

The First to Die

First of Two Articles

1923-1940

By
Mike Fix and Rich Forliano

As local historians it is our responsibility to report on the people and events that took place here in town in the context of national and international events. Sometimes as in the case of the next two articles it is necessary to make connections that could or could not have taken place. It is documented that all of the figures mentioned in the next two articles had some connection with this town. We will leave it up to the reader to decide how much contact the first man and woman to die in World War 2 had with World War 1 flying ace Eddie Rickenbacker and how much they were influenced by the speeches of Winston Churchill whose mentor began his career as a teacher in town.

Douglas Van Buskirk was a toddler when Bourke Cochran died. Cochran was the former Eastchester teacher who went on to become one of the greatest orators of his time but even more important the mentor who schooled Winston Churchill in how to make speeches that are today recognized as some of the greatest in the English language. But what would the connection be between the twenty year old American born flier Van Buskirk and the sixty seven year old British Prime Minister Churchill? It is a long story.

Charles Harold Van Buskirk was an affluent, handsome, and successful businessman who was the very image of the elite between the world wars who resided with his wife Evelyn and several children in Bronxville. Both Charles and Evelyn were Olympic athletes who competed in 1924, 1928, and 1932. While in Europe the Van Buskirks learned about the hate filled rhetoric of Hitler and his fascist tactics. From that point on the VanBuskirks would warn anyone who would listen about the upcoming Nazi menace.

Their second son, Douglas, listened very carefully to these warnings. Douglas also probably fell under the spell of World War One Flying Ace Eddie Rickenbacker who lived in the village of Bronxville. Douglas longed to fly and use these dreamed of skills to combat the Nazi onslaught that would take over Europe. By the time Douglas graduated from high school, Nazi Germany was already on the move. Hitler had already taken over Austria and had annexed a part of Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland. In 1939 Britain, France, and the Soviet Union had entered World War but a year later the Nazis had control over France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark.

Douglas wanted to join the fight against Hitler but American laws known as the Neutrality Acts imposed harsh penalties for fighting. The penalties were a \$1000 fine, jailing for years, and the

revocation of citizenship. A nineteen year old Douglas Van Buskirk defied these laws, volunteered for the Royal Canadian Air Force and learned to fly.

At the same time that Van Buskirk was learning to fly Winston Churchill became Prime Minister of Britain and for a time the only belligerent leader in the free world able to stand up, speak out against, and fight Hitler and his fascist allies. It should not be forgotten that Churchill learned his legendary skills as an orator from a former Eastchester teacher named Bourke Cochrane. While America was still trapped by an isolationist policy that had cost Douglas Van Buskirk his citizenship and classified him as a criminal, Churchill took over a country that was contemplating capitulation to the Nazis. On May 13, 1940 he made the first of his many memorable speeches to the House of Commons.

“It must be remembered that we are in the preliminary stage of one of the greatest battles in history, that we are in action at many other points in Norway and in Holland, that we have to be prepared in the Mediterranean, that the air battle is continuous...I would say to the House, as I said to those who have joined this government: "I have nothing to offer but **blood, toil, tears and sweat. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word. It is victory. Victory at all costs - Victory in spite of all terrors - Victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no survival.**”

By the summer of 1940 the situation would grow more desperate. France surrendered; the British army had narrowly escaped capture in Belgium, and was forced to flee the continent. In Britain there was talk of capitulation to Germany. The United States government refused to get involved in the struggle against fascist powers that were taking over the entire eastern hemisphere.

In the next article the story continues. Douglas Van Buskirk, still a fugitive, will leave Canada and fight in the Royal Air Force against Hitler's Luftwaffe, in the Battle of Britain. Churchill will continue to make inspiring speeches to motivate his people to fight what many at that time thought to be an impossible cause.