



GLENN LOWSON/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Mieczyslaw (Mark) Oziewicz, sees a Lancaster bomber yesterday at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum outside Hamilton for the first time since he flew them as a radio operator during the Second World War.

'I don't ever remember being scared'

A veteran of 17 bombing raids over Germany recalls 'a great plane' that helped end the war. ESTANISLAO OZIEWICZ reports

Royal Air Force Warrant Officer Mieczyslaw Oziewicz will be 89 in a few months and he lost most of his hearing long ago, but the shattering roar of the four powerful engines of the Lancaster bomber could never be forgotten.

"I never thought I'd ever see one again, a great plane, the best," he said, smiling and giving a thumbs-up.

In the decades since his demobilization, my father has not been anywhere near a Lancaster, until yesterday when, on a day of remembrance, he joined more than 1,000 others at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum, outside Hamilton.

It is the home of one of only two airworthy Lancasters remaining of the 7,000-odd that were built; the other is England and maintained by the RAF's Battle of Britain Memorial Flight display group.

My father Mark, as he became known after immigrating to Canada in 1953, had already endured years of suffering, dislocation, extraordinary hardship — and adventure — before joining the Royal Air Force Bomber Command.

'We did what they asked us to do. They told us to fly and we flew.'

Mieczyslaw (Mark) Oziewicz

But that, too, was more than eventful, packed with great risk and anxiety arising from the knowledge that the chances of returning from a night mission alive and unharmed were small.

In the last four months of the Second World War, he flew 17 combat operations into enemy Germany, dodging flak and enemy fighters, not always successfully, in Avro Lancaster bombers of RAF Group One's 300 Polish (Mazowiecki) Squadron based in Faldingworth, England.

The Lancasters, some of which were built in Malton, Ont., are probably the most famous bombers of the Second World War.

On my father's final sortie, the April 15, 1945, bombing of Berchtesgaden, Hitler's Bavarian mountain retreat, his plane was hit by flak and machine-gun fire, wounding the pilot and flight engineer and forcing an emergency landing outside Reims, France, with one engine billowing smoke, the fuselage peppered with shrapnel and one of its two front tires blown.

But even with his bandaged leg, pilot Jan Witkowski was able to bring the plane down safely — right at the very end of the runway and round 180 degrees.

"The whole crew must have been born under a lucky star," my father recalls. "We again won the lottery."

They won it again after war's end when their Lancaster crashed in England during a training flight, skidding on its belly perilously close to an ammunition depot.

Wearing steel-reinforced vests to protect them from flak splinters, leather-and-fleece lined suits to keep them warm, and oxygen masks in upper altitudes, my father used to sit in the space for wireless operator, maintaining radio contact and tapping out Morse code.

"It's a lot smaller than I remem-

ber," my father, man of few words, said yesterday after boarding the Hamilton museum's Lanc.

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To those fighting under the Allies for a free Poland, the Feb. 11, 1945, Yalta Agreement, under which parts of eastern Poland were handed over to Stalin's Soviet Union, was an enormous betrayal by British prime minister Winston Churchill and U.S. president Franklin Roosevelt.

It was particularly painful and bitter for people like my parents, who, while Hitler's forces were storming through Poland's western frontier in September of 1939, were later rounded up from their homes in eastern Poland and sent by rail boxcars to Stalin's slave-labour camps in northern Russia and Soviet Central Asia.

Today, that would be called ethnic cleansing.

Released after nearly two years of captivity in harsh conditions, they and thousands of other Poles then took a treacherous odyssey through northern Russia, Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

Thousands died of disease and terrible privation along the way, including one of my uncles and my maternal grandmother, who died of typhus in Iran, where they are buried. Earlier, in Uzbekistan, disease and malnutrition took another uncle and my maternal grandfather.

My mother, Stanislaw, by then an orphaned teenager, and her sisters ended up as de facto refugees in Iran, then in what is now Pakistan, and then Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), where they spent the rest of the war and several more years before being moved to England.

Young survivors of Stalin's forced labour such as my father — he slaved in a copper mine in the Ural Mountains — joined the Polish forces fighting with the Allies.

But there was another harrowing episode, and a foreshadowing of a link to Canada, before he got to England.

The trip began in early 1943 in Durban, South Africa, where he had ended up after trekking under the umbrella of the Polish military through the Soviet Union, India and Iran.

With about 200 other Poles, he and 1,800 others boarded a CPR ship — the Empress of Canada. Around midnight on March 13, a torpedo from the Italian submarine Leonardo da Vinci slammed into the Empress, which was sailing off Sierra Leone.

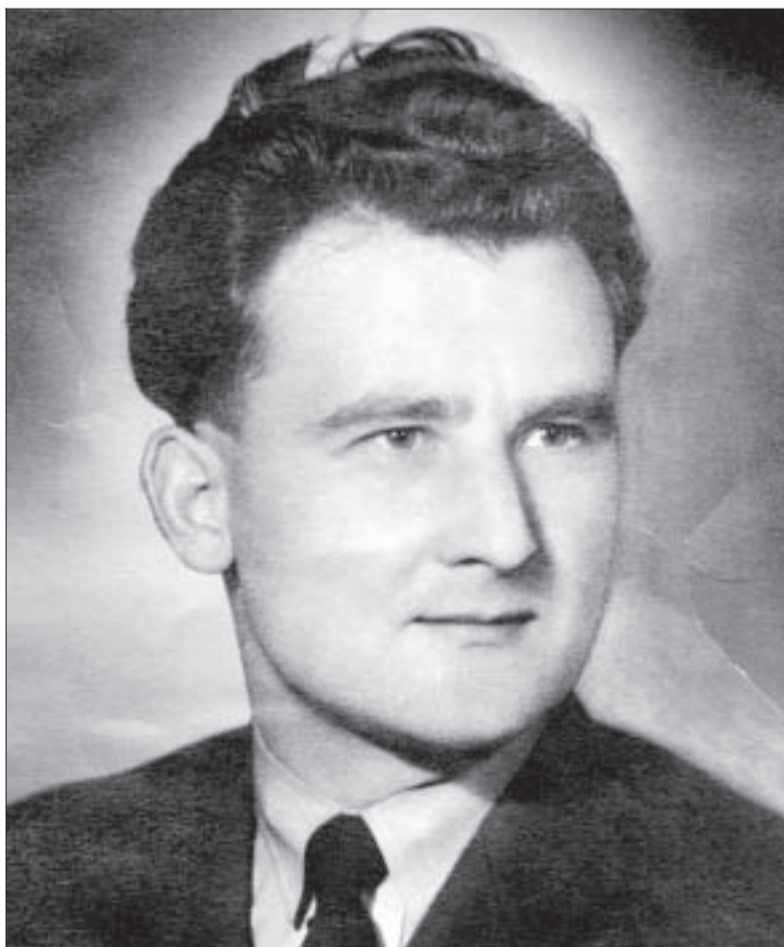
Leonardo's commander gave the captain of the Empress 30 minutes to abandon ship before hitting the Empress again. A total of 392 people died, including many Italian prisoners of war.

The survivors, enduring exposure and circling sharks, were eventually picked up by friendly vessels and taken to Freetown. From there, they resumed their trip to England aboard the RMS Mauretania II.

Given everything he had been through, it is not surprising that later in life my father was authoritarian, modest, impatient, physically tough as nails, stoical and indifferent to pain — he once pulled out one of his own decayed teeth with a pair of pliers — and uncomprehending of what in today's Canada passes for hardship.



Warrant Officer Oziewicz sits astride the remains of a Lancaster bomber that crash-landed at the RAF base in Faldingworth, England.



The writer's father, shown in a photo taken during the war, flew Lancaster bombers with RAF Group One's 300 Polish Squadron.

It also helps explain that by the time he became a flier in England, he had already become fatalistic.

"I don't remember ever being scared," he says of the bombing missions. "What happened, happened. That's it."

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Flying a bomber was one of the riskiest occupations during the war. It had the highest loss rate of any major branch of the British forces. In fact, the RAF Bomber Command lost 55,000, or almost half, of its serving members.

Had they known about it earlier, the Yalta Agreement would have given Polish fliers, who had also distinguished themselves in the Battle of Britain, less incentive to keep on risking their lives.

But many weren't aware of it until

weeks before Germany's surrender on May 7, 1945. And, besides, they were intent on making sure Germany was down and out.

"The Command wanted to make sure Germany wouldn't rise again," my father said. "We did what they asked us to do. They told us to fly and we flew."

Wieslaw Karpinski, a 300 Polish Squadron Lancaster pilot who trained with my father and flew with him after the end of the war, said that among Poles there was no distress about bombing German cities.

"Quite the contrary, we were happy to do it. Most of us had a grudge against Germany because we were subject to such bombing by Germany earlier in the war, in 1939, in Poland," said Mr. Karpinski, who lives in Hanover, Ont.



NATHAN DENETTE/CANADIAN PRESS

War veteran Fred Burnard, 84, reflects during Remembrance Day ceremonies yesterday at Toronto City Hall.

"Nobody that I knew had any compunctions about it. . . . I felt quite happy to drop bombs on Germany, which had caused so much misery in Poland."

But for Poles, the VE-Day celebrations were nevertheless rather grim. As Bomber Command Group One Captain Robert Beill said at the time: "This war was begun in defence of Poland's independence and, summing up our contribution, we can state with pride that it was great, out of all proportion to our means. We gave more to bring about this victory than these means allowed and hence our hearts are heavy that this day is not the day of victory for the cause of Poland."

Before the complete cessation of hostilities, my father flew with the RAF to repatriate British PoWs in Belgium and Italy and to drop Red

Cross food supplies in starving Holland (known as Operation Manna), where people like Cornelius Vanturennot, then a child, endured brutal occupation and great privation.

Yesterday, at the Remembrance Day ceremony, Mr. Vanturennot, now 71, searched out my father after being told of his mercy missions and, tears streaming down his face, embraced him, blurting that the relief supplies were a godsend, both in food and hope.

"You saved my life. We were so excited to see the Lancasters. We were down to eating tulip bulbs and sugar beets. A lot of people were dying. I was so skinny, I thought I wasn't going to make it," Mr. Vanturennot said.

"The planes were a beautiful sight, oh man. The drops gave us hope to go on."