



Dreams and memories collide in the night skies: Rudy Wagner remembers

By Capt John Weingardt and HCol Frank Kozar

Rudy Wagner keeps a pen and paper handy when he sleeps. He dreams; he dreams of things that happened over 60 years ago, in the night skies, during the war.

He didn't always. "I just didn't recall for a while." But now the dreams are vivid. "That's when I seem to remember," Mr. Wagner says. "The trouble is I can't sleep the rest of the night. It bothers me so much."

And since he cannot sleep, Mr. Wagner takes his bedside pen and paper and writes down the memories, some of which have been mercifully forgotten for so long. But he writes them clearly now, as clear as the dreams, so that Canadians present and future will know what it was like to serve with Bomber Command during the Second World War.

Mr. Wagner was a farm boy in the 1930s, and grew up near Spruce Grove, Alberta. In 1941 he enlisted with the Royal Canadian Air Force. He volunteered for aircrew and was sent on a three-month air gunnery course in Lethbridge, Alta. He took his training seriously. Later, he would look back at this initial training as inadequate.

"On training we used Vickers machine-gun. On ops (operations) we used the Browning machine-gun, which we didn't see. The training introduced us to the

basics, the very basics of things."

"What we were taught that was of use to us was Morse Code, the Aldis Lamp, and aircraft recognition. But the actual mechanics of air-to-air firing, they didn't have any instructors that knew anything about that."

Mr. Wagner was an excellent student. He formed a friendship with a fellow named Keith. The two of them studied so hard that they finished first and second in the class. As a reward, the top two candidates were commissioned as officers. This was rare, as the huge majority of air gunners were never commissioned. In fact, the majority were killed on operations; bomber aircrew had the highest casualty rates of any Canadian branch of service.

In 1942, he crossed the Atlantic on the Queen Elizabeth. The ship was actually hit by a torpedo, but not seriously damaged. It was typical of Mr. Wagner's luck. Normally, a fresh crew would be placed on 'O.T.U.' (operational training unit).

"But they were so desperately short of crew we went straight to conversion squadron. That's where we finally saw our Boulton-Paul turrets and our Browning machine-guns and had our first taste of training for going on ops."

Mr. Wagner and his crew were posted to 419 'Moose' Squadron, part of 6 Group, the Canadian element of Bomber Command. His plane was the Handley-Page Halifax, a four-engined

heavy bomber. They would fly at night deep into Nazi-occupied Europe. Though the bombers would fly hundreds at a time, in the darkness they could not keep formation, and it could feel as if they were completely alone. Rookie crews were especially vulnerable.

Mr. Wagner and his crew survived the initial missions, but he remembers others that did not. "It was the first five trips that were just devastating. Many times when a new crew would hit our station in the morning, we had to send them on ops that night, and they'd go missing."

As a gunner leader, I had to write letters to their loved ones back home. I found that extremely hard to do. Because you didn't get to know them! Finally they saw the light and they got the padres to write home.

Mr. Wagner remembers the superstitions that crews would adopt. On his first mission, he accidentally took his peaked cap with him, not necessary with a flight helmet. "I had meant to leave it in the locker." They survived the first op. Perhaps it was because of the 'lucky' hat. "After that I insisted on taking it. I did not go on ops without it."

There were other superstitions, more sombre. "Our skipper said, 'None of you get married, for gosh sakes!' So many types that got married wouldn't last very long." The odds were terrible. Only 24 percent of bomber aircrew survived unharmed. Luck was part of it.

To complete a 'tour of ops,' Mr. Wagner had to survive 30 missions into enemy territory. As a gunner on a Halifax, he sat in one of three turrets: the nose turret, the mid-upper turret, or the rear turret.

Mr. Wagner was an exceptional gunner. He shot down three nightfighters during his tour—two during the same mission! This stands in stark contrast to the huge majority of gunners who never shot down a single plane.

Because of his skill, he was decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross—a rare honour. More importantly, because of his skill, Mr. Wagner and his crew survived. Thirty trips. He beat the odds, by both luck and skill.

Mr. Wagner feels it is tremendously important to remember all aspects of war, why it was fought and the terrible price paid.

"I have always despised war and do not wish to glorify it. It has to be documented and it has to be published. Otherwise in a very short time it will all be gone."

Capt Weingardt is editor of The Western Sentinel, where this article first appeared. HCol Frank Kozar of 20 Field Regiment, RCA, was a contributor to The Western Sentinel until his death in late February 2004.

Aircrew statistics:

- 51 percent killed on operations
- 9 percent killed in crashes in England
- 3 percent seriously injured
- 12 percent prisoner of war
- 1 percent evaded capture
- 24 percent survived unharmed
- 10 percent of those who began the war in Bomber Command were alive at the end of the war.

Statistiques sur les équipages d'aéronef

- 51 % ont été tués dans le cadre d'opérations
- 9 % sont décédés lors d'écrasements en Angleterre
- 3 % ont été blessés grièvement
- 12 % ont été faits prisonniers de guerre
- 1 % ont échappé à l'ennemi
- 24 % ont survécu sans blessure
- 10 % de ceux qui ont commencé la guerre dans le Bomber Command étaient vivants à la fin de la guerre.



COURTESY OF/AVEC LA PERMISSION DE RUDY WAGNER

The Handley-Page Halifax heavy bomber.

Le bombardier lourd Handley-Page Halifax.