

I was researching the wartime experiences of two air force fliers from Ottawa. They shared one thing in common: they bailed out. Parachutes saved their lives. They are entitled to wear a tiny gold caterpillar with ruby eyes on their lapels.

Jumping from disabled or burning aircraft over land brought membership in the Caterpillar Club – a membership few actively sought. A club member will probably tell you he would rather have never qualified for membership. If it wasn't for the honour....

The Caterpillar Club has no officers, no formal constitution, no formal organization and no meetings.

There are several parachute survivor clubs – Wireworm, Caterpillar, Goldfish and Australia's Roo club.

But the best-known is Irvin's Caterpillar Club.

The Irvin parachute company estimates that more than 100,000 fliers were saved by Irvin 'chutes – a third of them during WW II. Irvin estimates that the exact number of living members is around 4,000.

Stuntman and parachute maker Leslie L. Irvin founded the first Caterpillar Club in 1922. He is credited with making the first free-fall parachute in 1919. He chose the name "Caterpillar Club" in recognition of silk threads in original parachutes and the fact that a caterpillar lowers itself down by a silken thread.

The original Irvin caterpillar pins had red rubies for eyes but the soaring costs soon became prohibitive and synthetic

rubies were substituted. Metal shortages during WW II forced Irvin to substitute a gilt gold pin for a solid gold one.

A flier who parachutes over water is also eligible for membership in the Goldfish Club – an informal freemasonry of downed pilots, which originated with P.B. Cow & Co, one of the world's largest manufacturers of air-sea rescue equipment.

Each Goldfish Club member was presented with a heat-sealed, waterproof membership card and an embroidered blazer crest. Because of a shortage of metals, the badges were fabricated from redundant dinner suits collected in response to a *Daily Express* appeal by columnist William Hickey.

Actress Mae West cabled a Goldfish reunion in Britain that she "took great pride" that the Royal Air Force had adopted her name for their life jackets.

One of the best-known Goldfish Club members is British businessman/adventurer Richard Branson. He jumped from a trans-Atlantic balloon and became the first "lighter than air" Goldfish.

World War II Spitfire pilot Jerry Billing of South Woodslee, Ont, jumped into the Mediterranean Sea twice when his aircraft were shot down defending the island of Malta. His Goldfish has gold eyes and his name and jump date are engraved on the reverse. Jerry had his Goldfish made into a wedding ring for Karen, his bride-to-be.

A Caterpillar or Goldfish pin is a passport to the most exclusive flying club in

the world. The club motto is: "Life depends on a silken thread."

Other 'chute makers have honours for flyers saved by their products. The Pioneer Parachute Company in Skokie, Illinois, gave plaques. The Switlik Parachute Company of Trenton, New Jersey, issued gold and silver pins.

Charles Lindbergh was a Caterpillar Club member. Irvin parachutes saved his life four times in two years. General Jimmy Doolittle, the leader of the U.S. bomber raid on Tokyo, was a club member. So was President George Bush, the elder, who jumped from his fighter plane in the Pacific.

Doolittle bailed out three times and cabled Leslie Irvin: "Airplane failed. Chute worked."

Some of the most famous names in aviation – Alec Henshaw, Ernst Udet, Lord Douglas Hamilton, Geoffrey de Havilland, "Cobber" Cain, Sir Douglas Bader, Stan Turner, "Bluey" Truscott and "Pathfinder" Don Bennett – were members.

Only one woman, RAF Cpl F.H. Poser, received a Caterpillar pin during WW II. She was serving with a meteorological unit in the Middle East and jumped from 600 feet.

A little known fact is that German *Luftwaffe* airmen were eligible for membership in Irvin's Caterpillar Club. German flyers carried Irvin-designed chutes made at a factory bought out by the Nazis in 1936. Irvin's United Kingdom office wondered what it would do if an enemy flier applied but none ever did until long after the war was over.

An Irvin-Canada press release out of Belleville, Ont, boasts that the number of lives saved – 100,000 persons – would fill the Rose Bowl or Wembley Stadium.

Up to the time of his death in 1966, Leslie Irvin had made more than 300 parachute jumps but was never eligible for membership because he never had to jump to save his life.

The poem "Little Silk Worm" was found in the journal of an Allied prisoner of war:

*Little silk worm – so very small
You saved me from an awful fall.
Tho you're such an ugly thing
I owe my life to your man-made wing.*

(Ed note: Pat MacAdam of Ottawa is a veteran newspaperman, columnist and author.)



Canadian Forces pilot Capt Brian Bews is the newest inductee into the Caterpillar Club. He ejected from his stricken CF-18 Hornet during an air show practice at Lethbridge, Alta, on July 23rd 2010.

Lethbridge Herald photo by Ian Martens