he just said "why not?"

Ross signed up on the day of the Dieppe Raid in Montreal and remained in the borough of Lachine, Quebec for two months before moving to the RCAF station in Victoriaville, Quebec. Ross would undergo the usual training that any pilot would, by flying the yellow Harvard training planes, learning the ins and outs of what was asked of him as a pilot. When moving up in rank during mid-1943, Ross spent a little time in the W.A.C. or "Western Air Command," where he would have participated as a staff member. For the remainder of his training in the months leading up to 1944, my Ross was struck on and off strength while a part of 118 Squadron who were stationed in Sea Island while also going on holiday during early November.

In April 1944 on the 18th, Ross who was used to flying fighter bombers like the brand new Typhoon, was flying an Auster Mk III on a "Familiarization Flight" when he inevitably crashed by stalling out 5 feet above Funtington Airfield in the UK. He came out unscathed and without punish. From that point to July 12th, Ross took part in operations with the 438 squadron that included dive bombings, covering convoys, destroying bridges and radar stations, armed recce, fighter cover, tank and troop concentration, ammo drops and patrols of the French coast.

On the night of the 15th, Ross was travelling in a truck with his fellow airmen to an airfield three and half kilometers Northwest of Caen when an explosion rocked the truck and lives inside. The canopy of the truck forfeited to the shrapnel, leaving the men inside at the mercy of fate and the forces of our universe. There was no one to scream "Look out" or "Get down." There was only one man who crumpled to the bed of the truck; lifeless and soul sucked. Ross could not believe what he had just witnessed. 'It could've been anyone', he would think for decades to come. It could've easily been him or all of them for that matter. He realized that war had a certain random element that he could not control or have a handle on. Ross understood death before but he had never come so close to the face of the cloaked one, feeling the sting of mortality on his cheek like the frost of a cold winter's day. Ross overheard the medics who were treating the slightly wounded pilots and deemed the dead man as wastage. The pilot was simply a man; not "wastage." The image of him being driven off to the rear on the night of the 15th would forever stay with Ross. This man was no waste.

Through the rest of the war, Ross would fly over Belgium and Germany, supporting the British army in the war effort. He made it though. Ross didn't know how he did it or why he was the one to do, but he did. He went home to his family with memories of what he saw but couldn't articulate when asked about his experience. 2 years later, Ross continued on the path that he had left at McGill and got his business degree to please his father by taking on the family business responsibilities it was on a ski trip, to Mt. Tremblant, Quebec that Ross met his future wife. Her name or the story of how they became acquainted escapes my memory, but what mattered was the fact that they loved each other unconditionally. She held him on those nights when he would re-live the night of the 15th. She was his rock, keeping him grounded and sane in a world where sanity was a rare occurrence. The two of them had children who grew up not knowing what kept their father up on those nights. They couldn't see the invisible wounds that their father carried but they knew they were there, giving him a struggle and half.

At the age of 84 in 2008, Ross ventured back over to where he had once fought to visit his friends and dear companions. He and his wife toured throughout Normandy, seeing the beaches where our sons died in the salt water and sand. He came to where we are now to meet the fallen airmen from that fateful night to reconcile and cast out the shadows that haunted him through life. Ross kept to himself for the time spent at the cemetery until a young boy came to his side, asking if he had seen the things that the young boy had heard so much about. Ross told him what his tired blue eyes had seen by simply just being there; alive to stand by his friend's grave. The two got along. They could talk like two old men sitting on a porch during those warm summer nights in Ontario, reminiscing about anything and everything. Like old men, they talked about how skiing has changed and how Ross broke his ankle when he was nine. They talked about why Ross joined up when he was still in school and they talked about the war Ross had seen from a cockpit and the sorrow he had witnessed. The two became good friends and thus an accord was struck. Ross would try his best to stay alive and the boy would always bring something to the table of conversation for the purpose of reminiscing. After the years past, the two would meet again and again in the same spot to talk about life, love and all good things under the clear blue sky. The boy changed over the years with different haircuts and a deeper voice. Ross watched his friend grow up in the world that he helped change. They neither judged nor spoke poorly of anyone or thing, as it was a relationship of respect and kindness towards the world and one another. When together, Ross was alive, wearing a smile. He was what could have been.

But Ross's potential future never happened. What could have been is a dangerous question to ask, but when dealing with the beauty of living in this world, it becomes so relevant.

My Ross died that night, not the other pilot. It was him that collapsed on the bed of the truck and it was him covered by a blanket, driven off to be returned to the earth. It was Ross's mother who got the telegram. Elsie never got to hold her Ross again. She never got to look into his blue eyes and appreciate the joy and love that is shared between mother and child. She was broken with a wound that sunk much deeper than any bullet could ever reach. Ross was now just the name and painful memory of her dear boy. No mother should have to feel this pain. It's not fair. But what could have been? My dear Ross, you were taken too soon and it is times like this that I wish you had been born in a time where our world wouldn't need lads like yourself. He was a boy and son to our country that never got to see his home again. Ross; is with us. They; are all with us. They are the bird song in the air and the bee's buzzing on the flowers. They are the water through our streams and the air that we breathe. They are what keep us warm when drawing sap on the crisp mourns of the season and the cooling breeze on the lush

strawberry fields of summer when picking. They are the rocking thunder in the storm and the sun that breaks through to shine light on a brand new day in a world that they were and are a part of. They are at peace. Ross is at peace. Ross is and has been with me for my entire life whether I knew it or not. It's strange where you can find friends but I'm proud to introduce you to one of mine. I will always keep your spirit with me forever and I thank you dearly. Fly high Ross. Fly High.

God Bless