

When Stuart Hunt went off to war in 1943, the longtime San Diegan remembers having the same gung-ho, patriotic spirit as the millions of other young men who enlisted to serve in the Allied Forces during World War II.

But when he reluctantly returned to the battlefield again in 1950, as a forward observer during the Korean War, he was a changed man. In his autobiography "[Twice Surreal](#)," the Rancho Bernardo veteran and onetime prisoner of war says he couldn't muster much enthusiasm for a second conflict.

"I was one of those eager young people, ready to go fight for our country, willing to accept that my life was a number, disposable on the cheap," he wrote of World War II. "But I am sure that, for many, after they see the horrors of war, the enthusiasm wears thin or disappears."

Hunt, who turns 94 on April 5, is one of the nation's few surviving veterans who served in both World War II and the Korean War. On the wall in his home office, a glass case filled with ribbons and medals, including a Bronze Star, testifies to his bravery. But when he talks and writes about his experiences, he focuses more on the friends he lost and his own will to survive.

"There is no glory in war," he said, "and often .. you have experience it to fully understand it."

Stuart Hunt, 93, of Rancho Bernardo flew for the Royal Air Force during World War II. He also served in the Army during the Korean War.
(Howard Lipin / San Diego Union-Tribune)

Hunt grew up in Montreal, a dual citizen with an American dad and Canadian mom. His father, Thomas Hunt, ran an airfield in Ontario and young Stuart learned to fly single-engine planes like the Tiger Moth before he was 15.

In August 1941, his father took a job with Ryan Aeronautical and the family moved to San Diego. Hunt, then 18, was sailing with a friend near Coronado when they heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The U.S. Army Air Corps rejected his application because he lacked two years of college credits, so he signed up instead with the Royal Canadian Air Force. After more than a year of training, he was shipped overseas to serve as a flying officer in the U.K.'s Royal Air Force.

Assigned as a tail-gunner to the No. 425 Alouette Squadron in Yorkshire, his crew flew four-engine Halifax Mark II and III bombers on daring night raids over Germany in 1944. Up to one-quarter of the planes that made the bombing runs over Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Berlin, Essen, Kiel and other cities never returned.

“For self-preservation, you didn’t make friends over there because the guy next to you would be gone the next day,” he said.

A few weeks after Hunt’s 21st birthday, his squadron was assigned to bomb the city of Karlsruhe on April 24th, 1944. Hunt had such a bad feeling about the mission, he wrote a goodbye letter to his parents and arranged to have his things shipped home if he didn’t return.

Sure enough, there were problems from the start, with ice on the wings, fuel problems and high winds. On the way home, a German fighter plane shot up the Halifax’s crew and set two starboard engines ablaze.

As the only officer on the plane, Hunt helped each man — some badly injured and one dying — parachute out before he leaped free, landing hard in the waters off the southwest coast of Holland.

With the help of the Dutch Underground, he and some other downed RAF and American pilots made it to Antwerp, and then south into Belgium before they were sent their separate ways and told to find their way to Spain on foot.

Stuart Hunt’s war memoir, “Twice Surreal,” recounts his experiences in two wars and the often-surreal experiences he had.
(Howard Lipin / San Diego Union-Tribune)

Eventually, the Germans caught up with Hunt hiding in a haystack on a farm near Brussels. He would spend the next 13 months as a prisoner of war, enduring extreme hardship and injuries that still trouble him today.

After weeks of interrogations at Belgium’s St. Gilles Prison and various other places, Hunt was held for 36 hours in a prison camp with no name in Weimar, Germany. It wasn’t until much later that he discovered it had been Buchenwald, the Jewish concentration camp. He doesn’t like to talk about what he saw there.

“I knew something was wrong,” he said. “I could see people walking in, but there were bodies going out in trucks.”

From there he was sent to Stalag Luft 3 in Poland, where he was held with 2,000 others in a section of the camp reserved for British officers. He arrived just a few months after the famed “Great Escape,” where a British pilot organized a massive tunneling effort under the camp walls. Seventy-six men escaped, but only three made it to safety. Fifty were executed and conditions for prisoners were quite restrictive by the time Hunt arrived.

Stuart Hunt, 93, holds the POW camp identification he wore during his time as a POW during WWII.

(Howard Lipin / San Diego Union-Tribune)

Germany was losing the war, Russia and Allied armies were closing in and food was scarce. To escape approaching forces, the Germans marched their under-dressed prisoners 52 miles west in blizzard conditions with no water and virtually no food. Three months later, the men were forced to march another 90 miles, once again in below-zero conditions.

Hunt remembers those months as the worst of his life. He struggled with dysentery and lost nearly 60 pounds. His feet were so damaged by frostbite that even today the nerve damage in his feet causes constant shooting pains.

On May 3, 1945, Hunt said he woke up at a prison camp in Lubeck and realized all the guards were gone. Minutes later, the British Second Army rolled in.

When Hunt returned to San Diego, he married the pretty blonde San Diego State co-ed he'd begun dating before the war, Edith Bridget Darsey. They would have three daughters together and 70 happy years of marriage until her death last year.

After the war, Hunt worked as a stock and bonds trader. To make extra money for his growing family, he joined the National Guard. He figured it was worth the risk of being called up because the nation was weary of war.

But in 1950, the call came. Because the newly established U.S. Air Force was flush with pilots, Hunt and his fellow WWII "retreads" were assigned to Army artillery units as "forward observers," which he describes as a polite phrase for "cannon fodder."

Stuart Hunt's cap shows the two wars he served in as well as the emblem for the Royal Canadian Air Force, which he joined in 1942, since he had dual American and Canadian citizenship.

(Howard Lipin / San Diego Union-Tribune)

Stationed in bunkers along the front lines in North Korea, Hunt called artillery missions at several battles against North Korean and Chinese forces. One of the most memorable and surreal experiences was the Battle of Heartbreak Ridge in September and October of 1951.

The month-long battle resulted in more than 3,700 American and French casualties and an estimated 25,000 North Korean and Chinese casualties. Not

long after, Hunt was assigned to supervise the firing of the war's millionth high-explosive round.

When he finally returned home to his family in late 1952, Hunt knew he was done with war. For the good of his family, he asked for, and was granted, a discharge. Eventually he founded a security products company with Jim Horwood, who he met in officer's training school in 1942 and remained close friends with until Horwood's death in 2008.

When Hunt started writing his [memoir, which is available on Amazon.com](#), he decided to name it "Twice Surreal." The name reflects his experiences in two wars as well as the unimaginable odds he overcame to survive.

"I almost felt like everything that happened over there doesn't seem real," he said this week. "If you read my book you can see why there's really no reason I should be sitting here right now."

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