

Portraits is a series profiling exceptional Manitobans who live with passion and purpose. From movers and shakers to little-known characters, we're looking for innovators, achievers, crusaders, experts, people with unlikely jobs or quirky obsessions... the fascinating folk who live among us. If there's someone whose story you'd like to read, send your suggestions to: alison.mayes@freepress.mb.ca.

Saving their stories

'Every day is Remembrance Day to me,' says history buff

OTTAWA has the Canadian War Museum with its stunning architecture, 500,000 artifacts and state-of-the-art exhibits featuring a military jet, tanks and a submarine.

Now Manitoba has the Legion House Museum, a time-worn former banquet hall with three walls of neatly displayed photographs, news clippings, uniforms in glass cases, and artifacts such as medals and a First World War gas mask.

The modest collection had its official launch as a provincially recognized museum last month. Its garishly carpeted second-floor space has been donated by the Norwood Legion at 134 Marion St. A crammed second room serves as its archives and library.

So far it's only open Monday evenings, special occasions such as Remembrance Day, or by appointment.

But it's a start — that's what matters to part-time historian Bruce Tascona, who has devoted countless hours over the past three decades to accurately documenting Manitoba's military heritage.

"Every day is Remembrance Day to me," says the co-founder and president of the Military History Society of Manitoba, which marks its 20th anniversary this year and has about 30 members.

For Tascona, remembrance is all about the empathy that arises when we grasp the local connection to world events. He wishes more young people would take an interest in the stories of ordinary Manitobans who interrupted their lives to serve Canada, some paying the ultimate price.

"I want (the war experience) to be relevant for people," says Tascona. "It was more than London, Berlin, Paris... Find out what happened from our end. Don't just think it happened somewhere else."



Alison Mayes



Bruce Tascona with First World War artifacts. He is co-founder of the Military History Society of Manitoba.

The various branches of the Armed Forces have their own museums in the province, but the Military History Society has long believed there should be a site — other than Tascona's archive-packed St. Vital basement — that tells the overall story of how Manitobans served in conflict.

If you've got wartime mementos gathering dust in your home, Tascona welcomes donations for what he is sure will grow into a more substantial institution.

Tascona, 51, holds a bachelor's degree in history and museum studies from the University of Winnipeg. He has worked for Canada Post for 30 years, most recently as a letter carrier, pursuing historical research on the side.

His father Ross, a postal worker and union leader, was a D-Day veteran — a gunner who stormed Juno Beach. But it wasn't until father and son visited

Normandy in 1994 — the 50th anniversary of the battle — that his dad finally talked about the experience.

Raised in St. Boniface, Tascona is a friendly, unpretentious guy. His dark hair, eyes and goatee reflect his Italian and francophone heritage. He's self-deprecating and quick to laugh. You can see how the many veterans with whom he has taped interviews would open up to him.

He has doggedly rooted out and pieced together the details of who fought, in what unit, on what field, with what equipment, wearing what uniform — down to the badges on the soldiers' caps. He has visited cenotaphs and cemeteries in practically every town in Manitoba. He's been known to spend his holidays at the National Archives in Ottawa, driving the librarians crazy with his photocopying.

In 1979 he published a book about as thick as a magazine, *The Militia of Manitoba, 1883-1979*, that included many photos and summed up his findings to that point. Today, he says he could do a second edition that would be as thick as a phone book.

He has three other books to his credit, including *Little Black Devils: A History of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles* (co-written with Eric Wells), and *From the Forks to Flanders Field: The History of the 27th City of Winnipeg Battalion, 1914-1919*.

The new *Encyclopedia of Manitoba* tapped Tascona's military expertise as a contributor.

When he looks back, he can't say exactly where this passion began, except that he always played with "army men" and from about the age of nine picked up from his father a sense that the world wars were deeply significant events.

"My dad never wore his medals," he remembers, "but he had this way of letting us know what was important."

Tascona, twice-divorced, has two grown daughters and two sons, aged 12 and 15. Now a grandfather of three, he says he married too young and was always too busy earning a living and being a dad to immerse himself completely in his historical avocation.

But look out: He'll be eligible for retirement from Canada Post in four years. And he's beating a drum that's only going to get more insistent as the 100th anniversary of the First World War looms in 2014-2018.

That drum is the conviction that Manitoba must properly conserve and recognize Camp Hughes. Located west of Carberry, it's the camp where more than 38,000 Canadian troops trained during the First World War. Tascona was one of the experts who pushed to have it designated a heritage site in 1994.

The buildings were removed long ago, but the 10-kilometre system of training trenches is the only one intact in North America. "It's still in relatively pristine shape," he says. "It's a jewel."

"People who trained there fought at Passchendaele. ... For the price of a tank of gas, I can drive to Camp Hughes, examine the terrain, walk through these trenches, and know that people who spent time in these trenches captured Vimy Ridge. They fought and they died. It's so tangible."

The land is owned by the Crown and partly leased out as pasture. The Military History Society wants it turned into a park with interpretive panels where visitors will be able to take a self-guided tour.

The new museum at the Norwood Legion displays a number of artifacts that Tascona and a few others have recovered — under the supervision of archeologists — from Camp Hughes. There's a rusted mess tin, a tobacco tin, grenade fragments, and white-washed rocks that were used to outline pathways. More relics are in storage.

Tascona jokes that prominent Manitobans like Gail Asper and Harold Buchwald, who now know him as "Mailman Bruce" — his postal route is in Tuxedo — may get to know him better in coming years as the historian who won't be quiet until the province takes action on Camp Hughes.

"I don't have the political smarts to get this thing done, but I do have the passion to talk about it. The time is right to start clamouring."

Even if it's his grandchildren who ultimately see the task through, he says, he won't stop working in the heritage trenches.

It takes until the end of the conversation for Tascona — probably like many a veteran he has interviewed — to share the story of his trip to the beaches and cemeteries of Normandy with his dad 13 years ago.

Right at the start, as they were watching departing families saying goodbye to loved ones, Tascona Sr. told Bruce for the first time that on the day he left for the Second World War here in Winnipeg, he deliberately told his parents to see him off at the CPR Station, when he was actually departing from Union Station.

He was only 18, and soldiers were supposed to be 19 to go overseas. He didn't want his parents to drag him off the train.

So there was no farewell. And both parents died while he was at war. "He lived with that," says Bruce.

Six months after the Normandy trip, Tascona's dad was gone. But keeping alive the thousands of stories like his may be what remembrance is all about.

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VITAL SIGNS:

■ Born in 1955. Raised in St. Boniface. Father was a postal worker of Sicilian heritage, mother taught Business English at Red River College and was of French-Canadian descent.

■ Attended Provencher School, Louis Riel Collegiate and the University of Winnipeg. Currently sits on the board of the St. Boniface Museum.

■ Is constantly asked if he is related to artist Tony Tascona, baseball legend Sam

Tascona or Ontario politician Joe Tascona. Yes, they're all related, he says — there's only one Tascona family in North America.

■ Spent three summers in the Air Force reserves when he was 18 to 20 years old.

■ Started amassing military collectibles in his teens, eventually becoming most interested in the "material culture" of the First World War. Although he didn't have family members in that war, he feels a deep empathy for the more than 75,000 Manitobans



BRUCE TASCONA

who participated. Their photographs seem to speak to him, he says.

■ His collection at the St. Vital house he shares with his partner Pam includes some 2,500 photos, and items such as a 1914 cavalry saddle and a heliograph (a telegraphing apparatus using mirrors).

■ Tascona is willing to help anyone doing genealogical research who wants to find out what a relative did in a war. Among the resources stored at the new Legion House

Museum are sailing lists for First World War troop ships.

For more information about the Military History Society of Manitoba, including vintage photographs of Camp Hughes, visit www.mhsmb.taniwha.ca

To contact Tascona, e-mail tasconab@mts.net or phone 955-3397.