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Uncle Bill's Service in Bomber Command, 1942-1944

Family Memory and the Written Record

Roger Sarty

As a kid in Nova Scotia during the 1950s and early 1960s, I was close to my grandparents, great aunts and great uncles. They were born between 1896 and 1914, the generation that came of age in the roaring 'twenties, endured the Great Depression, and saw service, often in leadership roles because of their age, during the Second World War. Uncle Bill I knew least well because his career as a chemist took him to Montreal and ultimately to a research position



with the Department of National Defence in Ottawa, but he was an exotic and fascinating figure. He was reserved, slender, and his dark good looks were reminiscent of a leading man in a 1940s *film noir*. Moreover, he had been decorated for action in combat over Germany while serving as a navigator in Bomber Command. This was the capper for a kid whose cultural references were the stream of movies, television shows, and comic books that appeared in the 1950s and early 'sixties about Allied heroism in the Second World War. Even the Nova Scotia primary school readers featured stories about how David Hornell and Andrew Mynarski of the RCAF won their Victoria Crosses (the poor teachers were tolerant of our palpable boredom with the poetry of Walter de la Mare, which we seemed incapable of memorizing, while we nailed down every detail of the Hornell and Mynarski stories without apparent effort and well in advance of scheduled assignments).¹

My mother (Bill's niece), and my great aunt Anne (his older sister) with whom I stayed at every opportunity because she spoiled me rotten, were particularly close to him, and they responded to my endless questions. Mom and Aunt Anne always underscored the modesty and humour with which he talked about his service. He painted himself as a figure somewhat like the hapless film character created by comedian Buster Keaton, the poor dweeb vainly trying to do his best in the malevolent chaos of modern

John Kopf ("Bill") Bell in 1952, when he was about 40 years old and working as an industrial chemist for Tibbetts Paints in New Glasgow, NS.



Bill (right) and his wife Jeanne at a club in Montreal after his return from overseas in the summer of 1944. Her expression likely reflects fatigue rather than boredom, as she was proud of her husband's military service and later became an active member of the Royal Canadian Legion. Her brother, Stewart Logan, also served in the RCAF and in 1945 was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for operations in de Havilland Mosquitos.

industrial society. Bill, far from the hero, quaked with fear in "his black hole" as he termed the navigator's position, which had light-proof screening to shield the illuminated chart table. Even more terrifying than the anti-aircraft fire over the target was the stark, appalling awareness that "I was the one who was supposed to know how to get us the hell out of there and home." I'm pretty sure that those were the words Mom and my aunt used in reporting his anecdotes. I may have heard him directly, perhaps while I was lurking around the fringe of the "adults" during one of the summer gatherings at the Bell cottage on the Northumberland Strait, giving an hilarious account from later in the war about an encounter with a German V-1 rocket or "buzz bomb." He was drunkenly trying to find his way home from a pub in the inky darkness of the blackout - he might have been weaving unsteadily on a bicycle - when he became aware of an irritating sound that was making his head pound even more severely. The relief when the racket suddenly stopped was instantly overtaken by the realization that the silence meant the weapon was about to detonate. Cursing, he hurled himself into a ditch.

This may have been the beginning a story remembered by Bill's daughter, Judi:

He was picked up by a nice fellow driving what appeared to be a truck, who told him he could ride in the back. Since there was a blackout, there were no lights. He stretched out comfortably on a large box and discovered when they were well along the road to wherever they were going that it was a coffin - an occupied coffin at that, and he hastily took a less comfortable seat beside it.²

Still, the family's talk, when Bill was *not* present, inflated his decoration to a VC, and certainly the details seemed to support such a claim. Apparently, his bomber was severely damaged by a German night fighter, and the control surfaces were so badly shot up that the pilot's legs became exhausted to the point where he could no longer work the rudder pedals. Bill, while still plotting the course home with constant corrections to allow for the erratic progress of the aircraft, and calming the other members of the crew, leaned forward to work the pedals with his hands. They made it to England, headed for the first airfield they saw, and crash landed, ultimately coming to a rest in a pile of sand at

Jeanne and Bill after his return from overseas. Jeanne later recalled the great difficulty he had with the news that, instead of going back to England for a second operational tour, he would be immediately discharged because of a heart condition.

the end of the runway where the wreck was carted directly to the junk yard. In a quirk of fate, according to the family stories, the pilot, whose name was also Bell although no relation, and the rest of the crew were soon thereafter killed in an accident during a local joy-ride flight; my uncle, the story had it, elected not to go on the jaunt at the last minute.

Bill visited our house in suburban Toronto in the mid 1960s, not long after we moved from Nova Scotia. I would have been about thirteen, was by then devouring popular books about the war, and mustered the courage to ask him about his air force experience. He was, as I realized even at that age, almost shy when I raised the subject, and said little. He was not in the least unkind, but I vividly remember what an intimidating figure he was, somewhat gaunt and in a severe dark suit. He may have been aware on that visit that he was fatally ill, a late casualty of the bomber war. The strain of his combat tour had contributed to the development of heart disease; he passed away in Ottawa in 1967, when he was fifty-four years of age.

In the 1980s I became a member of the RCAF official history team at National Defence Headquarters, but never systematically looked into my uncle's war record. A few bits and pieces came my way, but in circumstances that hardly inspired research. In the mid-1990s, for example, I had the good fortune to spend a great deal of time with Bill's widow, my aunt Jeanne (née Logan), during the last year of her life. She, a beautiful and vivacious woman who had had a long career at what was then the Civil Service Credit Union, was still grief-stricken over Bill's death nearly 30 years earlier. She had recently ordered a copy of Bill's service file from the government to respond to questions from a local historian who was working on the war records of air force personnel from Pictou County, Nova Scotia, and let me have the file. I had no inclination to do anything more than skim it. She told me at considerable length how Bill had returned from the war a changed man, extremely irritable, insomniac, and prone to sudden flashes of rage. He had always had a quick temper but



this was different. He was, she said, tortured for at least several months by the fact he had been released from the air force in 1944, and had abandoned his buddies. She also spoke about the agony of his rapidly progressing heart disease in the mid-1960s. The only brightness of those years, she said, was the unswerving support and friendship Bill and she received from the Royal Canadian Legion, support that continued to the end of her life.

The theme of the present issue of the journal seemed to require at least a preliminary effort – and this is all the present article pretends to be – to pull together some of the pieces of Bill's story. This is particularly the case because, in recent years, the last of my grandparents, great uncles and aunts and many other friends of that remarkable generation have left us.

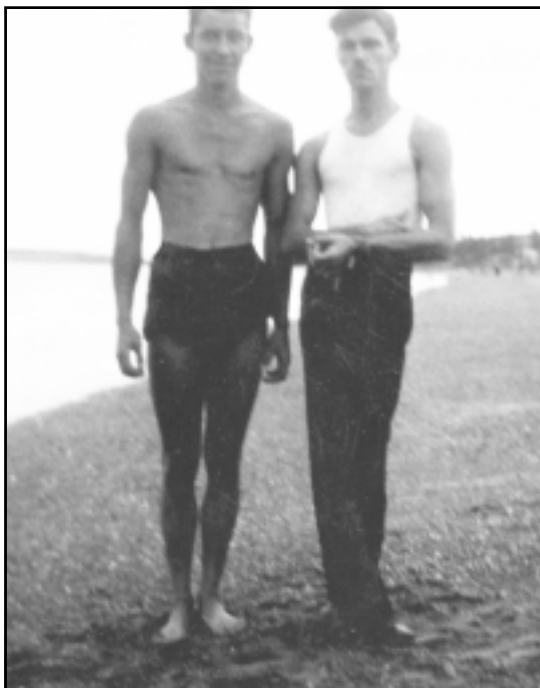
Bill's real name was John Kopf Bell. Early on someone decided that he was "Bill" and the name stuck. He was the fourth and last child, born on 11 July 1912, of Dr. John Bell, a medical doctor in New Glasgow, the largest town in Pictou County on the northern shore of Nova Scotia, and Elizabeth Kopf. Elizabeth was a New Yorker of German descent. Her family had come from Alsace-Lorraine. She was scarcely more than five feet tall and had taught public school before she met John when he came to New York as part of his medical studies. Until the end of her life she

had an undiluted broad New York accent, and was a formidable figure. She was the “ying” in the family to the gentle Dr. John’s “yang.”

The Bell clan was prominent in Pictou County. They were not one of the founding families of that Scots enclave, but fairly early arrivals in the 1820s. Basil Bell, a classical scholar who also had medical training, emigrated from Scotland, was for a time principal of the Pictou Academy, and established a drugstore in New Glasgow. His son, Adam Carr Bell (1847-1912), Bill’s grandfather, returned to Scotland for part of his education as a ‘chemist’ and subsequently took over the drugstore. Active in politics for the Conservatives, he was the first mayor of New Glasgow (1876), sat in the Provincial legislature in 1878-87 (and was leader of the opposition in 1882-7), won a seat in the House of Commons in 1896 and 1900, and was appointed to the Senate after the Conservative victory in the federal election of 1911, a few months before his death. Dr. John, who according to family tradition had in the face of a beating defied his father’s insistence he go into law and politics, nevertheless did his duty. He stood as a sacrificial candidate in the 1916 provincial election when the Conservatives were in disarray, and in 1928 became a member in the upper house of the Nova Scotia legislature just long enough to fill a Conservative election

pledge by helping that unelected body to vote itself out of existence.³ The eldest of Dr. John and Elizabeth’s children was Mary Carr (1907-92), my grandmother, followed by Anne Elizabeth (1909-92), and Adam Carr (1910-69). The family’s life was dominated by the severe illness of Adam, who contracted polio while an infant. He survived thanks to his mother’s intense – fanatical – care, but had under-developed legs. All the children became keen members of the “flapper” generation in the 1920s, influenced in no small measure by close ties with the Kopf family members still in New York, who appear to have been very culturally aware. Nova Scotia, like the US, had prohibition, and many of the family stories were about the endless quest for booze and fascination with the new popular music, jazz. Although Adam could normally walk unassisted, his legs, badly weakened by the polio, gave out after a few drinks. Bill’s role was to hoist Adam over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes to get him home.

Bill, according to the family, was possibly the most intellectually gifted of the children, all of whom attended university, but not the most disciplined. He finally completed a bachelor’s degree in science at Mount Allison University in 1938 after six years at that institution, and started, but did not complete, graduate work at Dalhousie University before moving to Montreal



Late 1930s snapshots from Melmurby Beach, Nova Scotia, where the Bell clan gathered every summer from the early 1900s until well into the 1960s. To the left is Bill and his older brother Adam (right) who developed his upper body physique to compensate for the weakness of his legs as a result of childhood polio. Above is Bill with his adoring niece Joan Bartlett, the author’s mother.

in 1939 to become an "assistant" in industrial chemistry. His brother Adam pressed on to complete a PhD in organic chemistry at McGill University and became a product-development scientist at Colgate-Palmolive in New York. He was later a professor at Nasson College in Springvale, Maine.

The position Bill obtained in Montreal was only a temporary one that ended in March 1940,⁴ which may explain the timing of his efforts to join the air force. He was accepted at the recruiting office in Halifax in September 1940, and was initially posted to No.5 (Bomber Reconnaissance) Squadron which was then at Sydney, Nova Scotia, before he began aircrew training, at No.1 Initial Training School, in Toronto, in January 1941. At 29 years of age, he was too old to become a pilot, but his background in the sciences made him a natural candidate for "observer," the term then used for the navigator/bomb aimer.⁵ After courses at No.1 Air Observer School (Malton, Ontario), No.1 Bombing and Gunnery School (Jarvis, Ontario) and No.1 Air Navigation School (Rivers, Manitoba), he went overseas in September 1941, and proceeded to the Royal Air Force's No.16 Operational Training Unit in October. He was not a "star" or a "natural" in his performance, but often in the top third or quarter of his class. Interestingly, in view of my childhood memories of him, Bill's instructors and commanding officers almost invariably noted his "reserve"; one or two suggested this might be a detriment to leadership potential, but most commented that it was one aspect of a mature and attractive personality. Several of the reports in his personal file

The caption of this official photograph dated 31 March 1944 reads "Successful Navigator, Flight Lieutenant Jack [sic] Bell, DFC...has been places and done things...Now Navigation Officer at a Canadian heavy bomber conversion unit in Britain, Bell instructs 'sprog' navigators..." Bill's comment was

comment on his keenness and the intensity with which he applied himself.

With effect from 1 March 1942, Bill was posted to 408 Squadron RCAF, which then was part of No.5 Group, RAF Bomber Command. Some of his letters to his older sister, Anne, survive (she passed them on to me during the last years of her life), and in them he studiously avoided reference to his air force activities. The Nova Scotia newspapers, however, drew upon RCAF press releases to follow closely what the province's native sons were doing overseas, and this coverage alerted the family to the fact that Bill began operational flying in the spring of 1942. On 24 July he wrote to Anne:

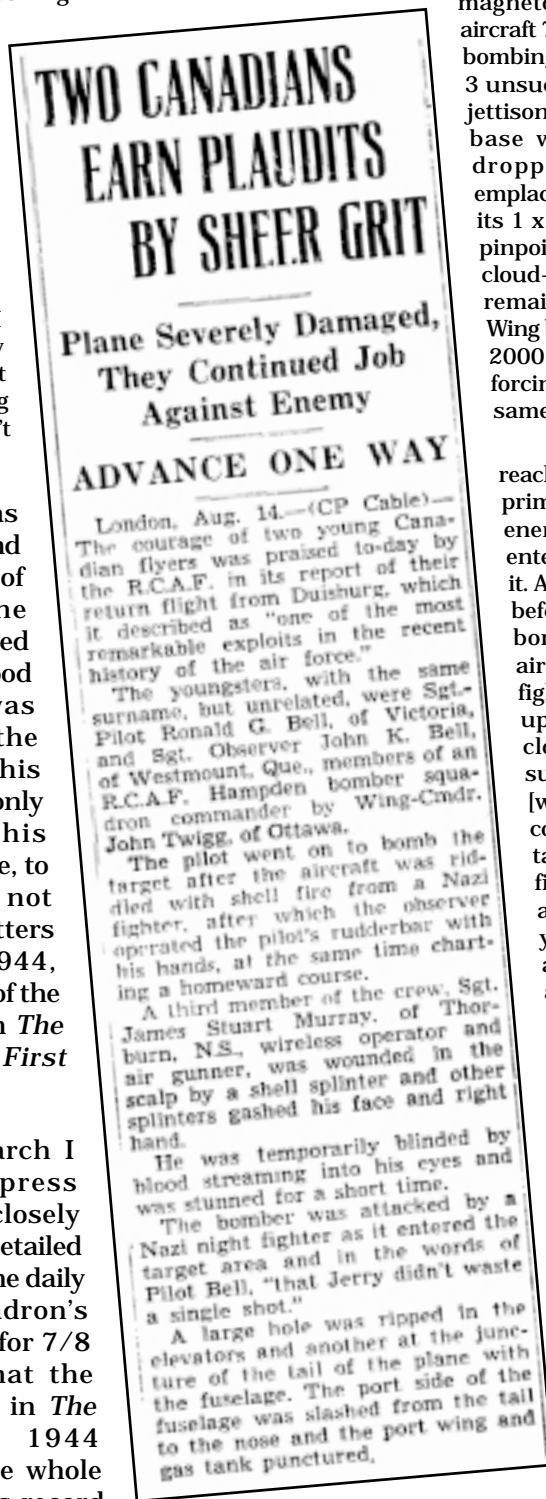
I must owe you a letter or so. I can't remember when I wrote last, but it must have been awhile back. I'm a lazy devil. And rather busy in spots



as you've found out from the local paper. I was doing very well in keeping deep dark secrets too. I've been trying to keep you people from worrying. But it isn't much use now that you've had such a broad hint. But I suppose you must have suspected something anyway. It is rather exciting in spots. But mostly you're too damn busy to think about anything but your work at hand. There isn't much to it tho: you go over there - they shoot at you, you drop bombs on them - then everybody goes back to bed. Terrific isn't it. I haven't developed any operational twitch yet but I suspect my hair is falling out a bit. But anyway, don't worry about me.

The mission that was the subject of family legend took place on the night of 7/8 August 1942. The family's oral version proved to be accurate, and for good reason. The action was reported in detail in the national press⁶ and this coverage moved Bill, for only the second time in his surviving correspondence, to break his rule about not discussing air force matters in letters home. In 1944, moreover, a full account of the action was published in *The RCAF Overseas: The First Four Years*.⁷

In my recent research I discovered that the press stories in 1942 were closely based on the unusually detailed report that appeared in the daily narrative of 408 Squadron's operations record book for 7/8 August 1942,⁸ and that the account that appeared in *The RCAF Overseas* in 1944 reproduced virtually the whole text from the operations record book. It is a remarkable piece of writing worth publishing again:



At 0940 hours No. 5 Group requested 12 crews for a bombing attack over DUISBERG...

Of the 12 aircraft detailed for this night's operations, 2 were cancelled prior to take-off owing to lack of brake pressure and magneto drops. Of the 10 remaining aircraft 7 were successful in reaching and bombing their primary target and, of the 3 unsuccessful remaining aircraft, one jettisoned its bombs and returned to base with engine trouble, another dropped Wing Bombs on a gun emplacement and returned to base with its 1 x 2000' owing to being unable to pinpoint on Dutch Coast due to 10/10 cloud-base approximately 3000 ft., the remaining aircraft having dropped its Wing bombs in the target area, but, the 2000 H.C. hung up on being released forcing the pilot to return to base with same on board.

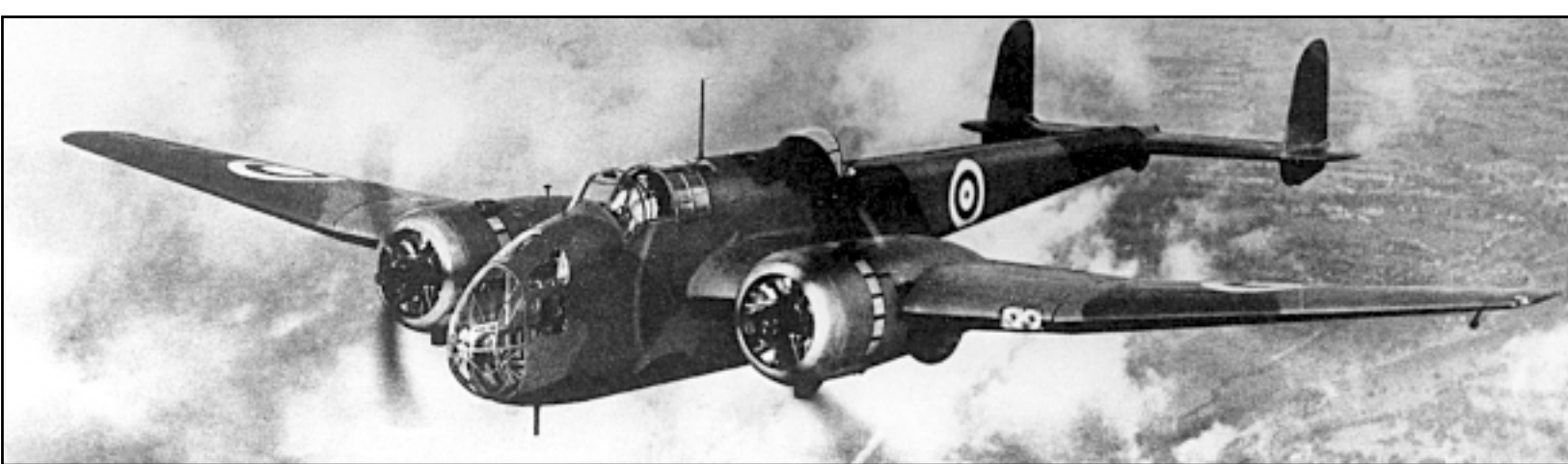
One of our aircraft which reached and successfully bombed the primary target encountered severe enemy action and flak both before entering the target and upon leaving it. About approximately nine minutes before target time, whilst doing his bombing run on the target, this aircraft was attacked by an enemy fighter which suddenly pounced upon our Hampden from out of cloud cover. The attack was so sudden that, before the WOP/AG's [wireless operator/air gunner] could notice the enemy aircraft and take necessary action, the enemy fired with all guns at a range of approximately between 50-100 yards. This attack took place at approximately 0230 hours 7/8 and, the first sign of attack was when tracer bullets were fired at the Hampden from dead astern. The armament of the aircraft (as seen from the glare of the cannon firing) seemed to consist of four cannons, close together, forming a square. The pilot immediately put the Hampden into a deep diving turn to starboard pulling out about 6,000 ft. and, the attacking aircraft was lost from sight and not seen again. The two WOP/AG's were unable to return the fire, at the time of the attack, owing to being thrown off balance by the unexpected violence of the attack. The

attack was so fierce that the pilot's impression was that all shells and bullets seemed to hit the aircraft everywhere. There were

three large holes in the elevators, one in the port aileron, one large hole in the port tail fin, one huge rent at the intersection of the tail boom and the fuselage, another large hole in the bottom of the port engine nacelle, the top gunner's cupola was smashed and the magazines shot away from his guns, all port tanks were riddled, the hydraulics shot away and, the sides of the fuselage seamed and scored by cannon shells. One cannon shell struck the spar behind pilot's left shoulder in the fuselage. The top WOP/AG was wounded in this encounter and had shell splinters imbedded in his scalp. His face was all scratched up by perspex and flying splinters and, also had a deep cut in right hand caused by shell splinters which were later found to be imbedded there. The shock from the shell splinters knocked the WOP/AG unconscious for approximately 30 seconds and upon regaining consciousness, the pilot instructed him to change places with the 2nd WOP/AG in the lower compartment, owing to blood streaming down

so tired that he was unable to hold the rudder any longer, and, it was then that his navigator helped him by taking hold of the rudder bars with his hands thereby taking part of the strain off the pilot. This the navigator managed to hold from thereon until their crash landing at R.A.F. Station Lakenheath. No other member of the crew besides the first WOP/AG injured by this accident. All switches and gases were cut off at 500 ft. as the aircraft was coming in to land and, an attempt was made at landing 75 yds. to the right of the flare path in order not to hinder either take-offs or landings which might have been taking place. As it so happened, an Oxford aircraft came in to land at about the same time our own aircraft landed. The hydraulics being completely shot up, it was necessary to make a belly-landing and, the aircraft came to rest in a sand dune....

Both the Pilot and the Navigator were recommended for the award of the Distinguished



A Handley Page Hampden, the aircraft type in which Bill and his crew survived severe damage by a German night fighter attack over Duisberg in the early hours of 8 August 1942.

his face and over his right hand from his wounds. Following this encounter and although badly shot up, the pilot attempted another run on the target and, successfully unloaded his bombs as detailed. Approximately 10 minutes after leaving target, explosions were heard from the port engine and this one stalled completely, remaining absolutely dead for the remainder of the journey. At the time the port engine stalled, the aircraft was flying at 9,000 ft. and, shortly after this the aircraft fell into a right spin which the pilot managed to pull out of at 4,000 ft. Once the aircraft was under control and, flying at excessive speed, the pilot raised his altitude to 6,000 ft. and then instructed his crew to prepare for abandoning aircraft and a possible sea landing. Once over the sea the aircraft lost more height it was only at 4,000 ft. that the pilot was able to bring the aircraft under control and keep it steadily at this height most of the way back. Whilst over the sea, the pilot's right leg became

Flying Medal and, on the 1st Spt., 1942 His Majesty the King, under recommendation of the Air Officer Commanding in Chief, graciously approved the immediate award of the Distinguished Flying Medal to the Pilot RCAF/R. 76955 Sgt. BELL, R.G.. The names of this crew ...are as follows:--

Hampden A.R.366 -U-

CAN/R. 76955 Sgt. BELL, R.G. (Pilot) (Uninjured)...

CAN/R. 65428 Sgt. BELL J.K. (Navigator) (Uninjured)...

CAN/R. 62945 Sgt. MURRAY, J.S. (1st WOP/AG) (Wounded)...

935912 Sgt. NORMAN, A. (2nd WOP/AG) (Uninjured)...

Here is Bill's own account, from a letter to his sister Anne dated 13 October 1942:

I've not mentioned our little 'do' in any of my letters to date. I didn't think you'd be particularly happy about that sort of thing. Me, I'm not as a matter of fact. I just don't like it. As a matter of fact I can't think of anybody who does. But then, you've got to expect these ups and downs that little episode being one of the downs. But I've practically forgotten the whole business now. The paper was quite accurate. Only it was approx. nine times as bad as they made it. Which is enough on that subject. But perhaps I'd better expand a bit. What happened was really silly when we came to think of it. We were stooging along on our run into the target admiring the scenery - chatting back and forth on how beautiful the anti-aircraft fire was, and what lovely fires the boys were building and which way do we figure is the best way to come over the target. Just minding our own business, like. But we weren't minding our business enough and there was a Jerry who was sneaking up on us who was. And the next thing we knew he shot so many holes in us we look looked like a sieve. We did considerable drafty tearing around the sky leaking gasoline all over the place and got away from him. Then went ahead with the work at hand and left that place for home. Slightly worried about the immediate future but not unhappy. We just got started for home when the pilot called [word erased by water damage] and said don't look down but that bang was one of our engines giving up. Which same made us just a wee bit unhappy seeing as how we had a couple of hours to go for the English coast and some very unfriendly natives all along the way. But we were still not too miserable. That is for the first few minutes then we went into a spin. Like the paper said, only we didn't lose a mere 1000 feet like it said. We lost 5,000. Which brought us down fairly close to the ground. But we got out of it and managed to gain a few thousand feet with the speed we'd picked up coming down. Which I [word illegible] was considerable. It was at this point that Ron's [the pilot's] leg gave out. Very, very unhappy we were becoming. So I took the rudder bars with my hands. Afer that things didn't improve at all. But we managed to keep going. I'd say off hand, we were in about a dozen minor spins. After the first ones we kinda got used to them. Anyway after a couple or three hours we managed to get back to England and land in a neat heap in the middle of somebodys air-drome. Which is all there was to it. We were very lucky, and very happy to be home.

That is enough shop for this letter. I don't mind writing the stuff now and then. But there really isn't much to write about. It's all just a little different type of work. But you can get used

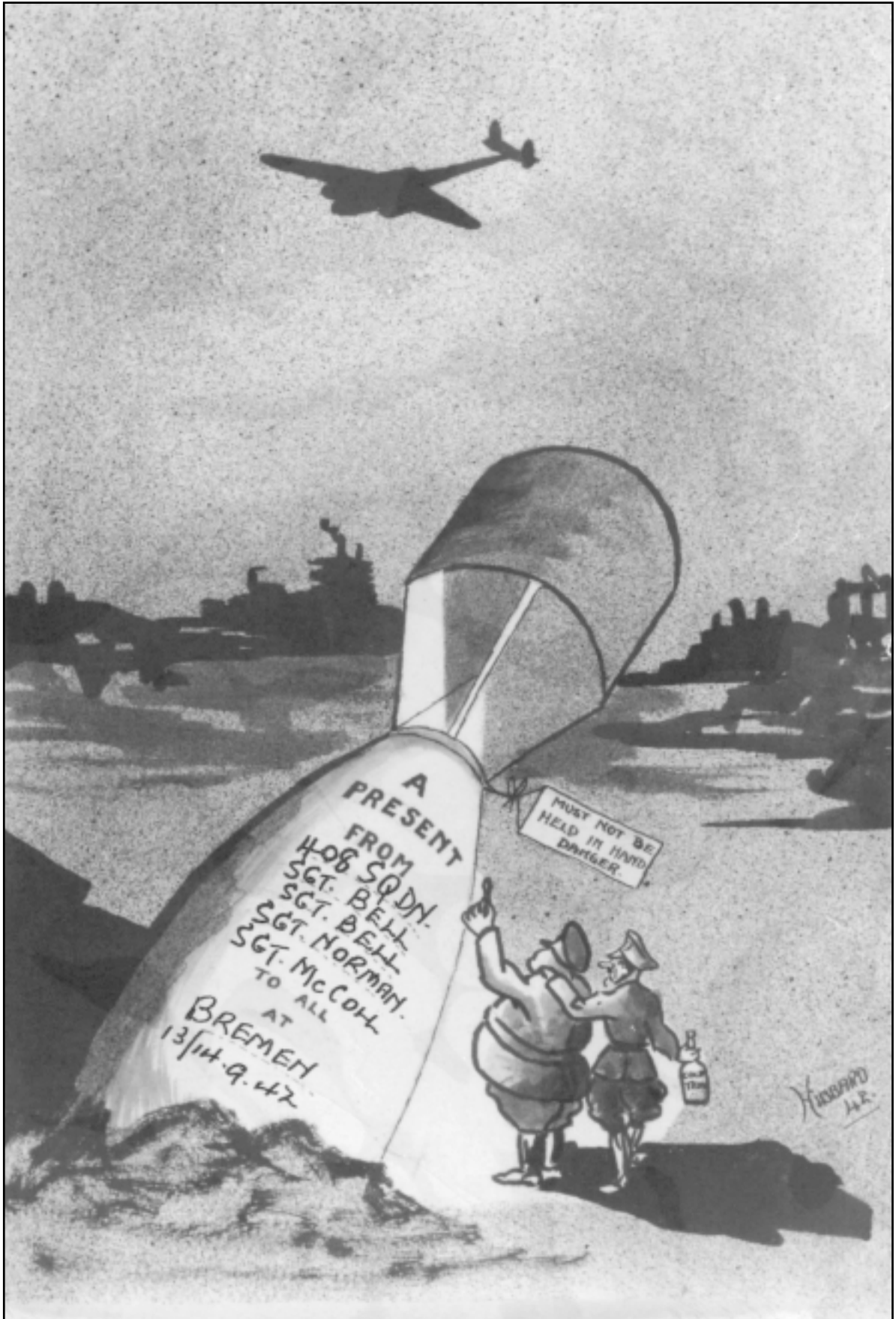
to anything. I think most of the boys haven't anything better to write about, now that the weather has gone out of style.

I've been leading a moderately quiet life. With an occasional binge thrown in. But not too often. I'm not where I was before - which means I've moved and have been [smudged word - "finding?"] my way about the local pubs for a spot to operate from. I've taken up horse-racing as a side line. Which is not makeing [sic] me any money - but not losing me too much. An Aussie bloke is the cause of it all. I'm convinced that all Australians are horse crazy. I enjoy it myself. But not *that* much. It's the bar at the track which really appeals to me. Just a born bar-fly, I guess. But actually I don't drink a great deal. It interferences with my work.

The crew had only a brief respite from operations. They participated in an attack on Osnabruck on the night of 17/18 August, on Flensburg the next night, and then on Saarbucken on the night of 28/29 August 1942. In September they joined two attacks, on Dusseldorf on the night of 10/11 and Bremen on the night of the 13th/14th. A few days later Bill received his commission, and with effect from 17 September 1942 was a pilot officer, and ultimately became a flight lieutenant by the time he left the service. The squadron was then taken off operations for over two months to convert from their twin-engine Handley-Page Hampdens to the four-engine Handley-Page Halifax, a process that was prolonged because the unit's initial new equipment of the Mark V type was withdrawn at the end of November and, in December, replaced by the Mark II variant. As part of the change-over, the four-man Hampden crews were broken up to provide a leavening of experienced personnel for the seven-man Halifax crews, and that was the end of the flying partnership between Bill and Ronald Bell. The family story about Bill's crew-mates dying in a flying accident, however, proved to be partly true. On 9 November 1942, Ronald Bell and the whole of his new crew were killed when their Halifax crashed during a "fighter affiliation" exercise.⁹

408 Squadron returned to operations with its Halifaxes in January 1943, and after a few unopposed minelaying ("Gardening") operations

This cartoon, commemorating one of the many missions by Bill's crew in August-September 1942, was found in the letters he sent to his sister.





Bill, despite his reserve, loved to socialize. The woman to his left in this photograph taken in England in early 1944 is probably the English fiancée of a long-time friend from New Glasgow who was serving in The Sherbrooke Fusiliers, one of the Canadian armoured regiments preparing for the invasion of France.

in the North Sea, was in a series of raids on Lorient, the French Channel port that the Germans had developed as a U-boat base and given heavy anti-aircraft defences. Bill's new crew participated in at least three nights' actions and he was specifically mentioned in national press coverage of the raids.¹⁰ Bill completed his "tour" of 28 combat missions in April 1943, and was then assigned as a navigation instructor at "conversion" units, where aircrew received advanced training in the operation of four-engine aircraft.

The family story that Bill received a high decoration specifically for the Duisburg operation turns out to be only partly true. Although he and Ronald Bell were both recommended for immediate receipt of the Distinguished Flying Medal, only the pilot

received it. Bill was awarded a "Mention in Dispatches" in January 1943; no record of the reason for the award has come to light, but it may have been related to the Duisburg operation. In June 1943, however, he received a periodic Distinguished Flying Cross in recognition of his whole tour of operations, with a citation that particularly noted his leadership qualities:

Pilot Officer Bell has completed a large number of operational sorties against some of the most heavily defended targets in enemy territory including Lorient, Munich, Hamburg, St.Nazaire and the Ruhr. On one occasion in August 1942, his aircraft was badly damaged by an enemy night fighter just prior to reaching the target. Despite this the mission was successfully completed. With one engine useless and whilst over the sea the pilot experienced considerable difficulty in holding the rudders. Pilot Officer Bell immediately came to his assistance and by

his co-operation and calmness contributed in a large measure to the safe return of the aircraft. At all times with a cool, quiet manner, Pilot Officer Bell has displayed a fine fighting spirit, skill and initiative worthy of high praise.¹¹

During August and September 1943 Bill joined the staff of 6 Group (RCAF), and then returned to instructional duties until July 1944. At that point he had completed a full overseas tour, 28 combat missions during 14 months in an operational squadron, and 14 months of staff and instructional duty. He immediately volunteered for another operational tour, hoping for a chance to operate the fast new de Havilland Mosquito bombers, and received 30 days leave in Canada, which he took in Montreal where his wife had settled.¹²

Regulations required a medical examination before returning overseas, which took place on 13 September at Lachine, Quebec. The examination raised red flags. Bill was immediately removed from the overseas draft, and admitted to hospital for tests. The key report stated that the "Patient exhibits hypertension for which no cause has been demonstrated. Has slight peripheral arteriosclerosis. On the basis of essential hypertension, this patient should be boarded medically unfit and discharged from the R.C.A.F. No treatment necessary." Regulations required Bill to fill in a section of the medical board report to supply any knowledge he had of the cause of his condition. Bill wrote: "When I joined the R.C.A.F. I was told that my blood pressure was borderline for aircrew category." He then continued, "I had a severe tour of operations with a great deal of nervous strain. Our targets were difficult. We were shot up on three occasions, crash landed once and attacked by fighters on various occasions."¹³

I just discovered this statement in the last few days when I forced myself to sift through the hundred or more pages of forms in Bill's service file. I am now only a few months younger than he was when he died, and freely admit to the excessive sentimentality of middle age. Still, I can't help but think that this terse summation of his operational tour, which he was compelled to pen on the document that triggered his sudden removal from the air force, was laden with emotion. Perhaps it is not too far fetched to suggest that his silence when I eagerly grilled

him about the war not long before his final illness expressed that same emotion.

Notes

Note: All photos for this article have been supplied by the author, except where noted.

1. Many thanks to Bill's daughter, Dr. Judi Bell, who gave every assistance in the preparation of this article, including the photo research.
2. Judi Bell to author, 17 August 2006.
3. James M. Cameron, *Political Pictonians: The men in the Legislative Council, senate, House of Commons, House of Assembly 1767-1967* (Ottawa: privately published, [1967]), pp.82-95, 171; *The Canadian Parliamentary Guide 1912* (Ottawa: Mortimer Co., 1912), p.63; J. Murray Beck, *Politics of Nova Scotia. Vol. Two: Murray to Buchanan 1896-1988* (Tantallon, NS: Four East Publications, 1988), p.80.
4. "Record of Service Airmen," nd, file HQ J-16345, Library and Archives Canada, Personnel Records Centre [hereafter, personal file].
5. "R.C.A.F. Special Reserve Interview Report," 12 September 1940, personal file.
6. "Two Canadians Earn Plaudits by Sheer Grit. Plane Severely Damaged They Continued Job Against Enemy," *Hamilton Spectator*, 14 August 1942, accessed at <http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/newspapers/intro_e.html> 24 June 2006.
7. *The RCAF Overseas: The First Four Years* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1944), pp.171-3.
8. Library and Archives Canada, reel C-12274.
9. 408 Squadron Operations Record Book, 9,13 November 1942, Library and Archives Canada, reel C-12274.
10. "German U-Boat Base Left Sheet of Flames....," *Hamilton Spectator*, 8 February 1943., accessed at <http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/newspapers/intro_e.html> 15 August 2006.
11. "Decoration Digest for Press Release," personal file.
12. Form "RCAF/UK15" [record of tours], nd, "Pro Forma For Aircrew Returning to Canada for Special Leave," 19 July 1944, personal file.
13. "Report of Medical Re-examination," 13 September 1944, "Medical Board Proceedings," 2 October 1944, personal file.

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