



 **The Caterpillar Club**

THOMAS J. FROATS, W/O., PCAF

qualified as a member of THE CATERPILLAR CLUB
on **JULY 25, 1943**

his life having been saved in an emergency jump by
use of parachute equipment.

IRVING AIR CHUTE CO., INC.

George White
President

TED FROATS

When war broke out in 1939, I was sixteen years old. At that time my biggest fear was that the war would be over before I was old enough to enlist. Let's face it - thirty dollars a month, all the food you could eat, all your clothes supplied, hot and cold running water, indoor plumbing, warm and comfortable living quarters - sound like heaven to a young lad from a farming village. Population 120 people. Most of the people were middle to lower middle class. The Froats' were the poorest of the poor. Eighteen years of age could not come soon enough.

April 20, 1941, at long last my eighteenth birthday. I was more than ready to serve my King and Country and enjoy all of those aforementioned goodies. There was no doubt in which service I would enlist - the Royal Canadian Air Force - hands down. Problem number one, to be a pilot it was necessary to have a grade twelve education, I was a grade ten drop out. The best deal I could get for aircrew was air gunner. Oh well, at least I would be riding around in an air plane. Not a bad dream for a guy who was frightened to death of heights.

It would be a year before air gunnery took place. June 6, 1941, a telegram with instructions to report to St. Huberts, P.Q. Manning Depot. A manning depot is where all us eager young recruits first reported to get our uniforms, learn our left foot from our right and rather quickly (to our way of thinking), became quite worldly. The fact that the City of Montreal was just across the river from St. Huberts, no doubt had some bearing on our rapid development into manhood. Although I met a lot of young fellows at manning depot it was not a place to form lasting friendships, as people were constantly being shipped out to air force stations in various parts of the country.

Finally my "draft" came. I was being sent, along with about thirty others, to St. John, N.B. as a Security Guard. This was a good first "posting", as Red Rose Tea had a plant in St. John with scads of female employees. This enabled me to start to fine tune the art of successful pick-up. I had a very good tutor for this bit of my training, a chap by the name of George Cowie. My first good buddy in the Air Force.

St. John Air force Base consisted of Lysander aircraft doing coastal patrols probably looking for German subs. Our job as security guards was to man any one of the following positions; bomb dump, front and back of aircraft hanger, and one end of the runway where the highway crossed and flag down cars if an aircraft was either taking off or coming in to land. Very exciting! One other duty we had was to put on S.P. (Special Police) arm bands and petrol the streets of St. John watching out for unruly airmen. Never did see any. St. John was a navy town. The airmen were badly outnumbered and kept a low profile.

It was at St. John that I got my first taste of Air Force discipline. The bomb dump which was one of our guard posts, had bombs stored in tin huts. We felt it was good bayonet practice to jab the bayonet through the wall of the tin huts. This did not meet with the approval of those in command. The whole of the security guard was C.B. (confined to barracks) for 14 days. No more bayonet practice.

Finally got out again and pay day was coming up. Pay parade, an inspection by our Pay Officer, a little French Canadian. I got nailed for not having a hair cut. Not much justice there. However, another 14 days C.B. added to my record. My final brush with Air Force discipline at St. John also involved the Pay Officer. I was on guard duty at the front of the air hanger and George Cowie was on guard duty at the back. It so happened we were checking the windows, etc. on the same side of the hanger at the same time. We met and were discussing various things not related to the Air Force, when along came the little Pay Officer who had duty that night as orderly officer. George and I got nailed for deserting our posts. You could get shot for that, but nothing that drastic happened - we got 14 days in the "Digger", with pack drill thrown in for good measure. It also meant the loss of 14 days pay. I was beginning to dislike the little Pay Officer with a passion. Another black mark on my record.

About half way through this punishment, the whole security guard detail was posted to

Trenton, Ontario. George and I included. We were supposed to be under guard for the trip, someone forgot about this little item. George and I were free. When we arrived at Trenton, everyone was given a 48 hour pass. We were to report back to Trenton on Monday morning. George was from Cardinal, Ontario. He got us both a ride with an Air Force guy going to Cornwall. Perfect - I was going home for the first time in six months. My grandmother took pity on me and gave me ten dollars spending money. I was rich again!

I reported back to Trenton on Sunday evening after a ride back with the same guy. PANIC! Early Monday morning the S.P.'s came in the barracks looking for Cowie and Froats. Our records had caught up with us. We were supposed to be in the "Digger". We were escorted over to headquarters to appear before the Commanding Officer. He was very upset with the officers from St. John Station, and their handling of our little discretion. He dismissed the balance of our time in the "Digger" and apologized that he would be unable to get our pay reinstated.

My time at Trenton was not very eventful. We trained on the proper handling of Thompson machine guns and how to be "good" security guards. My friend George Cowie was posted overseas. I missed him, we had a lot of happy times together. And his valuable training in the ways of the world had not been completed.

On the move again, once more heading for the East coast. A brief stop and Penfield Ridge, N.B. Then on to North Sydney for embarkation to Port Aux Basques, Newfoundland. We crossed the Cabot Strait on the passenger ferry Caribou. (This ship was later sunk by a German sub). Back in 1941, the railroad was the major means of transportation in Newfoundland. After disembarking, we were loaded on the "Newfie Express". Solid, uncomfortable wooden seats which we sat on for approximately 600 kilometres. I still have the callouses on my backside from that and three other trips on the infamous "Express". Thankfully there was plumbing on board. We ended our trip in a place called Botwood. This was a seaplane base. The Air Force Station was in the final planning

stage for barracks, mess hall, etc. and we ended up in a renovated seaplane hanger.

At that time, the security guards and cook were the only personnel on the station. A total of about 25 of us. It really was a good posting. The cook drew rations from the army base for about fifty people and we ate like kings. The people of Botwood treated us in a like manner. My dreams of the good life in the Air Force were coming true. I met another Air Force chap by the name of Les Patrick from Windsor, Ontario. As the time rolled on we became very good friends. The new Air Force station was being built at a rapid rate. We moved from the boathouse to a barracks. The new mess hall opened. More personnel kept arriving. The Germans never did land. I never had a chance to fire a Thompson machine gun in anger or in fear.

I did manage to add another black mark to my already soiled record. Les Patrick and I were a day late reporting back from a rather hectic 48 hour pass spent in Grand Falls. The Sargent of the Guard - a fellow by the name of Keating - was on us like a rat on cheese. He would not accept what we considered very plausible reasons for being late. He took the two of us off guard duty and put us in the mess hall washing dishes, pots and pans, mopping floors and cleaning up all kinds of crap. This being a brand new mess hall, there was all modern equipment. We drove the cook crazy, breaking dishes and leaving potatoes in a machine that peeled them until they were the size of marbles. After a month, the cook begged Keating to get us out of there. We went back to guard duty, and the "Halt who goes there", and "Advance and be recognized" routine.

I received a letter from home with the news that *Dalton Vipond had been killed in action.* Dalton was one of us four from the village of Wales that had joined the RCAF air crew. He was a pilot in bomber command, and twenty years old at the time. Dalton had stopped in to see me when I was stationed in St. John and he was on his way overseas. His death made me realize that the Air Force was not all fun and games.

I received my first furlough. It seems to me we also got travelling time, (furlough was two

weeks). Anyway it meant another ride on the "Newfie Express", the Caribou, the CNR to finally end up at the village of Wales. It was a most enjoyable leave, but all good things must come to an end, so back to Newfoundland.

Shortly after arriving in Botwood, the Security Guard was transferred to Gander in Newfoundland. Gander was a big busy Air Force Station, a stop for the Ferry Command planes on their way to England. There was no town there so social activities were limited to the Air Force Station. The Americans had facilities on the station and we spent most of our idle time there - taking in movies, etc.

At long last postings came through for both Les Patrick and myself. We were to report for Air Gunnery Training. The only drawback was that Les was going to Brandon, Manitoba and I was going to Mont Joli Quebec. Separated from another friend. *Les Patrick was killed in action on a raid to Monchen Gladback on August 31, 1943. He was twenty-three years old.*

I was now included in course 36B Mont Joli Gunnery School. We took various ground instruction such as Morse code, aircraft recognition, firing from gun turrets set up on the firing range. My ability at aircraft recognition won me some admiration from my fellow would be gunners, that on tests there were many a whispered, "Hey Froats, what the hell kind of plane is that?". We did our "air gunnery" in fairy battles, a big heavy single engine plane. We fired "Lewis Guns", a single barrel machine gun with a drum on top that held the ammunition. We had to load the drums ourselves. The ammunition had paint on the tips of the bullets, a different colour for each of the gunners so it was possible to tell the number of times a gunner managed to hit the long white cotton sleeve which was pulled through the air on a wire cable by another aircraft.

I was very average at scoring hits. I'm not sure it was because of my poor aim or my fear of falling out of the aircraft. Two gunners went up at the same time. We were in an open area at the back of the cockpit and held in by a belt around our waist that was fastened to a hook on the side of

the cockpit. When it was your turn to fire, you unhooked, squeezed around the other gunner, and hooked up behind the Lewis Gun, put your drum of ammo on and you were ready to let fly. I always found the moving manoeuvre rather nerve racking.

Another incident occurred. I had my jacket unbuttoned while standing in the park in Mont Joli and was charged by a S.P. with being improperly dressed. I got another 14 days C.B. By now, I was convinced that the powers that be in the Air force were only familiar with the number 14.

Our course finished in October. We graduated as fully fledged Air Gunners. We received our air gunner badges and our sargent stripes. Wow! We got our embarkation leave with instructions to report at Halifax on a Saturday, about 'fourteen' days hence. All of the guys on the course thought Saturday was a poor day to report back and thought it should be Monday instead. How stupid can one get?

I had a great time on leave and caught the train at Cornwell for my Monday reporting date. In a frantic search of the train for any other guys from our course, who had also decided Monday was the best reporting date, I finally found two guys. Both were from Hamilton, Don Gibb and Jack Lewis. What a relief to know that you are not the only one that is going to be in deep crap. It ended up that there were eight of us who reported late. When we arrived at Halifax and were being transported to the RCAF Base there, were (it seemed to us) there were thousands of airforce personnel on the way down to the harbour for embarkation to England. This was getting serious! What would they (commanding officers) do to us for missing our overseas draft!

It turned out we did not get kicked out of the airforce or thrown in jail. (I guess they needed airgunners pretty badly). Instead, we all received a severe reprimand, though I never could figure out what that meant. We were put on the C.O.'s drill squad and took turns giving each other all kinds of drills, exercises, etc. We also got the usual 14 days C.B. The C.B. didn't matter much, as we went through a hole in the fence and into Halifax whenever we felt like it.

I can't recall just how long we were in Halifax before our draft was called for overseas. But we boarded a train and headed for New York City. Down at the harbour, we were put aboard the Queen Mary for our trip to England. We sailed the next morning with two destroyers as our escort. It was very stormy and the destroyers would almost disappear in the waves. On the second day out the destroyers returned to their base and we were on our own. The Queen Mary was a big fast ship and I think it only took us five days to cross the Atlantic. No trouble with German subs etc. I never got sea sick but I did get turned off mutton. The smell of mutton in the mess on board ship did affect my liking of this product to this day. Bread and jam was my favourite food during the voyage.

We arrived at Greenock Scotland and went by train to Bournemouth on the south coast of England. Noted some bomb damage as we passed through some of the cities. Bournemouth was the gathering point for the air force, from here we were posted to the various training units. It was a rather uneventful time.

There was an organization in England run by a woman called Lady Francis Ryder. People would put their names in to have servicemen visit their homes. Through this organization, Jack Lewis and I spent Christmas with a family in Walsal which is just outside of Birmingham. Don Gibb, who had been in England prior to the war, took off for his girlfriend's.

Shortly after Christmas we were posted to an O.T.U. (Operational Training Unit). Don Gibb and I were sent to the same unit. Jack Lewis was sent to another. *Jack was killed in action on June 20, 1943. He was twenty years old.*

At our O.T.U., a place called Wing, we were "crewed up". These would be the people we would do our "ops" with. Don and I did not get with the same crew. I was the second to last member to join my crew, which consisted of Pilot "Pat" Patterson, a Canadian, Navigator Bill Goodall an Englishman (the daddy of the crew and only commissioned officer), Wireless Op George Adams from Yorkshire (I had a hell of a time understanding his accent) and Max Bacon the Rear

Gunner who was also English. Our Bombaimer was an Englishman, but I can't remember his name. He got very sick just as we finished our O.T.U. and was grounded.

We trained in Wellington twin engine aircraft. They did not have a midupper gun turret. On occasion, I would ride in the rear gun turret. I was not at all keen on this position at the very rear of the aircraft because there was nothing around you. I did not feel at all secure. For the most part, I just observed from the astro hatch, a glass bubble where the navigator could take star shots, etc. We did cross country flights, air to air gunnery practice where I learned to take the 30-30 browning machine guns apart and could put it together with my eyes closed. There was a lot more aircraft recognition.

The most exciting thing that happened was that one night we lost an engine while doing circuits and bumps and landed after the "meat wagon" and fire trucks got into position. Not needed - "Pat" feathered her in, an almost perfect landing. O.T.U. was finally over, the next stop would be at a conversion unit where we would train on the big four engine bombers.

I would mention that I had my last brush with Air Force discipline while at O.T.U. We were sent to a satellite station for some fighter evasion training. The airdrome was on one side of this large village, the barracks on the other. We were not supposed to visit any of the pubs in our battle dress which we wore for flying and other duties. One day while returning to barracks after flying, a terrible thirst overtook several of us. Although we were still in battle dress, we stopped at a pub for a couple of cool brew and a game of darts. Our activity did not last very long - a couple of R.A.F. officers happened to choose that very pub for a beer and we were charged with being improperly dressed in a public place. We did quickly finish our beer before we were banished from the building. It ended up that we received 7 days on the deplorable C.O.'s drill squad. That was the last time I got caught doing something not quite in line with Air Force rules and regulations.

Before going to the conversion unit, we were sent on leave. As we no longer had a Bomb-

aimer, our leave was for an indefinite period, if I remember correctly, it lasted about 25 days. Being attached to the R.A.F., but an R.C.A.F. member, we could only draw R.A.F. rates of pay. The R.C.A.F. pay was somewhat higher. The difference in pay was being banked for us at R.C.A.F. headquarters in London. Don Gibb also finished O.T.U. and asked me to join him for a visit to his sister's in Windsor. I gladly accepted.

Don asked if I would care to go down to his girlfriend's place (they were now engaged) and she would have a girl for me. Why not! That proved to be the smartest thing I ever did. It turned out that the girl I met on that blind date, Muriel Kempin, later became my wife.

Funds were starting to get a little short, so off to R.C.A.F. headquarters to draw out some of the banked money. Imagine my surprise when the guard at the gate at headquarters turned out to be my old friend and tutor, George Cowie. George insisted that I wait until he was off duty and return with him to his billet in Putney (part of London). The billet was a big six bedroom house. Only four of the security guards were staying there. I now had free lodgings and board and I could wear George's civilian clothes.

I could catch the underground, change once and then I was in Elm Park where Muriel lived. Truly the Gods were smiling on this lucky airman. What a wonderful leave it turned out to be. While staying at George's billet, another graduate from our gunnery school at Mont Joli showed up, Bill Demolitor whose brother was a security guard and billeted at the house in Putney. Bill and I had some great times together touring London, drinking beer, picking up girls, etc. ***Bill was killed in action August 10, 1943 on an operation to Mannheim. He was twenty one years old.***

We were called back off leave to return to O.T.U. and crew up with our new Bombaimer, a New Zealander by the name of Ike Walker. We did not do any flying but were put on duty as Flying Control Personnel. This was a very boring job (almost as boring as this story). We were at the end of the runway were aircraft landed and gave a green light if it was okay to land and a red light if it

was not okay. Our moto was "more reds keep them flying".

The fortunate part of this was, our Navigator, Officer Bill Goodall, worked in the adjutants office and could stamp an unauthorized pass. I think I had three of these stamped unauthorized 48 hour passes during the two weeks we spent on flying control. It was a great opportunity to spend time with Muriel. Muriel was, by the way, working in a factory near Elm Park as a welder on jerry cans - "war work". I can truly say that Muriel did a permanent weld on the two of us. For over fifty three years she was my love.

Now that our crew was complete, we were sent to a conversion unit WaterBeach to train for operations on Stirling bombers. A big four engine job. I finally got my own position on board, that being the mid-upper gun turret. Our Pilot had to become familiar with flying the Stirling, so the first thing that happened was we were taken for a flight by a veteran pilot who had finished a tour of operations. That was the scariest flight I had ever been on. He threw that big Stirling around like it was a fighter aircraft. I was sure glad when we landed in one piece. By the time we finished our conversion, "Pat" our pilot could do a very good imitation of the veteran pilot in throwing the Stirling all over the place. We had one area where we could practice low flying and I mean "low". Although this was the most dangerous of all our flying, I enjoyed it the most. It must have been my fear of heights. One thing that gave us some concern, was when the outer one half of a wing fell off of a Stirling as it was taxing out to take off. That crew was blessed. The two crews of Stirlings that collided in mid-air were not so fortunate. ***Fourteen young men died in that accident. Included was Jack Atkinson, a poker playing friend of mine.***

Now came the posting we had trained for, Bomber Squadron #620, located at Chedborough near Bury St. Edmonds in Suffolk. This was an R.A.F. Squadron. My friend Don Gibbs was also posted to an R.A.F. Squadron flying in Stirlings out of Kings Lynn in Norfolk. Don finished a tour of operations without mishap. (Married his girlfriend Dorothy and now lives in Hamilton).

Although we were now on a squadron, training continued - cross country flights, fighter affiliation (mock attacks by various kinds of friendly fighter aircraft), height tests with a full load, sixteen thousand feet being the maximum height we were able to reach, sighting the machine guns, loading ammunition belts.

It may be difficult for a person whose only flying experience is in modern airliners to imagine what it was like in a war time bomber. We wore multiple layers of clothing, silk gloves inside fine leather ones, fur lined flying boots. All of this to help keep out the freezing cold. Although we were issued electrically heated suits which plugged into the aircraft supply, I never found it necessary to use as I did not have any winter operations. I found my leather fur-lined bomber jacket to be enough. We wore leather helmets with ear phones, a fitted oxygen mask which contained a microphone and supplied oxygen that we needed once we were over 10,000 feet. We had canisters of oxygen if it was necessary to move about the aircraft.

Our pilot flew as a "second dickey" on an operation to Krefeld in Germany, part of his training. Now we were ready. Our first operation was to lay some mines at the mouth of the Gironde River which flowed into the Bay of Biscay, Southwestern France. From take-off to touch down, this flight lasted almost 12 hours. However, it was uneventful.

More training, then a briefing for another mine laying operation, this time off the Denmark Coast by the Friesische Islands. A much more dangerous trip than our previous one. The place was supposed to be loaded with flak ships, etc. Once again we were lucky and did not encounter any enemy action. The mines were loaded in the bomb bay and were dropped by parachute. When they hit the water down they went taking the parachute with them, waiting for some unsuspecting ship to pass overhead. The mine would detonate and either damage the ship or blow it up. I am almost sure we used magnetic mines. The metal of the ship attracting them, thus the detonation and the resulting damage.

I had another leave (7 days) and went to see Muriel. What a good time we had. Little did we know it would be almost two years before we would meet again.

While we were on leave, another crew had taken our aircraft on an operation to Germany and failed to return. Never found out what happened.

We went to a briefing for an op to Acchen. We were to fly a spare aircraft. The aircraft were marshalled, "lined up just off the main runway to enable take-off one right after another". The planes took-off and circled to gain height, then waited until ready to join the main stream of aircraft and head for the target. As we crossed the English Channel and approached the coast of Holland, we started the customary weaving flight. This was done to make it more difficult for the German ack-ack gunners to plot your flight path. When we started weaving we also started losing height. When we crossed the coast we were down to about 6,000 feet. This was an extremely unhealthy situation - a sitting duck - for light ack-ack and German night fighters. So we did what any normal non hero would do, we turned tail and headed back to England. We jettisoned our bomb load in the Channel.

We landed at our base and headed for debriefing. I must say that the Intelligence Officer, an R.A.F. chap, was not very happy with us, saying we should have switched to rich gas mixture to maintain height. "Rich gas mixture is what you use when taking off and gaining the height you need for your flight". I was frowned upon when I questioned this bit of advice. What does an airgunner know?

We did get a new aircraft out of this, and after we finished all of the necessary service work on the aircraft, we were once again ready for operations. Next was a briefing for a massive operation against Hamburg Germany. This was the first raid "window" was used. Every aircraft received bundles of "window" which was strips of foil broken open and booted out of the aircraft by the bomb aimer. The strips showed up as blips on the German radar. The Hamburg raid was a relatively easy one. Tremendous damage was done to Hamburg.

Briefing the next day for a mission to Essen. Fortunately the weather closed in and the mission was cancelled. This called for a celebration at the wet canteen. Huge amounts of "Oh Be Joyful" were consumed. I met another Canadian Pilot by the name of Joe MacDonald and his crew, they were good guys. The next morning we went out to our aircraft, cleaned and oiled the guns in my turret and shot the breeze with the ground crew. I used to loan one of them my jacket so he could join us in the Sargents Mess.

The weather changed and looked good - operations would be on. Sure enough we were once again briefed for Essen. This city is located in the Ruhr Valley, a very industrialized area and very heavily defended by the Germans. While we waited to board our aircraft, I noticed my lucky lady bug crawling on my arm - no harm would come to us on this op.

Flying at night is difficult. The airfields in England were situated quite close together and as you circled awaiting your turn to land, you could intermingle with aircraft from another airdrome. Collisions did occur, with loss of life. What a way to go after coming back safely from an operation over Germany.

To assist us over enemy territory, a thing called a "boozer" was installed in the aircraft. This consisted of a wire which trailed behind the aircraft and attached to a light in the instrument panel in the cockpit. If the aircraft was picked up by a night fighter with radio directional finder, the wire would pick up the radio impulses and the light would come on in the cockpit. We gained the necessary height and headed out across the Channel on our way to Essen, just prior to crossing the coast of Holland "boozer" lit up. Pat threw the aircraft into a violent weave. We didn't spot any enemy aircraft and the "boozer" light went out. We heaved a great sigh of relief as we continued on our way.

We wove back and forth as we crossed the coast, lots of search lights and "flak" (anti aircraft fire) in the distance. Both Max the rear gunner and myself kept a good watch for German night

fighters. Suddenly Pat called out, "**Boozer's on! Keep alert.**" Max spotted the German night fighter, coming in from the rear, a little high and on the port side. "**Corkscrew like a S.O.B.**" he instructed and started firing at the fighter. Just as I also started firing, the German let blast. Fortunately for me, we had just made a diving turn to port. The tracer shells from the fighter went flashing past my turret. You could feel the thud as they tore into the starboard wing and outer starboard motor. I got another burst at him as he broke away. (Don't know if we damaged him).

The wing and starboard motor were on fire. I reported this to Pat. He and Scottie the engineer tried desperately to douse the fire, feather the prop on the motor. Nothing worked. Ike reported from where he had been releasing "window" that something was flapping like the 'clappers'. The fire was spreading. Pat called out, "**Let's get the hell out of here.**" I told Pat, "**Okay, I'm gone**".

I got out of the turret and put my chute on, opened the escape hatch in the floor. I sat there with my feet hanging out, when the Engineer came back. He used the same escape hatch. He gave me a push and said, "**Hurry!**". I pushed myself out and didn't have time to think. We were losing height, probably doing well over 200 miles an hour. When I got out I pulled the ripcord and the chute opened. It was one hell of a jolt. One of the straps on the chute hit me and took some of the skin off the side of my face.

After I made sure I hadn't been "sent for", I was able to spot our burning aircraft heading for the ground. I hoped everyone got out safely. It seemed that not too long after that, there was an explosion as the plane hit the ground.

I have always been thankful that it was night time when I bailed out. I couldn't tell how high up I was so the height didn't bother me as I floated down to earth. When I finally was able to see the ground, it appeared I was going to land in some trees before I could decide what I was going to do about that - I hit the ground. I did land in an area full of evergreens, 6 or 7 feet tall as well as some

full grown trees. I undid my chute and gathered it up. I hid it well under some evergreens. I decided to climb up one of the trees, using my big flying sweater to secure myself in the tree, and wait until morning. It was at this time that I discovered that I had lost one of my flying boots. I guess this happened when my chute opened with such a jolt.

At long last daylight came, climbing down out of the tree, I took the time to thank God that I had survived unhurt. We were supplied with little compasses for escape purposes. "Go west young man go west." I did have a couple of problems. First of all, I had no idea where in the devil I was and I only had one flying boot. The boot problem I solved by wrapping my big white flying sweater around my foot. I was now ready to head west.

I travelled in a westerly direction, all that day, having to hide out on several occasions from German bicylce patrols. No doubt looking for downed airmen. It made me realize that I could not travel on the roads, so I stuck to the fields. For food I dug up a turnip from a garden and drank from a cattle watertrough. Just before nightfall, I came to a farm. The farmer and his wife were outside talking to some friends. I was tired, thirsty and hungry. So, taking a chance, I made them understand who I was and what I needed. (They couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak their language.) The farmer led me to his cattle barn, and spread out some straw for a bed. Then he took off and came back a short time later with a plate of food, glass of milk and some wooden shoes. (How lucky can one get?)

Early in the morning, after he fed me again, I once more set out in a westerly direction. The wooden shoes proved to be a good fit and quite comfortable. Once again I had to hide from German patrols. On one occasion, as I had to cross a road, a man and woman on bikes came down the road and stopped right in front of where I was hiding. I didn't mind them having a picnic lunch, but when he started making a pass at her (it looked like it was going to be successful), I let them know of my presence. They were surprised and it turned out that they could speak English. After informing me

I was in Holland, they advised me to turn myself in to the Germans. They beat a hasty retreat, and I was afraid they would report me.

I took off as fast as possible and an hour or so later, I came to a few houses. I spotted a man and woman sitting in the back yard, knowing I was in Holland gave me the courage to make contact with them and ask for help. It turned out that the man had lived in Hamilton, Ontario. He was afraid, but he let me go into the house for a shower and a shave. My face was a bit of a mess where the chute strap had struck. I managed to make myself look a little more presentable. I was given food, but he was afraid to do anything else and asked me to please leave.

Once again I set out in a westerly direction and had only gone a few hundred yards when a man caught up to me and placed a hand on my shoulder to stop me. He couldn't speak English but had a big smile on his face and a drawing showing a stick figure (me), the coastline, a boat and pointed from me to the drawing. What a relief! God, I thought, I'm going to be getting back to England!

He took me by the hand and indicated that I was to follow him. He led me to a reforestation area and made me understand to stay there. I was there for three days. Every evening, he would come with a big pot of food and a jug of water. On the last day, he came with two other men. Members of the Dutch underground. I had to go through a very stringent interrogation, as they had to be sure that I was not a German, trying to infiltrate the underground. I got through all the questions, etc and proved that I was indeed a member of the R.C.A.F. and had been shot down several days prior.

I was given civilian clothes (which included a pair of real shoes). The men had brought an extra bicycle, off we went to what turned out to be Arnhem. It was rather unfortunate that the house that I was taken to was also the home of a young man (alias Bob Sterling). The Germans were on the look out for him, if caught he would be sent to Germany to work in a factory or some other type

of war work. That evening someone came to the door and informed the people the Germans were on their way to search the house. I was rushed up stairs, a secret trap door was opened and I was told to get in. It was a space between the bedroom floor and the downstairs ceiling. This was also where these people kept a small printing press used to print up the B.B.C. news (received by hidden radio) and distributed to the Dutch people. After much loud banging and shouting, the Germans left. An hour or so later, I was allowed to come out and have a visit with "Bob" and his folks.

The next morning I was told they would take me to another town for a short stay at another link in the underground. At this time, I received identification papers. The card contained my picture and the necessary information that said I was Joseph Anndrohegan.

"Bob" got me down to the train station and bought tickets for Utrecht. Although "Bob" travelled on the train with me, he kept a good distance away in case I was picked up by the Germans. The trip passed without incident.

At Utrecht I was turned over to another member of the underground. I have forgotten the lady's name. I believe she was a doctor and was quite high up in the organization. She took me by street car and it was indeed a queer and intimidating feeling travelling on both the train and streetcar surrounded by German soldiers.

We ended up in a suburb called 'Ziest'. Here I stayed at a house owned by the parents of a young (19 years old) and brave lady, Joke Folmer. I stayed here for 3 or 4 days. Joke took me out in the evening for a walk and for safety reasons, always walked twenty or thirty feet behind or in front of me. While at Joke's, I stayed in the attic, which was pleasant and roomy. I could look out the window and see a German sentry stationed on the opposite side of the road. (Brave people the Dutch).

Joke told me that I was to be taken by a guide to Belgium. The next morning I was introduced to a young man who had a bicycle for me. There was another man with him, an Air Force

squadron leader from South Africa who had also been shot down. We travelled through Holland on back roads and sand trails. About an hour out, I got a flat tire and had no means of repairing it. Off came the tire and I went the rest of the journey riding on the rim.

In the late afternoon we crossed into Belgium and arrived at a safe house - a bake shop. We stayed overnight. In the morning two men driving a North American Ford stopped at the shop to pick the two of us up and take us to Brussels. Here we stayed at the "Captain's" place. The Captain was a boisterous man, with excellent English. I was certain I was headed back to England.

It turned out that the "Captain" was an escape line organizer turned traitor. He was an Englishman whose real name was Harold Cole. He had been with British Intelligence. He was caught by the German Counter Intelligence sometime in 1942 and made to work for the Germans. His job was to inform on escape line activities in Belgium and France. At least 150 people were betrayed by Cole and other traitors who had sold themselves to the Gestapo. *Joke Folmer was one of those people captured by the Germans and sentenced to death. Fortunately this sentence was never carried out.*

A group of five or six downed airforce men had left for Paris just as we arrived. One chap, an Englishman who had been badly injured when his aircraft was shot up, had been left behind to further recuperate from his injuries. Additional credit to the Dutch underground for treating this man's injuries and getting him in shape to travel.

The food at the "Captain's" was, to say the least, excellent. We had steaks which turned out to be horsemeat, but it tasted like beef to me. Also included were all the goodies that went with a good meal. The three of us were bunked in the same room. On the second day we were looking out the bedroom window and saw half a dozen men scaling the fence, brandishing guns and heading for the house. With much commotion, they came crashing and bashing into the house and beat up on the poor lady housekeeper.

They came into our room and demanded to know who we were. The South African, who could speak French, said we were French workers. The police or whoever they were seemed satisfied with this explanation and did not ask for identification. Good thing - my identity card indicating that I was Joseph Anndrohegan, was hardly a French sounding name. After they left, the South African felt we should get out of there and go out on our own. I said we had been told in England that if we got in with the underground to trust them and stay with them. We stayed where we were.

Shortly after this incident, the "Captain" came in and assured us there wasn't anything to worry about. The police had been looking for black market food and everything had been cleared up. That evening, the South African still thought things were not right and that we should take off. After a bit of a discussion, we stayed put.

The next morning, the "Captain" told us we would be picked up and shipped to Paris. The same two men in the same Ford car stopped by and the three of us piled in and off we started to Paris. I don't suppose we had travelled more than four or five blocks when we were stopped by a German road block. We were hustled out of the car which took off. We were searched. I tried to tell them that I was Joseph Anndrohegan.

The search revealed my airforce identity tags. A not too gentle slug from the German soldier followed by, "**For you the war is over**". The other thing that was over was my dream of getting back to England.

The South African and myself were taken to the civilian prison in Brussels and put into the same cell. I don't know what happened to the injured Englishman. The first thing I did was admit that I had been wrong - and that we should have taken off the night before. The South African indicated in sign language that the cell was probably bugged and we should speak in whispers when discussing any part of our escape attempt or the Dutch underground. We were together in the cell for 4 or 5 days before he was taken away. I never saw him again.

I was interrogated by the Gestapo at least a half a dozen times. Although the interrogations were harsh and strict in their efforts to find out where I had been and who helped me, they were not brutal. I stuck to my story that I had no idea where we had been shot down and that it could have been inside the German border. I also said I had no idea who helped me. With each interrogation I got a couple of cigarettes - the only good thing that came out of them.

Several days after I was in the civilian jail, I saw Ike Walker our bombaimer being led down the corridor. At least I knew someone else had managed to get out of our burning aircraft.

The Gestapo tired of hearing my story and at the end of August, I was sent by train to Oberursel near Frankfurt, and the Dulagluft Interrogation Centre. Once again I was put into a cell by myself. The next day it was out to interrogation again, this time by a German Luftsaft Officer. I gave my name and number again and again, indicating that this is what they would expect any German airman to do if they were captured. Finally the German officer started to read from his files. Our time of take-off, how we circled and gained height before joining the stream for our flight to the target - Essen, that we had been shot down near Appledorn in Holland and that the crew was now all accounted for. He also told me that five members of the crew had been captured the next morning, July 26 and that Ike Walker and myself were captured after our short fling at freedom. *Pilot Jack Patterson had not bailed out of our aircraft in time and had been killed. He was 23 years old.*

I remained at the Dulagluft Centre for a couple of days, during which time I received replacement army clothes and shoes. I was also given a postcard for mailing. This, dated September 3rd, I sent to Muriel to let her know I was okay and that my pilot, Jack Patterson had been killed. I was then transferred to the prisoner of war camp Stalag IVB at Muhlberg on the Elbe River in Eastern Germany, 30 miles north west of Dresden. We were marched from the train to the camp, about 2 K's away.

Stalag IVB was a large camp and contained nationals from many countries, France, Holland, Belgium, Denmark, India, to name a few and there was a large compound of Russians. It seemed there were 100's of P.O.W.'s watching our arrival. The Russians did not belong to the Red Cross and were a sorry looking bunch with ragged clothing covering their thin bodies. I was to find out later how desperate they were.

We were warmly welcomed by airforce personnel already at the camp. This included Max Bacon - Rear Gunner, George Adams - Wireless Operator and Scott the Engineer, from my crew. Bill Goodall our Navigator had been shipped off to Stalag Luft 3 Camp for Officers. The chap in charge of the British compound was an airforce warrant officer by the name of Snowshoe Meyers, a Canadian who had been shot down in 1940.

Although the different nationalities had their own compounds, there was a big common area that you could walk around. The camp itself was surrounded by two high barbwire fences with rolled barbwire in between. On the outside, every so often, a guard tower was located to give the German guards a bird's eye view of the activities within the camp. About 12 feet in from the fence a trip wire was placed. Between it and the main fence was "No Man's Land". To go in there was to take your life in your hands. The guards were instructed to shoot first and ask questions later.

The barracks were wooden structures with brick floors, one brick stove with a flat, 3 x 3 cooking grill. Each barrack was divided by a closed in area which contained several cold water taps for use by both sides of the barracks. Each row of bunks were three high, two wide and three long. Eighteen men occupied each row of bunks, and if my memory serves me right, about 180 men were in each of the barracks. At the end of the bunks was an open area about twelve feet wide which ran the length of the barracks. The stove was located about half way in this area. At the very end of the barracks by the door to the outside was a one hole toilet. Once evening came and we were confined to our barracks, this one holer had to service 180 people until we were allowed out in the morning.

Accidents did occur and the poor victim took quite a razing. In time, it was no longer an embarrassment - one can get used to almost anything. The bunks were about three feet wide. 3 inch boards laid across top to bottom. About a 6 inch board formed the sides, top and bottom. We had a burlap sack rather sparsely filled with paper strips for a mattress. Outside was the main toilet, a 40 holer in a solid brick building. Even this could become rather busy when you consider there were probably a 1,000 men in our compound.

This was to be my "home" for the next year and a half. What a pleasant thought.

To draw rations we were divided into groups of four. My first group consisted of Bob Case, a Canadian from Aurora, Ontario, an Englishman from India named Sutton and another Englishman whose name escapes me. It is very important that under the conditions we lived, everyone got along. In our group, this did not happen. Sutton proved to be rather difficult. So after several months, Bob Case and myself joined two Americans. Rupert Coker - alias "Fisher" and George Owens - alias "Eguall". This proved to be an excellent move as the four of us became very good friends.

When we first arrived at Stalag IVB, the Germans gave us a hair cut. This was accomplished by running the clippers front to back as close to the scalp as possible. We were then taken to the showers for delousing and a shower. I am sure I would have enjoyed it more had I known how few and far between we were to get showers. To keep clean, a sponge bath with cold water was the answer. It was 6 months before the Red Cross food parcels finally started to arrive at the camp.

The German rations supplied about 1,000 calories a day. When you could eat the food and believe me, after a couple of weeks you would be waiting for ration time. If memory serves me correctly, this consisted of Ersatz coffee in the morning, a watery soup you were apt to find contained unappetizing parts (like animal teeth). But when you're hungry, you just pitch that aside and dig in. At noon we received some potatoes boiled in their skins. As the Germans brought in the "honey wagons" to pump out the toilets and then spread the contents on the fields as fertilizers - I could

never force myself to eat the skins. Of course the same held true for all my fellow P.O.W.'s. This was the only food that was thrown in the garbage. Supper time was bread time. A piece of black German bread, 1 to 2 inches thick, sometimes a sliver of margarine, a tablespoon of Ertz jam or perhaps a round fried egg size of cheese, which at first I could not eat. However, in a short time, even this became edible.

Until Red Cross parcels and parcels from home started to arrive, we were very short of cigarettes. That was a bummer. Cigarettes were the money of the camp. We could buy bread from the German Guards and the Dutch P.O.W.'s as they were forced to work outside the camp. Perhaps in a bakery. Most of the nationalities in the camp worked on the outside. Any of the British/American with the rank of Sargent or higher did not work. The Red Cross parcels were the real life savers. We received one parcel between two men. For a time we were issued one every week as the bombing by the Allies became more fierce, the frequency of the parcels being issued fell off to some degree.

When a freight car of Red Cross parcels arrived at Muhlberg, the P.O.W.'s from the British Compound (the only ones to receive Red Cross parcels) had to take a "big" wagon to Muhlberg several kilometres from camp. Load up with parcels and pull and push the loaded wagon back to camp - back and forth - until the freight car was emptied. This was the one job that everyone did without grumbling.

The Canadian Red Cross parcels were the best! They contained 1 can of Spam, 1 can of corned beef, 1 small can of salmon, 1 can of sardines, 1 can of jam, 1 can of butter, 1 package of biscuits, 1 package of raisins or prunes, 1 package of coffee or tea. And 50 cigarettes.

About the same time, parcels from home started to arrive. I had sent a letter home asking for tobacco and cigarette papers. These started to arrive as well as similar parcels from other families of my home village of Wales. Bob Case received cartons of cigarettes from home. Fisher and Eguall

received cartons of American cigarettes from their homes. These were golden, because American cigarettes were tops for purchasing the extras that made life in prison camp a little more bearable. The tailor made cigarettes were, for the most part, kept for barter. We rolled our own from the tobacco I received. We never threw our butts away, these were broken down to be rolled again. I think in the end they were almost pure nicotine.

"Eguall", the street wise guy from Louisville had more nerve than a poop house rat. It was through him we were able to barter for our additional food and other comforts. Fisher in civilian life was an electrician and he liberated some electrical wire from a vacant barracks and hooked up a light over our bunks, and also an immersion heater for hot water (strictly forbidden). We charged one cigarette for a "billy" of hot water. This proved to be a good business while it lasted. A surprise visit by "Blondie" the German in charge of our compound, caught us playing cards with our forbidden light shinning brightly. This cost Bob, Fisher & Eguall, 14 days in the camp jail. I was spared because I jumped down on the other side of the bunks out of sight of "Blondie" and his fellow guards.

I did sneak down to the jail and after finding out which cells they were in, managed to pass some cigarettes through the cell windows. I will admit that this was a rather gut tightening experience.

The Red Cross and I believe the YMCA sent in some musical instruments. A chap in our hut - Brodie was his name, got an accordion which he could play with some degree of efficiency. His favourite tune was "Jealousy" which I am sure he played several hundred times. He was also the hut barber and charged 2 or 3 cigarettes for a hair cut. We also received a couple of trumpets and one of the P.O.W.'s had played trumpet in Charlie Spevack's band and could belt out some pretty good stuff. The tune I remember the most was "The Flight of the Bumblebee". We had some talented directors, actors and stage hands who put on what we considered to be excellent stage plays. I think the ticket cost to these plays was between 5 and 10 cigarettes.

Snow Show Meyers our C.O. managed to get the Germans to erect a library in our compound. Shortly after that, an escape tunnel was started with the entrance under the library. All of us had to contribute bed boards to shore up the walls and the ceiling of the tunnel. This made our uncomfortable bunks even more uncomfortable. Eventually the Germans discovered the tunnel and used loads from the "honey wagon" poured into the tunnel to put an end to this venture.

Our chief pastime was walking around the inside of the camp. This proved to be a fatal pastime for one Canadian Pilot. He was in the camp as he had been shot down on his "second dickie" trip. There was a German Air Force Station not far from our camp. When the Germans found out that there were Air Force P.O.W.'s located at the camp, they used to fly over and put on some pretty impressive aerobatics. One day a Pilot in a JU88 was doing a low pass over the camp and came in too low. He took out the outside fence and the tip of the wing killed the Canadian. The German Pilot was able to get the JU88 back up without crashing. There were no more air shows.

A chap by the name of Bob Hay from Niagara Falls had a pair of skates sent to him. I borrowed them once or twice for a skate on the pond in the centre of camp which froze over during the winter. This pond was the source of water for the camp. In the summer it was used on occasion for swimming. Eye and ear infections put an end to this activity.

We also had softball equipment, soccer balls shipped in by the Red Cross. Teams were made up and the summer of 1944 was a rather active one. We had three really good fast ball pitchers in camp. Vanzant from Newmarket, Papas who played in the Toronto City League and a big American who pitched the windmill. I did not collect many hits of any of these three. The pitcher on our team, "Stewart" from B.C. was also good. We won our share of games.

To try and keep our huts warm and provide adequate cooking time, we would send several guys out at night to raid the coal shed and bring back coal. This worked out alright until the Germans caught one of the groups in the coal shed and opened fire on them. Taffy Jones was killed and several

others were wounded.

The first radio we had in the camp was not the best, some of the parts were somehow made by several talented P.O.W.'s. On occasion we were able to pick up the BBC and the news would be read in each barracks. Our next radio, with parts bought from German guards, proved to be much better and we were kept informed of the progress being made on all war fronts. The old radio was kept as a spare and hidden in the ceiling over my bunk.

One major problem was that we had bed bugs. Nasty, little blood sucking bugs. They got into everything. Finally on a cold winter day, during morning roll call, we were informed that we could not return to our hut for the remainder of the day as the Germans were going to fumigate for bed bugs. I don't know what they used, but it sure got rid of the bugs. It made standing out in the cold worthwhile.

We had three experiences with friendly fighter aircraft. Once a dog fight took place over the camp, an untimely burst of cannon shells from the friendly fighter penetrated one of the P.O.W. huts. No one was killed, but there was a lot of soiled underwear. Another time one of our wood collecting details was returning to camp and they were spotted by a hawkeyed Pilot in a friendly fighter who mistook them for a German Patrol. He opened fire on them. Again no one was killed, but there was more soiled underwear. The third time, the Germans had parked some freight cars loaded with ammunition on a siding about two kilometres from camp. This was spotted by our fighter planes. They would come sweeping over the camp, waggle their wings, and go in on the freight cars with canons blazing. The freight cars were set on fire and the ammunition started to explode. There must have been some big stuff, because the explosions knocked out some of the windows in our huts. After the second episode, we had painted big white P.O.W. letters on the roofs of several huts - and there were no more shoot ups near the camp.

The Allied activity had really cut down on the German transportation and as a result, our Red

Cross food parcel supply became almost extinct, and once again talk reverted from women to food. During one of our hungry periods, Fisher got a hold of a cat. It was quickly given the coup-de-gra, skinned, cleaned and quartered. We cooked it up and under the envious eyes of our hut mates, had a feast of cat. I must say that it tasted pretty good, and I would do it again under similar conditions.

Early in the Spring of 1945, we knew that our ordeal as P.O.W.'s would soon be over. But the Germans were not quite finished with us. A surprise search of our hut turned up the hidden radio from the ceiling over my bunk. I expected the worst. I wouldn't get shot, but I could end up in the camp jail for the duration. Snow Shoe Myers had rigged up the records to show that I had reported stuff stolen from the ceiling hideaway on several occasions. Off I was marched to the German Camp Commander for interrogation. He spoke fairly good English. I told him I didn't know anything about the radio and the stuff that had been stolen - that anyone had access to the place the radio was found. I don't think he believed a word I said, however the war was almost over. All I received was a rather stern warning about what could have happened to me. No soiled underwear.

By my Birthday on April 20, 1945, we could hear Russian and German big guns blasting away at each other. The evening of April 22nd, there was a fire fight right outside the camp. The German guards had taken off earlier. The morning of April 23, 1945 a company of Russian Cossacks rode their horses into our camp and planted the hammer and sickle flag in the Russian Compound.

OH HAPPY DAY! Almost 21 months to the day since I was shot down. A short time later, a jeep with four Americans on board showed up. They were unable to do anything for us at that time. They told us to take it easy, and we would be out of there shortly.

The camp was open. We went out and went down to Mulhburg. We took a case of canned milk from a warehouse, stole a suckling pig from a farm and anything else that was not nailed down. We cooked the pig, drank canned milk and got very ill from all the rich food. We were not alone in the plundering. Several cows were herded into the camp and slaughtered for food. After 4 or 5 days,

the camp was closed and we were not to go out.

In the meantime, Bob Case and I liberated two bicycles for our own use. On May 1st the camp was opened again. Bob and I took off on our bikes for Torgau, where the Russians and Americans met up. We were very disappointed when arriving at the bridge over the Elbe River. The Russians would not allow us to cross over to the American side of the river. So we came back down to a small town where one Russian soldier stood guard swigging from a bottle of vodka. Happy with the whole world, he indicated that it was okay with him if we crossed the Elbe on the small ferry that was plying back and forth. This turned out to be not necessary as an American Patrol arrived on the other side. We yelled across to them and they jumped in a row boat and rowed over. They told Bob and I to take the boat to the other side.

Bob and I grabbed our bikes and along with 4 or 5 other P.O.W.'s, crossed the Elbe. We had been told that the territory part way up to Torgau was not secure, but we did not encounter any problems until we reached the edge of Torgau. For some reason we encountered a Russian Guard who would not let us enter the town. We stood there not knowing what to do, all the time the Russian was talking about something or other. The problem was solved when an American Officer showed up and took us under his wing. With a big smile on his face, he told the Russian to *##** and leave us alone.

At last Bob and I were **FREE**. The American Officer showed ~~us~~^{us} a vacant house we could stay in. Another house where we could find some mattresses and to join the American chow line for supper. That was the best food and the most comfortable bed we had had in months.

A couple of days later we were taken by truck to Leipzig. Although the American guards at the camp we were staying were not allowed to let us out, we could go through a large hole in the fence, right beside the gate. We could walk downtown.

On May 16, 1945 we flew from Leipzig to England, landing at my old O.T.U. station. From

there we were taken to London, where Bob and I spent the night watching the victory celebrations, through the windows of the building we stayed at. We were still in our P.O.W. clothes. The next day we went down to Bournemouth for debriefing and outfitted with proper dress. I now had the rank of Warrant Officer First Class.

This was my final rank as I told the Commission Board what they could do with a commission. After all the clearances had been completed in Bournemouth we were sent on leave.

Off I went to see my Muriel once more. I am happy to say that we got married on May 30, 1945.

We spent 51 years together until Muriel died suddenly on July 21, 1996.

This ends a little story of my life in the Royal Canadian Air Force - as I remember it.

On the night that we were shot down, we lost three aircraft from our squadron. Joe McDonald was killed, his two gunners escaped and became P.O.W.'s at Stalag IVB. Rathborne was shot down and all crew were killed. 13 out of a total of 21 crew members were killed that night.