

## RCAF War Years 1943-1945

### *Joining Up*

In our group of five young friends in 1943, two of us joined the Royal Canadian Air Force as air crew, two joined the navy, and one joined the army. My best friend and I joined the air force to get into action quickly, and to earn at least three times as much as the army and navy boys.

We both volunteered to take the air gunners course, as it was the shortest course to graduate with wings and with sergeant's stripes. As a sergeant you earned \$3.75 a day, whereas our other friends earned \$.90 a day.

### *Training*

The same week we joined the RCAF we were posted to the Edmonton manning depot for foot soldier training drills, which I thought was a waste of time for aircrew types. After learning how to march, carry a rifle, and help in the mess, we were assigned to various other training stations. During our 6-8 week stay at the manning depot, I was surprised to hear young men crying at night due to homesickness. The people of Edmonton treated us royally, especially the girls.

We were then posted to McGill University for math classes. After living in Winnipeg for 18 years, we found Montreal out of this world, with giant bottles of beer, and French girls. It was a great place to be in the war years. After completing our course at McGill, 83 men were then posted to the Bombing Gunnery station at Summerside, PEI. The first flight I made in an aircraft was in a Bolingbroke, which had an extremely narrow fuselage. Three trainees were expected to sit

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bent over in the fuselage, which was without windows, while waiting to take their turns in the turret for gun target firing at the droug. A droug is a long cotton cone pulled by a faster aircraft. This teaches the gunners how to lead while firing their guns at enemy aircraft. Needless to say, the vast majority of us were very ill in this confined space until we got used to the odour of puke and the motion of the aircraft. Most of the PEI course was spent on learning and sending Morse code, some radar training, and gunnery practice. At the end of the course, about 60 of us graduated with wings and sergeant's stripes, which meant a salary of \$3.75 a day.

### ***Leaving for England***

We then went home on leave for 2 weeks and reported to the station at Lachine, Quebec. We had a restful time there as all we had to do was wait for a troopship overseas. We waited for our troopship, the Empress of Scotland, for approximately a week and then headed for England.

The ship was packed with airforce and army personnel. They placed the majority of the men in the holds in layers of 4 hammocks to an area of approximately an area of 10 feet by 6 feet. The holds seemed to be a thousand feet deep and all I could think of was "I'll never get out of here if we're torpedoed". Consequently, I spent every day, all day, on the decks and most of the nights. We had three submarine sightings, and the subsequent emergency drills, during the six-day trip. There were four to five thousand men on board, and life boats for about one thousand. This was a concern.

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The food on board was atrocious. The only way you could get a decent meal was through the navy black market. A number of us ate nothing but black market eggs and bacon during the whole trip.

### ***Arriving and joining a crew***

Upon our arrival in England, all bomber aircrew were sent to Wombleton airbase, where we were assigned to fly first on 2-engine aircraft, and then graduated to 4-engine aircraft. One of the first things we did at Wombleton was to choose the crew we would fly with, a crew of 7 men. Fortunately, I was chosen by a pilot flight lieutenant, Ted Barsby, who had flown as an instructor over the past 2 years. Experience sure proved itself in this case. Besides the pilot and I, there were 5 others chosen; navigator, engineer, wireless air gunner, bomb aimer, and a second air gunner. After flying 4-engine bombers, and learning to crew together, we were then posted to Skipton-on-Swale in Yorkshire, which wasn't the best of bases. The showers were in a separate building and froze solid in the winter. Consequently, no showers could be had during the winter months. Fortunately, air crew had a week's leave every six weeks.

### ***Circuits and Bumps***

We now began training in earnest as we made circuits and bumps, and doglegged over England, Scotland, and the North Sea in our new Halifax bomber.

Circuits and bumps are necessary, because most of the flying accidents occur on takeoff or landing. After completing this training, we then commenced flying

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our bombing missions over Germany. About this time, I decided action wasn't all that great.

### ***The Raids***

The RCAF and RAF had begun massive bombing raids of German cities. We often flew on bombing raids of 800 to 1000 aircraft. The RCAF and RAF flew night bombing missions, and the USAAF flew daylight. We would vary our briefing times between 8 PM and 10 PM, depending on the distance of the bombing mission. At the briefing session, we were advised of the weather forecast (which was accurate about 50% of the time), the number of enemy fighters and anti-aircraft coverage we could expect. Our fighters could not fly with the bomber squadron to protect them because it was night and dark. The USAAF had Mustang fighter coverage on their daylight raids during 1944-45. This reduced bomber casualties substantially.

We were losing from five to seven percent of the bombers on every raid, an approximate loss of 300 to 400 aircrew every mission. Our aircraft was shot up several times, but never shot down. Many, many bombers from 433 Squadron were shot down, and we never saw our friends again. At university, students are taught that only 10% of the RCAF Bomber Command aircrew completed their tour of duty.

### ***Terrifying Times***

The destruction and fires caused by incendiary and explosion bombs lit up the skies over the German cities. This enabled the German night fighters to locate and shoot down our bombers. A very effective

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way of doing this was to fly beneath us with a cannon pointing up. The target bomber would have an enormous hole blown in the bottom of the fuselage. It happened to us; we felt very cold, and there was a strong wind blowing through the aircraft. Once, the pilot asked the wireless operator to investigate, and he found a foot-square hole right beside me. If I had moved, I would have fallen in.

On one occasion, our pilot was blinded by anti aircraft fire. He had blood streaming down his forehead into his eyes. The Engineer had to fly the aircraft back to the closest base. The pilot took over the controls and landed it. Only he was qualified to land; we were trained only to fly, put it "on George", then jump with parachutes. Almost every member of our crew was wounded at one time or another.

On numerous missions, I saw our bombers blown from the sky by the German night fighters and flak. Most bombers when hit, burst into flames before plummeting to earth. We would never fire at a night fighter, unless they fired at us, because often, they would be tracking other aircraft with radar. They might pass within 50 feet of us, and we did not want to attract their attention. They would home in on one aircraft, follow closely on its tail, and shoot it down.

The discomfort was incredible. It could get to minus thirty degrees in the gun turrets, and if your electrical suit malfunctioned, you had to be carried out when you arrived back at base, because you would be so stiff with cold. This happened to me.

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It was terrifying to take off in the darkest part of the night, not returning home until nearly dawn, when the human body is at its lowest ebb. There were no lights anywhere, until it was time to land. Sometimes we would be met by German fighters on the French coast as we headed toward the German city targets, engaged until we reached them. We then were greeted with anti-aircraft fire over the cities, which was much worse than the fighters. On the return flight, the German fighters would harass us, sometimes right up to the English Channel. We would be fighting for our lives for up to 4 to 5 hours at a stretch, and the strain was terrific.

We had an unusual mission, to bomb a German battle cruise in a Norwegian fjord. We flew at approximately 50 feet over the North Sea to the fjord, then increasing our height to 200 feet, dropping our bombs on the cruiser while we made a bombing run between the cliffs of the fjord. However, the Germans had stationed anti-aircraft guns on the top of the cliffs, and they fired at us from above. It was frightening having them shoot down, from point blank range. We were lucky to escape.

### **USAAF bases**

We couldn't always make it back to home base. Sometimes there were engine problems, or fuel shortages. If home base was fogged in, and we couldn't land, we were lucky to be diverted to the US air bases, where the food was great. You could have peanut butter by the spoonful. Nobody else had peanut butter, or such things as jam, butter, desserts,

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steaks – anything you could get at home, but never in England.

### ***More highlights***

On one mission to Hamburg, we became lost over the North Sea. There was a strong wind that had not been forecasted. Our navigator lost his bearings, and broke down in tears from tension and frustration. Ted, our pilot, calmed everybody down, and we finally made it back to an RAF base in Scotland, very short of fuel, but alive.

I remember one mission very vividly. There were two Junkers 88 night fighters about 20 feet above our aircraft, homing in on radar on two Lancasters just above and ahead of us. We didn't shoot at them, because they would have turned on us and shot us down.

### ***Lancasters***

After about 12 missions, we were assigned a new Lancaster bomber. It was a far better aircraft than the Halifax. Easier access to parachuting, faster climbing, and it flew at a faster speed. We liked to take off about a half hour after the Lancasters. Our missions now became 6-7 hours, and one lasted 8 hours.

### ***Joining the Pathfinders***

A normal tour of duty was 30 trips. You were then usually sent home to Canada to instruct the new recruits. We had by then done 25 trips, and were looking forward to returning home. Our skipper was

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asked if our crew would transfer to 405 Pathfinders. Only the very best crews were chosen, and our skipper, always gung-ho, accepted for all of us, immediately. The rest of us felt like killing him. This meant we would have to complete 45 trips, or 2 tours, and then we would be discharged.

Upon arriving at 405 Marsden Lodge station, which is fairly near to London, we were once again in training to drop flares, instead of bombs. The Pathfinder Squadron aircraft, both Mosquito and Lancaster bombers, dropped flares over the target city. The bombers were supposed to drop their bombs on the flares, but the more anxious of them dropped theirs as soon as they could, and hightailed it home. We flew as the lead Pathfinder, which meant circling the target city for about 30 minutes, advising the bomber stream to bomb to the left or right of the flares, whatever was necessary. The anti-aircraft fire seemed to fill the sky over the target city. We were extremely frightened; this was the worst experience, as the German anti-aircraft gunners and fighters were all out to get the lead Pathfinder.

### ***Daylight missions***

Towards the end of the war, we started flying daylight bombing trips over Germany. I often wondered why we continued to bomb cities such as Hamburg, Essen, Hanover, and in fact, every German city. They were all a mass of rubble.

I saw my first jet aircraft while flying a daylight bombing trip. You would see the jet on the runway, and within a few minutes the aircraft would be in the



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bomber stream at 18 thousand feet, shoot down one or two bombers, and then often coast back to their field, out of fuel.

The Germans had excellent fighter aircraft all during the war. They were also very accurate with their anti-aircraft guns.

### ***The End of the War***

The war ended, as you know, in May, 1945. Our crew had finished 36 trips, and received our operational wings. We then started flying to German prisoner of war camps, picking up the prisoners, and returning them to England. They were all very thin. We flew about 1000 to 2000 feet and saw the destruction we had caused with our bombing raids. We saw a number of major cities where not a single complete building was standing. They were completely rubble.

### ***Back to Canada***

Our squadron, No. 405 Pathfinders, was selected to fly back to Canada, the only squadron allowed to do so. Although this was an honour, it meant we had to leave all our personal belongings behind, except for a small suitcase. I left a motorcycle, which sold for 2 pound, my American bomber jacket, boots, and my RCAF flight jacket. Nonetheless, we were all very pleased to leave England for Canada.

Upon arriving in Canada, we flew to Greenwood, Nova Scotia, and left our beloved Lancaster. One of these aircraft is in the war museum; the only Lancasters left in Canada were from the Pathfinders.

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Our crew travelled to several Canadian cities, to give talks about our adventures. We were treated royally, and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. Lots of girls were in the audiences.

We were discharged in September, 1945, and most of us settled into civilian life, with the exception of Jack Woodman. He decided to stay in the airforce, take the pilot's course. When he finally resigned from the airforce, he became the top test pilot for Boeing in Seattle. We all remember him as the only man who never experienced fear throughout all our adventures.