

Amputee became tireless helping hand

Second World War veteran Bill Neil, 100, was devoted to improving lives of War Amps members, honouring fallen soldiers

By: Ashley Prest

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For Bill Neil, turning loss into a new way of life was his life's work.

A Second World War veteran who lost his left arm just below the shoulder in battle in 1944, Neil spent his working years and his volunteer time helping other amputees get prosthetic limbs, find supports and look positively to their futures.

Neil, who was fully vaccinated but had some underlying health issues, died on Oct. 3 at 100 years of age after contracting COVID-19. Throughout his life, he kept his military service and dedication to his country close to his heart. He was a principal participant for decades in Remembrance Day ceremonies in Winnipeg and was instrumental in helping to restore 4,800 gravesites in Brookside Cemetery's Field of Honour.

"He lost that arm when he 23 years old and he lived to 100. It never held him back, and he was as positive a guy as you'd ever want to meet," said John Neil, a retired teacher who is Bill's eldest son. "He was involved in so many different activities and received so many different awards. I went through life always hoping that I could measure up to him. That's how much I thought of him."

On a tribute page to Neil on its website, Veterans Affairs Canada states that Bill Neil "participated in several Veterans Affairs commemorative pilgrimages to France and Belgium, honouring the memory of Canadians who fought and died in the European theatre of war." It notes that Bill Neil has been honoured with numerous awards for "his devotion to the welfare of veterans and his effective advocacy of veterans' causes."

"This will be the first Remembrance Day he's actually missed since the war," John said, noting his father's usual role in Remembrance Days past was to escort dignitaries such as former lieutenant-governors Peter Liba (1999-2004) and Pearl McGonigal (1981-86) to their front-row seats at the Convention Centre event. "We were always very proud of him."

On Remembrance Day 2020, beneath the shadow of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions when traditional Remembrance Day ceremonies were not allowed, neighbours delivered an outdoor event to Bill, complete with a bagpiper, in his front yard.

“The family was overwhelmed by the outpouring of support for our father on Remembrance Day. The students of Luxton School, led by one of their teachers, Robert Schulz, spent hours making Remembrance Day posters, wreaths and drawings to decorate the front yard of Dad’s home,” said Bill, Jr., John’s younger brother.

“The local community also came out to show their respect for all those that we remember on Nov. 11.... It is one day a year to set aside to remember all our fallen men and women of the armed forces who made the ultimate sacrifice to keep us safe and free, and to honour those who continue to serve.”

After joining Canada’s Army in 1941, Bill Neil completed his training in England. It was in June 1944 that the 23-year-old sergeant and wireless operator with the 8th Reconnaissance Division landed in Normandy. In August at the Falaise Gap, his armoured car was hit with an 88-mm shell.

“It was pretty brutal what happened. It was a case of their armoured car getting hit, and my dad managed to get into a ditch but his compatriot there got caught on a jagged piece of the car and couldn’t get out. My dad went back to help him, and just then, another shell hit,” John said. “His buddy was killed instantly, and he (Bill) lost his arm. Dad didn’t talk about the war a lot, but that story I’ll always remember.”

William (Bill) Joseph Neil, born July 17, 1921, attended St. John’s High School before joining the army. When he came home, he and Josephine “Jo” Schan (1924-2013) married in 1947. The couple had four children: John (1949), Nancy (1957), Susan (1959) and Bill, Jr. (1963). During their 66-year marriage, Jo never failed to get a laugh when teasing her husband.

“Because my dad lost his arm, my mom would always joke, ‘Well, yeah, I married your father because I felt sorry for him!’” John said, chuckling at the memory. “They certainly carved out a beautiful life for themselves.”

When he returned home to Winnipeg from the war, Bill worked 18 years for Veteran Affairs Canada’s prosthetic services department, and spent eight years as the regional superintendent until he retired in 1977. He went on to

serve with the War Amputations of Canada National Council and helped found CHAMP, the War Amps Child Amputee program known internationally for its work in helping children adapt to amputations, and funding and replacing prosthetic limbs for growing children.

“He was most proud of getting the CHAMP program off the ground because of the fact that he went through the war, lost an arm, but he never let that hold him back. He went through life doing all these activities; he would golf and curl,” John said.

“He visited the families — the parents and children — and encourage them that the War Amps and their programs would help them. To see them feel more comfortable with how their lives were going to progress was one of the areas that he had the most satisfaction.”

A member and former president of the Manitoba Branch of the War Amputations of Canada, Bill also served as the national director, vice-president, and president of the War Amps National Council. In addition to being a decorated soldier, he was a decorated community member. Among myriad awards for his community service, Bill was awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Medal in 2002 and the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012.

Bill and his family were able to celebrate his 100th birthday on July 17 after public-health restrictions at the time were lifted, allowing small family gatherings. With Bill looking on, his four children planted a maple tree in the backyard of his home.

“We’re going to be selling the house, but we’re hoping the people that buy this home will keep that tree,” John said. “It’s a beautiful maple tree with the leaves turning colour.”

Photos: Celebrating Bill ’s 100th Birthday - Back - Sons Bill Jr. and John,
Daughters Susan and Nancy

Photo: Bill presented with the Legion of Honour by France’s Attache Capitaine de Vaisseau Olivier Casenave-Pere in 2004 at the Museum of the Regiments in Calgary

