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Listowel Banner

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'That vast armada of the air'

Historic photograph connects RAF Bomber Command crew to Listowel

WENDY VAN LEEUWEN
Special to the Banner

The seven men in the faded photograph squint into the sunlight as they pose proudly behind the wing of a Lancaster bomber. Likely taken in the spring of 1945, this photo opens the door to some fascinating historical connections between the Royal Air Force Bomber Command and the small town of Listowel during the Second World War.

The framed photo is part of the modest archives of the Listowel District Secondary School library. Its recent rediscovery prompted a number of questions. Why was the photo donated? Is there a local connection to any of the seven crew members, or to the plane in the background?

A handwritten notation

on the back of the frame indicates that it was donated by Neil Schade on April 21, 1988. Donald Allen Neil Schade died in May 2020 at the age of 92, in Brussels. He was formerly a resident of Wallace Township, and his obituary states he was affectionately known as "Mr. Lanc." He was a bit too young to serve in the Second World War, but was a Lancaster bomber enthusiast and had a wealth of knowledge about this iconic aircraft. Neil's son, Don, a resident of Brussels, remembers Neil speaking of the crew in the photo as his friends.

"Al Petrie was a rear gunner. Richard Harris was an Englishman. Dad corresponded with him until Alzheimer's stole his memories," said Don.

Allen Petrie, front right in the photo, is indeed listed as a rear gunner. Next to him, with a broad confident grin, crouches the pilot, Dennis P. Varden. To his left is Russel Abrams, mid upper gunner. In the back row, left to right, stand Neville Grayer, bomb aimer, Claire Mackie, wireless operator, Richard Harris,

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LEST WE FORGET – A large crowd gathered at the cenotaph in Atwood on Sunday, Nov. 6 for the annual Remembrance Day service. Members of the Listowel Legion, along with local dignitaries, residents and members of the #769 Centennaires Royal Canadian Air Cadets, were on hand to pay their respects and lay wreaths, as well as observe a moment of silence.

Photo courtesy of #769 Centennaires Royal Canadian Air Cadets

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Mayor Kasenberg in the running for Perth County Warden

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PERTH COUNTY – At the Nov. 3 meeting of Perth County council, North Perth Mayor Todd Kasenberg expressed his interest in seeking election for warden of the council, after current Warden and Perth South Mayor, Jim Aitchison, expressed his desire to depart from the position.

"I have no intention of seeking the war-

den's position again. Would I like to do it, sure," stated Warden Aitchison at the Nov. 3 meeting. Aitchison has served as warden for three terms, and expressed his gratitude to fellow council members as well as employees across the county. "I want to say I have thoroughly enjoyed it, but that could be a bit of a stretch. It has had its share of moments in the past three years with COVID.

"It's been a great three years! I've enjoyed working with you all. I'll be coming back as Mayor of Perth South, so

you're not done with me yet," joked Aitchison.

The Perth County councillors all thanked Aitchison for his time in the position.

When asked for recommendations for a new warden, the only willing candidate to come forward from council was Kasenberg.

"I too, am grateful for your service over the last three years. I'm pleased to indicate that I would be honoured to serve as warden and will allow my name to stand for that purpose," expressed Kasenberg

at the meeting.

Kasenberg later provided a comment to the *Banner* on his intention to seek the position.

"The county has a number of significant projects that lie ahead in 2023 and beyond, and these projects will challenge our processes yet strengthen our ability to enjoy a high quality of place and life in our county," said Kasenberg. "We have a wonderful and diligent staff team at the county, and I have enjoyed my service

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at the BIA for more info
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Make a purchase at any participating business Nov. 17-19 for a chance to win a gift basket made up of donated gifts from local businesses. List of participating businesses found on website.

Additional Late Hours

Select stores are adding late hours for your shopping convenience on Nov. 17 and Nov. 18 from 4p.m-7p.m. List of businesses offering late hours found on our website and follow our Facebook event page for regular updates.



Sales, Discounts, and More

Select stores are offering special promotions and discounts. Kick-off your holiday shopping with our Deck the Halls Town Wide Open House.



Visit our website at discoverlistowel.com/deck-the-halls-event to see specifics.

Photo connects RAF Bomber Command crew to Listowel

Continued from front

navigator, and William Moffatt, flight engineer. All of these men survived the war, and none of them were from the Listowel area.

So if none of the men in the photo were local lads, why donate the photo to the school? Perhaps there is a connection to the plane? The aircraft partially visible in the photo at right is clearly a Lancaster, the heavy bomber relied upon by RAF Bomber Command for night-time bombing campaigns over Europe from 1942 until VE Day. Altogether, people from 60 nations around the world served in Bomber Command, many of them from Commonwealth nations, including Canada, and they were instrumental in changing the outcome of the Second World War.

According to the Bomber Command Museum of Canada site, "The successes of Bomber Command were purchased at a terrible cost. Of every 100 airmen who joined Bomber Command, 45 were killed, six were seriously wounded, eight became prisoners of war, and only 41 escaped unscathed (at least physically). Of the 120,000 who served, 58,000 were killed including over 10,400 Canadians."

Of the 7,377 Lancasters built for the war effort, 3,736 were lost.

The Lancaster proved to be Bomber Command's most successful aircraft. In early 1942, the decision was made to manufacture them in Canada, out of the range of the German bombers. Altogether, 430 Canadian-made Lancasters came off the production line at Victory Aircraft in Malton, Ont., and headed across the Atlantic. Each Lancaster was coded with three letters and a registration consisting of two letters and three numbers. In the LDSS library's photo, the letters NA*S are visible, and to the far right, a faded "KB" indicating that this plane was definitely built in Canada. Could it be the Lancaster purchased by the townspeople of Listowel to support the war effort?

The *Listowel Banner* of March 29, 1945 tells that story.

"In November, 1944, Canada launched its Seventh Victory Loan. Listowel's first objective was \$283,000. Then the happy thought came that Listowel should raise the objective to \$350,000 and buy a Lancaster Bomber to be presented to the RCAF. The promise was then made that if Listowel would raise \$350,000 a new Lancaster Bomber would come off the assembly lines, the crest of Listowel would be painted on the bomber and that it would fly across the Atlantic to join that vast armada of the



air that is doing such a grand job in bringing victory to the forces of freedom. That promise has been fully kept. Listowel citizens raised \$374,100. The Bomber was purchased and named 'Listowel, Ont.' It is now travelling the highways of the air over enemy territory."

There is a justifiable note of pride in the article. The amount raised was a tremendous sum for a town of about 3,000 people in 1944, when the average annual income was \$2,500.

Other sources describe the bomber purchased by the Town of Listowel as being named "The Spirit of Listowel." It served for the last couple of months of the war with RCAF Squadron 428, ("Ghost Squadron" because of their night bombing operations), based at Middleton St. George, England. However, "The Spirit of

Pictured, from top to bottom: The Lancaster bomber crew that has been associated with a plane that the people of Listowel funded during the Second World War – Back row: Bomb Aimer Neville Grayer, Wireless Operator Claire Mackie, Navigator Richard Harris, and Flight Engineer William Moffatt. Front row: Mid Upper Gunner Russel Abrams, Pilot Dennis P. Varden, and Rear Gunner Allen Petrie; the crest of Royal Canadian Air Force Squadron 428; the tombstone of Flight Lieut. Dennis Varden and his wife, Clare; the Lancaster bomber purchased by the people of Listowel in 1944.

Listowel" was coded NA*V, so it is definitely not the plane pictured with the unknown aircrew. That Lancaster is another aircraft altogether, but which one?

An important clue is hidden by the frame at the right-hand edge of the photo: the faded beginning of a number 8 following the KB. This narrows down the identity of the mystery aircraft to only one possibility. This must be NA*S KB864, which also served with Squadron 428, beginning in early January 1945. Historian and artist Clarence Simonsen mentions in his blog that this plane was very popular for photos because of her nose art, which was painted by Sgt. Thomas Walton. On one side of the nose, Walton, who also served as wireless air gunner on this bomber, recreated Alberto Vargas' pin-up girl from the January 1945 *Esquire* magazine. He christened her 'Sugar.' Silhouettes of 21 diving girls further forward on the nose pay tribute to the bomber's 21 missions. The plane itself was nicknamed "Sugar's Blues," after a popular Jazz dance tune that was a favourite of Walton's American-born pilot, Pilot Officer Latumer. A reproduction of the fuselage of "Sugar's Blues," complete with

nose art painted by Clarence Simonsen, is currently on display at the Bomber Command Museum of Canada in Nanton, Alta.

Two hundred eighty-eight aircraft, among them "The Spirit of Listowel" and "Sugar's Blues," were returned to Canada when the war ended. "Sugar's Blues" participated in a cross-Canada bond tour that summer to raise money for the ongoing war effort in the Pacific. Many of the returning planes, including "The Spirit of Listowel," were ferried to Nova Scotia, the home of the 661 Heavy Bomber Wing of Tiger Force based at Yarmouth, NS. The intention was to reorganize and retrain the crews and repaint them for joining operations in the Pacific by December. However, the war ended in August with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Tiger Force Yarmouth was disbanded. One hundred sixty Lancaster bombers were taken to Alberta and placed in long-term storage, where both "The Spirit of Listowel" and "Sugar's Blues" were eventually sold for scrap metal.

The Wartime Heritage Society of Yarmouth has documented the next part of the story. Upon arriving in Nova Scotia at the begin-

ning of June, crews were immediately given a month's leave.

Flight Lieut. Dennis Varden, the pilot in the photo, hurried home to his wife Clare in Montreal, with instructions to report back for duty in July. On June 30, 1945, an 11-man RCAF crew from the nearby No. 6 Ferry Unit Dorval headed out to deliver a Canadian-built B-24 Liberator to the Royal Air Force in England. The pilot lost control on takeoff, and the plane crashed near the runway and burst into flames.

Closest to the crash was the home of Flight Lieut. Varden, still on leave from RCAF Yarmouth.

"He immediately entered the burning wreck and pulled out two crewmen who sadly had been killed by the crash. A third attempt pulled out a survivor. A second survivor was pinned by wreckage that was too hot to handle. Varden's wife brought him water which was used to cool the metal, but Varden's hands were still burned releasing the trapped airmen. In all, Varden helped all five surviving airmen from the wreckage. He ceased his efforts only when other people arrived on scene and took over."

For his incredible and selfless act of bravery, Varden was awarded the George Medal on Feb. 21, 1947. This medal was given for acts of bravery by civilians and military personnel while not under enemy fire.

That might be the end of the story, but the faded Operations Record Books archived at the Bomber Command Museum provide the final crucial pieces needed to solve the puzzle of the photograph. They include hundreds of daily entries which detail operational successes and failures: bombing runs, bad weather, damaged aircraft, targets destroyed, and the names of crew members who did not return from missions.

The records for Squadron 428 indicate that Varden and the rest of his crew shown in the photograph were posted as a unit to the squadron on Feb. 28, 1945, and flew numerous missions over the next two months. On April 10, 1945, Varden and his crew were sent out on a night-time bombing run over Germany which was noted in the log as a 'good attack' with minimal damage to the aircraft.

That aircraft was KB899, "The Spirit of Listowel."

In the one and only recorded bombing run carried out by the Lancaster bomber purchased by the people of Listowel, the pilot in this photo, the valiant Flight Lieut. Dennis P. Varden, and most likely the six men with him, served as her crew.

