

Part II

Flight into nightmare – the last moments of Lancaster LQ-K JB280

Editor's note: Last week's article was the initial story as garnered from material Maj. Marty Zimmer supplied Contact to see if there would be interest in the story. Sharon Zimmer and Rob Wethly have helped us fill in some of the blanks and have supplied us with some of the photographs used in the article written by Mr. Wethly and Dave O'Malley entitled "Blast From the Past," which also helped us recreate some of the final minutes for the crew of Lancaster LQ-K, RAF serial number JB280.

By Ross Lees

Ronald Zimmer was born Dec. 10, 1923, in Viscount, Saskatchewan, to parents Rudolph and Mary Zimmer. Rudolph and Mary immigrated to Canada from Russia, arriving September 1923, with two young children in tow. Ronald was the third child, the first born to the family on Canadian soil.

Ronald had six siblings; five brothers, and one sister who died in early childhood.

Between the ages of 15 and 17, Ronald worked as a farm labourer in Saskatchewan. From 17 to 18, he worked at a bush camp in Ontario, and then from 18 to 19, he worked at Canada Car & Foundry in Fort William, Ontario, as an aircraft fitter.

Ronald enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) on Aug. 20, 1942 at the age of 19. He attended #7 Bomber and Gunner School in Paulson, Manitoba, and then #9 Bomber and Gunner School in Mont Joli, Quebec, where he graduated on July 9, 1943.

After arriving in England on Aug. 11, 1943, he was posted to 1659 Heavy Conversion Unit at Royal Air Force (RAF) Topcliffe, North Yorkshire. In September of that year, he was posted to 429 Squadron at RAF Leeming, Gatenby, Northallerton, and in December of 1943, he was posted to 405 Squadron, RAF Gransden Lodge, Cambridgeshire. Six weeks after receiving his Air Gunner's badge,

and three weeks after his 20th birthday, he was killed in action. "Ronald graduated #9 Bomber and Gunner School in Mont Joli with a grand total of 2.35 hours spent arming, loading and harmonizing turrets, and 21.53 flying hours. His rank in his graduating class was 19th of 119 students.



Not a lot of experience to be sent off to war with," Sharon commented.

She also filled in some of the gaps as far as details about the incident ascertained through her research and with help from Mr. Wethly.

"The crew attempted to jettison their bomb load before crashing at 02:10 hours. This was commonly done, with hopes of improving their survival rate," she explained. "From the coroner's report, a large explosion was heard at 01:30 hours, possibly the jettisoned bombs. The report also states the aircraft ex-

ploded in the air, as the debris field spread over two miles."

Mr. Wethly was able to inform Major (Maj.) and Mrs. Zimmer that the remains of all the crew were buried three days after the crash in the Schoonebeek General Cemetery, Drenthe, Netherlands, where they remain today.

"Rob was able to provide me with some of the classified details of the mission, crash, and the events that took place at the initial burial of the crew members," Sharon said.

"The Germans took responsibility for the burial, and kept personal items found with the bodies. After the war ended, the RCAF had the bodies exhumed, correctly identified, and reburied with named grave markers."

By far the best assessment of what the crew of Lancaster LQ-K, Royal Air Force (RAF) serial number JB280 would experience on this trip comes from "Blast From the Past."

We learn that Jan. 1, 1944 was a typical English day, overcast with mists drifting across the airfield; the crews had been stood down for the day, although they learned at a briefing there would be an operation that night, take-offs wouldn't begin until after midnight. Being stood down was good news for the crew, as several of them were still recovering from their "...New Year's Eve revelry."

According to "Blast From the Past," which we have been granted permission to use excerpts from, "Flying Officer Tom Donnelly and

Sgt. Ronald Zimmer's military photograph looks more like a mug shot. The A is his blood type.

Photo from Sgt. Zimmer's military records supplied by Sharon Zimmer



his crew were ready for the task. Donnelly himself was a veteran on his second tour of operations. Surviving one tour was an accomplishment, beating odds that were well stacked against making it home alive."

In the story about this aircraft and crew, we learn of at least one crew member feeling confident in his experienced skipper, but also wondering when his luck was due to run out.

Carrying their bomb load, the Lancaster and its crew moved out onto the runway around midnight, they took off as part of a flight of 12 Lancasters destined to join a stream of 421 similar aircraft heading for Berlin on a bombing run.

"With them was a small group of 15 Bomber Command Mosquitos that would attempt a diversionary 20-somethings. Sgt. Zimmer had attack on Hamburg. It didn't work. The night fighters' dispatchers were not fooled this night," according to "Blast From the Past."

The story discusses the events coming together as the English aircraft ventured out on their mission and the German aircraft and crews prepared to receive them. It says the Junkers JU 88 and Messerschmitt Bf 110 were the true scourge of Bomber Command. "Unlike searchlights and flak, which to some extent could be avoided, night fighters were unseen, vicious and above all, unpredictable. The entire crew (of JB280) relied on

Wethly eventually found and uncovered an unexploded bomb from Sgt. Ron Watts in the rear turret and Sgt. Ron Zimmer in the top turret. Watts was 33-years-old, young by today's standards but ancient

under professional direction, the bomb was eventually exploded in that very field to dispose of it. The Zimmers hope this story

Destiny pounced on the crew in the next few minutes in the form of one of those night fighters as they approached the Dutch-German border and "...at approximately 2:10 a.m., the remains of Lancaster JB280 and its crew came shrieking, flaming and tumbling out of the night sky near the small town of Nieuw-Schoonebeek, slamming into the ground not 200 metres from the German border."

Seventy-two years later while searching for metal fragments with metal detectors with his two sons Yannic, 12, and Yde, 9, Mr.



Dutch citizens come to look at the wrecked fuselage of Lancaster JB280 lying in a farm field near the town of Nieuw-Schoonebeek, Drenthe, Netherlands. The framework on the right of the fuselage is the floor above the bomb bay with doors gone. The faring around the hole in the centre of the fuselage section is for the H2S Radar, the antenna housing having been destroyed. These wrecks would soon be loaded onto trucks and driven away to be melted down for German production. Photo via drentheindeoorlog.nl

will refocus attention on the extraordinary story of Lancaster LQ-K, Royal Air Force (RAF) serial number JB280 and its crew that literally flew off into the night and were never seen again.

For those of you who like a good but chilling and suspenseful war story, "Blast From the Past" should be just your cup of tea. Rob Wethly and Dave O'Malley did an excellent job of compiling the information and putting it together for a fascinating read.

Sharon Zimmer supplied us with a letter from Ron Zimmer's father Herbert telling of a letter written by Ron in 1943 noting that he did not feel he would return to Canada. "They are throwing everything at us but the kitchen sink," he wrote at the time. Contact thanks Marty and Sharon Zimmer for sharing this story with us and supplying us with the background, details and photographs that have helped us generate this two-part series.



Dutch military history enthusiast Rob Wethly and his two sons (Yanic, 12, and Yde, 9) use their metal detectors to search for fragments of metal that connect them with powerful events that happened in this field long ago. It was on just such an outing that the three made a remarkable and very dangerous discovery which would bring to light a long forgotten story of the Royal Canadian Air Force. Photo supplied by Rob Wethly



The 1,000 pound medium case, general purpose bomb from Lancaster JB280 exposed to the light of day for the first time since the night of Jan. 2, 1944. These bombs came with one of two types of fuses – an instantaneous contact fuse in the nose and a long-delay (up to 144 hours) fuse in the tail. As the nose of this 1,000-pounder is smooth, this was a long-delay fused bomb. The fusing was clearly damaged in the crash and the bomb was never fused, lying dormant but very much alive for more than 70 years. This type of iron bomb was used for area bombing raids (industrial demolition). Photo by Geert Bos and supplied by Rob Wethly



This photo of the explosion of the 1,000 pounder clearly shows that its lethality was very much intact 70 years after it was manufactured, loaded and then lost. Photo by Geert Bos and supplied by Rob Wethly