
To Flight and Back

A Tale of Friendship
and the Second
World War

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Born and raised in Edson, Alberta; Rodney Davidge and William Switzer's friendship grew as they did. They attended school together,¹ socialized collectively and in 1941 joined the Royal Canadian Air Force together to become fighter pilots in World War Two. The duo took to the skies as part of 193 Squadron until they returned home to their families in 1944.

Both the Davidge and Switzer families had moved to Edson in the early days of the town. William Davidge, who was originally from Newfoundland, made the trip west on a harvest excursion train before finding a job with the Grand Trunk Railway in Edson, Alberta. This is where he met Ethel Brown who was in town visiting her sister. The couple married in 1917² and Rodney (Rod) Davidge was born to them on January 4, 1920,³ the second child out of six. Rodney had one sister (Mildred) and four brothers (Bart, George, Eldon and Stanley).

Harvey A. Switzer graduated in Ontario with a Bachelor of Pharmacy in 1910,⁴ initially taking a position in Weyburn, Saskatchewan⁵ before moving to Edson in 1912 and opening his own pharmacy.⁶ William (Bill) Switzer was born in Edson to Harvey & Edith Switzer on September 21, 1920, the sixth⁷ of 14 children.⁸ William Switzer and Rodney Davidge grew up and graduated together in Edson, Switzer became a pharmacy apprentice in his father's drug store⁹ and Rod studied in Calgary to become a mechanic¹⁰ before returning to work for the Edson Motor Company.¹¹ Both enlisted in the RCAF¹² in 1941,¹³ Harvey Switzer wrote in a letter that Bill enlisted in June¹⁴ and Davidge in August.¹⁵



Front Row: Rodney and Bertha Davidge, Eve and Muriel Mahon with son, Gary Mahon, Richard Switzer, Vivian McLeod, Helen C., and William Switzer. Back Row: Daniel Switzer, Flora Switzer, Joe Switzer, Edith Switzer, and George.

Fig. 1. Switzer, Switzer Family. Photograph. From: *My Family* (Switzer), 168

¹ Deakin, Jack. "Magic Numbers Aid..." *Edmonton Journal*.

² Davidge. "Family Group Sheets for the Descendants of William Davidge (1882-1978) and Ethel Brown (1890-1957)." In *Davidge Family History*, 191. 1997

³ Davidge. "Family Group Sheet" In *Davidge Family History*, 1997.

⁴ Switzer, *My Family 'Switzer'*, 33.

⁵ Switzer, *My Family 'Switzer'*, 34.

⁶ Switzer, *My Family 'Switzer'*, 49.

⁷ Switzer, Harvey. "William A. (Bill) Switzer." In *My Family 'Switzer'*, 133. Edson, Alberta: Estate of Harvey A. Switzer, 1984.

⁸ Switzer, *My Family 'Switzer'*, 106.

⁹ Switzer, *My Family 'Switzer'*, 133.

¹⁰ Ireland, Nancy. "The Stories Are Among Us..." *Regional News This Week*, November 11, 2009.

¹¹ "Edson Airmen, In Attack on Rommel Back Home." *The Ottawa Journal*, January 5, 1945.

¹² "MLA Bill Switzer Dies Unexpectedly." *The Edson Leader*, July 2, 1969, Vol. 16, No. 27 ed.

¹³ Ireland, The Stories are Among Us...

¹⁴ Harvey Switzer, personal letters, date unknown.

¹⁵ "Edson Men Who Shared in Rommel's End." *Edmonton Journal*, October 25, 1944.

Switzer headed to a manning depot in 1941, where he learned the basics of being a soldier- shining boots, polishing buttons, and shaving. There were also two hours of exercise each day which included marching, rifle drills, foot drills, and saluting.¹⁶ He later moved on to the Canadian Forces Base Borden in Ontario¹⁷ where he became a pilot.¹⁸ Base Borden was one of the homes of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) that educated over 167 000 air force personnel from all across the commonwealth.¹⁹ Switzer was deployed to the United Kingdom on August 19, 1942.²⁰ Similarly, Davidge's training as a fighter pilot took place in several locations, due to the BCATP.²¹ His basic training was conducted at Canadian Forces Base Pearce, Saskatchewan, initial flight training at Canadian Forces Station Ladner, B.C. and advanced flight training at Base Borden, Ontario.²² Davidge travelled back to Edson to marry²³ Bertha Mitchell²⁴ on July 22, 1942²⁵ before being shipped off to England in August.²⁶ Valerie Switzer, the family's historian, was quoted as saying that Bill made the quick trip home at that time as well to stand at Davidge's side as the best man.²⁷



Rodney Davidge with Typhoon.

Fig. 2. Darling, Tim. [1941]. Photograph. From: "Excerpts from the WWII Stories of Rod Davidge (193 Squadron). http://www.amnesta.net/other/index_davidge.html (accessed October 23, 2015.)

It was in Tealing, Scotland²⁸ where the men became familiar with British instruments by flying Hawker Hurricanes.²⁹ Hurricanes were introduced into the Royal Air Force in 1938 and were vital to the Battle of Britain - more so than the popular Spitfire, as more Hurricanes were deployed. After this final training, the friends graduated to flying Hawker Typhoons as part of the newly formed 193 Squadron.³⁰ On October 16, 1942 the squadron was adopted by the Bellows Fellowship of Brazil.³¹ Typhoons were one of the first planes to provide close ground support for Allied troops. The engine inside the plane was also twice as powerful as the Hawker Hurricane,

¹⁶ Loughheed, E. C. (2002). *No. 4 Wireless School At Guelph, 1941-1945*. Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph. RE1 UOG A1642.

¹⁷ Ireland, The Stories are Among Us...

¹⁸ "Edson Airmen, In Attack on Rommel Back Home." *The Ottawa Journal*, January 5, 1945.

¹⁹ Forsyth, Bruce. "Canadian Forces Base Borden." *Canadian Military History*. May 1, 2007. Accessed November 6, 2015. <http://militarybruce.com/canadian-forces-base-borden/>.

²⁰ Valerie Switzer, email containing W.A. Switzer War Records, October 11, 2015.

²¹ Ireland, The Stories are Among Us...

²² Ireland, The Stories are Among Us...

²³ Ireland, The Stories are Among Us...

²⁴ "In Memory of Rodney 'Rod' Davidge." Ballard Minor Funeral Home. February 21, 2015. Accessed November 7, 2015. http://www.ballardminorfh.ca/tribute/details/284/Rodney_Davidge/obituary.html.

²⁵ Davidge. "Family Group Sheet" In *Davidge Family History, 1997*

²⁶ Ireland, The Stories are Among Us...

²⁷ Valerie Switzer (daughter of William Switzer), in discussion with the author, December 11, 2015.

²⁸ Ireland, The Stories are Among Us...

²⁹ Woodcock, C *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 1. Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire: The 193 Squadron Association.

³⁰ Ireland, The Stories are Among Us...

³¹ Davidge, Rodney. *Pilot's Flying Logbook F/L R.W. "Rod" Davidge RCAF. 1942.*

allowing it to fly at a speed of more than 400 mph.³² Switzer joined the squadron in December 1942 and Davidge joined as a Staff Sergeant³³ in January 1943.³⁴



Davidge and Switzer seated in front row, left.

Fig. 3. Baker, *Squadron*. 1944. Photograph. From: "England and the Beachhead." http://www.eregbaker.info/ww2_1944.htm (accessed November 5, 2015.)

The 193 Squadron of the Royal Air Force was formed during the First World War at Amriya, Egypt on August 9, 1917, as a training unit, disbanded in 1919, and later reformed in Harrowbeer, Devon, UK as a fighter unit.³⁵ Due to the slow arrival of planes to the squadron, some of the men were sent to other squads to receive their training with the Hawker Typhoons, until there was an adequate number at the base in Harrowbeer for training. However, due to intensely cloudy weather that frequented that area, there were many days they couldn't fly even if they

had enough planes.³⁶ Rod mentioned in his flight log book on October 8, 1942 that their bombing mission was called off so he went hunting instead.³⁷

On December 30, 1943, Switzer was one of two pilots whose planes were hit by flak - a German word which refers to anti-aircraft fire³⁸ - over Trieux Estuary near the village of Lézardrieux on the North coast of France, while patrolling for enemy ships. Both pilots made it back to base, one with a damaged wing and Switzer with a severed rudder cable.³⁹



Switzer standing beside his flak damaged aircraft.

Fig. 4. Woodcock, *Flak*. [1940]. Photograph. From: *RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*. Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire: The 193 Squadron Association.

³² Truman, CN. "Hawker Typhoon - History Learning Site." History Learning Site. May 26, 2015. Accessed November 6, 2015. <http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world-war-two/weapons-of-world-war-two/hawker-typhoon/>.

³³ Wikston, Laura. "The Luckiest Man Alive." *The Dunnville Chronicle*, January 6, 2010.

³⁴ Woodcock, 193 Squadron, *RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 74.

³⁵ Woodcock, 193 Squadron, *RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 1.

³⁶ Woodcock, 193 Squadron, *RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 1.

³⁷ Davidge, Rodney. *Pilot's Flying Logbook F/L R.W. "Rod" Davidge RCAF*. 1942.

³⁸ "Flak." Dictionary. 2015. Accessed November 5, 2015. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/flak>.

³⁹ Woodcock, 193 Squadron, *RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 10.

On June 6, 1944 an event occurred in Normandy, France that Switzer later described in his flight log book as 'A wonderful sight.'⁴⁰ D-Day was much anticipated, and 193 Squadron was charged with taking out the enemy's early-warning and communication systems as well as specific transport targets.⁴¹ Only the most experienced pilots were able to participate, Flying Officer (F/O) Rod Davidge and Flight Lieutenant (F/L) Bill Switzer were among those pilots. Davidge's operation took out two tanks, damaged another four and shot up a German staff car and motorcycle. Switzer flew in a second operation, only a few days later, to bomb the beachhead at Normandy.⁴²

While dive bombing German troops near Tilly-sur-Seulles, France on June 15, 1944, Switzer was once again hit by flak and forced to land, luckily with no injuries.⁴³ Only two days later, Davidge was also hit by flak, near Falaise, but was able to land safely at an the Allied air strip in the Falaise Gap. He wrote in his log book 'Shot up while leading Squad. Force land at B6 in France. Servicing Commandos help me repair kite. My dear, the dust!'⁴⁴



Davidge (laying down on left with hat) in propaganda photo for the Rommel bombing.
Fig. 5. Woodcock, *Propaganda*. 1944.
Photograph. From: RAF *The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron*. Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire: The 193 Squadron Association.

Soon after, Davidge and Switzer took off on a routine bombing and reconnaissance mission with six other members of 193 Squadron. It was July 17, 1944 and the team was successful in destroying a German Army Headquarters set up in a farmhouse⁴⁵ before they came across a German motorcade made up of several motorcycles and other vehicles, including a staff car. Orders came in to strafe the convoy,⁴⁶ so the pilots of 193 Squadron set their 20mm cannons on the Germans, leaving few alive below.⁴⁷ After returning to base the men learned that they had killed the Desert Fox himself, Field Marshall Erwin Rommel,⁴⁸ and they became the topic of many newspaper articles at home and abroad. After the war they learned that Rommel had simply been wounded in the attack and the RAF was crediting 602 Squadron with bombing Rommel's convoy⁴⁹ near St. Foy-de-Montgomery, France.⁵⁰ 193 Squadron had actually attacked a convoy near Dozule, France on the same day.⁵¹ It is said that Rommel was actually forced to commit suicide as punishment for his role in the plot to kill Hitler on July 20, 1944.⁵² The July

⁴⁰ Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 19.

⁴¹ Ireland, *The Stories are Among Us...*

⁴² Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 19.

⁴³ Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 21.

⁴⁴ Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 21.

⁴⁵ Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 27.

⁴⁶ Ireland, *The Stories are Among Us...*

⁴⁷ Ireland, *The Stories are Among Us...*

⁴⁸ Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 26- 28.

⁴⁹ Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 27, 28.

⁵⁰ Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 28,

⁵¹ "4 Canadians in Squadron That Ended Rommel's Life." *Toronto Daily Star*, October 21, 1944.

17th attack came only one day after the untimely passing of Bill's mother, Edith, of a stroke at the family's homestead in Edson.⁵³

When the previous flight leader, Wally Wallace, was taken prisoner after crash landing behind enemy lines, Rod Davidge became the Acting Squadron Leader⁵⁴ of 'B' Flight on July 18, 1944.⁵⁵ Bill Switzer had become leader of 'A' Flight⁵⁶ on June 13, 1944.⁵⁷



Photo of flight leaders and their commanding officer.
Fig. 6. Woodcock, *Flight Leaders*. [1944]. Photograph.
From: RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'. Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire: The 193 Squadron Association.



Switzer and Davidge playing cards with 'A' Flight.
Fig. 7. Woodcock, *A Flight*. [1944]. Photograph. From: RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'. Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire: The 193 Squadron Association.

Hit by flak for the third time, Bill Switzer was thrown from his aircraft at 500ft over enemy territory on August 15, 1944. For days his squadron heard nothing about what became of him and Davidge wrote in his log book 'Switz missing'.⁵⁸ The squadron sent a search party out on August 24. In fact, Bill was unconscious when he hit the ground and woke up later with burns to his face and neck, as well as a broken leg. He found himself in the middle of a forest which soon caught fire due to heavy Allied shelling and he was forced to crawl out to the road to escape the flames. On August 16, Switzer was captured by 25 German soldiers who attempted to gather information from him regarding the current battle. When his captors were again engaged by Allied gunfire, Switzer was able to crawl into a ditch and escape. After crawling all night and part of the next day, eating apples from orchards along the way, Bill was eventually picked up by American soldiers and taken for medical care. This was the end of the war for Bill, who was flown to the United Kingdom on August 20, 1944 to be cared for at a military hospital.⁵⁹ He was honourably discharged⁶⁰ on August, 1944.⁶¹

⁵² Ireland, *The Stories are Among Us...*

⁵³ Switzer, *My Family 'Switzer'*, 79, 111.

⁵⁴ Wikston, Laura. "The Luckiest Man Alive." *The Dunnville Chronicle*, January 6, 2010.

⁵⁵ Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 29.

⁵⁶ Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 31.

⁵⁷ Switzer, William A., "Dear Mother" (letter to Mrs. H.A. Switzer, from England, June 26, 1944)

⁵⁸ Davidge, Rodney. *Pilot's Flying Logbook F/L R.W. "Rod" Davidge RCAF*. 1944.

⁵⁹ Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 31, 33.

⁶⁰ Switzer, *My Family 'Switzer'*, 134.

During an armed reconnaissance mission on August 18, 1944 where 193 Squadron was pursuing the fleeing German army near Trun, France, Davidge experienced engine failure and crash landed in Allied territory.⁶² Eleven days later, on August 29, 1944, Davidge was discharged and in September he was reunited with Switzer at the Bramshott Military Hospital in Hampshire.⁶³

Overall, Valerie Switzer says Bill flew 135 missions⁶⁴ throughout the war and Davidge clocked 136.⁶⁵ Three of the Typhoons that Davidge flew happened to be marked DP-C which he happily declared stood for 'Damn Proud Canadian'.⁶⁶ Family lore indicates that Switzer named each of the eight planes he flew during the war after his sweetheart, Vivian McLeod, who he married on July 22, 1946.⁶⁷

In recognition of the service he provided during World War II, Rod's son Jim was able to show that Davidge received the following medals; 39/45 Star, Air Crew Europe Star, British Defense Medal, Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and 39/45 Victory Medal.⁶⁸



Picture of Bill in cockpit at B3. Fig. 8. Woodcock, Vivian. [1944]. Photograph. From: *RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*. Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire: The 193 Squadron Association.



Davidge on a motorcycle. Fig. 9. Darling, Rod. [1944]. Photograph, From: *"Excerpts from the WWII Stories of Rod Davidge (193 Squadron)"*. http://www.amnesta.net/other/index_davidge.html (accessed October 23, 2015.)

In his father's letter it was explained that Switzer arrived home on Christmas Eve, 1944⁶⁹ then was later awarded a Mentioned in Despatches (MID), for valiant conduct and devotion to duty,⁷⁰ and received an honorable discharge in July 1945.⁷¹ He was also added to the King's Honour List.⁷²

⁶¹ Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 74.

⁶² Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 32.

⁶³ Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 33.

⁶⁴ Valerie Switzer, email containing W.A. Switzer War Records, October 11, 2015.

⁶⁵ Ireland, *The Stories are Among Us...*

⁶⁶ Woodcock, *193 Squadron, RAF 'The Fellowship of the Bellows of Brazil Squadron'*, 34.

⁶⁷ Switzer, *My Family 'Switzer'*, 134.

⁶⁸ Jim Davidge, email to author, November 4, 2015.

⁶⁹ Harvey Switzer, personal letters, date unknown.

⁷⁰ "Canadian Honours Chart." National Defense and the Canadian Forces. 2015. Accessed November 6, 2015. <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhr-ddhr/chc-tdh/chart-tableau-eng.asp?ref=MiD>.

After the war, life moved on for both men. Davidge resumed working for the Edson Motor Company before he, Bertha & their oldest child moved to Nelson, BC where he again picked up work as a mechanic and they had their second child, Jim.⁷³ In total the Davidges had four children, Judy, Jim, William and Daniel. In 1946, the family moved out east to Dunnville, Ontario⁷⁴ to help Bertha's father run his grocery store/bakery shop.⁷⁵ Davidge spent the rest of his life in Dunnville,⁷⁶ and become a dedicated member of the No. 6 RCAF Dunnville Museum.⁷⁷ Davidge passed away peacefully at the Haldimand War Memorial Hospital in Dunnville, Ontario on February 21, 2015.⁷⁸

William and Vivian Switzer welcomed twin girls, Joan and Janice, into their family,⁷⁹ and after finishing his pharmacy training at the University of Alberta and obtained his Ph.C. degree,⁸⁰ Switzer began his Edson practice⁸¹ in 1947.⁸² It wasn't until 1955⁸³ that the Switzer family moved to Hinton,⁸⁴ where William opened his own pharmacy on November 30th that same year,⁸⁵ and then in 1958 became Hinton's first mayor.⁸⁶ After three terms as mayor of Hinton, he was elected as the area's Liberal MLA in 1963,⁸⁷ 1965 and 1967.⁸⁸ Switzer enjoyed spending time with his family, hunting, curling and golfing.⁸⁹ He passed away suddenly in Hinton, Alberta on June 30, 1969.⁹⁰

Rodney Davidge and William Switzer, friends through thick and thin, grew up together in Edson, flew side by side through World War Two and survived to continue their unbreakable friendship on home soil. On November 12, 2015 their families worked together with the Edson and District Historical Society to present this story to members of the Edson community.

⁷¹ Switzer, *My Family 'Switzer'*, .

⁷² Switzer, *My Family 'Switzer'*, 133.

⁷³ Jim Davidge, email to author, November 6, 2015.

⁷⁴ Ireland, *The Stories are Among Us...*

⁷⁵ Jim Davidge, email to author, November 6, 2015.

⁷⁶ "In Memory of Rodney 'Rod' Davidge." Ballard Minor Funeral Home. February 21, 2015. Accessed November 7, 2015. http://www.ballardminorfh.ca/tribute/details/284/Rodney_Davidge/obituary.html.

⁷⁷ "In Memory of Rodney 'Rod' Davidge." Ballard Minor Funeral Home. February 21, 2015. Accessed November 7, 2015. http://www.ballardminorfh.ca/tribute/details/284/Rodney_Davidge/obituary.html.

⁷⁸ "In Memory of Rodney 'Rod' Davidge." Ballard Minor Funeral Home. February 21, 2015. Accessed November 7, 2015. http://www.ballardminorfh.ca/tribute/details/284/Rodney_Davidge/obituary.html.

⁷⁹ Hart, In *History of Hinton*, 307.

⁸⁰ Switzer, Bill. *The Story of Bill Switzer Your Liberal Candidate for Edson-Jasper*. Hinton, Alberta: Jasper-Edson Federal Liberal Assn., 1962.

⁸¹ Hart, In *History of Hinton*, 307.

⁸² Switzer, Bill. *The Story of Bill Switzer Your Liberal Candidate for Edson-Jasper*. Hinton, Alberta: Jasper-Edson Federal Liberal Assn., 1962.

⁸³ Switzer, *My Family 'Switzer'*, 134.

⁸⁴ Hart, In *History of Hinton*, 307.

⁸⁵ Hart, In *History of Hinton*, 330.

⁸⁶ Hart, In *History of Hinton*, 305.

⁸⁷ Hart, In *History of Hinton*, 307.

⁸⁸ Hart, In *History of Hinton*, 222.

⁸⁹ Switzer, Bill. *The Story of Bill Switzer Your Liberal Candidate for Edson-Jasper*. Hinton, Alberta: Jasper-Edson Federal Liberal Assn., 1962.

⁹⁰ Switzer, *My Family 'Switzer'*, 135.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=py8wTFPIP1s> (accessed November 6, 2015)
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