

CANSOFCOM PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

"LITTLE GIANT KILLER"

THE BILL UNDERWOOD STORY

DR. EMILY SPENCER WITH ROBBIE CRESSMAN



THE CANSOFCOM PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

MISSION

The mission of the Canadian Forces Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) Professional Development Centre (PDC) is to enable professional development within the Command in order to continually develop and enhance the cognitive capacity of CANSOFCOM personnel.

VISION

The vision of the CANSOFCOM PDC is to be a key enabler to CANSOFCOM headquarters, units and Special Operations Task Forces (SOTFs) as an intellectual centre of excellence for special operations forces (SOF) professional development (PD).

ROLE

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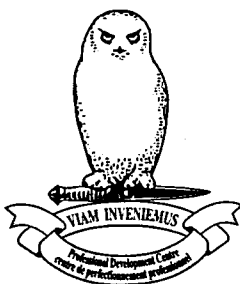
1. develop the cognitive capacity of CANSOFCOM personnel;
2. access subject matter advice on diverse subjects from the widest possible network of scholars, researchers, subject matter experts (SMEs), institutions and organizations;
3. provide additional research capacity;
4. develop educational opportunities and SOF specific courses and professional development materials;
5. record the classified history of CANSOFCOM;
6. develop CANSOF publications that provide both PD and educational materials to CANSOF personnel and external audiences;
7. maintain a website that provides up-to-date information on PD opportunities and research materials; and
8. assist with the research of SOF best practices and concepts to ensure that CANSOFCOM remains relevant and progressive so that it maintains its position as the domestic force of last resort and the

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Dr. Emily Spencer with Robbie Cressman



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FOREWORD

I am delighted to introduce the eleventh monograph produced by the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) Professional Development Centre (PDC). *“Little Giant Killer”: The Bill Underwood Story* contributes to the PDC’s vision of creating a series that provides quality articles that address topics pertinent to CANSOFCOM personnel and that are also of general interest to a wider audience, including the military community at large, military and civilian decision-makers, international allies, as well as the Canadian public. In this case, by highlighting the life of the unofficial “godfather” of Canadian unarmed combat and paying tribute to a veteran of both world wars, this monograph also serves to preserve part of our military heritage.

It is thus my pleasure to introduce *“Little Giant Killer”* written by Dr. Emily Spencer with the assistance of Robbie Cressman. This volume looks at an, arguably, unique Canadian style of unarmed combat (or martial arts) that Bill Underwood developed throughout the 20th century. In doing so, it also provides details about the incredible life that he led. Corporal Underwood developed his Combato and Defendo unarmed combat and self-defence systems and instructed them to military and law enforcement during the Second World War and its aftermath. Although not always documented, anecdotal evidence also appears to support the contention that Underwood trained Allied special operations forces (SOF) operators during this period as well. Moreover, Underwood’s techniques and legacy live on as many law enforcement agencies and SOF personnel continue to train today on the philosophical tenets of his initial discipline through the teaching of Robbie Cressman, who makes an understanding of this history imperative in teaching his personal Use of Force and

Unarmed Combat system which reflects an evolution of these skills to meet current contexts.

As always, we hope this publication is both informative and sparks discussion and reflection. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have comments or topics that you would like to see addressed as part of the CANSOFCOM monograph series.

Colonel Bernd Horn, OMM, MSM, CD, PhD
Director
CANSOFCOM Professional Development Centre

PREFACE

Sadly, as the 21st century progresses, the living memory of many 20th century heroes is disappearing as their stories are being pushed to the annals of history. Increasingly fewer witnesses to major events in the first half of the 20th century remain to provide firsthand accounts and, instead, those who seek to learn about the past are forced to rely on secondary or tertiary accounts and whatever documentation exists, which can at times be scarce or without context.

Of course, this situation is not unique to the present and one of the predominant roles of the historian is to analyze the information available within the historical record and to synthesize it in such a way that the final product provides a meaningful narrative of the subject matter. One of the key reasons to embark on this sometimes lengthy and laborious process is to assure that our past is not forgotten and remains interesting and available for future generations.

For those interested in the field of military history, the firsthand accounts and recollections of veterans are rich sources of information and can provide valuable insight into many aspects of the military. Despite the availability of memoirs of many general and flag officers, there are fewer accounts of your “average” soldier. As such, when the opportunity presents itself to hear their stories, it is a shame not to transfer this knowledge into a form that is readably enjoyable.

Such an opportunity presented itself with respect to the life of First World War veteran Corporal Bill Underwood. As you will see within these pages, Bill led a remarkable life and his legacy endures today, partially within the Canadian Special Operations

Forces Command where a modern system of unarmed combat, which has a direct heritage to the work of Bill Underwood, is currently being taught.

While there is no hard, paper evidence in hand at present that directly connects Bill with a Canadian special operations forces organization, circumstantial evidence through Tactical Use of Force trainer Robbie Cressman's research and claims Underwood made directly to associates seem to support rumours of his involvement with the Special Operations Executive (SOE), the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and potentially the British Security Coordination (BSC) during the Second World War. In particular, Bill's contributions to unarmed combat training at Camp X, located near Whitby, Ontario, have been underscored via these means. Additionally, during this period, Bill is credited with having developed and taught a method of open-hand assassination or "wet work" skills so lethal that the material was rumoured to be classified due to liability concerns after the war. It is public knowledge that Underwood deemed his wartime methods too lethal for peacetime, refused to continue to teach the most deadly aspects of his systems and instead amended the style which he then taught to law enforcement agencies and in self-defence classes, often specifically designed for women and seniors. In fact, Bill once recollected how a robber had tried to get the better of one of "Bill's seniors" only to discover, to his detriment, that appearances can be deceiving.

While an original "Killing Syllabus" cannot be produced, there is some verbal evidence to its existence. Certainly Robbie Cressman was convinced of its existence after interviewing several children of men whom had been associated with the aforementioned organizations during the war. While all were sworn to secrecy, apparently some veterans did teach their sons what they believed to be valuable life skills. As these children became adults, some

recognized the need to share their knowledge before it was lost for good. Consequently, an understanding of this unique Canadian history has assisted in propelling Robbie to develop much needed current applications for our law enforcement, government and military professionals.

As Robbie began to study Bill's methods of unarmed combat, he was soon fascinated by the man himself and pursued his passion to find out everything he could about Bill Underwood. While the journey was never easy, over the years Robbie was able to accumulate quite a wealth of information on Bill, including copies of broadcasts that Bill was on, newspaper and magazine articles, recollections that Bill recorded of his experiences during the First World War and, perhaps most importantly, while just missing the opportunity to speak to Bill himself, Robbie was able to interview members of Bill's family, former friends and associates.

The following monograph is based on the material that Robbie collected about Bill. It is a private collection of material and not readily available. Nonetheless, if you ever have the opportunity to watch one of Bill's broadcasts, you would certainly enjoy hearing him speak. It is also important to note that this monograph has only come to fruition because of Robbie's passion and enthusiasm to preserve Bill's legacy. As such, Robbie deserves all the credit in this respect.

Much of the research material is comprised of stories that Bill re-told in the 1970s and early 1980s in various forms and thus raises the issue of how memory affects the interpretation of the past and the meaning of events. While Bill appears to recall his involvement in the First World War with crystal clarity some sixty years after the fact, there is no doubt that the present did shape the lens through which Bill recalled the past. Rather than make the story inaccurate, however, it adds insight into how veterans cope with

their combat experiences and conversely how these experiences in turn shape their lives.

Bill was a man who wanted to have a positive influence on society and he lived a life fuelled with personal honour. *"Little Giant Killer"* is dedicated to preserving this honour and helping CANSOFCOM members to understand a bit of their heritage. As Bill's recollections were focused on the First World War, so too shall this monograph be centred on this monumental event. Importantly though, Robbie has ensured that Bill has a living legacy within CANSOFCOM and thus this monograph will close with a glimpse of a chapter of Bill's heritage that is still just in its infancy.

INTRODUCTION

In 1910, Bill Underwood began what would prove to be a long career in teaching combatives by instructing a non-western boxing and wrestling system in Montreal, Quebec. Importantly, what he taught was not a direct regurgitation of a traditional martial art but was rather an evolving western variation on some Jiu-Jitsu concepts that he had seen demonstrated as a young boy in England. In this sense, a distinct new art form was born. Underwood's new system of martial art became known as "Combato," a system that he would later amend and rename "Defendo," which he described as an "occidental system of self protection."

Combato was the first unarmed combat system taught to Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members during the Second World War. During the conflict, Bill "disappeared" as he went on to teach his special brand of unarmed combat to the shadowy world of special operations forces. In the postwar period he took his amended version, Defendo, and helped to train and establish tactics for Canadian law enforcement agencies (LEA). To this day, elements of Underwood's original methods can be found at the core of postwar techniques taught and this history of our Canadian beginnings are perpetuated both within LEAs, as well as the nation's special operations forces, especially through Tactical Use of Force trainer Robbie Cressman's efforts.

Aside from Bill's incredible achievements in the arena of martial arts / unarmed combat, his personal story is also fascinating. He interacted with many iconic personalities from Harry Houdini and Charlie Chaplin to Buffalo Bill Cody, and even appeared four times on the *Late Night Show with Johnny Carson*. Additionally, a short film of his life, "Don't Mess with Bill," was nominated for an Oscar in 1980.

Nonetheless, Bill is not formally recognized as the godfather of Canadian unarmed combat and, aside from personal stories and Hollywood recordings, he leaves behind little historical record about his life. As such, this monograph tells the story of the “Little Giant Killer,” as Bill was affectionately called, in order to help fill this void and reaffirm Bill’s legacy as the godfather of Canadian unarmed combat.

Early Years

William J. (Bill) Underwood was born on 14 September 1895 in Manchester, England, the youngest of thirteen children. His parents, John Underwood and Ann Flannigan, lived in an extremely modest home in Manchester and, like so many families of that era, lost family members to illness. Bill had only one brother, George, who he remained in touch with for his entire life. His relationships were not so consistent with his eleven sisters, many of whom passed away at a young age or had already started families of their own while Bill was still a young boy.

Tough economic times had the family relocate to Liverpool when Bill was still a very young boy. In many accounts Bill referred to his early Liverpool days as living a bit of a “street rat” existence. His father was a chef by trade and had consistent work during the summer. As such, the summers were a very pleasant time for Bill and George. There was always food and money and they spent a carefree existence swimming and enjoying the warm weather. The other seasons were significantly tougher on the family. Often work was difficult to find and John Underwood struggled with an alcohol addiction which put considerable additional stress on the family.

Bill and George both did what they could to help bring home money to the family. It was not uncommon for them to find

employment in a factory and work the long ten-hour shifts that men did while being potentially whipped by the factory owner for a lack of production. Bill often said that during those days he learned to “live by his wits” and developed a very healthy street sense.

Despite obvious challenges, Bill also did well at school. He acknowledged that he had been regularly “caned” for being a “high-spirited lad” but his school work was generally good and he received awards for penmanship and creative writing.

One of Bill’s jobs during this era, which turned out to be the starting point for his entire life’s work, was as a programme salesman and cue boy for the local Vaudeville Hall in Liverpool. In the early 20th century, people flocked in droves to local theatres such as the Vaudeville Hall to see performances in drama, music, magic and various related entertainment arts. From about 1907 to 1910, Bill sold programmes in front of the hall, attempting to entice the crowd to come in for the show. He also worked backstage calling the performers on and off the main stage for their shows.

Bill often recollected experiences that he had with many of Vaudeville Hall’s great performers. For instance, it was during this period that Bill met Charlie Chaplin. As a child star, Charlie graced the stage singing and acting and Bill spent time with him before and after performances helping him in any way he could be of assistance. Bill also made the acquaintance of Buffalo Bill Cody. Buffalo Bill was essentially the last of the real old American West cowboys who had a live wild west show called “Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West.” Buffalo Bill toured England with his Wild West shows and performed at a variety of venues and was one of the most well-known entertainers in the world during this period. Additionally, Bill was introduced to Harry Lauder, who the former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once said was truly “Scotland’s greatest ambassador.”

One of the lasting friendships that Bill made during this period was with Harry Houdini, arguably one of the world's most legendary escape artists. Bill worked regularly with Harry and even helped him practice a few of his acts, including sawing women in half. Bill fondly recounted stories of Harry taking the time to teach him how to develop his stomach muscles by showing him leg raises and other moves. Harry was famous for challenging anyone to punch him in the stomach as hard as they could and he would handle it with ease, hence demonstrating his muscle development and control. Even into his 80s Bill would actually get down on the floor and stretch himself out to show his developed abdomen and demonstrate how Harry had shown him how to train it. Bill gave such a demonstration in the Oscar nominated short film *Don't Mess with Bill* and also on *The Late Night Show with Johnny Carson*.

There is no doubt that Harry Houdini had an impact on Bill's life. In fact, Bill recalled, often with tears in his eyes, the time when in 1926 he went to visit his old friend at McGill University campus in Montreal, Quebec. Harry had been in Canada performing on a tour that landed him on the McGill campus. Bill, who was living in Montreal in the 1920s, was quite excited to hear that Harry was in town and they initially had a very cheerful reunion. The two had decided to take a walk around the university grounds when a group of young men, of whom a number were boxers, surrounded them and in an "excited teenager" fashion asked Mr. Houdini if they could punch him in the stomach. Barely blinking an eye, Harry turned to oblige them. He contracted his muscle and a couple of boys did their worst but to no avail. Then, when Harry turned away to continue his walk with Bill, a "smart alec" young man in the crowd turned back to Harry and punched him with everything he had. Harry, who had not set his stomach muscles for the blow, doubled-over and dropped to the ground where he lay for a moment. Bill, reaching down to offer his friend a hand asked if he was hurt. Harry responded that he would be alright and the

two continued their stroll around the campus. Obviously, Bill was incredibly saddened to learn that a week later Harry dropped dead of peritonitis in a hospital in Detroit. Clearly, as Bill remarked, the punch had done some damage – during the autopsy the doctors had even discovered that Harry’s appendix had actually moved to the opposite side of his abdomen.

While Bill’s friendship with Harry Houdini was no doubt influential, none of the people he met at the Vaudeville Hall would have as much of an impact as Japanese traditional Jiu-Jitsu masters Yukio Tani and Tara Maki. This story begins with the father of hybrid martial arts, Edward Barton Wright.

Edward Barton Wright was the son of a British railway engineer who had travelled the world engaged in his trade. As such, Edward grew up exposed to other cultures, including Japanese culture. While in Japan from 1893-1897, he had trained in a number of styles of Jiu-Jitsu which included Tenjin Shin’yo Ryu Jiu-Jitsu and Kodokan Judo. During this period, Edward had formed a close relationship with Yukio Tani, a young martial art instructor who was barely twenty years old. Tani had trained for years in Tenjin Shin’yo Ryu Jiu-Jitsu.

Engulfed, with the entrepreneurial spirit, Edward had a dream of creating his own martial art system, which he would eventually call “Baritsu,” and he invited young Tani to come to Great Britain as an instructor. As the story goes, in 1900, when Yukio Tani stepped off the boat on British soil, he turned to those around him and stated that if he was ever in a match with any man in England that he could not best within three minutes, then he would get on the next available boat back to Japan, never to return. Tani was never defeated to anyone’s knowledge.

From 1900 to 1903 Edward Barton Wright’s Baritsu School of Arms and Physical Culture was in operation at 67B Shaftesbury Avenue

in London's Soho district. Although seemingly a venture destined for success, two issues had unfortunately been overlooked. Primarily, the effects of racism proved to be stronger than originally considered and many were reluctant to train or associate at all with a foreigner, especially one of Japanese descent. Secondly, a general lack of knowledge or exposure to what Jiu-Jitsu was or what Eastern martial arts had to offer severely limited numbers of those wanting to participate. Despite his best efforts, Edward closed the doors to his Baritsu school in 1903.

When the Baritsu School of Arms and Physical Culture closed in 1903, Tani needed to decide whether to remain in Great Britain or return to Japan. Although his three-year employment with the Baritsu school had ended, he had met numerous people, many with connections in the boxing and wrestling communities. In particular, William Bankier would make his decision easier.

William Bankier, who carried the stage name of "Strongman Apollo: The Scottish Hercules," was a wrestler who was involved in the Vaudeville circuit throughout England. William was known for performing some very entertaining feats. For example, he would harness lift an elephant as one trick and for another roll backwards over a chair while holding a 65 pound weight in each hand.

William and Tani had met at the Baritsu School of Arms and Physical Culture where Strongman Apollo had been beaten by Tani in a number of matches. William, always in good spirits about the defeats, was fascinated by how a mere five foot tall man could make such quick work of him. As the two had become friends, when William heard that Tani was out of a job he came to him with the idea of developing an act for the Vaudeville circuit. And thus Jiu-Jitsu hit the Vaudeville circuit where our protagonist, Bill Underwood, was exposed to its mystique and potential.

From the very first time Bill saw a non-western boxing and wrestling form of hand-to-hand combat he was fascinated. Bill was mesmerized by Yukio Tani and his contemporary Tara Maki. Bill, who would be only 5'3" as an adult, was amazed by these "little men" who were capable of easily beating the largest of western competitors. He had found his inspiration.

Bill reached out to Tani and Maki, exchanging tea and cigarettes for discussions on the physical techniques they were using and very quickly a friendship developed. Important to note is that Bill Underwood did *not* take Jiu-Jitsu lessons from Tani and simply transplant those skills into a new system. At the time Bill was only twelve years old and Tani and Maki were only in town for a short period of time. Rather, Bill was a child who had some techniques shown and explained to him. It was from this introduction that Bill began to develop a unique system of martial art with a Western mindset behind it but some exposure to Eastern practices. Bill put his own spin, signature and approach on his work, which clearly showed a difference in thought between the East and West. In essence, Bill began to develop a Western approach to self-defence, unarmed combat, joint-locking and control tactics.

Of course, inspiration and character building came from more than just the Vaudeville Hall. Bill very often expressed that as a boy he had been involved with some of the first Boy Scout groups to ever be put together by Lord Baden-Powell in England and had achieved a "King Scout" ranking. He was also quick to comment that while a Scout he had made a pledge to never drink or smoke until he was 21, at which time he always noted that he had lost any desire for either of these activities. The Boy Scout experience was a very positive experience in young Billy's life and he always claimed that it had a deep impact on his character and view of life.

While Bill's life from 1895 to 1910 was difficult, it was filled with many interesting experiences and these years certainly played a significant role in forming the young man he grew into. Bill continued to work at the Liverpool Vaudeville Hall until 1910. By then his home situation had deteriorated and Bill's father was beginning to get physically aggressive with the boys. Additionally, the economic situation was not improving. As such, Bill's mother reached out to her brother in Montreal, Quebec and it was determined that it would be best for the boys to move to Canada to live with their uncle, Reverend Martin Luther (Cyril) Flannigan.

Consequently, Bill, George and their mother packed what little they had and boarded a boat for the six-week crossing of the Atlantic. The trip was not an easy one and all three of them experienced seasickness and went hungry for the majority of the voyage.

Glad to land and finally disembark in Montreal, they were met by their uncle, Cyril Flannigan, who had made very ample arrangements for them to begin their life in the new world. Cyril was a minister in the Anglican Church of Ascension and it was this environment that served as a backdrop for the next phase of Bill's life. The majority of Bill's time was spent around the church, its activities and the local Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Bill attended services, sang in the choir and eventually taught Sunday School classes. Moreover, the local YMCA provided the perfect opportunity for Bill to engage in every kind of sport imaginable. Both basketball and soccer stood out as his favourites. Bill, who played in the church basketball league, was known for being very quick and agile.

Additionally, Bill had been working at developing his own hand-to-hand combat method and he began to demonstrate it to others at the gym. It was not long before Bill was mixing it up with those who were boxing and wrestling and was showing them his methods of locking joints, etc.

Between 1910 and 1914 Bill had the privilege of living a healthy, happy childhood and was likely far better off than he would have been had he remained in England. It was during these years that he met the love of his life, Kathleen Lockwood. The Lockwood family also attended the Anglican Church and Bill was smitten by her. The two would eventually marry but this heartwarming tale shall remain their family's to tell.

Source: Robbie Cressman's Personal Collection



First World War

The Beginning

On 21 September 1914, at Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Valcartier, nineteen-year-old Bill enlisted in the Canadian Army. Bill was assigned Regimental Number 25899 and attached to the 14th Battalion, Grenadier Guards of the Royal Montreal Regiment. His mother was listed as his next of kin at a 2289 Park Avenue address in Montreal.

Being the high-spirited youth that he was, Bill jumped at the chance to join the forces and was given the role of a bugler within his outfit. According to Bill, the 14th Battalion was composed of four companies, each with members drawn respectively from the 14th Montreal Regiment, Grenadier Guards from Montreal, the Victoria Rifles from Montreal and the 65th Caribanniers.

Bill trained at Valcartier and learned the Army ropes until his unit departed for the European theatre where they eventually set-up camp at Salisbury Plains. Here the Montreal Regiment was folded into the Highland Brigade. It was at this location that Bill began to experience military life in a foreign land, which left him with a million and one stories to tell. In fact, when recording his memoirs he noted that he already had 20 hours of tape about the Great War and was not even close to being done with the story.

One story that Bill liked to recount of his time on Salisbury Plains was of the “mock battles,” a training exercise in which blank ammunition was supposed to be utilized. But, as Bill pointed out, “very often they would get the ammunition mixed up or they just didn’t know the difference.” It was the job of the buglers to hold the leads or bridles of the horses that belonged to the commanding officers during these exercises. On more than one occasion the group of them were either standing or sitting down in the

grass amidst the sounds of bullets driving themselves into the trees around them. They would immediately dive for cover shaking their heads at the insanity of it all. Sometimes the horses were even hit by incoming bullets.

On 15 February 1915, Bill's unit set out for France. After a brief training period they marched to Bristol and then Avenmouth on River 7 and loaded onto an old captured German ship called the "Ostriland," or "an old tub" as Bill described it, which was loaded with up to 2,000 men, 500 horses and a few early motorized trucks. Once on board, the buglers or "young boys" as they were often perceived to be, scurried to find comfortable spots up and out of the way of the general flow of traffic. Bill and a couple of his young comrades found a nice comfortable spot way up on top of the horses' hay just underneath one of the top hatches.

Yet, nobody could find shelter from the incredible rolling and swaying of the boat in rough waters, which was exacerbated by the movement and shuffling of the horses in their stalls. As the ship moved, they moved, which made life very miserable. Bill said he would never forget the feeling of being on his knees for hours and even days just praying he would not die from seasickness. In a word, it was "horrible," Bill recollected. The seasickness was so bad that thirty-six horses died. On one occasion a horse fell over the railing and landed on a soldier below, killing him as well.

It was a dreaded thing to have to pick-up the bugle and play the Last Post for a soldier who had died on the ship when you were swamped with the effects of seasickness. Bill recounted that it took every bit of strength you could muster to blow the horn. He felt that playing the song alone would kill him.

Nonetheless, from time to time the monotony would momentarily break as young soldiers would attempt to find themselves a little mischief such as shooting at porpoises off of the deck of the ship

with Ross Rifles. Notably, when the Ostriland finally arrived in St. Nassure after their five-day voyage, they were told that they were over thirty-six hours late.

Another memory that stood out for Bill was the passing out of multi-coloured goat skin coats upon their arrival. Senior officers were passing these out to the soldiers as they exited the boat. The soldiers looked at themselves in bewilderment as they received the coats. Bill could not hold back a chuckle when he recounted that the big, fluffy coats had them all walking around looking like big stuffed bunny rabbits.

It was at this point that they saw their first "Germans." They were captured soldiers that were put to work by the French doing menial work around the docks. Bill recalled the intense hatred that they all seemed to automatically feel toward them.

Once grounded, fed and regrouped the soldiers assembled for transport via railway car to their next destination. They piled the whole Battalion into old freight railway cars along with the horses. Bill automatically darted to one of the corners to afford him some privacy and perhaps safety. The location had its pitfalls as well, however. It was February, cold and wet. Being in the corner, where it was less boisterous, also meant that you were further from the generosity of locals who often handed in bread, tea and coffee at the various stations on the way to Hazebrook. Bill said he would always remember the cold and hunger, as well as the noise of the guns in the distance. It was felt that when they arrived, they would already be more dead than alive.

Once in Hazebrook they assembled and began to prepare for "forced marches" that would take them closer to the fighting. They assembled their kit and would walk for an hour, followed by a five-minute break. The break would always go by lightning fast.

Bill noted very clearly how much kit they initially had and how much they soon abandoned. Most of them felt that they were quite well supplied with combs, hairbrushes, tooth brushes, extra socks and underwear and a whole variety of such items, which, due to the amount of walking, were quickly seen as luxury items that could be discarded. As Bill recollected, it was just too much of a hassle to cart these things along. In the end Bill settled for a coat, ground sheet, water bottle and a blanket.

From Hazebrook they marched up to Sossalee. While in that area they were billeted in barns. This experience marked Bill's first true exposure to the human cost of war. The farms were littered with the dead carcasses of both men and horses for almost as far as the eye could see. There were fields of frozen corpses in various states of decay. As Bill recalled, the scene was completely "unreal, horrific." One day when Bill was out he found a boot sticking up and out of the ground and began, out of sheer boredom, to kick it. One of the farmers who was passing by him encouraged him to put a bit more effort into it. As he did, the boot broke away from the ice revealing a frozen foot and leg attached to it. Bill would later comment that he would never forget the chill that ran up and down his spine from the sight of it.

It was at this location that Bill was also introduced the concept of "souvenir hunting." It became a game amongst the young boys to see who could collect the best souvenirs of German corpses. A German helmet, if you could get one, was considered a top prize. If you had one you could trade it for almost anything or keep it for yourself if you were determined enough to carry it around with you. It was common practice for these young lads to pilfer through a corpse to get what they could as it all had value in those human wastelands.

As their group continued along on their journey to reach the fighting, the first place they hit was Armenteers. Bill considered this

to be his first full view of active war and the experience left him awestruck. The sounds of raging guns were constant and the night skies were always lit with the flashes of gunfire and bombs.

The first night Bill's outfit was in Armenteurs they were billeted in an old asylum. Once things began to get quiet, he and an equally young colleague decided to slip out of the building and walk toward the action. They walked quietly and carefully for some time until the fighting was in full view. They had reached the trenches. At one point a British sentry stopped them and in a curt British style barked: "So where do you think you chaps are going?" Bill quickly responded: "Sir, we are heading to the trenches to meet with Captain [a fictitious name was provided] who has asked to see us." "Pass on!" was the sharp, matter-of-fact response. Once at a line of trenches they sat and watched the action ahead of them for a number of minutes before retreating. Back at the asylum they lay down in some hay and went to sleep acting as if they had never ventured out.

In retrospect Bill shook his head at the audacity of their little mission. They could have easily been killed walking into circumstances they knew nothing about. Additionally, had they been caught they likely would have been shot for their actions.

In the morning one of their commanding officers walked over to Bill and their young group and admitted to them that he was not sure what to do with them. The unit did not particularly have a need for buglers but he also fully recognized that they were young boys and thus not yet full soldiers. In retaliation, Bill piped-up and told him that he and one of his associates had in fact left the building the night before and ventured into the trenches. The commanding officer's eyes grew as big as saucers. He was immediately alarmed but was making very visible attempts to keep calm. He reminded them that they had better not say a word about having done so

or they would be court-martialed and shot and that he probably would be as well for having allowed it to happen. They all agreed to “keep it dark” and that was that, except from that moment on the commanding officer began to treat them like real soldiers.

Sent Out to the Field

The night Bill received his field kit as a full soldier the commanding officer made the decision to split the battalion in half and to send them into action with a currently active combat group. Half of the battalion went in with the Leinster Regiment and the next night the other half went in with the North Staffords.

Within 24 hours, Bill had one of the most traumatic experiences he would have during the entire war. Even as he retold the tale years later, you could still hear the stress in his voice. As the story goes, returning from the trenches, Bill got up the next morning and went outside looking for a place to wash-up as no such facilities were readily made available to the soldiers. As he was rounding the outside of a building he heard the sound of a huge volley of rifle fire. Bill almost jumped out of his skin. Looking to see what was going on, he found his way through a hole in a wall which looked onto the scene of the action. In front of him was a stake with a limp body hanging from it. Soldiers were walking towards it. They untied the corpse and began to drag it to the side.

It turns out that what Bill had witnessed was three British soldiers being court-martialed and shot in front of the troops. Bill recalled that it was all that he could do to just stand there with his mouth hanging open as he watched the men drag the second and then third man forward for execution. The men were tied to the stake with a white disk over their heart and a blindfold over their eyes. After each volley the Provost Sergeant would walk up to each body and put a final bullet through its head.

With that horror etched into his memory, Bill moved to Fleur Bay and then on to Divinchi. During this time Bill witnessed fruitless campaigns where thousands upon thousands of men were lost in an attempt to gain seemingly worthless pieces of wasteland. It all seemed very hopeless to him but there was nothing that he could do about it.

Ypres

In April 1915, Bill's unit had moved to Ypres and connected with the French army. As they settled into the trenches they met French and Polish soldiers. The Germans had posted a big cotton sign that said "Von Hindenburg is coming." In retaliation, the Allies grabbed some wood and put up another sign that told them what they could do with Mr. Von Hindenburg when he arrived. The two groups continued to antagonize each other with bullets and verbal harassment. At one point a German voice called out... "Any of you Canadians from Vinnipeg? I was a waiter in Vinnipeg." Yet, despite brief moments of camaraderie between the opposing forces, the fighting continued.

Bill's unit was pulled from the trenches on 21 April and withdrew to the village of St. Julian. As such, the following day when the gas attacks commenced, Bill was lying on his stomach in a field enjoying the sunshine as he penned a letter to his mother. The next thing he knew a terrific bombardment began from the Germans. In the distance, Bill could make out what looked like a great rain cloud.

They were then ordered to "stand to" which meant they had their Ross Rifle in their hand, a trenching tool, a water bottle, a haversack and 300 rounds of ammunition. They walked up the St. Julian road, as Bill would later say "as so many sheep to the slaughter," and entered the fields to the sight of the Algerians racing back towards them in a panic. Bill's unit attempted to stop the Algerians

and tried to rally them back into the fight. The Algerians, however, were convulsing and gasping for air. In the trenches, the Canadian troops tied their handkerchiefs around their faces, dug in and fought back. The retreating French and Algerians were shot in the back as they ran. Many were severely injured or dying. There was certainly no lack of confusion. With their handkerchiefs on their mouths, the Canadian troops still did not understand what was happening. German volley after volley launched in their direction and “the poor devils” as Bill would later say, did not have much chance. In the end, only 32 men of approximately 200 remained.

In the distance, all they could see was this great big green cloud slowly creeping across the ground towards them. What they could not see were the German soldiers behind the cloud that were releasing the gas from tanks on their backs. One of the soldier’s in Bill’s group was a chemist and once getting a whiff of the gas recognized it as chlorine. He quickly instructed the men to urinate on a cloth and tie it over their face to help prevent their lungs from burning. The soldiers continued to dig in to their position and began to fire back at any German that came close enough. They did all that was in their power to hold their ground. The result was a three night, two day battle that ended in a standstill. Although British reinforcements eventually arrived, the Canadians, as well as Belgians in the line, had saved the day.

Capture and Escape

Not surprising given the chaos and uncertainty emanating from the Ypres gas attack, there was a tremendous sense of confusion and a lack of leadership. Indeed, Bill recollected feeling that the group of soldiers that he found himself with in the trenches simply did not know what to do in their dire circumstances. Amidst this indecision and inaction, and particularly within the vacuum of leadership, Bill decided to break from this tattered group and attempt to find another group of Canadian soldiers to join.

Traveling at night, confused, exhausted and trying to make sense of his surroundings, he stumbled on to the back of a German trench where he was soon discovered.

Over the next two days Bill was a captive but, aside from the occasional taunting, he was generally treated well. To Bill it seemed like the small group of Germans was also in somewhat of a state of confusion. The leading soldier was a big, older man and he continually ridiculed Bill for being a Canadian "paid" soldier or mercenary. Somehow they had the idea that Canadians making \$1.10 a day (about twice as much as the Germans) were extremely well paid for their soldiering and thus there for profit rather than an ideological commitment to the war. To no avail, Bill tried to explain that this was not the case. The leading soldier then asked Bill what his job was back home and how much he earned. The German concluded that he should probably go to Canada and attempt to find work at the end of the war.

Despite being generally treated well, Bill was simply waiting for an opportunity to escape. For two days he helped to dress wounded Germans and then Bill's opportunity arose. He was left alone with two young Germans at which point he engaged them in hand-to-hand combat. His speed, surprise and strength made him the easy victor and he fled the German camp, leaving at least one of the young German's dead from this encounter.

Bill met up with a fellow Canadian and they holed up in a farm house for a much deserved meal and night's sleep. In the morning he ventured out to familiarize himself with his surroundings. They were in the thick of the fighting and it was not long before Bill saw two British troops and their mule obliterated as a shell hit the group. Then, soon after and much to his surprise, he heard bands playing. "It was like something out of fantasy," Bill recalled. Bill made out a whole British Battalion coming up the road in full

ceremonial marching order. The band was playing, the officers were on horseback and, as Bill thought, the whole Regiment was marching “as if sheep to a slaughter.” Bill dashed up to the lead men who were on motorcycles. “Good God man... you are leading them into annihilation!” Bill exclaimed as he explained that they were only a couple of miles from the German trenches and that the gas and other attacks were in extremely close proximity. The column halted, a couple of the leading men listened to what Bill had to say and while they were discussing it and attempting to decide what to do Bill remembers looking-up and seeing a German “toeb” drop a flare. Then it started. Shells began to rain down upon the road and Bill watched with horror as the entire unit was annihilated. Men and horses moved in a panic futilely attempting to find cover. Body parts and equipment were thrown in all directions. Bill described it as a “God awful experience” and was eternally bothered that such mistakes could be made. To Bill, it seemed like whole units were sent in various directions with no knowledge of how close they were to full contact with the enemy.

Survival of the Fittest

War often calls for ingenuity and strength that soldiers may not have known was capable of them prior to conflict. Bill quickly learned that to survive, he needed to employ these skills. One way that he did so was to decapitate enemy soldiers in the trenches with piano wire. At night, Bill and others would slip out of their trenches and stealthily creep up to enemy positions with piano wire firmly in their hands. They would loop it through their hands and drop it over a man’s head. They found very quickly that, especially with narrow or thin wire, it was a fast and clean job. Seemingly devoid of emotion some sixty years later, Bill recalled, “Oh... the head often came right off!”

Going Home

About nine months after the battle of Ypres, Bill was hospitalized for appendicitis. Bill always maintained that this in fact very likely saved his life in theatre as shortly thereafter his unit was involved in a battle from which few survived.

According to Bill's First World War medical records on 13 February 1916 he was diagnosed with appendicitis. On 3 March he was officially admitted to Norfolk War Hospital at Thorpe, Norwich. By 13 March, Bill had his appendix removed and he recovered in hospital until 7 April. Then he was transferred to the Canadian Convalescent Hospital at Hillingdon House in Uxbridge where he remained for another twenty days. On 16 May 1916 Bill returned to Montreal aboard the *S.S. Scandinavian*.

Bill Takes to the Sky

It did not take Bill long to return to the military. Later that year he volunteered for training for the Canadian wing of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) recruitment section. The initial RFC operation had three main training stations: Camp Borden, Deseronto and North Toronto. North Toronto had three aerodromes: Long Beach, Leaside and Armour Heights. Bill spent the majority of his time at Long Beach learning how to fly and working with the staff of the organization. He also helped train young pilots. While he did not serve outside of Canada as part of the RFC, he did come into contact with legendary fighter pilots such as Billy Bishop and Roy Brown.

Bill was quick to share memories of his time with the RFC. He would often comment on how rudimentary the original planes were, with only an altimeter and a gas gauge as instruments. In fact, Bill used to poke a little fun at their original flying outfit with their scarves and goggles. As Bill was arguably short, at 5'3" he would actually

have to stand on the seat with the stick between his legs so he could reach up and load ammunition into the machine gun while flying. Certainly this was no easy task but as Bill said, “you got used to it!” Bill also liked to talk about the daredevil wing walking stunts that he and some of his fellow flying brothers would engage in. If it were not for the photographic evidence, it would certainly be hard to believe some of these seemingly outlandish stories. Bill stayed in the RFC corps until the end of the war. He was without doubt proud of his service and was in fact much later cremated wearing his RFC jacket.

The Interwar Years

With the return to peace, Bill married and focused on starting a family and establishing himself in a business career. By the end of 1920, Bill had packed-up his Toronto life and moved back to Montreal. Here he worked for a Montreal area newspaper in a marketing capacity. He got so good at it that he attempted to open his own newspaper but quickly discovered that it was nearly impossible to compete with the large city papers. Next he had the idea of selling advertising to be projected before movies were shown at the local theatres. While it is now common, this concept was novel in the 1920s.

Eventually, Bill and his wife Kathleen made the decision to move back to Toronto. Soon the family saw the addition of three beautiful babies: Audrey, then Shirley, then Pat. During these years Bill worked for a variety of local companies usually in a marketing or advertising type of role. Bill was not suited for the standard nine-to-five type job, however. He found it very difficult to remain interested and motivated day after day and thus did not stay long in any one position.

The Great Depression saw Bill, Kathleen and their young brood struggle, like many Canadians, to keep afloat. Nonetheless, they

remained generous to their family. At one point, the family, living in a small apartment, also undertook the care of a sick uncle. The Underwoods were certainly a generous and thoughtful group.

During the 1930s Bill continued to struggle through a variety of jobs. In between employment periods, Bill would always go back to teaching self-defence, his “Combato” system as he later called it. Although Bill loved these periods of self-employment, Kathleen continued to pressure him to settle for steady, regularly paid employment.

Nonetheless, during the mid-1930s, Bill pushed very hard to promote the self-defence training system that he had developed. Soon local papers began to feature his exploits and he even traveled to New York and New Jersey to teach Combato.

Teaching Women’s Self-protection Classes

During the mid-1930s, Bill began to increasingly focus on teaching self-protection classes to the general public. In particular, Bill began to focus on teaching women. It is likely that Bill chose this avenue as it aligned with his passion for physical education and his entrepreneurial bent, as well helped to at least partially fulfil his wife’s desire for him to have steady, gainful employment.

Working with Special Government Agencies

While it remains difficult to fully outline this period in Bill’s career, there is evidence that suggests that he was involved in hand-to-hand combat demonstrations at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York City where he showcased his Combato system. There is also plausible oral evidence that even prior to the outbreak of the Second World War Bill was “recruited” to work with US government organizations as an instructor.

World War II

During the war, Bill continued to develop his Combato system and was a key instructor for the Canadian Armed Forces in central and eastern Canada. He also trained others to teach his hand-to-hand defence system. Moreover, he continued to work in the US, traveling as a mobile unarmed combat consultant providing training to instructors.

Bill's recognition as an expert in hand-to-hand combat was not instantaneous, however. In 1939, at the age of 44, Bill was turned down from active duty and thus, to fulfil his sense of patriotism, he was forced to seek a Reserve or Militia role. As such, he joined The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada and spent the coming days attending parade nights and training as directed.

It was not long before Bill tired of the routine, however, and requested a more challenging position. At that point, Bill announced to the Commanding Officer that he had a better style of hand-to-hand combat that he could teach and that at 5'3" and 44 years of age he could easily beat any one of the younger, bigger recruits. Subsequently, three of the biggest and strongest recruits were selected to challenge Bill. Each one ended up in the hospital. From then on Bill was permitted to hold training sessions for the recruits. Soon word had spread to other local units who also sought Bill's skills. Combato marked a significant change from the more standardized forms of western boxing and wrestling which were taught in North America. Moreover, once demonstrated, its usefulness to combat operations was undeniable.

Notably, Bill did not operate in any "official" capacity as an Unarmed Combat Instructor for either the Canadian, American or British forces. It appears rather that he volunteered for such duties. As such, his official military record is devoid of information

on the subject. Additionally, it seems that Bill became involved with special operations-like forces and thus there is a dearth of official records. Interestingly, in the 1980s when Bill was asked how he had managed to work with the US Rangers during the Second World War, he replied, "Simply by going to the Pentagon and explaining the whole thing. I believe in going to the top." Lastly, Bill was not concerned with gaining perpetuity through his teachings and instead, like many at the time, focused on the effect he was having rather than worry about whether or not his name would stand the test of time. Consequently, even though his system was widely used, it may not have been referenced as such. Nonetheless, it is possible to piece together some of Bill's Second World War contributions.

Regardless of whom he was teaching, most who witnessed Bill's first session with any group retell the same story. Bill, unimposing as he was at only 5'3", would walk to the centre of the room, identify the biggest and strongest looking individual in the room, and bark at him to come at him with all he had. Most watched stunned, fearing the older man would soon meet his demise. And then it would start. The big guy would be literally thrown through the air as Bill would order another one up to receive a similar punishment.

By 1941, Bill had begun to teach regularly in New York and New Jersey as well. In particular, Bill recollected that he had trained both soldiers and instructors for American Marauders and then Rangers at Camp Butner. According to many veterans, Bill was also involved with the New York Police Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the US Air Force. For the most part, however, Bill trained the trainers, not the troops and consequently his name is not universally known amongst veterans who were taught his style of hand-to-hand combat.

Source: Robbie Cressman's Personal Collection



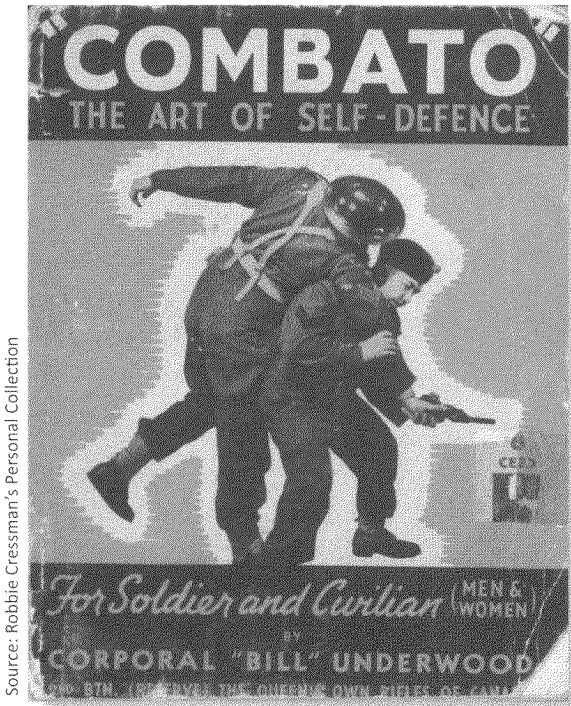
CORPORAL W. J. ("BILL") UNDERWOOD

Earning a Living as a Writer

While much of the work Bill did for militaries and other defence networks was voluntary and performed out of sense of patriotism, there was still the pressing need to support his family. In order to do so, Bill decided to write down his training methods and publish them in book form. In 1943, Bill self-published his first un-armed combat training book, *Combato: the Art of Self-Defence for*

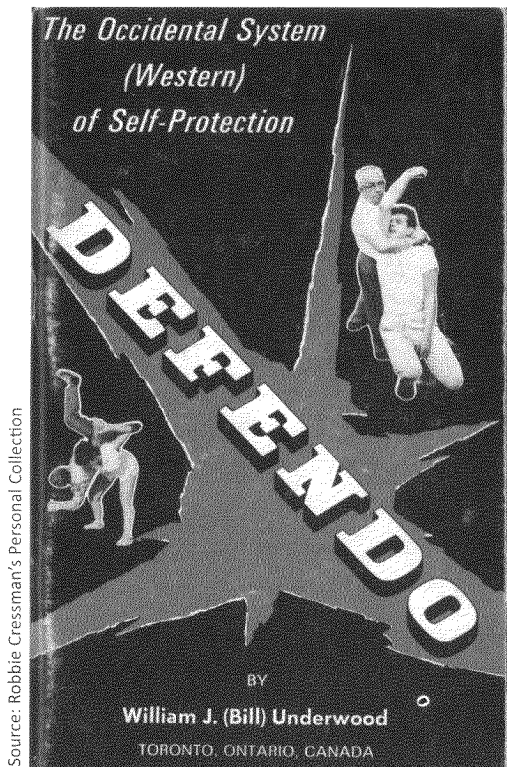
Soldier and Civilian. Combato was designed as a comprehensive, illustrated pocketbook for general use. This marked the first of five books that Bill would publish. Interestingly, as part of Bill's promotional efforts for his Combato system in general and his publications in particular, Bill arranged for public demonstrations of his techniques. A natural salesman, Bill recruited three young women who had learned his Combato techniques to go on the road and perform demonstrations.

In general, the books were intended to educate people on specific techniques one could use to defend oneself against a larger opponent. The books provided a "Western" alternative to Eastern self-defence and martial arts. They were designed to provide a thinking solution to a physical problem, to primacy "brain" over "brawn" as Bill liked to put it.



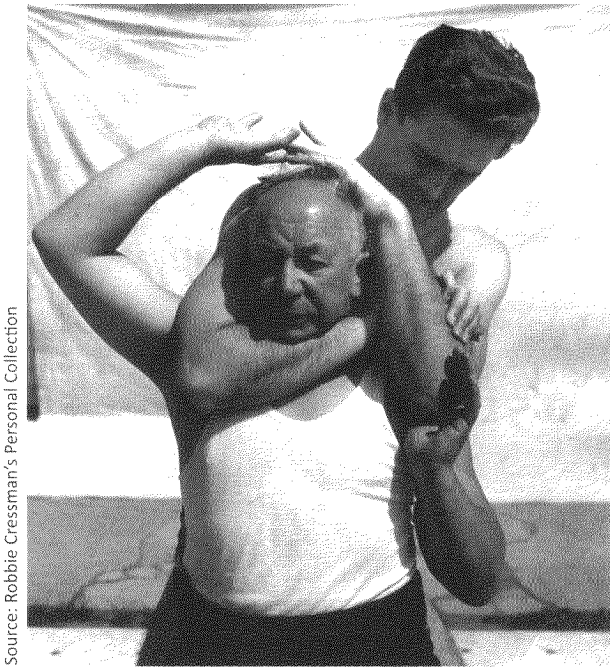
Source: Robbie Cressman's Personal Collection

Often Bill demonstrated how one could use an attacker's weight, strength and momentum against him and thus switch the attacker-victim roles. Notably, Bill viewed self-defence as a science, not a sport. In fact, he much later explained, "I want to reach people who have neither the time nor the inclination to go to the mat with a bunch of speedballs. I can teach anyone from 9 to 90. I've taught blind kids, people with one arm and a man with no legs. If you know five grips, four leverages and 12 nerve pressures, you're home free." As evidence he told the story of a man who had brought his 7-year-old daughter in to learn "some tricks." As he recalled, "the father came home the next night, and said: 'Daddy's a kidnapper – what are you going to do?' Well, she did it. He went to work with a cane for a week."



Postwar

When the war was over, Bill was reluctant to teach many of his most lethal techniques in case the knowledge might be abused. Instead, he adapted his methods and began to teach a peacetime version of Combato that he re-named “Defendo” at the suggestion of one of his daughters. As he explained, “By 1945 I had taken the aggressiveness out of it and made it purely defensive.” He continued to explain, it is the “...answer to all crime. You don’t need muscles; it’s a method whereby nice people learn to take care of themselves.”



Source: Robbie Cressman's Personal Collection

Bill taught Defendo to many LEA during the late 1940s and 1950s, even titling his 1949 book, *Defendo: Police System of Self-Defence*. Bill continued to teach classes for citizens and to hold demonstrations as well.

Yet, it was not until after 51 years of marriage when his beloved wife Kathleen passed away that Bill re-devoted himself to teaching Defendo. Now in his 80s, the world seemed ready for Bill. In fact, 14 million people watched the Oscar nominated short film *Don't Mess with Bill* when it aired on NBC's *Real People* in 1980. Subsequent appearances on *The Late Night Show with Johnnie Carson* and *100 Huntley Street* simply underscored the growing interest in Bill's unique style of self-defence, which was described as "not a martial art from Asia" but rather "a unique, unorthodox, western system developed by a Canadian." As Bill explained, "you can do a lot with a little know-how, because you train your mind and body to work together from the beginning." Most importantly though Bill remarked, "Defendo has given me absolute assurance because it eliminates fear. I think it can do the same for everyone."

Source: Robbie Cressman's Personal Collection



During this period Bill also developed very good personal relationships with Canadian wrestlers Whipper Billy Watson and Bill Flannigan. During one summer at the Toronto Exposition, Bill walked up to Whipper Billy Watson, two time world heavyweight and wrestling champion, who was demonstrating at the Expo and immediately subdued his much larger opponent with a type of joint lock – clearly illegal in a competitive wrestling match but nonetheless effective. The crowd was breathless as the two got up off the ground laughing and smiling.



Source: Robbie Cressman's Personal Collection

Bill's time at the Toronto Exhibition also renewed his connection to the Canadian military. In August 1981, the *Toronto Star* described the scene: "Underwood demonstrates his technique that involves using an opponent's weight and strength against himself daily ... on muscular paratroopers from the Canadian Airborne Regiment. He often has them shrieking in pain ... with his bone-crunching finger holds." Then Captain Clyde Russell of the Canadian Airborne Regiment, and a future Commanding Officer of Joint Task Force 2, remarked, "He's probably one of the foremost experts in the martial arts in the world today." Russell continued, "He's trained soldiers in two wars and done a lot of people in himself." In fact, after his demonstrations at the Toronto Ex, the octogenarian was invited to Petawawa, Ontario to teach Defendo to paratroopers at the base.

For all those who knew him, Bill's death in February 1986 at the age of 90 was without doubt a tremendous loss. For Tactical Use of Force trainer Robbie Cressman, it was also a lost opportunity. Robbie had recently been introduced to Bill's unique system of self-defence and had begun to study its methods and adapt his own unique style of unarmed combat. In missing the chance to speak with Bill directly, Robbie satisfied himself with talking to as many family members as possible and richly devouring any tidbit he could find on the man he believes should be known as the godfather of Canadian unarmed combat.

Continuing a Canadian Legacy

Robbie Cressman is certainly one of the leading advocates for assuring Bill Underwood's place in Canadian history. More than simply wanting to preserve Bill's legacy, however, Robbie, a Tactical Use of Force trainer, wishes to continue to build on the great man's combatives foundational concepts, while incorporating important advances in our understanding of physiology, our current

culture and operational requirements since the system was originally developed in the Second World War era. In fact, Robbie has developed his own unique system of combatives, which he calls the “Immediate Recall High-Stress Combatives Program” which is particularly well suited to current close-quarter combat or “ICQB” requirements. Indeed, Robbie’s system has proven effective and CANSOF units today seek his expertise and training.

Since 2001 Robbie has been researching and preserving memorabilia about Bill Underwood and I would be remiss if I did not once again pay tribute to all of the information that Robbie has contributed to this project. Additionally, the CANSOF community at large owes Robbie thanks both for preserving part of our Canadian heritage and for his continued contributions in the area of close-quarter unarmed combat training.

Source: Robbie Cressman's Personal Collection



Dr. Emily Spencer is the Director Research and Education at the CANSOFCOM Professional Development Centre. She holds a PhD in War Studies from the Royal Military College of Canada and has authored / co-authored or edited numerous books, chapters and articles on the contemporary operating environment. Her research focuses on the importance of cultural knowledge to success in the contemporary operating environment, as well as the role the media plays in shaping understandings of world events.

Robbie Cressman is the President and Chief Instructor of Canadian Use of Force Systems, a Canadian mobile training team focusing on Close-Quarter Combat, Use of Force and Weapon System Integration skills for International Law Enforcement, Government and Military Special Operations Groups. Currently based out of Toronto, Canada, Robbie has spearheaded the research, preservation and perpetuation of Canada's original Unarmed Combatives methods through the life work of Bill Underwood and his Comabto and Defendo systems. Moving this skill-set forward into our present generation, Robbie has created the "Immediate Recall High-Stress Combatives Program" which is being current utilized by many special operations-based organizations.

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