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# “Truly they died that we might be free”

## Remembering the Westlake Brothers

Jean-François Born

Three Toronto brothers went to war, none returned. Today they lie at Bény-sur-Mer Canadian War Cemetery. One question, “who were the Westlake brothers?” has defined this story. The memorialisation of the brothers is illustrative of Canadian remembrance of the Second World War.

### Introduction

“York’s home-grown war heroes are immortalised on the same ground where they played as youngsters.”<sup>1</sup> This sentence, from a newspaper account in 2001, represents the prominence, and power of Canadian Second World War memory. Thomas, Albert, and George Westlake were ordinary Canadians who volunteered to serve and became war fatalities. Their story provides a new perspective on Canada’s Second World War and its lasting impact.

In the last letter George Westlake mailed home to his family in Toronto in May 1944, he wrote: “please do not worry if you here [sic] some bad news soon. I will be all right, I promise...”<sup>2</sup> By 7 June 1944, the day after the Normandy landings, George would be dead along with many other soldiers of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders. Four days later, 11 June

**Abstract: This article examines Canada’s Second World War memory through the experiences of the Westlake family of Toronto. George, Albert and Thomas Westlake were killed in action in Normandy, within a period of four days. Their story is fascinating in terms of the representation of Canadian war casualties of the Second World War. In addition, the article sheds light on one family and how it remembers and has acted to prevent the fading of memory. The Westlake family has ensured that George, Albert and Thomas are honoured and will be remembered. Examining this family provides a new perspective on the Second World War and its lasting impact.**

1944, his brothers Thomas and Albert, serving with Toronto’s Queen’s Own Rifles of Canada, were killed in a chaotic assault through a Norman wheat field. They were unaware that George had already been killed.

For the Westlake family, the cost of victory was high, and its sacrifices enormous, yet not unique. Other Canadian families also gave three of their own. The Wagner family of Teeterville, Ontario, lost three sons, Bruce, Ivan, and Harry. The Lanteigne family from Caraquet, New Brunswick, mourned Arthur, Jean-Baptiste, and Phillippe. The Kimmels of Milner, British Columbia, wept for Clifford, Kenneth, and

Gordon.<sup>3</sup> There are probably other such examples. More than six decades following its conclusion, the Second World War’s legacy of bereavement continues to be felt in Canada.

This article, drawing on the Westlake family’s devastating experience, examines the manner in which Canadians remember their war dead. “I could see they would be forgotten forever” - this sentiment motivated Gary Westlake to uphold the memory of the three uncles he barely knew.<sup>4</sup> He succeeded. The memory of the Westlake brothers has been rescued from obscurity.<sup>5</sup> Despite a troubled family past, their memory was made to flourish and inspire.

How was the memory of the brothers shaped? How do they live on? What can their story tell us about remembrance? How will the legacy of the Second World War be preserved? The story of the Westlake brothers demonstrates the value of studying the Second World War through the tales of ordinary Canadians. In a larger historical context, it is clear that memory is the spine of our identity.

### The Westlakes

Thomas Westlake, the oldest of the brothers to go overseas, was born 13 February 1915. Albert was born on St. Patrick’s Day, 17 March 1919, and



Westlake Family Papers



Westlake Family Papers



Westlake Family Papers

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**The Westlake brothers (l. to r.): Tommy, Albert and George.**

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George on 5 December 1920. Edward, born 5 August 1913, and John (Gary's father) born 13 October 1916, were two Westlake brothers who did not serve during the Second World War; there were three other sons who died in infancy.<sup>6</sup> The family lived in York Township, on Toronto's northwest fringe, in an area that was one of the city's burgeoning suburbs. It was a working class neighbourhood, and there were many industries nearby, including a Canada Packers plant, an immense stockyard, and railway marshalling yards.<sup>7</sup> The Westlakes lived on Cliff Street, adjacent to Jasper Avenue and a sand and gravel pit owned by Conn Smythe, proprietor of the Toronto Maple Leafs.<sup>8</sup> The pit, at the end of Jasper Avenue, was used by Conn Smythe in the construction of Maple Leaf Gardens, but many local children also played there, including the Westlakes.<sup>9</sup>

The Westlakes grew up during the Great Depression under the

most difficult circumstances. Their father passed away 5 January 1936. Soon after, the brothers lost their mother to mental illness. She did not die until 1945, but spent her last years in a mental hospital, never aware that three of her sons had been killed overseas. As a result of the loss of their parents, the brothers banded together, and developed an unusually strong bond. Like many people at the time, the brothers had a limited formal education because they needed to work to support themselves.

### Shaping Memory

The Westlake brothers were killed in two disastrous and well-documented military engagements during the first days of the Battle of Normandy. The North Nova Scotia Highlanders of the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade were in

a precarious position temporarily holding the villages of Authie and Buron on 7 June. The left flank of its position was exposed because of the haste of the advance.<sup>10</sup> The Germans counterattacked on that open flank, squarely against the North Novas, who were unable to call in artillery or naval gun fire support.<sup>11</sup> Before long, the position at Authie and Buron were surrounded and overwhelmed by the tanks and troops of the 12th SS (Hitler Youth) Panzer Division.<sup>12</sup> George Westlake fought his first and only battle in an orchard on the southern outskirts of the village of Authie. It was there that he was killed along with many of his comrades. The North Nova's losses were catastrophic: 84 killed, 158 wounded, and 128 lost as prisoners of war.<sup>13</sup>

Only four days later Thomas and Albert Westlake, both members of "D" Company, the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada (QOR), were also

dead. The QOR personnel had embarked on the backs of Sherman tanks of "B" Squadron, 1st Hussars at Norrey-en-Bessin on 11 June for a poorly conceived attack.<sup>14</sup> Their objective was le Mesnil-Patry, but "D" Company was devastated by the Germans troops who were waiting for them. No time had been allowed for reconnaissance and no artillery preparations provided despite the fact it was known that the place was strongly held. The Toronto infantrymen rode on the tanks through flat wheat fields, thus providing perfect targets for the defenders.<sup>15</sup> The regiment suffered 96 casualties that day, 55 of them fatal.<sup>16</sup>

There is no evidence to indicate how George Westlake died, but Garnet Watson, a friend from Toronto serving with the QORs, provided an eyewitness account of the fate of "Tommy and Ab [Albert]." They "were 1 & 2 on the same gun and they got it to-gether [sic] after doing a damn good job."<sup>17</sup> Evidently the brothers fought side by side until they met their end.

In Toronto, Vera Westlake received a telegram that her husband George was missing in action:

Minister of National Defence deeply regrets to inform you that B63018 Private George Westlake has been officially reported missing in action seventh June 1944 STOP If any further information becomes available it will be forwarded as soon as received<sup>18</sup>

Then, in nearly identical telegrams, Edward Westlake received notification that his brother Albert was missing in action; Dorothy Westlake, Edward's wife and Thomas's official next-of-kin, was notified that her brother-in-law, Thomas Westlake, was also missing in action.

It is likely that men of the 4th Field Regiment, Royal Canadian

Artillery, found George Westlake and buried his remains along with dozens of other Canadian and German dead. Only recently arrived in Normandy, on 11 July 1944 the unit moved to the area lying between Authie and Buron where it was to deploy its guns. The area had been retaken on 8 July 1944 after fierce fighting. It was a difficult initiation to war for one of the unit's officers, Lieutenant George Blackburn, who described the scene: "decaying bodies of men are everywhere. The sights on all sides are sickening...many of these bodies had been here a long time."<sup>19</sup> The constant fighting over the previous month meant that bodies could not be immediately buried. George Westlake and his comrades were left exposed with gruesome consequences. "The heat has done its work, and the indescribable, but unforgettable, stench from the

bloated bodies of men surpasses the revolting odours of rotting animals in the nearby fields."<sup>20</sup>

As a result of George Westlake being found, Vera Westlake received this telegram on 19 July 1944:

Minister of National Defence deeply regrets to inform you that B63018 Private George Westlake previously reported missing has now been officially reported killed in action seventh June 1944 STOP If any further information becomes available it will be forwarded as soon as received.<sup>21</sup>

Albert and Thomas had been found earlier than George. Vera Westlake was spared the details of the 4th Field Regiment's difficult task; not so for John Westlake and family. On 22 June 1944, Garnet Watson, Thomas and Albert's friend in the Queen's Own Rifles, wrote his







Westlake Family Papers

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**Vera and George Westlake after their wedding, and prior to his enlistment.**

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wife in Toronto: "Im [sic] rather low mentally to day after not sleeping so well."<sup>22</sup> He explained that he had spent eleven days since the assault on le Mesnil-Patry "inquiring for the Westlake brothers." Watson reported: "Well they were found by another regiment and word sent out to us. So I offered to take the Padre and go and get them. We found them alright and it wasn't very nice to see..." With the

area still under "slight fire," Watson went to retrieve the bodies of Albert and Thomas. Explaining that he would ensure that they were properly buried, he added that he would "try and contact the third brother and let him know." Watson asked his wife to relay the news to the Westlakes in Toronto: "tell them Im [sic] doing what I can for a couple of swell guys. I seen Tommy & Ab [Albert] on the

10th of June & gave them smokes as they were right out and they were in real good spirits."

"Those boys were unlucky thats [sic] all," concluded Watson. But he was clearly agitated and saddened and this was likely the cause of his disturbed sleep: "someone I know [sic] so well & liked so good [sic] it sort of got me down. I don't relish the job [the burial] but I'd sooner do it myself and know, then not..."<sup>23</sup> Despite the grimness of the news, the Westlakes were likely comforted to know that a trusted friend from Toronto was looking after their loved ones' remains. Watson's letter provided much more information than the official notices, and it brought the battlefields of Normandy painfully close to home.

### Remembering the Westlake Brothers

"It is difficult I know to sustain such a loss as this and I pray God comfort you and your family at this time. *Truly they died that we might be free*,"<sup>24</sup> wrote Captain Jack Clough, padre of the Queen's Own Rifles to the Westlake family in a handwritten letter dated 12 July 1944. This was the first attempt to give meaning to their loss. Despite the personal nature of the letter, it is clear that the padre was not familiar with Thomas and Albert: "One of your brothers who was killed in action gave your name as his next of kin and I thought I would write to you as representative of the family and adhere as best I can my sympathy of your loss..."

Clough did his best to provide information which the Westlakes were undoubtedly seeking. "They were killed in action helping to stem what I believe would have been a very dangerous German thrust." The description of the battle was contrary to reality, but the chaplain depicted the deaths of Thomas and

Albert as having served a purpose. Clough further put the brothers' loss into perspective: "As I think of those who have given their lives [sic] Those who are wounded and the privations endured [sic] that we may be free and have peace, I remain one of these [one of the free]. Our lives must be of a quality that deserves peace if we are to retain it."<sup>25</sup> One can only speculate on the impact of this letter on the family.

"But us Westlakes will get along some how [sic],"<sup>26</sup> wrote George in his last letter. Perhaps this was intuition, though possibly he imagined that he would never return to Toronto. After the Second World War, many Canadian families would have to get along without their loved ones. Only two Westlake brothers remained. Getting along meant managing bereavement, and carrying memory at the personal level, because there was much standing in the way of public memorialization. "I know my dad missed them dearly, but times were difficult..." remembers Gary Westlake.<sup>27</sup> The Westlakes had been working class people, with no connection to influential circles, who lived far from Toronto's heart. John and Edward Westlake had families for which to provide and life had to go on. To dwell on the hardships caused by the war would not have eased the pain: "At the time, there were countless families that had lost someone," wrote Gary Westlake in 2008, "and it seemed it was just time to move on and try to forget. My dad never forgot, he just de-emphasized."<sup>28</sup> In 1944, it might have seemed unfair to single out three casualties when so many other Torontonians had lost their lives.

Edward and John Westlake posted obituaries in local newspapers for their brothers. The poems they featured expressed the intensity the bereavement that the family subsequently suppressed:

They are gone, but not forgotten,  
And as dawns another year  
In our lonely

*I know it is difficult to sustain such a loss as this and I pray God comfort you and your family at this time. Truly they died that we might be free.*

Dorothy Westlake expressed her husband Edward's anguish in a letter to the Estates Branch of the Department of National Defence inquiring about Thomas's War Service Gratuity: "my husband has suffered immensely not only in losing this boy [Thomas] but his two other brothers in the same week..." she wrote. "We received telegrams all in one day and three brothers is a big sacrifice for any family to make..."<sup>31</sup> She believed that they were entitled to compensation: "This boy never had a chance or break in his life & it seems a shame that even in death

**Above: This image is an excerpt from a letter written by Padre Jack Clough of the Queen's Own Rifles as a result of the loss of Tommy and Albert. It is dated 12 July 1944. The author took the title of this article from this letter.**

**Below: An obituary from the Toronto Evening Telegram.**

WESTLAKE—In loving memory of three beloved brothers killed in action in France, Rfm. Thomas and Rfm. Albert Westlake, Queen's Own Rifles, June 11, 1944; and Pte. George Westlake, N.N.S.H., June 7, 1944.  
They are gone, but not forgotten.  
And as dawns another year  
In our lonely hours of thinking,  
Thoughts of them are always near;  
Days of sadness still come o'er us;  
Friends may think the wound is healed,  
But they little know the sorrow  
That lies within our hearts concealed.  
Sadly missed by brothers Edward and Johnnie, sisters-in-law Dorothy and Margaret and Children.

## IN MEMORIAM

hours of thinking,  
Thoughts of them are always near;  
Days of sadness still come o'er us'  
Friends may think the wound is healed,  
But they little know the sorrow  
That lies within our hearts concealed.<sup>29</sup>

We do not need a special day  
To bring them to our mind,  
For the days we do not think of them  
Are very hard to find.<sup>30</sup>

he is being done out of something rightfully his. He made his home with us along with the other one [Albert] & he left his will to me in appreciation as ours was the only home life he had much of."<sup>32</sup> The Department of National Defence responded that Dorothy was not entitled to a government pension because she had not been dependent of Thomas. Nonetheless, she received the balance of his Service Estate, worth \$657.07.<sup>33</sup> Each next of kin received a similar disbursement.

## Contemporary Remembrance

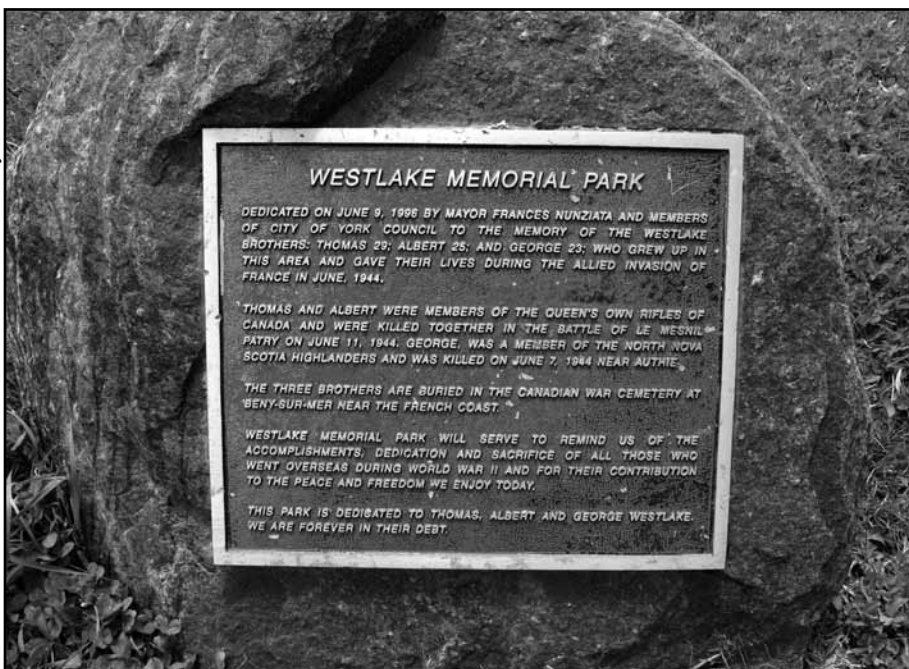
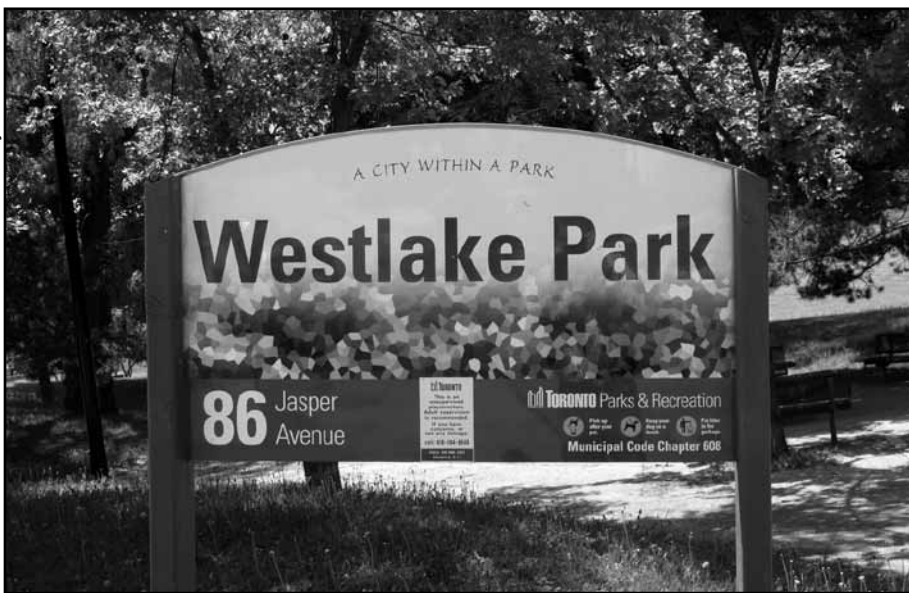
Gary Westlake has an early memory, or perhaps it is a dream, of his uncle Albert leaving for Europe.<sup>34</sup> Gary was born 4 November 1941. His uncles knew him as they went off to war, but whether or not he



**Left: Gary Westlake speaking at the inauguration of the renamed park, 9 June 1996.**

**Below: The sign to the park erected by the City of Toronto.**

**Bottom: The descriptive plaque at Westlake Memorial Park.**



carries a true memory of them does not matter. Despite their absence, their presence was imprinted within him. Throughout his life, Gary has done more to preserve the memory of his uncles than anyone else. Unlike his father, John, and uncle, Edward, he has had the opportunity to serve as an advocate for his uncles' memory, and he has been tireless in this pursuit. His desire to have his uncles remembered has outgrown its original purpose, and has come to mean much more than the tragic story of three brothers lost during the Second World War.

It took a decade for Gary to accomplish what he set out to do. He was especially motivated by the magnitude of his family's sacrifice. "There can't be many families," he said in 1994, "who gave up three brothers."<sup>35</sup> His quest to obtain the recognition he believed his uncles deserved began in 1986 when he proposed to the Council of the former City of York<sup>36</sup> that a park, street, or public building be named in his uncles' honour. Unfortunately, councillors who expressed interest in the plan repeatedly relegated it to the backburner. On 9 September 1987, Gary addressed Council to reiterate his request: "I would like to create a situation where in future years people out of curiosity, or a real desire to learn may ask: 'who were the Westlake boys?'"<sup>37</sup> His presentation was forceful: "I do wish to state firmly that I feel we do owe remembrance and I sincerely hope council can respect and understand the continuance of my endeavour."<sup>38</sup>

Gary's persistence outlasted three York municipal administrations. Finally, in 1996, he was successful. "I told Frances [Nunziata]" who was mayor at the time, "you might as well do this because I'm not going away."<sup>39</sup> Nunziata later recalled: "I really respect him for pushing for that," she said, "it was very fitting."<sup>40</sup> It was decided that Jasper Park, the

former sand and gravel pit used by Conn Smythe, would be renamed Westlake Memorial Park. It was the most appropriate gesture because of the site's connection to the brothers' boyhood days.<sup>41</sup> For the Westlake brothers, one journey was ending, and another was beginning.

A park dedication ceremony took place on the afternoon of 9 June 1996. Gary Westlake spoke about the meaning of the park, and his motivations, but indirectly, he was saying much about how Canadians have come to remember war casualties. "I always felt that Tom, Albert, and George went to war — were killed — buried and left deprived of the opportunity to live — to love — and to reach out to help their family and friends."<sup>42</sup> A crowd of a few hundred people had gathered for the occasion. Representatives from city council, the Queen's Own Rifles, and the Royal Canadian Legion were also in attendance, as were many local residents.

The Westlake brothers' remains could not be brought home after the war.<sup>43</sup> Their family was not present when they were buried, and as a result, the dedication of Westlake Memorial Park constituted the brothers' funeral oration. For the community, the park serves as a place to remember and as a symbol of the enduring legacy of the Second World War. The ceremony allowed the Westlake family to lay lost uncles to rest. It was their allegorical homecoming after a 54-year absence. They were returning to the Toronto they knew and loved. Gary Westlake explained:

This park will enable them to make friends and I hope develop relationships. I feel that they have come home, at least spiritually, and this park is where they are. I like to think they will watch out for the children who will play here and perhaps help those who take the time to read and think about the

inscription [on the plaque that was being unveiled].<sup>44</sup>

The park is more than a memorial to three war casualties; it commemorates the immensity of the Second World War as an historical event. The park stimulates reflection on purpose: why was the Second World War fought? "I often wonder what my family would be like if my uncles had not been killed in 1944, but I am snapped back to reality when I think of what could have been if they and thousands of others hadn't died for what they believed in."<sup>45</sup> For Gary, the Second World War was neither a "good war,"<sup>46</sup> nor a "just war."<sup>47</sup> He refers to it instead as a "necessary war."<sup>48</sup> His uncles were drawn into something greater than they could ever have imagined.

"We don't expect everyone to immediately embrace the new name for your park," explained Gary at the ceremony, "but I feel Albert, Tom, and George deserve the dedication."<sup>49</sup> Westlake Memorial Park facilitates the transmission of the men's memory and this was always the primary reason for the endeavour. "You know, everything I wanted to accomplish for my uncles has been accomplished today. A means of having them remembered by people other than those who knew them before they went overseas or while they were overseas."<sup>50</sup> The funeral oration of the Westlake brothers was an important milestone in the evolution of their memory. The plaque, which was unveiled that day, reads in part:

Westlake Memorial Park  
Dedicated on June 9, 1996 by  
Mayor Frances Nunziata and  
Members of City of York Council  
to the memory of the Westlake  
brothers: Thomas 29; Albert 25;  
and George 23; who grew up  
in this area and gave their lives  
during the allied invasion of  
France in June, 1944. [...]

Westlake Memorial Park will serve to remind us of the accomplishments, dedication and sacrifice of all those who went overseas during World War II and for their contribution to the peace and freedom we enjoy today. This park is dedicated to Thomas, Albert and George Westlake. We are forever in their debt.<sup>51</sup>

Gary Westlake's care and dedication has led to the flourishing of his uncles' memory. The greatest strength of his campaign has been his desire to reach children: "if only one child asks the question 'who were the Westlake Brothers?' and is given a thoughtful and caring answer — then — my small effort will be rewarded," said Gary at the park dedication.<sup>52</sup> Westlake Memorial Park is about dialogue with new generations about the meaning of the war.

Gary, moreover, has taken his message to elementary schools. On Remembrance Day 2004 he spoke to a fifth-grade class. Teacher Rosemary Blackwell recalled the effectiveness of the presentation:

Gary explained to the children that they were too young to remember people who made sacrifices during the wars. He said that because they now knew about Tom, Albert, and George, they could think about his uncles during the moment of silence. I think it is very important for the students to realize that war involves real people — people who had lives just like they have.<sup>53</sup>

The presentation was successful and had a positive impact on the students. It illustrates the importance of nurturing memory at the grassroots. The Westlake brothers' story accomplishes this. It encourages and stimulates thought and discussion on the lasting impact of the Second World War. Talks such as these bring people — young or old — to face history and engage it.<sup>54</sup>



## Further Exposure of the Story

Since the creation of Westlake Memorial Park, the brothers have received vast exposure in the Toronto and area press, as well as on national television. They have appeared in numerous *Toronto Star* articles, the most prominent being a full-page article by Warren Gerard entitled "D-Day's Dreadful Sacrifice."<sup>55</sup> One letter received by the *Toronto Star* in response to that article illustrates the value placed on remembrance in Canada:

Congratulations and thanks to Warren Gerard for his June 4 article, D-Day's dreadful sacrifice, about Gary Westlake's noble efforts to remember his three uncles who died during the Normandy invasion. [...] In honouring and commemorating his late uncles, Westlake honours all who served, who faced with such courage, the devastating horrors of war. For caring enough, I salute him.<sup>56</sup>

In 2004, the Westlake brothers' story was shared with audiences across Canada, on the CBC's nightly news program *The National*, in a report produced by Paul Workman. This item was about eight minutes in length, and provided all the salient facts of the story.<sup>57</sup> The production coincided with Gary Westlake's second visit to Bény-sur-Mer Canadian War Cemetery. It was the first time he had returned since 1962. He was accompanied by his eldest son, Scott. The CBC item included coverage of Gary and

Scott's journey to the cemetery, and their meeting with the ever grateful Roger Alexandre, mayor of le Mesnil-Patry, who as a young teenager was evacuated from the town at the time of the battle.

Alison Smith, who hosted *The National* on the night of the broadcast, introduced the segment by telling

what he's done."<sup>61</sup> Not only were they at the "holiest of places,"<sup>62</sup> but they were on television sharing the Westlake story with thousands of Canadians. "I don't want to forget [their sacrifices]," said Scott. "And I want to continue [remembrance] into the next generation; my son, my family, and on and on; that is the way it should be done."<sup>63</sup> The

brief CBC documentary segment says much about how Canadians commemorate casualties of the Second World War: the Westlakes' "devastating D-Day sacrifice" deserves to be remembered. It also alludes to the responsibility of passing on Second World War memory because of its preciousness and vulnerability. Most important, the segment reminded viewers that the Westlake brothers are but three of 2,049 Canadian fatalities that



**All three Westlake brothers are at rest in the Bény-sur-Mer Canadian War Cemetery. Tommy and Albert are buried side-by-side, while George rests nearby.**

viewers "The liberation of Europe came at such a terrible cost, and some families ended up bearing more than their share of pain."<sup>58</sup> Over the footage of Gary and Scott's visit to the graves of Albert and Thomas, Paul Workman narrated: "Uncle Tommy and Uncle Albert, buried the way they were found — side by side — clutching their arms in death."<sup>59</sup> The nobility of their death remains the most fascinating aspect of their story: Albert and Thomas were faithful to their duty and, particularly, to each other, until the end.

Gary Westlake believes that the greatest danger to the preservation of his uncles' memory is complacency.<sup>60</sup> That is why he was determined to ensure his uncles are remembered. At Bény-sur-Mer, Scott Westlake explained: "The fact that we're here, my dad and I, is because of

lie in Bény-sur-Mer cemetery.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

Gary Westlake is a catalyst for memory. By sharing his uncles' tragic story he has also raised awareness about the dangers of forgetting our past. His uncles have been fortunate to have had such a faithful nephew. Many of their comrades have been forgotten as those who knew them passed away; and without advocates, memory has faded. This is when a casualty truly dies. It is curious and ironic that dying in combat during the Second World War has allowed the Westlake brothers and some of their peers to live on through remembrance and commemoration. The romanticization of battlefield

Photo by Marie-Josée Lafond



casualties is largely responsible for this. Television journalist Tom Kennedy, in D-Day remembrance coverage by CTV in 2004, expressed sentiments similar to those of Paul Workman in the CBC item: "they [Thomas and Albert] died in each other's arms;...doing what they thought was right."<sup>65</sup> The prominence and reiteration of this element of the Westlake story exemplifies this tendency to romanticize the horrors and appalling arbitrariness of death in battle.

Conversely, who remembers Trooper Harold Westlake from Saskatchewan? While no relation to Thomas, Albert, and George, he served with the Royal Canadian Dragoons and is buried in Brookwood Military Cemetery in Surrey, England.<sup>66</sup> He was killed in a training accident on 28 April 1943. Is his death less noteworthy than those of Thomas, Albert, and George Westlake? Because he was killed while on duty, the Canadian government treated Harold Westlake as any other war casualty, but it is doubtful that his death could be as easily romanticized. Yet, is he not as deserving of remembrance as his Toronto counterparts? This comparison says much about the manner in which Canadians

remember, and depict, Second World War casualties: they were brave and died glorious deaths in battle while participating in a noble fight against a heinous foe.

The manner in which the Westlake brothers have been remembered demonstrates that Canadians are generally grateful to those who have given their lives in defence of our way of life and values. Their sacrifices for Canada translate into a feeling of debt by those who have benefitted from the service of Canada's Second World War volunteers. "They were never given the opportunity to live

Photo by Marie-Josée Lafond



long enough to enjoy and find out what there is good in life,"<sup>67</sup> said Gary Westlake. He was referring to his uncles, but his comment is relevant to thousands of his uncles' comrades.

The Westlake brothers' story shows that it is useful to look at the Second World War from the perspective of one Canadian family. Although this presents a narrow view on war, bereavement, and remembrance, it nonetheless provides a fascinating example of the impact of war at the grassroots, in one home among thousands of bereaved homes. The Westlake story is compelling because it is difficult to imagine

one family making such a sacrifice. Even in 1944, when thousands of Canadian families were grieving, the weight of the Westlakes' loss caused some Torontonians to take notice. A 1944 editorial from a Toronto newspaper noted that: "Three sons is a mighty gift for one family to make its country. That family's sorrow goes deep. But it is no more, perhaps, than the grief of homes which, giving one, give all."<sup>68</sup> Despite all the sorrow caused by the war there was optimism for the future. The same editorial called for a future Canada that would be "Worthy of These Boys."<sup>69</sup> It specifically mentioned the Westlake brothers and Wing Commander Lloyd Chadburn, RCAF, from Aurora, Ontario, who was killed 13 June 1944.<sup>70</sup> Canadians, it warned, would need "to be brave enough to build a future as great as they knew this nation could be."<sup>71</sup> The editorial looked to a better world after the war: "Let us seek the wisdom to turn the victory which they are buying at such cost into a just peace for all men."<sup>72</sup>

A *Toronto Star* editorial, published 6 June 2004, called upon the past for inspiration. "Sixty years ago today, Canadians like Tommy, Albert and George Westlake stormed the

Photo by Marie-Josée Lafond



beaches of France, changing the course of history."<sup>73</sup> By June 2004, the Westlakes had been featured in the *Toronto Star* several times. They had come to symbolize Canadian soldiers fighting in Northwest Europe during the Second World War. The editorial established a connection between the brave fighting of 1944, and Canada's resolve to see the conflict to the end, and the new challenges facing the country in the 21st-century. The author wrote: "The world is once again haunted by evil men. But like the Nazis, they will not prevail."<sup>74</sup> The courage shown by Canadians during the Second World War, and the bravery of individuals like the Westlake brothers was shown to be proof that contemporary threats could be met. The link could not be more plainly articulated:

Let us reflect, today, on the raw courage and self-sacrifice of those who fought tyranny so many years ago. Men like Tommy, Albert and George Westlake who lie beneath long rows of white crosses [sic] at the Canadian War Cemetery in Bénny-sur-Mer. And let us spare a thought for young Canadians who have followed them overseas, and who are serving their country today by keeping the peace, defending freedom and human rights, and battling terror.<sup>75</sup>

The memory of the Second World War is called upon as a source of inspiration. This was the greatest challenge ever faced by Canadians, and they proved themselves its equal. Victory was such a great achievement, it is no surprise that today's pundits would search the past for commentaries on present issues.

"I feel like they're finally coming home," said Gary Westlake. "Our family's great fear was that after we pass away, that would be it. No one would remember."<sup>76</sup> Those who

changed the course of history in June 1944 also became part of it. Thanks to valiant efforts, and loving dedication, the memory of the Westlake brothers will live on as long as Westlake Memorial Park continues to exist. People will continue to ask: "who were the Westlake brothers?" and how did they earn their namesake? The park is a simple gesture, but an enduring one. It is for this reason that ordinary Canadians like Thomas, Albert, and George Westlake will continue to live on in memory.

The Westlake family coped with the legacy of the Second World War, but its traces can never completely be erased. Vera Speed carried the scars of the Second World War throughout her life. She proved that time cannot completely erode the past. On her deathbed, she admitted, despite having remarried, that she never stopped loving George Westlake.<sup>77</sup> The Westlake family survives despite the hardship it faced during the Second World War. Just as George had predicted, they "got along." Perhaps the greatest lesson from the Westlake brothers' experiences during the Second World War is that despite the fact that the war brought out the worst in many people, it also brought out the best in others. "The Westlake boys from Toronto" will forever be a symbol of Canada's Second World War: sacrifice and sorrow, but recovery and the realization of a better tomorrow. Gary Westlake knows that the memory of his uncles, Thomas, Albert and George, will be forever poignant: "The story of the Westlake brothers is a story that should continue to be told. Their tragedy, and the efforts of all to have them remembered, is real and timeless."<sup>78</sup>

The Westlake brothers were "three good boys – boys they were – that went off and did what they were supposed to do, and died doing it."<sup>79</sup> But as long as their memory is preserved, they will live on, and

continue to inspire dialogue about Canada's poignant past. In a larger context, this story illustrates that it is extremely worthwhile, from a historical perspective to examine the experiences of ordinary Canadians. There are countless more stories like this one waiting to be told.

## Notes

1. Carrie Brunet, "Westlake brothers killed within days of each other," *The York Guardian*, 9 November 2001, p.1.
2. George Westlake to John Westlake, 5 May 1944, Westlake Family Papers [WFP].
3. Eric McGeer, *Words of Valediction and Remembrance* (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2008), p.14, and Veterans Affairs Canada, *The Canadian Virtual War Memorial*, <<http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=collections/virtualmem>>.
4. Warren Gerard, "D-Day's dreadful sacrifice," *Toronto Star*, 4 June 2000, p.A8.
5. For a contrast of two Canadian families, and their efforts to remember and memorialize, see Nic Clarke, "He was my best subaltern': The Life and Death of Lieutenant Herrick S. Duggan, 70th Field Company, Royal Engineers," *Canadian Military History* 17, no.2, (Spring 2008), pp.21-32, and Angela Fritz, "Regret deeply...': The Second World War Experiences of Bill and Fred Tucker," *Canadian Military History* 11, no.2, (Spring 2002), pp.67-72. These examples illustrate different manifestations of family commemoration due to class background.
6. All facts are derived from the genealogy entitled "The Family of Robert Robson Westlake and Etta Lee Kennard," WFP.
7. James Lemon, *Toronto Since 1918: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1985), p.35.
8. Randall White, *Too Good to be True: Toronto in the 1920s* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1993), p.177.
9. Interview with Gary Westlake, 13 May 2004, in preparation for the author's participation in the 2004 Canadian Battlefields Foundation Study Tour.
10. C. P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Volume III: The Victory Campaign, The Operations in North-West Europe 1944-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1960), p.131.
11. North Nova Scotia Highlanders [NNSH], War Diary [WD], 7 June 1944, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 24, vol. 15122. See also Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p.128, for a detailed explanation.
12. NNSH WD, 7 June 1944, LAC, RG 24, vol.15122.
13. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p.132. During the Battle of Normandy, 156

- Canadian prisoners of war were murdered by German SS troops. Twenty Canadians were killed at the Abbaye d'Ardenne after they were captured during the disastrous engagement at Authie and Buron. Murders also occurred as a result of the battle at Le Mesnil-Patry. After the war, Kurt Meyer was prosecuted for war crimes. See Howard Margolian, *Conduct Unbecoming: The Story of the Murder of Canadian Prisoners of War in Normandy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), and Ian J. Campbell, *Murder at the Abbaye: The Story of Twenty Canadian Soldiers Murdered at the Abbaye d'Ardenne* (Ottawa: The Golden Dog Press, 1996).
14. Ibid., p.139.
  15. W.T. Bernard, *The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada: One Hundred Years of Canada* (Don Mills, Ontario: The Ontario Publishing Company, 1960), p.201.
  16. Ibid., p.202.
  17. Garnet Watson to his wife, 22 June 1944, (France), WFP.
  18. George Westlake, (B63018), Service records, LAC, RG24, vol. 27313. See casualty report, 17 June 1944.
  19. George G. Blackburn, *The Guns of Normandy: A Soldier's Eye View, France 1944* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995), p.60.
  20. Ibid.
  21. George Westlake, (B63018), Service records, LAC, RG24, vol. 27313. See casualty report, 19 July 1944.
  22. Garnet Watson, in France, to his wife, 22 June 1944, WFP.
  23. Ibid.
  24. Captain Jack Clough, QOR, to Edward Westlake, 12 July 1944, WFP, emphasis added.
  25. Ibid.
  26. Letter George to John Westlake, 5 May 1944, WFP.
  27. "Questionnaire for Gary Westlake," prepared by author, 15 July 2008.
  28. Ibid.
  29. *The Evening Telegram*, date unknown, clipping from WFP.
  30. *Toronto Star*, date unknown, clipping from WFP.
  31. Dorothy Westlake to Department of National Defence, 3 March 1945, in Thomas Westlake, (B131131), Service records, LAC, RG24, vol. 27313.
  32. Ibid.
  33. Thomas Westlake, (B131131), Service records, LAC, RG24, vol. 27313.
  34. Interview with Gary Westlake, 13 May 2004.
  35. Mike Funston, "Brave brothers served, and died, side by side," *The Toronto Star*, 31 May 1994, p.A2.
  36. Today the area is amalgamated into the City of Toronto.
  37. Speaking notes for Gary Westlake's address to the City of York Council, 9 September 1987, WFP, emphasis added.
  38. Ibid.
  39. Carrie Brunet, "Westlake brothers killed within days of each other," *The York Guardian*, 9 November 2001, p.1.
  40. Ibid.
  41. The green space had been named Jasper Park because it was located at the end of Jasper Avenue.
  42. Speech by Gary Westlake at the inauguration of Westlake Memorial Park, 9 June 1996, p.13, WFP.
  43. Since the First World War, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission has enforced a non-repatriation policy concerning war casualties. See Philip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil: A History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 1917-1967* (London: Constable & Company, 1967), pp.41-42.
  44. Speech by Gary Westlake, p.14, WFP.
  45. Ibid., p.11.
  46. Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada's Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), p.3.
  47. J. L. Granatstein, and Peter Neary, eds., *The Good Fight: Canadians and World War II* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1995), p.14.
  48. "Questionnaire for Gary Westlake," prepared by author, 15 July 2008.
  49. Speech by Gary Westlake, p.17, WFP.
  50. Ibid., p.9.
  51. "Wording for the plaque," WFP.
  52. Speech by Gary Westlake, p.18, WFP, emphasis added.
  53. Rosemary Blackwell, "Teaching Remembrance Questionnaire," prepared by author, 11 July 2008.
  54. "Remembering War Days," *The Caledon Midweek Enterprise*, 17 November 2004, p.21.
  55. *Toronto Star*, 4 June 2000, p A8.
  56. Walter Misesek, "Salute to noble efforts," *Toronto Star*, 14 June 2000.
  57. The Westlake brothers were also interwoven into the "Battlefields of Normandy" episode of the Canadian television documentary series, *For King & Country* (2005), produced by Norm Christie.
  58. Paul Workman, and Alison Smith, Westlake brothers documentary segment on *The National*, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, hereafter CBC, 3 June 2004.
  59. Ibid. (They were likely not found "clutching their arms in death" but this romantic notion enriches the story.)
  60. "Questionnaire for Gary Westlake," prepared by author, 15 July 2008.
  61. *The National*, CBC, 3 June 2004.
  62. Carrie Brunet, "Westlake brothers killed within days of each other," *The York Guardian*, 9 November 2001, p.1.
  63. *The National*, CBC, 3 June 2004.
  64. Ibid.
  65. Tom Kennedy, "D-Day invasion a triple tragedy for one family," *CTV.ca*, Tuesday, 1 June 2004. (Another example of the romanticization of the story.)
  66. Harold Westlake, (L/58764), Service records, LAC, RG24, vol. 27313, and Veterans Affairs Canada, *The Canadian Virtual War Memorial*.
  67. Tom Kennedy, "D-Day invasion a triple tragedy for one family."
  68. "To Be Worthy of These Boys," unknown newspaper, June 1944, clipping from WFP.
  69. Ibid.
  70. Veterans Affairs Canada, *The Canadian Virtual War Memorial*.
  71. "To Be Worthy of These Boys."
  72. Ibid.
  73. "They fought, died for our freedom," *Toronto Star*, 6 June 2004, p.A12.
  74. Ibid.
  75. Ibid.
  76. Mike Funston, "York renames park to honor 3 brothers," *Toronto Star*, date unknown, clipping, WFP.
  77. Interview with Gary Westlake, 13 May 2004.
  78. Gary Westlake, "Councillor, assistant helped bestow honour," *The York Guardian*, 19 November 2004, p.4. This text was featured in the "Letters" section of the newspaper. Gary wrote in response to a poorly researched article that misconstrued all the facts concerning Westlake Memorial Park. See Stavroula Meditskos, "Remembering the Westlake brothers," *The York Guardian*, 5 November 2004, pp.1 and 3.
  79. Gary Westlake, featured on *The National*, CBC, 3 June 2004.

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