

TWO CATERPILLARS AND A GOLDFISH

In 1998, I wrote an article documenting the fate of Lancaster ND 641 and its crew on the evening of March 24/25, 1944, during the last major raid of the Battle of Berlin. The pilot, my uncle, Warrant Officer John Owen failed to return along with five of his crew mates — Sgt. Tony Lavender, Navigator; Sgt. Al Nixon, Mid-Upper Gunner; Sgt. Percival Simpkin, Signal Officer/Gunner; Sgt. Bill Broadmore, Flight Engineer; and Sgt. Bill Clark, Rear Gunner. Flt/Sgt. Frank Magee, Bomb Aimer, parachuted to safety and was liberated in 1944 as an evader. He returned to Canada after hostilities ceased and married the widow of his crew mate, Vera Simpkin.

In 1972, I initiated a search for Frank Magee. After 15 years, with the aid of an ad in the Legion Magazine's "Lost Trails" department, the trail ended in Abbotsford. Just before publication of my article, "Uncovering the Lost Trail" (January/February 2001 issue), Dan Black, Managing Editor, commented that it is hard to predict the feedback 50 years post-event. My expectations were not high — I was wrong!

1. The Parachute

After a barrage of telephone calls from friends and relatives, I received a parcel by registered mail from Joe Sweeney of Crescent Valley, BC. It contained a photo album and documents describing the 50 year history of Frank Magee's parachute and harness.

After landing in a farm field, just after midnight, in Albergen, Holland, he was ushered into a

farmhouse with his bundled parachute. Frank was conscripted on the spot to feed the farmer's infant children boiled milk — before being taken under the wing of the Dutch Underground. In war torn Holland, his silk parachute was a rare commodity. The farmer's wife did not hesitate to use a portion to sew communion dresses for her four daughters. The remainder was set aside and transformed into an ornate chasuble for her seminarian brother — Father Hermann Engberink was ordained on March 24, 1946, two years after the crash of ND 641. Father Hermann was assigned to a mission in Gold Coast. En route, his ship collided with a French Liberty vessel in the English Channel and he was forced to abandon ship — *sans* personal belongings. After rescue by a Royal Navy Destroyer, he continued his journey to Gold Coast. Several months later, an unexpected parcel arrived containing his personal effects including the indestructible vestment.

He eventually immigrated to Canada to become the priest of St. Rita's Church in Castlegar, BC. On March 24, 1996, he celebrated the Jubilee Year of his priesthood wearing Frank Magee's parachute cum chasuble.

Father Hermann's nephew, Bernard, was the infant fed by Frank in the early hours of March 25, 1944. He grew up to become a Social Studies teacher. Each year he introduces the lesson on the Second World War wearing Frank's parachute harness. He uses this artifact to embellish Frank's adventure with the Dutch Underground safe houses through to his liberation near Liège, Belgium.

In a recent telephone conversation with Joe Sweeney, he informed me that Father Hermann is

still alive and returned to Holland for his retirement years.

On October 14, 1944, Warrant Officer F.B. Magee received a congratulatory letter from Leslie Irvin inducting him into the Caterpillar Club. Membership was automatic to allied air crew whose life had been saved by an Irvin Chute. Frank still proudly displays his Silver Caterpillar pin on his RCAF wedge cap! I find it amazing that a single parachute could have such long lasting and far reaching impact — from the ravages of war to the serenity of peace, religion and education.

Before his departure for Holland, the Castlegar Branch of the Royal Canadian Legion was instrumental in initiating a liaison between Father Hermann and Frank Magee. Father Hermann was able to express his gratitude and enlightened Frank of the durability of his silk canopy.

2. Survivors

The next surprise came as a letter from Mrs. Joan Berry forwarded courtesy of Dan Black at the Legion Magazine. After reading her letter, the significance was obvious — in March 1944, she was married to Sgt. Bill Broadmore, my uncle's flight engineer. His loss left her a devastated widow with an eight-month-old son, Peter. She could vividly recollect her last visit with Bill, her mother and sister, as well as receiving his daily letters for three days after he was reported missing. She subsequently remarried and immigrated to Canada with her husband and Peter. Joan was kind enough to forward a photocopy of an October 1944 letter from my grandfather that captures the

tragic atmosphere of families coming to grips with the sudden loss of young lives during wartime. In corresponding with Peter, he informed me that my article had brought him closer to a father he had never known. I would later learn that my Legion article was instrumental in Joan and Peter reestablishing ties with the Broadmore clan in England after a 20 year hiatus. It also gave me closure to the puzzle of the epitaph inscribed on Bill Broadmore's headstone in Tubbergen, Holland — "In memory's garden, my darling you always will be". Joan admitted authorship of this touching line.

A week later, I received a telephone call from John Munro of Chilliwack, BC. He informed me that Frank Magee's story was not unique. He also participated in the March 24/25, 1944 raid on Berlin as a rear gunner of Lancaster ME 684 piloted by Flying Officer "Nobby" Clark. Their aircraft along with ND 641 and ED 317 (all from 625 Squadron) failed to return, falling to night fighters or flak. ED 317, piloted by Flight Sergeant Jamieson, was lost with all crew members. John had vivid recall of that fateful mission many years ago. On the return leg, they were forced to abandon a flaming Lancaster riddled by flak. After "assisting" the mid-upper gunner, frozen by fear to exit via the rear escape hatch, John sought the safety of his parachute. All seven crew members survived — three evaders and four POWs. Like Frank Magee, John successfully evaded capture until liberated by advancing Allied forces. Despite this misfortune, he still had the appetite to fly a final combat mission in 1945.

At war's end, he returned to Thunder Bay, raised his family, worked as an electrician and

learned to fly. He moved to BC and retired with his wife in Chilliwack, BC.

I was fortunate to meet John on several occasions after flying into Chilliwack Airport. Short in stature, he compensated with an energetic friendly personality. After a near miss, driving to his home, I was assigned to chauffer duties for future visits. He admitted that his vision was not what it used to be. At his home, he had a den dedicated to his war years and aviation adventures. This included Resistance photographs, forged documents, and identity papers from his escapades as an evader. After a visit, he would load me up with fresh produce from his vegetable garden.

Sadly, his health took a sudden turn and he departed on his last mission on Friday, September 13, 2002. I spoke to him the day before and knew that he was at peace with his fate.

I am still incredulous that Frank and John could survive bailing out of aircraft from the same squadron on the same night, evading capture, the next 50 years, and then live within ten miles of each other unaware of their celestial connection — in the end they did know.

3. The Legend of John Goldsmith, DFC, AFC, CD

On January 24, 2001, I received a parcel with a treasure trove of documents from John Goldsmith. His introductory letter noted that he had participated on the March 24/25 Berlin Raid — and returned intact. He enclosed the battle order for the raid listing all 17 aircraft and crew as well

as his personal notes, and a contemporary newspaper article on the raid. A list of operational missions by 625 Squadron from October 1943 to April 1944 included target names, aircraft dispatched (3 to 19) and losses for each mission. Losses varied from nil to three per raid. In addition, he provided contact addresses for Tim Dougal, an Oxford professor writing a book on the history of 625 Squadron and Ramsay Turner, Honorary Secretary of 625 Squadron RAF Memorial Association.

A follow-up phone call proved him to be a wealth of knowledge. His memory remains sharp as a tack and contrary to regulations, he kept notes on each mission flown. Following the Berlin raid he had vivid recollection of the disastrous Nuremberg trip later that month — brilliant moonlight and repeated explosions of bombers falling to flak or night fighters forced him to retreat to the seclusion of his navigation cubbyhole.

He recalls the raid at the end of February 1944 that was preceded by a heavy snowfall. Before take-off, air crew were called out to assist ground crew in shovelling runways clear. On the take-off run, their aircraft was damaged, losing its radome. En route, the mid-upper gunner was incapacitated by cold exposure and other crew members took turns manning his position to successfully complete the trip.

John completed his first tour with 625 Squadron and then volunteered with 156 Pathfinder Squadron. On his 44th operation, August 26/27, 1944 to Kiel, his credit account with Lady Luck hit a profound low. He was the volunteer navigator on Flt/Lt. Bob Etchells' crew when they were

mauled by a night fighter over the target. The combat resulted in the fighter retreating in flames but they did not escape unscathed — battle damage included two starboard engines disabled, port tail plane fragmented, bomb bay frozen open, and port main gear extended. The run for home base took a detour as the port inner engine caught fire — the mist shrouded North Sea beckoned. At this point, Lady Luck had second thoughts. Bob Etchells pulled off a textbook ditching at night on the unforgiving North Sea. All seven crew members survived, uninjured, to scramble into their leaking dinghy. It was none too soon as their Lancaster PB 302 slipped below the surface four minutes after ditching. The next day, they transferred to an airborne life raft dropped by an Air Sea Hudson. On the second day, they were plucked from their disintegrating craft by a Danish fishing boat. After transfer to an Air Sea Rescue Launch, they landed at Grimsby — 80 hours after leaving England. John has chronicled this adventure in the 1971 “The Lancaster at War” by Mike Garbett and Brian Goulding under the appropriate chapter “Seven more for the Goldfish Club”, a club exclusive to wartime air crew that survived a ditching.

After this saga, John did not participate in wartime operations. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for gallantry in the performance of his duty while serving with 156 Squadron. The citation for the award read: “This officer has completed numerous operations against the enemy, in the course of which, he has invariably displayed the utmost fortitude, courage and devotion to duty.”

In October 1944, John returned to Canada and put in a request for flying duties that did not

involve excursions over large bodies of water. He was promptly posted to the RCAF Meteorological Flight making 500 mile jaunts over the Atlantic between Yarmouth, Nova Scotia and Bermuda!

After hostilities ended, John was on the first course for radio-navigators that added wireless operators duties to his repertoire as a navigator. In May 1947 he was posted to 426 and 413 Squadrons, embarking on an Arctic adventure — Operations POLCO and Magnetic I and II. For his participation in hazardous mapping of our northern wastelands John was awarded the Air Force Cross. Excerpts from the citation by the Minister of National Defense gives example of the dangers involved:

“The Navigator, Flying Officer Goldsmith, was responsible for successfully guiding the aircraft through dangerous and uncharted areas in the Arctic Islands. In order to reach observation points surrounding the Magnetic Pole, it was frequently necessary to fly above the over-cast for many hours. With the minimum of normal meteorological and navigational aids, and the unreliable compass reading areas, this officer invariably directed the aircraft to its destination, often necessitating a let down through clouds in the vicinity of high hills or dangerous waters. Flying Officer Goldsmith did not have the assistance of accurate maps and his own sketches of important areas have been accepted for incorporation into official Dominion Government charts. The outstanding matter in which Flying Officer Goldsmith adapted himself to the difficult methods of navigation required over the pole is

worthy of the highest praise. The successful completion of this pioneering operation was directly attributable to the resolute direction, integrity and initiative of this officer and his skilfulness and courage has set a fulgent example which will be an inspiration to his comrades in the Royal Canadian Air Force.”

During these flights, he was credited with rediscovering the Spicer Islands located in the Foxe Basin south of Baffin Island. In 1952, John was further honoured by the Ministry of Energy, Mines and Resources with Goldsmith Channel being named to acknowledge his contribution to northern geography. This body of water is located between the northeast tip of Victoria Island and Stefansson Island. It is indeed a rare accomplishment for someone still living to have a geographical landmark named after them.

His military career included station adjutant at Goose Bay and a two year stint with the USAF in Hawaii, participating in the Korean Airlift in 1951/52. After completion of Staff College in Toronto, he was selected for training as an airborne intercept observer to fly in CF-100 all-weather fighters. In 1960, he was given command of 425 All Weather Fighter Squadron and promoted to Wing Commander — a unique accomplishment for a navigator! Under his leadership the squadron was awarded the Steinhart Trophy — Most Efficient Fighter Squadron in Air Defense Command.

John closed out his 33 year military career with postings to NORAD as Deputy Director of Operations in Great Falls, Montana and Director of Operations in St. Margaret’s, NB. For the next

10 years he ran a tax and financial consulting business in Vancouver, BC, retiring in 1988 to Sidney, BC where John and Vicki, his petite energetic soul mate, enjoy their immaculate ground-level townhouse overlooking tranquil Tsehum Harbour. Born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, John has an inexplicable affinity for water — a true Goldfish through and through!

With the benefit of John Goldsmith's excellent reference library, I was able to solve the mystery of Pilot Officer Al Normandin. In a 1943 sepia photograph of my uncle and his crew, in the gumboot swallowing mud of Kelstern, he is identified as the mid-upper gunner. However, by March 1944 he had been replaced by Sgt. Al Nixon. Frank Magee could remember an earlier mission from which he and Al Normandin were ordered as "spare bods" on separate crews. In the crew bus they sat across from each other en route to the aircraft dispersals. On disembarking at his Lanc, Al held out his hand and wished Frank "Good Luck". Frank shook his hand and responded, "I will see you for breakfast Al" — Frank kept his part of the bargain, Al Normandin failed to return. I found the answer in the appendix of Alan Cooper's "Bombers Over Berlin". The crew of Lancaster JB 122, piloted by Flt/Sgt. R. Gallop are all listed as killed on the January 30/31, 1944 Berlin raid. PO Al Normandin was listed as the mid-upper gunner of that crew. The cause of their demise (flak, night fighter or mid air collision) and place of rest are not noted — such are the fickle fates of war.

I found it remarkable that my original article brought to light two Caterpillars — Frank Magee and John Munro — and one Goldfish, John Goldsmith, alive and well over 50 years after their common connection as air crew of 625 Squadron over Berlin on March 24/25, 1944. It has

increased my resolve not to forget on November 11th — a minute of reflection for my Uncle Jack and John Munro and a telephone call to Frank Magee and John Goldsmith to maintain contact.