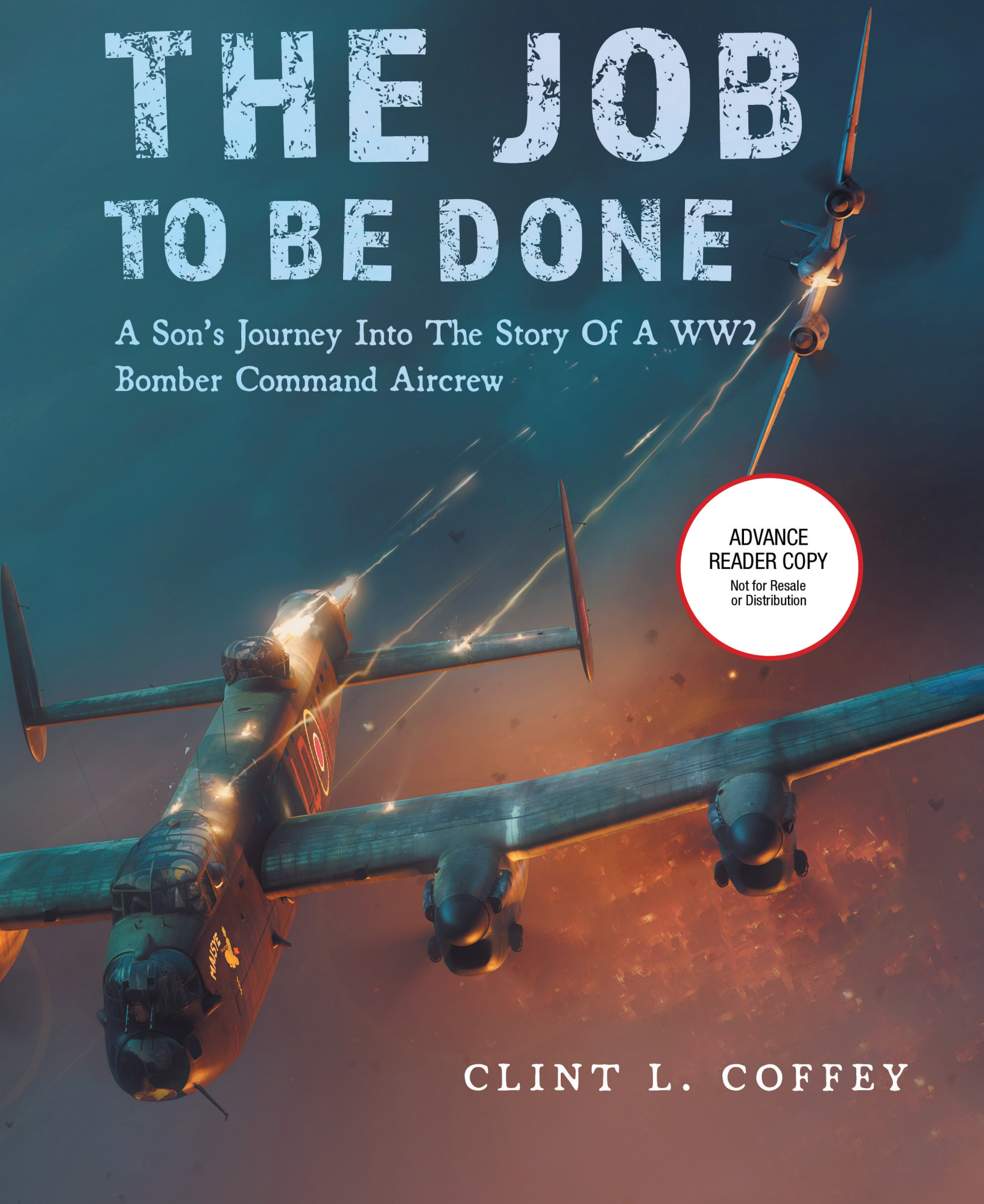
THE JOB TO BE DONE

A Son's Journey Into The Story Of A WW2 Bomber Command Aircrew



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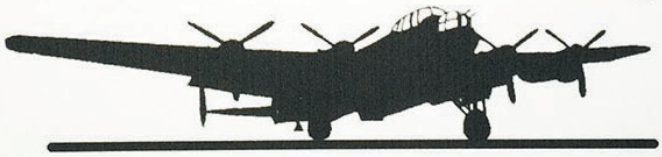
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CLINT L. COFFEY

Mine
was not a war of bugle calls and roaring engines
and magnificent defiance in the clamour of battle;

Mine
was a war of patience and endurance and stability;
of cunning and craft and stealth;
of attention to details
and giving my best to learn
all there was to learn about the job to be done.

Jesse Coffey



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"…and if they ask you what you did in the war, tell them you won it!"

– SIR ARTHUR "BOMBER" HARRIS,

SPEAKING TO DEPARTING CANADIAN AIRCREW AT THE END OF THE WAR.

Press on regardless

– UNOFFICIAL MOTTO OF BOMBER COMMAND

For Dad

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am not a scholar or professional researcher, and this book is not meant to be a work of history. I have heard that writing history is really just storytelling - I like the definition, and it is, in essence, what I have tried to do. But I am also keenly aware of my lack of academic credentials. So, I must state that although I have tried to include some historical facts and background in the story, (I truly felt it was essential to understanding the Coffey crew's experience), this book is a tribute, not a "history book," per se. You will find an extensive list of resources that I consulted at the back of the book, including books by *real* writers and historians!

As someone wishing to pay tribute to the valour and sacrifice of the young men of Bomber Command (in particular, of course, the Coffey crew), I make no claims of being dispassionate or impartial. Some readers may even accuse me of indulging in a bit of hero-worship at times—guilty as charged.

The opinions I have formed during my six years of research I have expressed openly and stand behind one hundred percent, but if I have gotten any facts wrong in the course of telling the story of the Coffey crew, I humbly apologize and will endeavour to correct them in any future editions. Whenever possible, I sought out the facts from the original wartime sources, like squadron Operational Record Books and interviews with those who were there, or their families. Secondary sources were books written by those who were there, and then those by post-war scholars.

There are so many people to thank—this project grew in scope faster than I felt I could keep up with at times, and it would have felt overwhelming without a lot of support.

I could not have kept up my enthusiasm if it hadn't been for the unflagging support and encouragement of the Dingwall, Hart, McWhirter, Rutherglen, Willoughby, and Bayne families. The memories, pictures, stories, maps, and logbooks the families of my Dads crewmates so generously shared with me made this project possible.

The passionate researchers on the forum at www.RAFCommands.com were lifesavers on many occasions. Someone on the forum was always able to answer my arcane questions or point me in the right direction to find it elsewhere. Thanks, in particular, to Pete Tresadern and Richard Koval - scholars and gentlemen! Very special thanks to Dave Champion, who was always encouraging and who also kindly reviewed my manuscript and pointed out some factual errors that had crept in.

Mark Evans from the Midland Aircraft Recovery Group was also very kind, helping me to understand "our" crew's training at the No. 22 Operational Training Unit.

A very special thank you to the amazing Polish CGI artist Piotr Forkasiewicz. His incredible depictions of Bomber Command in combat are breathtaking. After purchasing three prints, I contacted him to ask whether he would consider a commission—he immediately agreed, and would accept no payment. His depiction of the Coffey crew fighting for their lives over Wizernes forms the cover art for this book and I will always be grateful for his generosity. You can see his incredible work at **www.peterfor.com**.

Finally, the biggest "thank you" to my amazing wife, Tasnim—her consistent support, enthusiasm, and encouragement never failed to buoy me when the going got tough.

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INTRODUCTION

I think I was more surprised than anyone when my eldest brother Gary read Dad's will out to the rest of us assembled in Mom's kitchen.

My father passed away suddenly of a heart attack in May of 1990, leaving behind four grown sons and my Mom—I am the youngest of the four boys and was only twenty-eight at the time. The reading of the will seemed a formality, as I assumed that everything would go to my Mom. However, it turned out that at some point, Dad had added a handwritten codicil at the bottom of the will, specifying that I was to have all his WW II air force memorabilia. For me, this was a completely unexpected gift, and I recall feeling more embarrassed than honoured at the time, as none of my older siblings had been bequeathed anything specific.

I had always been interested in my Dad's wartime experiences, asking him questions and reading the occasional book from the public library about the history of the Royal Canadian Air Force in World War II. When I was about ten years old, I found out that Dad had been awarded a medal for bravery. Typical of the modesty of his generation, I had to specifically ask to find out, to my surprise, that he had won, not one, but two medals for gallantry. After that, I would sometimes ask to polish the Distinguished Flying Cross and bar, which Dad kept in its original black leather presentation case at the back of his sock drawer.

I learned that the only way to get a "war story" out of Dad was to ask, as he only rarely spoke of that time in his life (I'm sure this is a common experience with many children of combat veterans). So, although I may have shown a bit more interest than my brothers in his WW II experiences, I still felt uncomfortable being singled out to receive these precious mementos. I was a grown man at the time, but I remember feeling small and uncomfortable at that moment, like a dumb kid brother who had spoken out of turn. This gathering, under sad circumstances, was the first time we had all been together in a very long time. This tension and discomfort, combined with the shock of losing my Dad and my sense of helplessness in trying to comfort my grieving mother made the whole experience overwhelming and more than a bit surreal for me.

After the funeral was over and my brothers and I had made sure Mom was comforted and settled as best we could, I loaded my Dad's memorabilia into a large box and drove the five hours back to my home in Richmond, a suburb of Vancouver.

It wasn't until several days later that I sat down to take stock of the precious items I had inherited.

The first thing I removed from the large cardboard box was Dad's uniform. Only the tunic and cap were present, and I guessed the pants had been too threadbare to save and had been thrown out years before. The blue-grey tunic was well-worn, but in good shape after spending some fifty years in the back of a closet. I was intrigued by the presence of no less than three sets of wings on the left breast. The first set was the familiar pair of sewn-on pilot's wings, but the second set was a small brass eagle, with wings spread, on the pocket flap. The third set of wings was an odd winged "O" pinned on the pocket itself, with an even odder horizontal bar hanging below it from a pair of minuscule chains.

The battered peaked cap was the epitome of the "fifty mission cap" that I had read about in history books (and that had been immortalized in song by Canadian music icons The Tragically Hip), its crushed

shape and sweat-stained lining bearing clear witness to the fact that the owner was a seasoned veteran. The next item I pulled out was a sizable folded wartime map of Europe, carefully annotated with lines marking the routes and locations of dozens of targets in Germany and France. Some of the routes had the distance from their home base to the target noted, which was clear enough, but I puzzled over other notations like "Z-2023"—a coded designation for the target, perhaps? The map was well over a meter square, and I carefully folded it up exactly as I had found it. It had been folded that way for so long it was like an umbrella, just naturally returning to its original shape, almost with relief.

The next items were photos, tiny black and white pictures that felt brittle with age. There were two of a Lancaster bomber and one close-up of the bomber's nose, on which was painted a gremlin riding a bomb, with the name "Maisye" in bold letters. Another photo was a bit larger, showing Dad posing self-consciously (wearing the very same uniform that I now had spread across my sofa) in the back garden of a very English-looking home.

The last photo looked professionally taken, as it was a crystal clear eight by ten print showing Dad with two other men in uniform, posing one behind another, hands on each other's shoulders. Dad looks exhausted, with bags under his eyes and a weary smile. There were no notations on the back of the print to give any clues about the identity of the two airmen posing with Dad, nor the date or location. Next out of the box came an old wristwatch case, in which I found a small enamelled pin reading "General Service" and two shrapnel fragments, one of which had a small hole drilled in it. This item I recognized—Dad had shown it to me when I was a teenager. His "dog tags" were also in the cardboard box—a set of two hardened leather tags, embossed with his name and identity number, hanging from what I assumed was parachute cord. His Distinguished Flying Cross was here, as well as his campaign medals. Aside from one more item, this was the bulk of the collection—the rest was some miscellaneous paperwork, like his pay book and official letters and documentation from the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF).

The last item that I inspected was the most interesting: Dad's pilot logbook. With its slightly frayed cover and pages that were a bit brittle and brown with age, it exuded an almost tangible aura of history. As I leafed through the book, I was mystified by many of the abbreviations ("S.B.A." and "O/S") and unfathomable entries ("P-Plane factory" and "Wanganui").

Most of the many questions that came up in my mind as I examined the collection of mementos I was eventually able to answer through careful research, and I will come back to them a little later, but for now, we will leave them. Suffice to say that although I kept the collection safely stored, for the next twenty years, I spent little time with it.

Fast forward to 2013 when life, as it sometimes will, veered off the stable path I had been travelling on and into new, uncharted territory. I found myself starting over, single again after thirteen years of marriage; the choice had been my own to end a disastrous relationship, but the pain didn't feel any less because I had chosen it with eyes open. However, clichés are clichés because they are often true: the worst thing to happen to me in my life turned out to be the best thing to happen to me in my life. Later the same year, I had lunch with a lovely woman named Tasnim, and within eighteen months, she was my fiancée, and we had purchased a new home together. I had shown Tasnim my Dad's collection, and she had been particularly impressed with the map. After we moved into our new home, she suggested having it framed—she said it would look amazing on the wall of our new den. We took the folded map to a professional framer, who recommended using special backing and UV-resistant glass to protect it. The finished piece is dramatic, well over four feet square, and we were told it had been drawing a crowd as it sat on display in the shop awaiting pick up.



Once the map was up on the wall of my den, it was a constant reminder of my Dad's service, and it spurred me to look through his logbook again. I started looking things up on the internet and found quick answers to some of the mysteries. "P-Plane" for example, turned out to be another name for Hitler's V-1 flying bombs, which terrorized England in the summer of 1944. The kernel of an idea began to grow, and I started again at the beginning of the logbook, reading it line by line and making notes.

I soon realized that I was placing the seventy-year-old logbook under some stress by leafing through it and took it to a professional document preservation firm to have it scanned and reprinted. Now I had a copy I could use and make notes in while keeping the precious original safe.

Selected pages of Dad's logbook are reproduced in this book, in chronological order.

One aspect of the logbook quickly leapt out at me: Dad noted the names of the airmen who flew with him on each operation, and they were always the same. Their ranks changed as time went on, but the crew of seven stuck together (with one exception that we will come to in due course) through training and some sixty combat operations.

More and more, I began to wonder about these six other young men who relied on my Dad to bring them home safely night after night, and on whom my Dad depended to guide and defend the aircraft. Who were they, and where did they come from (and for that matter, what became of them)? And what of their families? Did they have maps and photos and stories to share? Could we exchange copies of these items and thereby get a more comprehensive picture of the incredible job our fathers had done?

In the fall of 2014, I decided to attempt to track down at least some of Dad's crewmate's families, but I didn't harbour much hope as I had nothing to go on but their ranks and last names. How in the world

would I find the descendants of a "Sgt. Hart" seventy years after the fact? My goal at the time was to get lucky and track down two or three.

With this modest goal I began a three-year process of internet sleuthing and cold calls to strangers across Canada as well as in places as far away as Jamaica, Australia, and the U.K.

My efforts paid dividends, slowly but surely, and I learned not only research skills but the value of dogged persistence in the face of rejection and dead ends. I was fortunate that all of the members of the Coffey crew (aircrews, I learned, were usually referred to by their pilot's name. The pilot was in charge in the air, regardless of rank, and was invariably known as "Skipper") had been decorated (awarded medals for bravery), and this meant I could almost always find at least a brief official biographical note on them somewhere online.

The names I had to start with were:

- Sgt. Hart
- Flying Officer Bayne
- Sgt. Dingwall
- Sgt. Willoughby
- Warrant Officer Rutherglen
- Sgt. McWhirter

I decided that I might as well begin my search close to home. I had found a brief biography of my first "target," which led me to believe his family might still be in Nelson, British Columbia, some six hundred kilometres from where I live in Maple Ridge.

Warrant Officer Raymond "Ted" Rutherglen was the crew's wireless operator/air gunner - a quick internet phone directory search showed that more than one Rutherglen presently lived in Nelson, and another clue led me to a small town in Alberta. Cold calling people out of the blue is certainly outside my comfort zone, but I steeled my nerve and made the calls. I'm glad I got so lucky on my first attempt, as the memory of my quick success gave me hope and encouragement later when I hit seemingly endless roadblocks and dead-ends. That very day, I spoke not only with Ted Rutherglen's daughter, but also with his son, both of whom were excited and enthusiastic about my project and more than willing to share any memorabilia they had.

I have had many exciting moments of discovery during my research for this project. Still, nothing comes close to opening an email from Ted Rutherglen's son and finding half a dozen photos of my Dad that I never knew existed. Photos of Dad in the air, at the controls of a Halifax bomber, two photographs of him in a Sergeant's uniform reading a card from home (was that my oldest brother Gary's baby hand print faintly visible on the card…!?), and an artistic snapshot of him coolly glancing out the cockpit window into the camera, looking every inch a skipper.

It became apparent that Ted Rutherglen had been a talented amateur photographer and these unique photos took my breath away. Ted's son (also named Ted) went above and beyond generosity by insisting on sending me the original photos so I could take them to a professional to have them digitally restored, touched up, and reproduced as glorious five by seven prints. They are precious family heirlooms now, and I am forever grateful. Later, he also sent me his father's logbook, which I took to a professional to scan and reprint. Ted's daughter, Christine, enthusiastically contributed as well, sending me copies of her father's personal navigation maps, air force documentation, and photos, and writing down her memories of her Dad's life and stories.

Sgt. Digby Willoughby was the crew's flight engineer and the only one of the crew who was a member of the RAF—all the others were RCAF. I learned online that he was not Canadian and that he hailed from

Jamaica. Tracking down Sgt. Willoughby's family proved to be far more challenging than my previous quick successes! There are plenty of Willoughbys in the Kingston, Jamaica telephone directory, and I didn't even know where to start. I decided to take a different tack and contacted the National Library of Jamaica's historical research department. A very kind researcher named Genevieve dug into the matter for me and came up with several newspaper clippings from the war, which gave me some interesting information about him and his family, but she was unable to find any clues as to current family members.

Now that I had a few Willoughby family biographical nuggets of information, I decided to try Ancestry.com, and this website proved to be a great resource. I eventually connected with Francoise, who turned out to be the daughter of Digby's sister, who had come to Canada during the war. She gave me a brief rundown on the Willoughby family and their time in Jamaica, as well as solving the mystery as to why I had been unable to find any relatives there. It turned out that after the war, Digby had immigrated to Australia.

Through family connections she was able to find an email address for Digby's son, and soon Keith (and his brother Craig) Willoughby and I were corresponding. Keith was delighted to hear from me and sent me a copy of his father's logbook and stories of his father's post-war life. I was saddened to learn that Digby (known to his friends and crewmates as "Jimmy" for some reason) had died long ago, in 1965, when Keith was only nineteen. Keith's two brothers were even younger, one just a baby when they lost their father.

Sgt. Ken Hart was the crew's mid-upper gunner, and I knew he came from Ontario, but such a common last name would likely make tracking him down difficult. After many false starts and dead ends, a connection clicked when I learned Hart had been employed by a large Canadian insurance firm called London Life for many years. Via a helpful employee at London Life, who found an old company newsletter about Hart's retirement, I got the names of Hart's children, including married names, which proved to be the final hurdle in finding his family. I was soon talking to Ken Hart's daughter, Suzanne. She was enthusiastic about my project and provided me with some of her Dad's wartime documents and photos, as well as putting me in touch with her father's brother Don. He kindly sent me many stories about his older brother and insights into Hart's family and childhood. My connection with the Hart family was soon to take a more profound and troubling turn when I uncovered some disturbing information about Ken's RCAF service that I felt duty-bound to share with them.

Flight Sergeant Malcolm Dingwall was the crew's bomb aimer, and all I could find on him was that he was from Saskatchewan. Cold calling people with the same last name turned out to be a dead-end. He seemed to have no online presence, aside from one passing mention in a very old obituary, which noted that the person had worked for a baker named Malcolm Dingwall after the war in a small town in Saskatchewan. From there, the trail went dead. I enlisted the help of the Saskatchewan Genealogical Society, and they managed to track down a newspaper obituary for Dingwall, which allowed me to leave Saskatchewan and pick up the trail in my own province of British Columbia. After a few false starts, I was delighted to reach Dingwall's daughter in Prince George and shortly after, his grandson Glenn, who visited me several months later.

Connecting with navigator **Flying Officer Robert Bayne**'s family proved to be one of my more difficult tasks, but not because I couldn't find them. I found a family member relatively easily, but this person was uninterested in my project. After an initial email, he simply stopped replying to my repeated attempts to engage with him. In frustration, I dropped the search for Bayne's family for a year while I focused on other research. When I started looking again, I had better luck and connected with Bayne's grandson in Toronto, who I interviewed briefly in the spring of 2018. My conversation with him cleared up many mysteries and led me to even greater respect for the Coffey crew's navigator.

The search for the family of **Sergeant Robert McWhirter**, the crew's rear gunner (or "tail-end charlie" as they were nicknamed), turned out to be uniquely rewarding. I knew I had met McWhirter once, some

twenty-five years previously, at a 405 Squadron reunion. At the time of Dad's death, he had been registered to attend and since the reunion was being held near where I lived, I had decided to go in his stead. I don't recall a lot of that evening, other than feeling a bit uncomfortable being at least forty years younger than anyone else in the room, but I remember meeting Bob and his wife, who were very kind and welcoming to me. My passionate interest in my Dad's wartime service had not germinated yet, and I am sorry to say I missed a unique opportunity to interview some of my Dad's comrades.

McWhirter came from Saskatchewan, so I started my search for him there, and after a series of connections, found myself talking on the phone to his stepson Curt. I asked Curt about his Dad's RCAF memorabilia, hoping for an introduction to the family member who might have his logbook and photos, and was astounded when Curt replied, "Oh, Dad still has his stuff in his apartment." The present tense almost left me speechless.

"Your Dad is still alive?" I asked rather stupidly.

"Oh yes, he goes curling twice a week and is sharp as a tack!"

Well, this was incredible news, and Curt soon put me in touch with his brother Tim, who lived in Kelowna, British Columbia, near his Dad. After a conversation with Tim, who assured me his Dad would be delighted to hear from me, I spoke with Bob McWhirter on the phone, and in the spring of 2015, my wife Tasnim and I drove to Kelowna to visit him in person.

Bob was the last surviving member of the Coffey crew, and I feel so grateful I had the opportunity to meet him and his son Tim. They were both unfailingly helpful, encouraging, and generous in assisting me in my research.

So now I had many more pieces of the puzzle than I had started with, and it was time to try and put them together into some sort of narrative. At first, my idea was to annotate Dad's logbook somehow, labelling various entries in it with paragraphs of explanation. This idea morphed into perhaps writing some kind of chapbook, getting it printed at Staples and sharing it with all the families I had connected with.

Finally, the idea of actually writing an actual book reared its ugly head in my mind. I rejected the idea immediately: writers write books, and I am not a writer. Some years later, the book that should have been written by a writer is in your hands.

In some ways, this book is a personal narrative, a son's journey to get to know his Dad better—but mostly, it is a tribute, an attempt to honour the awe-inspiring courage of seven seemingly ordinary young men who did something quite extraordinary.

I believe with all my heart that this story deserved to be told, and it seems it was stuck with me to try and tell it—I sincerely hope my passion for the subject can make up for my lack of talent as a writer. This book is an attempt to tell the story of these seven young men who came together from different places and disparate backgrounds and formed a team. They lived, trained, flew, and faced death together, and then went home when they had completed their part in "the job to be done."

CHAPTER ONE:

"NOT IMPRESSIVE AS AIRCREW"

FEBRUARY 1942 TO NOVEMBER 1942

Bomber Command pilots were probably the most extensively trained warriors up to that point in history: my Dad enlisted in February of 1942 and flew his first combat operation in February of 1944, almost two years of increasingly intense and sophisticated training. The chances of a new aircrew recruit surviving over two years of risk-filled training and then two tours of combat operations was shockingly low—about one in three—it's a good thing they were all unaware of their odds of making it or most of them might have chosen to join the Army instead. Nothing in Dad's background provides a clue about why he succeeded in coming home safely, where tens of thousands of other young men perished.

Jesse Ray Coffey was born into poverty in the village of Czar, Alberta, on April 16, 1921. My grandfather had brought the family to southern Alberta about twenty years previously from the American state of Arkansas, where the Coffey family had settled after emigrating from Ireland in the early-to-mid 19th century. Harry Coffey, my grandfather, worked many different jobs to support the family, but they never rose above a hardscrabble existence. I remember Dad telling me that, as a child, he could hear the bugs dropping from the ceiling at night and hitting the floor. Occasionally he and his brothers would run a burning roll of newspaper along the cracks in the ceiling to try and keep the insect population in check. I never knew my grandfather, but he was, by all accounts, a hard and ignorant man. His daughters (my aunts) wasted no time in leaving home and getting away from him as soon as they were old enough. My Dad never spoke of him, other than to tell me once that my grandfather chewed tobacco and wouldn't bother with a spittoon, preferring to spit on the floor of his own home—enough said. How my Dad grew up to be such a kind, wise, and classy gentleman coming from such a background is a bit of a mystery.

Despite these uninspiring origins, my Dad was no doubt an intelligent young man with ambitions. He managed to complete High School with above average grades, and soon landed a job as a clerk with that legendary Canadian institution, the Hudson's Bay Company. The HBC's all-pervasive presence across Canada ranged from upscale department stores in urban centres to tiny one-room trading posts in remote Indigenous communities. I don't know whether Dad had any say in his placement, but it's hard to believe that where he ended up was one of his top choices. The tiny hamlet of Port Simpson (today known as Lax Kw'alaams), on British Columbia's rugged northern coastline, was in essence an Indigenous village with a Hudson's Bay Company general store to service the community, buying furs and selling all manner of retail goods. The store had begun as a tiny trading post in 1834, but by the time Dad arrived in 1941 it was a substantial two story wooden building, with room on the second floor for employee accommodation. The natural beauty of the area must have been a real eye-opener for Dad, and his arrival in Port Simpson was the first time in his life he had seen the ocean.

I know little of Dad's life there, simply that he listed his occupation as "Senior Assistant," and to me that implies a wide variety of responsibilities. I know he became quite knowledgeable in the grading of furs during his time with the HBC, and it's almost certain his education began in Port Simpson.

However, like millions of other young men worldwide, his career plans were interrupted by the war, which was now well into its second full year. Sometime towards the end of 1941, he returned to his hometown of Czar and shortly thereafter travelled to the nearest large city to "join up."

When I first started making a timeline of my Dad's life for this time using snippets from various sources, one question began nagging at me: why had Dad travelled all the way back to Alberta to enlist? The village of Port Simpson was near the town of Prince Rupert, which likely had a recruiting office, or he could have easily taken a ferry or train south to Vancouver, one of Canada's major cities. Why make the long, convoluted journey back to Czar?

One can speculate and come up with all kinds of plausible explanations, but I choose to believe (and I admit that my mind may be clouded by sentimentality) that he made the long journey home because he was in love.

In the months before leaving Czar for British Columbia, he had worked at a variety of odd jobs, one of which was as a hired hand on a large and relatively prosperous family farm belonging to Gustav Anderson, a Swedish immigrant who had homesteaded in the area. Gustav had an eighteen-year-old daughter named Ruby, who was to become my mother.

Before leaving for his new job in Port Simpson, had Jesse promised her that he would come back as soon as he could arrange a transfer somewhere closer to Czar? I think it is a possibility. Had the two exchanged letters while Dad was far away on the wild coast of British Columbia? Again, I believe it very likely.

At any rate, Dad returned to his hometown in early 1942, and there is no doubt he spent time courting Ruby, as will soon become apparent.

In February of 1942, he travelled to Edmonton, Alberta and enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force. I never asked my Dad why he chose the Air Force, but it is not hard to guess at his reasoning: the Army probably held connotations of drudgery and trenches, and as a boy born and bred on the Prairies, the Navy wouldn't likely have even been in the running as a choice. On the other hand, Dad had no doubt looked up and seen many aircraft flying across the clear Albertan skies during his youth, and had read about the adventures of legendary Canadian bush pilots like Wop May and Punch Dickens.

As a young adult, he no doubt had read newspaper accounts about the heroic deeds of "the Few" in the Battle of Britain, and so he probably, like tens of thousands of other young Canadian men, had dreams of being a fighter pilot. However, his dreams would matter little to the vast bureaucracy he had just joined.

After passing all the tests and exams at the recruiting office, Dad returned to Czar for two months, waiting for a spot to open up in a new class of recruits at Manning Depot in Edmonton, which happened in May of 1942. Saying goodbye to friends, family, and sweetheart Ruby, he made his way back to Edmonton to begin his new adventure.



Every air force in the world faced the same challenge when the war started: how to find the right men for the job. They required men who not only had an aptitude for flying, but also the mental and physical stamina needed to endure the rigours of training and the unique challenges of air combat. Able-bodied men were the most valuable resource a country had as it faced war. It made no sense to waste effort and money

attempting to train someone with no head for mathematics to be a navigator, for example, if he would be better suited as an air gunner or engine mechanic, which were equally vital trades. Not to take anything away from the skills it required to be a good soldier or seaman, but a Bomber Command pilot or navigator was in a different league—navigators especially had to master complex calculations, techniques, and equipment that were cutting edge (and often top secret) in the 1940s.

Being tested, retested, and tested again was going to be part of Dad's life now, as the vast machine known as the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) decided what role he would play in the RCAF.



A mugshot of my Dad, taken upon enlistment in the RCAF.
Photo courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.

The BCATP was one of the real success stories of the Second World War, and one in which Canada played a large role. The Canadian government saw Allied airpower as an area to which the Dominion of Canada could make a major contribution, and Canada devoted tremendous resources to its success, far out of proportion to its relatively small size. Well, "small" in terms of population and economic power perhaps, but not lacking at all in terms of geographic size, and that's where the Canadian Prime Minister saw an opportunity for Canada to make a unique contribution to the Allied cause. Lester B. Pearson called on Canada to become (in President Roosevelt's catchy phrase) the "aerodrome of democracy," and envisioned hundreds of airfields across Canada, all churning out fully trained aircrew, ready to ship to Europe to join the fray. In Canada's vast expanses of flat, well-mapped prairie, fledgling aircrew would be safe from depredation by the German Luftwaffe, and the well-lit towns (there was no need for blackout rules here as there was in England) would help rookie navigators find their way at night.

There is no doubt Pearson had an ambitious vision, but even he didn't foresee how huge the Plan would become. It eventually spread across the globe, with airfields as far away as Africa and Australia. Once the Plan was agreed on by all involved (a miracle in itself, with politicians and bureaucrats from many countries mired in wrangling over who would pay for what), it snowballed quickly, but it took a lot of time and effort to get that ball rolling. The idea had been around for years, but political wheels often turn slowly and war had already started in Europe by the time the first British students arrived in Canada. Remarkably, by the end of the war, the BCATP had trained forty-four percent of all Allied aircrew, more than 200,000 men, with Canada hosting over 130,000 of this impressive number.



So it was into this vast establishment that Dad entered in early 1942, and it was no doubt a jarring and disorienting experience. He was paid the grand sum of $1.10 a day, which was about one-third the average daily wage in Canada at the time, but his room and board (such as it was...) was, of course, provided by his new employer.

His first stop was in the city where he had joined up two months previously, at the No. 3 Manning Depot, located in the heart of Edmonton, Alberta, at the Clarke football stadium. The RCAF's Manning Depots were basically air force "boot camps," and after being issued a rough woollen uniform and stiff leather boots, Dad and his fellow Aircraftman 2s (an AC2 was the lowest form of life in the RCAF) would be shorn like sheep by a military barber and begin the process of learning what the RCAF referred to, without irony or humour, apparently, as "airmanship." The days were filled with route marches, drilling, polishing buttons and boots, a seemingly endless series of inoculations and learning to clean and fire a .303 Lee Enfield rifle—some recruits must have wondered if they had joined the Army by mistake! There were lectures and calisthenics and assigned cleaning duties to keep the days filled. The conditions were typical rustic military style, with dorms filled with bunk beds and communal washing and eating facilities that made no allowances for privacy.

Then came the testing. The BCATP management was determined to be scientific in its selection process, and got a lot of input from civilian experts, including psychologists and medical doctors. Many ingenious (though often useless) tests were devised to determine who was suitable for aircrew, and in what capacity. Although every young man joining the air force likely dreamed of being a Spitfire pilot, precious few actually achieved their goal. When I interviewed Bob McWhirter (the crew's rear gunner) in 2016, I asked him if he as well had hoped to be a pilot when he joined up. The boyish grin and the twinkle in his eye

as he answered, "Oh yeah!" seemed to erase several decades from his ninety-three-year-old face. However, like so many others, his hopes were dashed due to his limited education, cut short so he could work on the family farm.

Tests administered included blowing into a glass tube and, by maintaining air pressure, keeping a column of mercury suspended at a certain level—this was supposed to test lung power. Word got around about the test and soon some cagey students learned to surreptitiously cover the opening of the tube with their tongues, which held the mercury at the correct level without having to blow!

Other tests were psychological, such as being asked odd hypothetical questions so experts could assess the answers. There were endless interviews with doctors and military officers who poked, prodded, questioned, and tested the recruits. I am fortunate to have copies of many of my Dad's medical forms and assessments courtesy of the Canadian government, which will provide military records to relatives if requested. The forms I received document the lengthy process involved to convince the RCAF that Dad was fit to fly. The questions asked and answered covered a broad range of mental and physical health subjects such as: "consumption" (negative), "nervous trouble" (none), "habits-smoking" (Dad admitted to twelve a day), and "Discomfort on Swings, Roundabouts and Switchbacks" (None). Several of the doctors made a brief, positive comment about Dad, including "good lad" and "better than average aircrew," but he certainly made a poor impression on a certain Dr. T, who wrote this dismissive assessment:

> Tall slim fair with some fine hair on body. Stuffy eyed – shy & timid – nervous tics as playing with shoe lace or coat belt. Unaggressive – satisfied with unexciting life?? store clerk. Lacks confidence. Not impressive as aircrew material for any position.

Was the good doctor just having a bad day, or did who-knows-how-many aspiring aircrew have their hopes dashed by a similar disdainful assessment? In my opinion, Dr. T had made the classic mistake of equating aggressiveness with courage and character—my father may not have been brimming over with the former, but he had the latter in spades.

In trying to be fair-minded, I must note that the attitude he expresses is reflective of the official thinking of the day, that good military men were the result of "good breeding," and that no amount of training could make up for the lack of it. Early RCAF recruiting posters depicted young men playing polo and driving sporty cars as the ideal of who they were looking for. Since such activities were well beyond the means of ninety percent of Depression era youth, one gets a sense of the snobbishness in some of the official attitudes of the day. Fortunately, Dr. T's old-fashioned prejudices did not prevent Dad from progressing towards the goal he aspired to, and he was assessed as being a suitable candidate for aircrew training, although in what capacity was still to be determined.

Dad had another run-in with another sort of doctor around the same time, this one a dentist. Dad told me he had never been to a dentist in his life before joining the RCAF, but that having a dental exam was part of the process of being deemed fit for aircrew training. The dentist performed the routine exam and informed Dad that he had two bad cavities that required filling immediately. He assured my nervous father that it was completely routine and pulled out a needle to inject some freezing into the problem area. When Dad saw the size of the needle he panicked, and insisted he didn't need it, and that the dentist should proceed without it. After much arguing, the exasperated dentist said, "sure kid, have it your way." Dad told me that the noise of the drill and the smoke coming out of his mouth was terrifying enough, but when the drill finally touched a nerve, things got infinitely worse, and he was lifted out of the chair with the pain. He now acquiesced to the anaesthetic needle, and the procedure was completed without further drama.

At this point, Dad's story follows the same path of almost all of the Manning depot graduates: he was assigned to a nearby airfield for six weeks of "tarmac duty."

Dad and a few of his fellow AC2s were transported to the No. 2 Air Observer School at Blatchford Air Field, only a few kilometres from the Manning Depot in Edmonton. There they would spend the next six to eight weeks tidying hangers, manning the entrance gates, cleaning Avro Ansons inside and out and patrolling the perimeter of the airfield. Whether the patrolling was to prevent unauthorized trips into town by the airmen, or to detect intrusion by Nazi saboteurs, I am not sure.

The Air Observer School was the first step in the training of future navigators and this particular one was headed by none other than Wop May, the WW I Sopwith Camel pilot who had pioneered the bush pilot trade in post-war Canada. On one occasion, May had helped the RCMP track down the murderous Rat River Trapper when he was on the run in the wilds of the North West Territories. It was one of the first times in history an aircraft had assisted police in such a task.

Towards the end of July 1942, Dad received a piece of information that was to change his life. I don't know the method used to convey the bombshell to Dad, but a telegram seems the likeliest: Ruby Anderson was pregnant. Sometime in April, while Dad was awaiting orders from the RCAF to report to Manning Depot, the young couple had consummated their relationship. To his credit, Dad lost no time in "doing the right thing"—somehow arranging for a pass and transportation, he met my Mom at the halfway point between them, in the small town of Lougheed, Alberta. There, on July 23, 1942 they were married by a Donald MacKie, likely the minister from the local United Church. No civilian records remain of the marriage ceremony, and as far as I know, there are no surviving photos. Not the most romantic of starts to a marriage perhaps, but their bond remained solid for over fifty years, with only death separating them in the end. I sometimes wondered growing up why not much was made of their yearly anniversary—it seemed to be downplayed a bit. It wasn't until I was an adult that my oldest brother Gary pointed out to me the time between their anniversary date and his birthday was about six months, and the penny dropped for me.

At the end of August 1942, Dad completed his stint on tarmac duty at Air Observer School. Before leaving Edmonton for his next post, he likely attended the graduation ceremony of the current class, where he and the graduating students were told to "keep their bodies clean and their minds clear and active" by their Commanding Officer.[1]

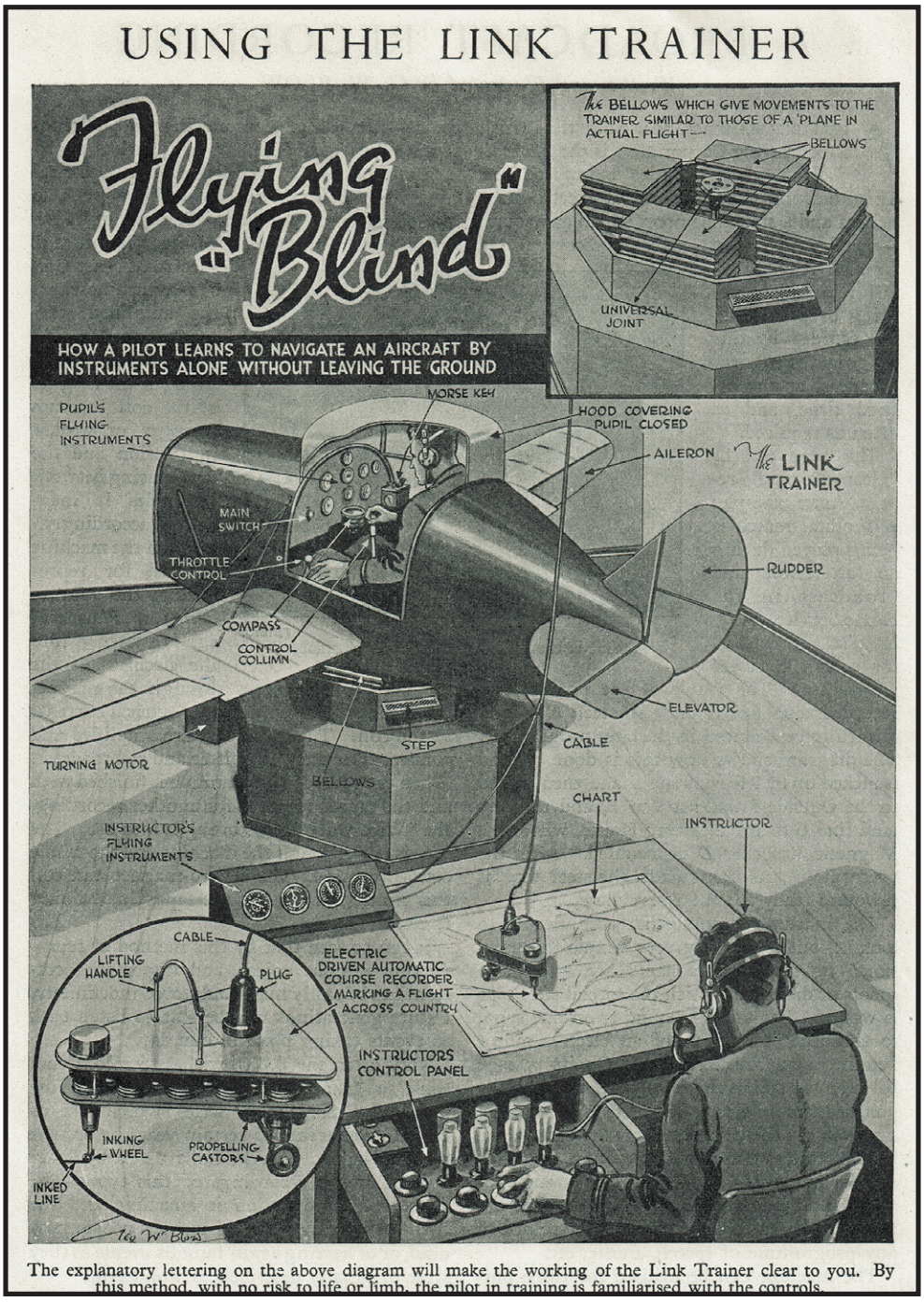
Dad's next step on the BCATP ladder was the No. 7 Initial Training School in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. The school was located in a re-purposed teacher's college, the Saskatchewan Normal School, whose former occupants were relocated to make room for the Air Force trainees. It is a beautiful brick and stone building, still in use today as a film studio, and is a designated heritage site.

Initial Training School's purpose was to give the Air Force the information they needed to finally separate the pilots from the navigators. Other trades, like wireless operators and air gunners, had already been identified at Manning Depot, and been sent on their way to their respective schools, but making final decisions about the pilots and navigators would require still more training and testing. The School curriculum was tough, and was meant to be: everything from algebra and trigonometry to sitting in a decompression chamber (to test tolerance to oxygen deprivation) was involved. An especially long medical exam was an integral part of the course: it was known as the M2, and ranged from psychological tests to balance tests, and even included an EEG over the course of some four gruelling hours. Dad would also make the acquaintance of a piece of equipment that he would become very familiar with over the next two years, the Link trainer.

The Link trainer was the brainchild of Ed Link, an American entrepreneur, who had seen the need for some kind of tool to train would-be pilots while keeping them safely on the ground. In a way, the trainer

1 Still good advice even today!

was a precursor to modern flight simulators. Link struggled through the Depression, but when war came he was flooded with orders, especially as the BCATP got up to speed. Although the Link became more sophisticated as time went on, it was essentially a plywood box with stubby wings and an instrument panel and control stick. It was rigged up with pulleys and cables (later models used a system of bellows), and moved in a somewhat realistic manner based on how the student sitting in it moved the control stick and rudder pedals. The wooden hood could be closed to simulate night flying, the student using just the instrument panel to follow the instructor's directions over his headset.



A Link Trainer depicted in a WW2 magazine article from Australia. Author's collection.

For the most part, aircrew trainees loathed the machine and many a would-be pilot saw his career hopes come to a (simulated!) crashing end inside the claustrophobic confines of a Link Trainer. There is little doubt, however, that the Link saved thousands of lives, and I think it is one of the unsung heroes of World War II. It was certainly an improvement over the method used in the First World War, where pilots flew a couple of flights as a passenger and then were simply sent off solo to see how they did, leading to many unnecessary and wasteful deaths. The training provided in the first war had also promoted aerial stunting as a way of building skills and demonstrating "keenness," with equally tragic results. In contrast, the BCATP taught professionalism—it was a different kind of war.

At the end of eight weeks of this intense program of testing and training, each of the students would spend a few crucial (and no doubt extremely stressful) minutes being interviewed by a panel of three or four senior officers, the Aircrew Selection Board. The results and postings were announced shortly afterwards, and there would be groans of disappointment and hoots of joy as the young men learned what the powers that be had decided about their futures. Dad was selected for pilot training, and along with all the other graduates, received a promotion to Leading Aircraftman and a propeller patch to sew on his left sleeve. He and his fellow LACs also were given a white flash to place in their caps, which signified they were aircrew in training. In what one must admit was a brilliant propaganda coup, soldiers across Canada soon spread the rumour to local girls that the white flashes meant the airman in question had an STD.

In the collection of my Dad's memorabilia, I found a group photo of Dad with his fellow students and their officers, taken on the front steps of the Saskatoon Normal School. On the back is scribbled the names (and nicknames) of twenty-eight of the sixty or so young men who graduated, and I was able to find out a bit about some of them.

Hugh Campbell gleefully wrote "L.A.C.!" after his name, obviously proud of his new status. Campbell went on to flying school but was unsuccessful, having "washed out" (to use the somewhat heartless phrase common at the time), and redirected to Bombing and Gunnery School. Campbell ended up a very successful and respected bomb aimer with 427 Squadron, rising to the rank of Flying Officer and being awarded the DFC. He never gave up on his dream of being a pilot, and after the war he finally earned his wings, becoming a Sikorsky helicopter pilot with the RCAF's Search and Rescue Squadron.

Jack "Hotcake" Burch completed his flying training and went on to be a pilot with 433 Squadron and another DFC winner. He, too, returned home safely and became an instructor, teaching student pilots to fly the famous Chipmunk, an aircraft almost as beloved as the Tiger Moth, which it had replaced as the RCAF's primary training aircraft.

Charles "Russian" Clegg was a classmate of Dad's at both Elementary Flying Training School and Service Flying Training School. He went on to be the skipper of a Handley-Page Halifax with the RAF's 51 Squadron, returning home safely to Alberta after completing two combat tours.

Others were not so lucky.

John "Angus" Black died when his Lancaster was shot down while attacking a V-1 flying bomb site in June of 1944. "Jock" Ramsay lost his life in January of 1944, shot down over Berlin. Ramsay had been a theatre usher in Nanaimo, British Columbia prior to joining up. He was an impossibly fresh-faced and boyish-looking young man, with tousled blond hair and an innocent smile—he looks like he belongs in a Boy Scout uniform rather than an Air Force uniform. In fact, he was twenty years old at Initial Training School (ITS), only a few months younger than Dad. For whatever reason, Ramsay was sent on to Bombing and Gunnery School after ITS rather than flying school—perhaps his grades were not quite there, or he may have failed to suitably impress the Aircrew Selection Board. He eventually became a bomb aimer with 429 Squadron, and on the night of January 20, 1944, he died over Berlin, along with all but one of his crew, when their Halifax was shot down, likely the victim of flak. Their pitiful, mangled remains were impossible

to separate in the wreckage, and the Germans buried them together in a group grave. They had trained, bunked, flown, and then died together, and in the end were buried together, as a crew. Something tells me they would not have minded the arrangement in the least.

Adding even more poignancy to the story of "Jock" Ramsay is a letter sent by RCAF headquarters in July of 1945 to a young Nursing Sister at the No. 24 Canadian General Hospital in Surrey, England. The letter, which began, "Dear Miss Sparks," advised that Ramsay's death had been confirmed and expressed deepest sympathy "in the loss of your friend." It is hard not to jump to the conclusion that the two were more than "friends," and not difficult to imagine the grief and sorrow this young nurse must have felt to have her deepest fear come true. She may have lived for eighteen months hoping against hope that her lover was safe in a German prison camp and they would be reunited after the war was over.

Although the fates of Dad's classmates who were awarded decorations were relatively simple to find, the majority proved untraceable, at least with the admittedly rudimentary skills I brought to the task.

What, I wondered, had happened to Bill "Coat 'n Hat" Cotton, A. L. "Signalgram" Seligman or "Machine Gun Louis" Bean? It is sobering to look at the photo of Initial Training School Class 61 and realize that, statistically speaking, more than half of these eager, smiling young men never made it home, dying over Germany or France, or in training accidents in England.

Upon graduating, Dad was given twelve days of leave, and he no doubt went home to Provost, Alberta, to spend time with his wife Ruby. When it was time to part, it was not far by train to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, some 150 kilometres north of Saskatoon. His destination was the No. 6 Elementary Flying Training School. It was the next stopping point on the BCATP conveyor belt: he would be taught to fly, and it is here that his logbook begins.