

SEARCH FOR THE SOLE SURVIVOR

“Those noisy beggars!” — my grandmother admonished, waving her garden hoe skyward. Low overhead, a formation of four Maritime Command Lancasters thundered. Jockeying for position, en route to a flypast at R.C.A.F. Base Comox, a half mile to the southeast. With their passage the windows on our old house rattled in protest. It would be many years before I understood her hostility towards this noisy foursome. In reality it was not the reverberating disturbance of their passage but the fact that one of their deceased stable mates had taken her youngest son and his crew on their final trip to Berlin in March 1944. Since my youth at Comox aviation fuel has compromised a small percentage of my circulation.

My uncle, John “Jack” David Owen, joined up with the R.C.A.F. in April 1942 despite the protestations of my grandparents. After initial training at High River, Alberta, on Tiger Moths he was selected as a bomber pilot and underwent multiengine training on Cessna Cranes at Claresholm. By November 1942 he had logged a total of 240 hours. After the transatlantic crossing followed a whirlwind refresher course on Tiger Moths and Oxfords. At the Operational Training Unit at Tilstock he crewed up and checked out on Whitley’s, Halifaxes and finally on Lancasters. His crew was a mixed “bag”, symbolic of the Commonwealth war effort:

1. Flt/Sgt. Frank “Spanky” B. Magee, bomb aimer, age 25, R.C.A.F.
2. Sgt. John “Tony” C.A.D. Lavender, navigator, age 20, R.A.F.

3. Sgt. Harry "Al" W. Nixon, mid upper gunner, R.C.A.F.
4. Sgt. Percival "Casanova" H. Simpkin, signal officer/gunner, age 22, R.A.F.
5. Sgt. William "Hugam" Clark, rear gunner, age 22, R.A.F.
6. Sgt. Wilfred "Bill" H. Broadmore, flight engineer, age 21, R.A.F.

A review of my uncle's log book indicated a total of 23 red inked operational flights to enemy targets. Five of these had to be aborted due to equipment unserviceability including engine problems, oxygen failure and rear turret malfunction. Ten trips including the last was to the "Big City", Berlin. The longest was to Stettin and was an incredible nine hour trip! The last entry for March 24/25, 1944 to Berlin had the following haunting comment under the Remarks column — "Missing — nothing heard".

It took some time to fill in the missing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. Shortly after the end of the war my grandfather received the following account from Frank Magee which filled in most of the missing pieces.

"Copy of account of operational flight of March 24-25: which was the date when

Jack was reported missing, as written down by the bomb-aimer of the plane, which was a Lancaster bomber.

We set course from base about 20:00 and headed for target, Berlin. One of our navigational aids failed about an hour out, but we still had to carry on. The winds during the whole trip were a way different from what we had been told on leaving base. We were in the first wave and as the wind was more or less behind us we arrived and overshot the target, no markers having been dropped as yet. We had a 100 mph gale to contend with heading back towards the target. We never did reach the target as it was time for all the bombers to head home; so we just dumped our load and headed for home. We dodged flak and searchlights all the way back, and were way off track, and I think about an hour late. It was a clear night and I believe I saw the coast of Holland when the navigator called up to the engineer and asked him if we had enough gasoline for an hour's flying, as it would take that long to reach England. The engineer said we were very low, and doubted if we would make it. Just then we could hear shells tearing through the kite, and as they came from exactly below we presumed it was flak. The plane was full of smoke and Jack opened the bomb doors to drop anything that might have stuck up and been on fire. However everything was gone and the draft cleared away the smoke. The mid upper gunner suggested that we do evasive action in case it happened again. Jack said, "Okay" and just started to do so when

we were hit. I could see tracer bullets flying past the nose so we all knew then it was a fighter. The plane immediately went into an almost vertical dive, and Jack shouted that he couldn't control the kite, and shouted for the engineer to help him. I couldn't get the escape hatch open during the dive, between them they managed to pull the plane out for a second or two. I flung open the hatch just as the inter-communication was cut; I could hear nothing over it. The engineer shouted my name and I saw him reaching for his chute so I jumped. I went down okay and landed in a small field just inside the Dutch border. I received immediate assistance from the Dutch Underground and was down in Belgium when Allied troops occupied the country.

Two days after I landed, the Dutch told me they had found the plane (not burned) with five bodies in it. Apparently the Germans later found the sixth.

I would just like to tell you how much I thought of Jack. He was a darn fine fellow, and a good pilot.”

This undated and unsigned document was stored in the attic and became part of our family history.

My parents married in August 1944 and I entered the picture in January of 1946 - named

John in memory of my uncle. During my childhood and formative years I often wondered of the whereabouts and welfare of the sole survivor. It was not until I had completed university that I had the time and resources to start a search. In 1974 I posted queries to the Air Historical Branch and Public Record Office in London, England. Mr. Hugh Tours from the Public Record Office rewarded me with handwritten notes from 625 Squadron after individual crew debriefings. This augmented the details from my uncle's logbook but gave no information on the whereabouts of Frank Magee.

Between 1982 and 1987 my efforts waned and the trail grew cold. Then during a visit to my parents in the summer of 1987 I perused a copy of my father's "Legion" periodical. This led to a last ditch effort with a search request in the next edition's "Lost Trails" section. Two months later I had a chance to review my father's July/August edition featuring Hampton Gray's heroic attack in a Corsair. A glance at "Lost Trails" on page 61 revealed my search in print.

On returning home that weekend we were surprised to find a letter in unfamiliar handwriting in the mail slot. My heart raced - I knew that this was a missing link in my quest. Sure enough the letter was from "Chuck" Laidlaw of Kamloops, a boyhood chum of Frank's. The contained information was a little vague but proved invaluable. Their last contact was in 1965-67 when Frank was employed in a municipal hall in Mission or some other Fraser Valley town. Armed with this information I had to strike while the iron was hot. Through the B.C. Tel Directory Assistance Operator I obtained the only listing for a Frank Magee in Abbotsford. My

fingers trembled as I dialed the number — intuition told me that if a man answered the phone I would be able to tell if I had finally succeeded. To the best of my recollection, the conversation went like this:

“Hello”

“Is this Frank Magee?”

“Yes”

“Is this Warrant Officer Frank Magee, R.C.A.F. retired?”

“Yes” — suspiciously.

“Did you fly with 625 Squadron in March 1944 with a pilot named Jack Owen?”

“Yes” — more suspiciously. Bingo!

After identifying myself and describing my tangential association through my uncle the tension melted away but I still had trouble controlling my tremor. After all these years and he was almost living in my backyard!

Two weeks later I met Frank and his effervescent wife, Vera, at their home in Abbotsford. Over lunch I learned of more intriguing pieces in the puzzle: After bailing out Frank parachuted to safety between Amelo and Hengelo near the Dutch-German border. He was immediately taken in by the Dutch Resistance and spent several days on the farm where Henk van Guens worked to avoid conscription to Germany as a slave labourer, before being moved by

car and train to Belgium. After six months in the spartan life of an evader he was liberated when their town was overrun by the allies. On returning to England his first task was an unpleasant one — to tell Vera that her husband of three months, Percy Simpkin, had not survived their last mission. After the end of hostilities Frank returned to Canada. Vera followed two years later and they married in 1947. They have been soulmates ever since, raising their family in the splendour of the Fraser Valley. In appreciation of his heroic assistance, Frank sponsored Henk van Guens to immigrate to the Okanagan Valley after the war. Their friendship has continued to flourish ever since.

I was now left with two relatively simple tasks. The first was to visit the graves of my uncle and his crew in Tubbergen, Netherlands, to pay my respects 50 years after their last flight. With my adventuresome wife, Ruth, acting as navigator we struck off cross-country from Amsterdam in a rented car. The weather was horrific with blistering wind, pelting rain, driving sleet and even snow flurries — a bomber pilot's nightmare! After several hours of wandering in this meteorological cauldron we found the needle in the haystack — the Roman Catholic Cemetery in Tubbergen. After a tip from Frank we also located Bertus Derksen who gave us a personal tour and narration during our visit. Fifty years prior he had been first on the crash site of Lancaster ND 641 and his memory had not been eroded with the passage of time. During our visit the incredible happened — the rain stopped, the clouds parted and the sun shone on the village and the cemetery. It was as if the resting souls knew we had come for a visit. This respite gave us time to appreciate how well kept the graves and headstones were of the two

crews laid to rest here. As we left the cemetery the sun retreated and the storm returned with a vengeance for our return trip to Amsterdam.

In April 1996 we managed to complete the final link with a visit to London, England. After a check ride in a Tiger Moth at the Tiger Club in Headcorn and a visit to the Bomber Command Hall of Fame at R.A.F. Hendon Museum, I was in the mood for another cross-country journey — this time by rail. Our destination was Grimsby in the Yorkshire Lowlands. The cabbie raised his eyes in bewilderment when this strange couple with Canadian and Filipino accents asked for a lift to Kelstern — the last and only home for 625 R.C.A.F. Squadron. We were in luck! Our driver was a spare time treasure hunter and provided ancient Roman coins as proof. He had found several in the locale of the old base. We set off and after a few erroneous zigs instead of zags located the commemorative cairn and head-on Lancaster profile, several crosses and memorial poppies. The only other reminders of a once bustling bomber base were the dilapidated concrete buildings relegated to farm storage barns and the ever present bone-chilling Yorkshire wind — the circle was complete, albeit in reverse order.

It is now over a decade since I located the sole survivor. During that time the friendship between our families has blossomed with visits, phone calls and Christmas cards. Each Remembrance Day now has a special significance and it is not complete without a call to Frank and Vera to confirm their well-being.

I am indebted to the Legion for completing this chapter in life for me — no, I will not forget.

Addendum: During a recent telephone conversation to review this article with Frank I was saddened to hear that Henk van Guens died suddenly from a heart attack in May 1988, at age 78.