

History is brought back to life for Major Marty Zimmer and his family

Sergeant Ronald Zimmer and the entire crew of Lancaster LQ-K, Royal Air Force (RAF) serial number JB280 lost their lives on a bombing mission on New Year's Day, 1944

By Ross Lees

8Wing/Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Trenton's connection to the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) is even more firmly established through the story of Major (Maj.) Marty Zimmer's uncle.

For those of you who may not know Maj. Zimmer, he is the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Forces Aircrew Selection Centre in 8 Wing/CFB Trenton. His uncle, Sergeant (Sgt.) Ronald Zimmer, was an air gunner with the famous 405 Pathfinder Squadron flying Lancaster bombers in the Second World War.

This story really begins on the fateful morning of Jan. 2, 1944. Sgt. Zimmer and his crew of seven departed from Gransden Lodge, England, at 00:23 hours, with 11 other Lancaster bombers on a mission that would involve a total of 421 Lancasters tasked to drop bombs on Berlin. Unfortunately, his aircraft (JB280) never returned and never made it to its target.

For the longest time, little more than that was known of the aircraft and crew's final resting place. That is until just recently when Maj. Zimmer's wife Sharon came in contact with a Dutch military history enthusiast by the name of Rob Wethly in Schoonbeek, Netherlands. Mr. Wethly, through his own research, had full details of the actual mission and the subsequent crash which had occurred in this little town 72 years ago.

"The details he provided revealed that the crew never made it to their target but were shot down by a German night fighter with their full bomb load as they reached the Netherlands/German border," Maj. Zimmer revealed.

Mr. Wethly proved a fountain of information and material for the Zimmers. He also provided historic photos of the actual crash site taken 72 years ago along with other details, including the coroner's report. Information supplied by Mr. Wethly has helped the Zimmers locate his grave site and fill in many details to help them get to know Sgt. Zimmer better. A portrait of Sgt. Zimmer, supplied by Sharon to Mr. Wethly, has now been placed in a standard beside the grave, according to Sharon.

Mr. Wethly also recently produced a literally explosive discovery to add to the story, promptly bringing this story into the 21st century. "Earlier this year while using a metal detector to look for metal objects in the vicinity of the actual crash site, Mr. Wethly found a large object which turned out to be a live 1,000-pound bomb that had not exploded during the crash," Maj. Zimmer said.

A special memorial service was held on the Netherlands' Remembrance Day, May 4 of this year and, while the Zimmers would have liked to have attended to commemorate the new information, and the fact their uncle's grave now had a face to go with it, they were unable to make travel plans that quickly. However, they plan on travelling there in the future.

Mr. Wethly didn't stop there. He worked with Vintage Wings Canada and Dave O'Malley to co-author an article that brings this story back to life, according to Maj. Zimmer. The article is called "Blast From the Past."

Maj. Zimmer was the Chief of Staff of Operations for the Quinte International Air Show (QIAS) 2016 recently held at CFB Trenton. He confirmed that there was some emotional attachment to this air show commemorating the BCATP. "QIAS will be extra special for us as a family as I am hoping to have the opportunity to get up close with the CWHM Lancaster where I can witness firsthand where my uncle, 20-year-old Air Gunner Ronald Zimmer, was positioned when he gave the ultimate sacrifice," he wrote in a brief prior to the air show. "With both of our two sons being serving members of the Royal Canadian Air Force, this whole story has brought us all closer to our RCAF history and has reinforced our connection to the Royal Canadian Air Force."

In subsequent interviews and correspondence with Maj. Zimmer and Sharon, we learned he did get to tour the Lancaster privately prior to the air show and was able to take a flight in the B25 bomber while flying in formation with the Lancaster.

"I think it's safe to say, it was an exciting, as well as emotional experience," Sharon confirmed. *Editor's note: The article by Dave O'Malley and Rob Wethly is entitled "Blast From the Past" and gives an incredibly detailed and realistic account of the final hours of the crew of Lancaster*



This portrait of Ronald Zimmer was taken after he graduated. Photo by Richard Newton

LQ-K, Royal Air Force (RAF) serial number JB280. The story discusses the bombing raid, the result of the crash and the details of finding, and finally exploding the 1,000-pound bomb discovered in 2016.

As a sidebar to this first part of the story, we have included Maj. Zimmer's own thoughts as he flew in the B-25 in formation with the Lancaster just prior to Quinte International Air Show 2016.



This photograph of a formation flight with the Lancaster taken by Maj. Marty Zimmer might have set his mind to thinking of the flight that early morning of Jan. 1, 1944.

Photo by Maj. Marty Zimmer

(Left) This photograph of the belly of the Lancaster was supplied by Maj. Marty Zimmer after his flight in the B-25 Bomber in formation with the Lancaster at the Quinte International Air Show 2016.



Flight Sergeant William Clark, Navigator Flying Officer Jerry Salaba, Air Gunner Sgt. Ron Watts, Pilot Hollingsworth (who was eventually changed out for Flying Officer Tom Donnelly), and Radio Operator Sgt. Brian West. Perhaps one of Flying Officer Tom Donnelly, Flight Engineer Sgt. Leslie Miller or Air Gunner Sgt. Ron Zimmer took the photo.

Maj. Marty Zimmer's flight experience in formation with a Lancaster bomber

The crew of Lancaster LQ-K, RAF serial number JB280 consisted of Flying Officer Tom Donnelly, a veteran pilot on his second tour of operations, Bomb Aimer Flight Sergeant William Clark, Navigator Flying Officer Jerry Salaba, Flight Engineer Sgt. Leslie Miller, Radio Operator Sgt. Brian West, and Air Gunners Sgt. Ron Zimmer and Sgt. Ron Watts.

As we moved into formation beside the Lancaster Bomber my feelings of emotion quickly changed from that of being an aviation enthusiast lucky enough to be given the rare opportunity to enjoy a flight in a Second World War classic B-25 Mitchell aircraft to one of going back in time to 1944.

I tried to imagine myself sitting there looking out the same window and seeing not one but several hundred other similar bomber aircraft surrounding me in close formation. Although I was on a headset, nothing was heard but the drone of engines vibrating through the whole airframe as I could see the engine cowlings shaking in position as we tucked up next to the Lancaster.

I quickly realized how important the job of the air gunner would have been to be vigilant to any threats of attack by German fighter aircraft. I can't even begin to imagine how it would have felt to the crews to see aircraft right next to you, many of them your buddies being shot up and fall from the formation.

With the majority of these aircrew in their early 20s (my sons ages) and in many cases only having several hours of experience before being thrown into combat, it must have been a frightening experience, particularly knowing that their chances of survival were decreasing on each mission. I expect that the only thing that kept the crews going was the tight camaraderie that they shared amongst each other as a crew. This is something that I am thankful to have experienced myself throughout my flying career within the RCAF.

I would be lying if I did not say that I had to wipe my eyes several times as this emotional event took place. Once we landed back in Trenton, I climbed through the B-25's small access hatch at the bottom of the aircraft to reach the concrete ramp. As I stood up and saw the C17 sitting there in the distance with all of its advanced technology and capability, it became apparent how far we have come as an Air Force and the significant number of lives that have been given to get us here.

This whole experience has made me feel that much prouder to wear the uniform.

I would personally like to thank 8 Wing leadership and Mr. Dave Rohrer, the CEO of Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum for providing me the opportunity of an emotional and memorable flight that I shall always remember.