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# "How glad I am that I am able to do this" Uncle Bill in the RCAF, 1940-1942

Frank Millerd

Growing up in West Vancouver in the 1940s and 1950s we knew Uncle Bill was shot down during the Second World War and was buried in Denmark, but we knew little else. There were reminders: my brother was named after him, a professor asked about him, a memorial window was dedicated at the church our family attended for many years, we saw his name in a memorial book in York Minister. Gradually, however, information on his life and time in the air force was revealed. After my grandfather died mementos of Bill came to my father, including pictures of his funeral conducted by the German military. In 1995 the pilot of Bill's plane who, unknown to us, had survived, wrote to our family and described their last flight. Now, in retirement, with the help of a surprising variety of sources, both specific to Bill and more generally about the air force, I have been able to put together at least part of the story of his service in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). Before this my image of bombing in the Second World War was that bombers were four-engined, there were losses but no more than in any other force, the Germans would never bury one of their "enemy," and bombers were only used to attack industrial cities. Instead, I found a story of outdated equipment, an effective but overlooked mission of Bomber Command, and unimaginable risk, endurance, and courage.

William (Bill) Francis Millerd was born on 3 May 1918 in Vancouver

**Abstract: Bill Millerd's service in the RCAF began in June 1940 when he was trained as a wireless operator/air gunner. Overseas he served with 408 Squadron in early 1942 when the squadron was equipped with the Hampden two-engine medium bomber. Millerd was lost on his 12th mission, a mine-laying flight, when his plane was shot down while attacking a German ship. Millerd's operational service was at a time of some of Bomber Command's highest loss rates. This article examines what is known of Millerd's last flight as well as the events after his death.**

where he lived until enlisting, except for several years in the 1920s when the family lived in Prince Rupert. He was the second youngest of his siblings, with two older brothers and older and younger sisters. His father, Francis, was born in Ireland and came to Vancouver in 1908 where he worked in the fishing industry, becoming an executive in one of the leading companies in the 1920s and founding his own firm in the 1930s. During his school and university years Bill spent summers working in his father's salmon cannery. Bill's mother, Anne Frances Ellen, née Findon, was born in England and came to Canada as a child.

He completed his schooling at King George High School in Vancouver in 1937, achieving junior matriculation or university entrance qualifications and senior matriculation credits equivalent to most of the first year of university. He worked at office jobs until enrolling

at the University of British Columbia in 1939. At UBC he participated in rowing and was a member of the Canadian Officers Training Corps and Phi Gamma Delta fraternity.

On 29 May 1940, as the evacuation from Dunkirk was underway, he applied to join the RCAF. In June he passed a physical examination, was interviewed, and completed his attestation papers. His interviewer wrote that he was "very keen to join, wants to be a pilot and will probably be OK as such, but to get in has chosen Observer Course. He is of the right type. Well educated, good demeanor and correct attitude." He was considered "fully qualified in personal respects for commissioned rank" and recommended for pilot.<sup>1</sup>

Bill enlisted on 26 June 1940 and was sent to the Toronto Manning Depot. In September, after initial training, Bill was sent to wireless school in Calgary. In January 1941 he went to bombing and gunnery school in Mossbank, Saskatchewan where he trained as an air gunner. On completion of this course on 17 February 1941 he was promoted to sergeant and received the air gunner's badge.

## Overseas

From 18 February to 11 March 1941, Bill was on leave, travelling to Vancouver to visit family with orders to report to the embarkation depot at Debert, Nova Scotia by 12 March 1941. He left the embarkation depot



Canadian War Museum (CWM) CN 19700218-064

**Handley Page Hampden by Peter Fong**



Photos supplied by author



**Left: Bill Millerd in Montreal, 11 March 1941.**

**Right: Studio portrait of Bill.**

**Below: Bill's student card from the University of British Columbia.**



on 5 April 1941 for, as stated in his service record, "elsewhere." He sailed from Halifax on 10 April and disembarked in the United Kingdom on 20 April, likely travelling on the *Georgic*, a Cunard White Star liner launched in 1931.<sup>2</sup>

After arriving in the United Kingdom Bill was in radio school and several operational training units, where the specialists needed for a crew trained together. Letters home discuss his quarters, the food, and, especially, the difficulty in heating his accommodations.

This fireplace is our main attraction in this house. Ken and I spend half our day getting it going, and trying to solve the mysteries of the drafts.<sup>3</sup>

I have a room to myself but I have not mastered the art of keeping the fire going for any length of time.<sup>4</sup>

There were no complaints about the food.

For breakfast we had, to my amazement, Herrings in Tomato Sauce!! and I rather enjoyed it. [Canned herring in tomato sauce, never considered a gourmet item, was one of the wartime products of his father's fish processing company.]...we do get ample. We have 5 meals a day...we are well taken care of.<sup>5</sup>

We have our meals in the Sergeants mess (four a day) and very good.<sup>6</sup>

In September 1941, while training, Bill was selected for pilot training and recommended for commissioning as an officer. When training would begin was not determined but Bill felt it would be "some months" and he "would like to see some action as an Air-Gunner before commencing another course."<sup>7</sup>

Finally, after nine months in England, on 3 February 1942 Bill was assigned to an operational bomber squadron, 408 (RCAF) Squadron, then stationed at Balderton, Nottinghamshire, southeast of Sheffield. This was the second RCAF bomber squadron formed overseas. It made its first operational flights on the night of 11-12 August 1941.<sup>8</sup> The lag in forming overseas RCAF squadrons was due to the very small size of the RCAF at the start of the war (only 4,061 officers and men and few aircraft); Canada's role in training air crew in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, a massive undertaking based in Canada; and the reluctance of the RAF to allow distinct RCAF squadrons. At the beginning of the war the British saw the RCAF as a source of manpower for the RAF but Canada pushed for a separate presence in the Allied air forces. As part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan agreement graduates who were members of Commonwealth air forces were to be assigned to squadrons of their own air force. The formation of RCAF squadrons did

not mean they were fully manned by RCAF members. Assignment of personnel was left to the RAF and sufficient RCAF personnel were not always available. In April 1942, when Bill was a member of 408 Squadron, only 44 percent of air crew and 57 percent of ground crew were Canadian. As Canadians arrived in the UK they replaced RAF personnel but the squadron always had some RAF personnel.<sup>9</sup>

### The Hampden bomber

When Bill joined 408 Squadron it was equipped with the Handley Page Hampden medium bomber, one of the Royal Air Force's front-line bombers at the beginning of the war. It shared with other medium bombers the major portion of Bomber Command's raids over continental Europe in the early part of the war. Criticized for its limitations, particularly in comparison with heavier bombers in service later in the war, its front-line employment was partly the result of the late and hurried British rearmament immediately before the war.

After the First World War the British government believed another major war was not immediate, a view reinforced by public opposition to war after the horrors of the trenches. Armed services budgets were



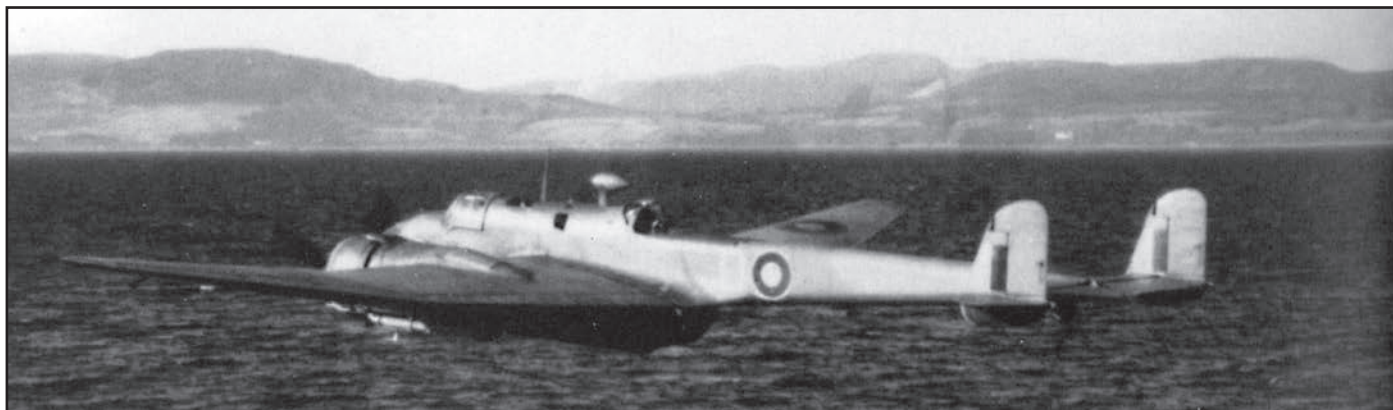
drastically cut and in August 1919 the cabinet approved a rolling "ten year rule"; the armed forces were to base their budgets on the assumption that no major war would occur for at least ten years. The "ten year rule" was only discarded in 1932 as the government realized that the military dangers to the country were more serious than any financial risks. By 1938 financial constraints on rearmament were removed and aircraft production was at the maximum possible level. Between 1934 and 1939 spending on the RAF increased ten-fold.<sup>10</sup>

Development of the Handley Page Hampden bomber began in 1932 and proceeded at a relatively slow pace, primarily due to financial constraints

and uncertainty about the future roles of bombers. An all metal monoplane powered by two Bristol Pegasus nine-cylinder radial engines, it first flew in June 1936. The fuselage was deep, to accommodate bombs, and very narrow, only one metre wide, with a tail boom only strong enough to support a twin-finned tail. The plane's appearance earned it various nicknames, including "the flying suitcase," "the flying tadpole," and "ferocious frying pan." The narrow fuselage, although streamlining the plane for speed, caused several problems. It was difficult for the four man crew to move around in the plane; replacing the pilot if he became incapacitated was almost impossible. The narrow fuselage also precluded the installation of power turrets for defensive guns, limiting the crew's ability to defend the plane.<sup>11</sup>

The rapid rate of aeronautical technical change in the 1930s meant that although the RAF's bombers at the start of the war did not have major design or building faults they suffered various limitations. They were slow, limited in their defensive capabilities, equipped with only basic bomb sights, and lacked electronic aids for navigation.<sup>12</sup> A history of Bomber Command states that "nothing was wrong with the design but things had moved on... Bomber Command's machines had all appeared wonderful when they

**A Handley Page Hampden from 415 RCAF Squadron flies low over the sea as it seeks out enemy shipping.**







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**The Hampden had a crew of four crammed into a small space. A former pilot commented, it was "a great aircraft to fly... It was a most reliable aircraft, one in which I had complete confidence. It was forgiving and...it was a tough aircraft."**

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had started to come on-line from 1936, but by the time 1939 came around technology and design had jumped on again making the aircraft vulnerable to the newest generation of German fighters."<sup>13</sup>

The plane had a crew of four, a pilot forward high in the fuselage, a navigator in a nose compartment, one wireless operator/air gunner at the top rear of the fuselage, and a second wireless operator/air gunner in the lower rear of the fuselage. Crew comfort, especially for the lower wireless operator/air gunner, was minimal. A former pilot commented that the "rear bottom gunner had the least space of all. How the gunners

ever folded themselves into their positions, I've often wondered."<sup>14</sup> "The gunners could often spend very long, very boring hours staring out into space. But they had to remain alert and vigilant constantly looking for enemy fighters. Constricted in their tiny turrets their joints stiffened and their bottoms became absolutely numb."<sup>15</sup> Bill flew in the cramped and uncomfortable rear gunner position.

Pilots often praised the Hampden, however, for its ease of handling, excellent maneuverability, and reliable engines. For W.J. Lewis, who completed over 36 operational flights as a Hampden pilot, "The Hampden was a gorgeous aeroplane

with two extremely reliable 980 horsepower Bristol Pegasus engines... the Hampden was a great aircraft to fly...I loved flying the Hampden. It was a most reliable aircraft, one in which I had complete confidence. It was forgiving and, contrary to what some historians say, it was a tough aircraft."<sup>16</sup>

### Mine laying

The Hampden's large bomb bay made it well suited for mine laying, the only bomber in 1940 capable of carrying a mine. Mine laying, although not fully appreciated

at the time, turned out to be “one of Bomber Command’s most important contributions to victory.”<sup>17</sup> Mines were laid in enemy-held shipping channels, inland waterways, and harbours along the Atlantic coast, in the North Sea, and in the Baltic Sea. The first mine laying by air took place the night of 13/14 April 1940 during the German invasion of Norway when 15 Hampdens mined the shipping lanes off Denmark between Germany and Norway; one Hampden was lost.

The mine most commonly used was a cylinder 2.7 metres long and 0.4 metres in diameter.<sup>18</sup> The mine was parachuted into water between ten and 24 metres deep, too deep to be easily recovered, where it sank to the sea floor and lay there until set off by a significant change in the magnetic field surrounding it, such as that due to the passing of a steel-hulled ship. Parachuting, done to avoid the mine breaking up when it hit the water, imposed limits on the speed and height at which the mine could be dropped. In the early years of the war, when Hampdens were heavily involved in mine laying, the mine had to be dropped at a slow speed, less than 200 miles or 311 kilometres an hour, and at low altitude, 400 to 1,000 feet or 122 to 305 metres.<sup>19</sup> Once the mine was dropped the aircraft was to continue flying in a straight line for a few minutes to help conceal the location of the mine. The mines had to be laid precisely, in shipping lanes or harbours, another reason for the low altitude and speed at which mines were laid. The code name for mine laying was gardening, the mines were called vegetables and the areas in which the mines were dropped named after vegetables and flowers.<sup>20</sup>

Mine laying usually had a lower casualty rate than other activities of Bomber Command; hence mine

laying was often the first operational flight of a new crew. But mine laying was not without risks. The Germans established flak batteries along the shores of shipping channels, and equipped mine sweepers, fishing trawlers, and older war ships with flak guns. Some operations were disastrous. On 27/28 March 1942, for example, 15 Hampdens were sent out to lay mines on the northwest German coast. Three, all with veteran crews, were never heard from again. In 1942 mines laid from the air sank 163 German-controlled vessels, with a loss of 165 aircraft, 3.3 percent of sorties. “This was less lethal than operating over Germany at the time but by no means the ‘easy ride’ that mine laying was often thought to be.”<sup>21</sup> Between 13/14 April 1940, the first Hampden mine laying flight, and 12/13 July 1942, the last, 75 Hampdens went missing when mine laying, 260 crew members were killed, 42 became prisoners of war, and one escaped capture and managed to return to England.<sup>22</sup>

Air mining had a significant impact on the German merchant marine, 717 vessels were sunk and another 665 damaged. In the cold

calculation of war mine laying was more effective than direct air attacks on ships, comparing ships sunk and aircraft lost. From April 1940, when the first mines were laid, to March 1943, 16,000 mines sunk 369 vessels with 329 aircraft lost. In the same period 3,700 attacks by air on ships at sea sank 107 vessels but with a loss of 648 aircraft. Six aircraft were lost for every ship sunk by direct attack but less than one aircraft was lost for every ship sunk by mine laying.<sup>23</sup>

Besides sinking and disabling ships, mine laying disrupted the training of U-boat crews in the Baltic Sea, hindered U-boat operations from French ports, reduced sea traffic in the Baltic Sea, and placed a strain on other forms of transport.<sup>24</sup>

Considerable German resources were tied up in deterring mine laying and attempting to remove the mines. One estimate is that more than 20,000 men, 100 flak ships and 200 mine sweepers were used to counter mine laying. By the end of the war, 40 percent of German naval personnel were devoted to mine sweeping. “Whatever the direct results of the mine laying campaign so far as the sinking of ships was concerned,



**Aircrew from 408 Squadron receive dinghy training.**



there was a tremendous indirect consequence in the manpower and materials that had to be diverted to meet the threat.”<sup>25</sup> Despite this success mining was regarded as a secondary mission of Bomber Command; mine laying flights often only occurred when weather conditions precluded bombing.<sup>26</sup> This meant mine laying often took place in bad weather, further increasing the risk and discomfort.

The impact of mine laying was not fully appreciated then and even now. “Mine-laying was not a glamorous business, by comparison with the heavy-bomber raids-in-force. It received little attention from the press and other outlets of information at the time, but the results were devastating to German merchant shipping and actually immobilized it at many stages of the war.”<sup>27</sup> “In the minelaying carried out night after night by Bomber Command, and to a much lesser degree by Coastal Command, there was a weapon at work far more deadly than we realized. Here was something unappreciated then, and little known now.”<sup>28</sup>

### With 408 (RCAF) Squadron

Bill’s first operational flight was the night of 29/30 March 1942 when his aircraft successfully dropped a mine off the north coast of The Netherlands (the “Nectarine” mine laying area). The relatively inexperienced “freshman” crew was given a task where less opposition was expected than when flying over Germany.<sup>29</sup>

Bill then joined a crew with Howard J. Copeman from Toronto as pilot, Albert Alexander Smith of Fredericton, NB as navigator, and Norman William Smith, a member of the RAF from Liverpool, England, as upper wireless operator/air gunner. Bill was the lower wireless operator/air gunner. Copeman and the two

Smiths had previously flown two operational flights with another crew member. Copeman was born in Toronto on 27 August 1921 and joined the RCAF in November 1940 at the age of 19. Copeman arrived in England in September 1941 and was posted to an Operational Training Unit, flying Hampdens until February 1942 when he joined 408 (RCAF) Squadron.

This crew completed ten operational flights, on the nights of 1/2 April, 8/9 April, 13/14 April, 17/18 April, 19/20 April, 22/23 April, 24/25 April, 26/27 April, 4/5 May, and 7/8 May. Six of these flights were mine laying operations in the North Sea off the coast of Germany, off the coast of The Netherlands and in the eastern Baltic. On two of these missions low cloud prevented identification of the target area resulting in the mine being brought back to base. The other four flights were to bomb the docks at Le Havre, France or factories in Germany. These operational flights could be up to eight hours long. One flight, on 10/11 April, was aborted due to an exhaust pipe leak which caused a visible exhaust flame, a flight that would not count towards completing a tour of 30 flights.

Flights did not always go smoothly as in the case of a mission reported in the press in April 1942:

With one engine on fire and with his altimeter showing a steady and ominous drop, Sergeant-Pilot Howard Copeman of Toronto, coaxed his faltering bomber safely home to England, following a recent bombing raid on enemy territory... It was a bit tricky, Copeman admitted later. Smoke was pouring out of one engine and the other was not able to maintain our altitude, so we had only a few hundred feet to spare when we got over English territory. However we made it – and that’s the main thing. Copeman’s landing was excellent and apart from one engine the aircraft was undamaged.<sup>30</sup>

### The last flight

In a 1995 letter to the family Howard Copeman described the crew’s last flight:

Our last operational flight, the thirteenth, took place on the night of May 15/16, 1942. On the afternoon of May 15, 1942 the squadron was briefed to lay magnetic mines off the east coast of Denmark in an area where it was anticipated that the German fleet would be passing from Kiel to the North Sea. [Altogether 13 aircraft from 408 Squadron took part in this operation. Mine laying was Bomber Command’s only operation that night with fifty aircraft involved.] Each aircraft was to carry one 2000 pound magnetic mine and on the chance that we might encounter the German fleet we were to carry two 250 pound delayed action bombs, one under each wing. At the time of the briefing the Commanding Officer suggested that it might be inappropriate to attack a battleship with 250 pound bombs but that smaller targets of opportunity should be engaged.

It was a beautiful late spring day with a blue sky and soft warm air with the scent of new growth from the surrounding farms. It made one feel glad to be alive! That night as we took off there was a large bright moon and when one’s eyes had become accustomed to the dark it seemed bright enough to read a newspaper right there in the cockpit of the aircraft. Not much cover in the sky that night!

The outbound trip was uneventful and we passed north of Heligoland which was a hot spot for flack. We crossed Denmark and on turning south toward the designated drop point for the mine we saw a German ship which I later identified as a mine sweeper



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**Recent graduates of the British Commonwealth Air Training plan await transport overseas, Debert, NS, 15 March 1941. Bill Millerd is standing at left.**

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[anchored southwest of Samsø Island]. I discussed a plan of attack with the crew over the intercom and it was decided that we would attack this ship on the return, after dropping our mine.

We laid the mine on target ["Pumpkin" area, southeast of Samsø Island, on the sea route from Germany to Norway] and on the return we again saw the mine sweeper. It was in the same location and appeared to be at anchor in a cove with no other ships in sight. We were still flying at a low altitude, having only minutes before dropped the mine at about 700 ft. It was agreed that we would attack the ship using a new glide bombing technique which we had discussed and practiced at the conclusion of our operational training at Upper Heyford. Our intention was to reduce power and glide toward the target from our initial height of about 1000 feet and at an air speed of 200 mph release the two wing bombs. Sweeping over the ship after releasing the bombs, by this time at low level, the two rear gunners would rake the ship with machine-gun fire. This was the plan.

I made a 270 degree left turn to line up on the target and as the aircraft turned the moon reflected off the windscreen reducing my visibility. I opened the hood to get a better view. On the run in the ship opened fire with a barrage of light flack and before we reached the bomb release point the port engine was hit and the wing burst into flame. Our altitude was about 200 to 300 ft. and we quickly crashed into the cold, unfriendly Baltic Sea [at approximately 2 am on May 16,



Canadian Forces Joint Imagery Centre (CFJIC) PL 3158

1942]. I was unconscious for much of the time while a lifeboat from the German ship which we had attacked rescued me. I recovered consciousness some unknown time later in a German military hospital in Aarhus, Denmark – a prisoner of war!<sup>31</sup>

In 2007 Howard Copeman, then in the veteran's wing of the Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, was interviewed by the Toronto *Star* about that night:

"Skipper, we've been hit," shouts a voice from the back of the plane. He struggles but there's no hope of pulling up the plane. There's only

one engine and the Hampden's going down fast. He shouts to his men to bail out, unlocking his own safety harness, then quickly reverses himself, "No, no, there's no time!"<sup>32</sup>

Within seconds, they hit the water. Copeman was hurled out on impact; the rest of the crew went down with the plane. Bill died at age 24 after just seven weeks of operational flying.

In the 2007 interview Copeman reflected on their last flight:

"I keep thinking about it and asking myself what I could have done. I feel responsible," he says, about his thoughts during

more than two years in German hospitals and prison camps, recovering from head injuries and a smashed left leg. He arrived back in Canada on a prisoner exchange in September, 1944, and went on to study engineering at the University of Toronto, work for Imperial Oil, marry and have three children.

His Anglican faith (and he swears he could hear his mother's prayers in Toronto) got him through. That, and his sense of duty. "The attack had been a joint decision," he says "... I came to realize eventually there was nothing I could have done that I didn't do under the circumstances," he says. "I suppose I had a choice. I could have avoided attacking the ship but I thought it was my duty to do that. I was doing my duty."<sup>33</sup>

There is an eyewitness account of the attack, although written 20 years later. The eyewitness was a Danish marine guard at a lighthouse on the south coast of Samso Island. He reported a lot of activity in the air that evening and a German ship anchored two miles west of the lighthouse. An aircraft was seen on a westerly course flying at a very low altitude. The German ship fired at the aircraft and hit it; the aircraft crashed into the sea and began burning. This was likely Bill's plane. A second aircraft then attacked the German ship; a bomb hit the foredeck but did not explode and bounced into the sea. The German ship fired at this aircraft, hit it, and it crashed into the sea. Later the German ship fired at a third aircraft but the aircraft continued flying.<sup>34</sup> The second plane was also from 408 Squadron, piloted by an American in the RCAF with a crew of a Canadian in the RCAF and two members of the RAF.<sup>35</sup> Howard Copeman was the only survivor from both crews.<sup>36</sup>

The body of Wireless Operator/Air Gunner Norman Smith was found in the sea near the crash site on 24 February 1943 and buried on Samso Island, Denmark, the next day. The body of Flight Sergeant Albert Smith was never reported found. He is commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial to those lost with Commonwealth air forces who have no known grave.<sup>37</sup>

Bill's father was informed immediately. A telegram was sent on 17 May stating that Bill was reported missing as a result of air operations. Letters were sent on 18 May by the commanding officer of his squadron and the officer in charge of Air Ministry Records. Both stated they had no information on Bill's aircraft and held out the hope that he might be a prisoner of war. The commanding officer of 408 Squadron wrote that Bill was a member of one of the top crews and that "William was very popular with the boys of the squadron, especially in the sergeants' mess where he was looked upon as 'a good fellow.'"<sup>38</sup> Five months later, in October 1942, the RCAF informed the family that "In view of the lapse of time, it is felt there can now be little hope of his being alive, but action to presume that he has lost his life will not be taken until at least six months [16 November 1942] from the date on which he was reported missing."<sup>39</sup> On 16 January 1943 a telegram from the RCAF stated that "advice received the International Red Cross Society quoting German information states that your son Flight Sergeant William Francis Millerd lost his life his body having been recovered... your son is to be considered missing, believed killed."<sup>40</sup> A 7 February 1943 telegram from the RCAF stated that Bill, previously reported missing, believed killed, is now, for official purposes, presumed to have died on 16 May 1942.<sup>41</sup>

Bill's body drifted ashore near Odder, south of Aarhus, Denmark on 12 September 1942. In 1947 the Aarhus chief of police provided a description of the funeral conducted by the German military.<sup>42</sup> On 14 September 1942 the German commander, Major Kruse, came to his office and told him that a body of an English airman had washed up on the shore and was to be buried. The funeral took place the next day at the Aarhus Vestre Kirkegaard (Aarhus West Cemetery) with "military honours in that the German Defence Force was represented by Major Kruse and two other officers as well as a detail with music." Pictures show a 21-piece military band and 30 soldiers parading. The Danes were represented by the chief of police and an officer, sergeant, and private from the Danish army. There was a short ceremony in the cemetery chapel during which the coffin was covered with the "English flag." The coffin was then escorted by the band and soldiers to the burial plot where the German chaplain spoke. Then, "In accordance with the German custom, three shovels full of earth were put over the coffin" by the Padre, the German officers, and, at the request of the German commander, the police chief. Wreaths from the Aarhus City Council, the German army, and the police chief were placed at the grave site. Three volleys fired over the grave concluded the ceremony.<sup>43</sup>

## **Bomber Command casualties**

**B**ill's plane and the three crew members killed were just part of the overwhelming losses in Bomber Command, which had the highest casualty rate of any Allied force during the Second World War, exceeded only by the German U-boat fleet. Bomber Command (including members from the Commonwealth)





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After the crash Bill Millerd's body drifted ashore near Odder, Denmark. He was accorded the honour of a full military funeral. The local German garrison supplied an honour guard as well as a 21-piece band, while the community was represented by the Danish army, the chief of police and the Aarhus city council. This series of photos was taken by E. Torp during Millerd's funeral on 15 September 1942 and supplied to Millerd's family by Erik Bach, the Aarhus cemetery administrator, in July 2006.

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**The Aarhus West Cemetery contains 11 Commonwealth burials: Bill Millerd, nine British aircrew and one British soldier from the Royal Armoured Corps. Millerd’s grave is second from the right. The bronze plaque in front of his grave was placed by his parents in 1951.**

in overcoming fear and adversity almost defies description. No other group of Western Allied combatants, except for their American daylight-bombing counterparts, suffered the same huge casualties, nor faced the mathematical certainty of their own deaths so routinely and so unflinchingly.”<sup>46</sup>

environment, be successfully trained, and carry out their flights. Joining air crew was selective. The minister of national defence for air, Charles “Chubby” Power stated in 1941 that “We have taken the very cream of the youth of Canada...They are the future leaders of this country, and the destiny of Canada will some day be in their hands.”<sup>47</sup> In *The Cream of the Crop, Canadian Aircrew, 1939-1945*, English writes: “in the eyes of Canada’s leaders and of the Canadian public in World War II there was little question that the air force’s finished product was the best the nation had to offer...young, healthy people who have demonstrated the ability to master complex tasks, to adapt to changing situations, and to make decisions under extreme pressure, possess the essential qualities of an aviator, and, by extension,... vital qualities for leadership in our society.”<sup>48</sup>

Of course, as family, we like to think of Bill as one of the “cream of

### The cream of the crop

The tragedy is not only the scale of losses but the quality of those lost. Those admitted to and completing air crew training had to have excellent physical and mental skills to adapt to the flying

lost 12,330 aircraft and 55,573 air crew or Canadians in Bomber Command, either in the RAF or RCAF, out of 40,737 aircrew 10,438 (25.6 percent) were lost on operations.<sup>45</sup> “In light of these figures [low percent who survived an operational tour] and considering the ferocity of the opposition, the scale of British and Commonwealth aircrew achievement



the crop." All through his courses Bill received good comments. After initial training: "outstanding, possible commission material" was noted on his record. After gunnery school: "Very well educated and has a high standard of intelligence, should make a good officer, excellent type."

Some have compared the loss of aircrew in the Second World War to the horrendous loss of officers during the First World War "If the Western Front stripped Britain of some of its most promising poets, composers, and officers, then the Second World War bomber offensive denied the nation thousands of highly trained technicians – wireless operators, engineers, navigators, pilots, men that had so much to offer their nation in peacetime."<sup>49</sup> "The aircrew total [lost], 55,573, has special significance; in the First World War the officer losses of the British Empire included 38,834 killed and this slaughter of the nation's elite was widely regarded as the most tragic and damaging aspect of the war...Yet,...by and large RAF aircrew were exactly the same type of men as the officers of 1914-18..."<sup>50</sup>

### Bill's reaction to losses

Bill was aware of his squadron's losses and the poor odds of completing a tour of duty of 30 operational flights. During his time with the squadron, 314 operational flights (not counting aborted flights and recalls) were flown, resulting in the loss of 43 airmen and 11 aircraft. This was a 3.42 percent loss rate,

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**In 1951 Bill's parents and older sister, Claryca (top photo, standing at left), visited his grave site. A plaque was placed by the family. A service, attended by many from the city, was held and wreaths laid by the family and representatives of the city of Aarhus, the local army garrison, the resistance movement, the Liberty Foundation, the Home Guard, and the Red Cross.**

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equivalent to a meagre 35.2 percent chance of surviving 30 operations.<sup>51</sup> The record of 408 Squadron from its inception in August 1941 up to and including May 1942 is even more chilling. The 699 operational flights resulted in 25.75 losses for a 3.68 percent loss rate, equivalent to only a 32.5 percent chance of surviving 30 flights.<sup>52</sup>

Bill was positive about his role:

I like this life. I can't imagine anything I want to do more, at present than be in the Air Force in this war. Looking back it seems to me that my life has led up to this work. This seems to be the one thing I can do well, and enjoy.<sup>53</sup>

I am doing the job I wanted to do, and I believe it is one of the most important today. Although it isn't at all times a quiet business it is paying big dividends and I know that before long we will break the hun...I have a personal debt to pay for some friends, and if I am able I intend to pay it in full. We are all quite serious about this but it is by no means a complete hardship because life here is rather enjoyable, and we do have a lot of fun.<sup>54</sup>

...Of course there are times when we think this is rather a heavy sort of a job, long hours spent watching a hostile sky, but there is nothing to match the satisfaction of knowing





that I am a member of a British bomber crew, and we are blasting hell out of the hun. The hours of stress and discomfort are soon forgotten, but never the knowledge that at least I am doing something worthwhile. It's a big job and I'm proud to be able to do my share.<sup>55</sup>

But he must have realized the danger he was in:

Of my life which you gave me, this, I think, is my greatest hour... There is nothing that can take from me the exultation of knowing that I am one of those that are smashing the Hun...

There is no sacrifice too great fore I could not live in a world where this horrible power flourished.

Could any one do more than give his life for those he loved? My life, the life you gave me, and so carefully and tenderly nursed will be gladly given if need be, in defence of you and of the Family. How glad I am that I am able to do this...<sup>56</sup>

Four days later Bill left on his last flight.

## Notes

Thank you to Erik Bach, Aarhus cemetery administrator; Howard Copeman, pilot of Bill's plane; Søren Flensted, creator of the *Airwar over Denmark* web site; Geoff Hayes, University of Waterloo; and Lenora Slade, Bill's sister, for their assistance with this paper.

1. Attestation Paper, William Millerd. In a First World War bomber an observer, whose main duty was reconnaissance, was often the only crew member other than the pilot. In the Second World War, however, bomber crew members with specialized training in areas such as navigation and gunnery were needed. Charles Webster and Noble Frankland. *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany 1939-1945*, Vol. I (London: HMSO, 1961) Bill's acceptance for the "observer course" meant he would receive training for a role other than pilot, although he had been recommended for pilot training.
2. This assumption is based on information in a 2 September 1941 report from Canadian Military Headquarters in the United Kingdom <<http://www.duchessofbedford.com/cmhq045.pdf>> and a listing of naval events for April 1941 <<http://www.naval-history.net/xDKWW2-4104-31APR01.htm>>, which list the *Georgic* as sailing when Bill did. Also, in his on-line memoirs, Sergeant Pilot William Aubrey Brew of the Royal Australian Air Force, who trained in Canada, states that he traveled to the UK on the *Georgic* at the same time as Bill did. <<http://brew.clients.ch/BillRAF2.htm>>. The convoy of two troopships, escorted by a battleship and various destroyers, arrived at the River Clyde in Scotland on 19 April 1941. See J.L. Raybould, "MV *Georgic*," <[http://www.norfolkbc.fsnet.co.uk/archive\\_collection/georgic/georgic.htm](http://www.norfolkbc.fsnet.co.uk/archive_collection/georgic/georgic.htm)> for information on the *Georgic*. The ship, which carried 1,600 passengers in peacetime, carried 3,000 as a troopship.

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**Howard Copeman, pilot of Millerd's plane, met with Millerd's nephew, Bill Jr., in November 2007. Howard died on 2 April 2008.**

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3. Letter, Bill Millerd, 25 April 1941.
4. Letter, Bill Millerd, 27 March 1942.
5. Letter, Bill Millerd, 25 April 1941.
6. Letter, Bill Millerd, 18 August 1941.
7. Letter, Bill Millerd, 3 September 1941.
8. The squadron symbol, the Canada Goose; motto, For Freedom; and badge were instituted by the first commanding officer of the squadron, Wing Commander Nelles W. Timmerman, who had travelled to the United Kingdom in 1936 on a cattle boat to join the RAF. John G. Armstrong, "RCAF Identity in Bomber Command: Squadron Names and Sponsors," *Canadian Military History* 8, no. 2 (1999), pp.43-52.
9. In the Second World War the squadron flew the most sorties or individual flights (4,453) and, along with 419 Squadron, suffered the most operational losses of aircraft (129) of Canadian bomber squadrons. Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries* (New York: Viking, 1985). As a result of operations 877 aircrew were killed, missing, or taken prisoner of war; 32 personnel were killed in non-operational losses. Samuel Kostenuk and John Griffin, *RCAF Squadron Histories and Aircraft 1924-1968* (Toronto: Samuel Stevens Hakkert, 1977). The 408 "Goose" Squadron Association website states that 170 aircraft were lost in operations and training and that 933 were killed, missing, or taken prisoner of war. The Book of Remembrance lists 674 as killed in the war <<http://www.forfreedom.ca/>>. The higher loss numbers likely include both operational and non-operational losses.
10. J.P.D. Dunbabin, "British Rearmament in the 1930s: A Chronology and Review." *The Historical Journal* XVIII, no. 3 (1975), pp.587-609; Maarten L. Pereboom, *Democracies at the turning point: Britain, France, and the end of the postwar order, 1928-1933* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995); M.M. Postan, *British War Production* (London: H.M.S.O., 1975).



11. Chaz. Bowyer, *Hampden Special* (London: Ian Allan Ltd., 1978); Hugh A. Halliday, "Canada and the Hampden." *CAHS: The Journal of the Canadian Aviation Historical Society* 36, no.1 (1998), pp.22-32; J. Brian Johnson and H. I. Cozens, *Bombers: The Weapons of Total War* (London: Thames Methuen, 1984); Harry Moyle, *The Hampden File* (Tonbridge, Kent, UK: Air-Britain, 1989).
12. David L. Bashow, *No Prouder Place, Canadians and the Bomber Command Experience, 1939-1945* (St. Catherines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing, 2005).
13. Mark Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars, A New History of Bomber Command in World War II* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2001), p.14.
14. W.J. Lewis, "Hampden Ops with 44 Squadron RAF." *CAHS: The Journal of the Canadian Aviation Historical Society* 44, no.4 (Winter 2006), pp.124-133, 156-158. Lewis also comments that, with was no washroom facilities on the aircraft, crew members had to "carry a bottle."
15. Mark Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p.14.
16. Lewis, "Hampden Ops," p.128, p.156. Lewis's positive assessment of the durability of the aircraft was likely influenced by his experience in an operational flight over Antwerp after which 138 holes were found to have been shot in his plane.
17. Halliday, "Canada and the Hampden," p.25.
18. Arthur Harris, the head of Bomber Command for most of the war, sponsored the development of a magnetic sea mine to be dropped from aircraft while serving in the British Air Ministry before the war. Denis Richards, *The Hardest Victory, RAF Bomber Command in the Second World War* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1994).
19. Reports on the speed and height at which mines were to be dropped vary. Lewis, who flew over 30 missions in Hampdens, states that mines were to be dropped at a speed of less than 120 miles an hour and a height of 100 feet or lower. Halliday states mine laying was done at 500 feet. Later, when heavy bombers were used for mine laying, mines were dropped from 10,000 feet.
20. Spencer Dunmore and William Carter, *Reap the Whirlwind, The Untold Story of 6 Group, Canada's Bomber Force of World War II* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991); Brereton Greenhous, Stephen J. Harris, William C. Johnston, and William G. P. Rawling. *The Crucible of War, 1939-1945, The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force*. Vol. III (Toronto: University of Toronto Press and Department of National Defence, Canadian Government Publishing Centre, 1994); Moyle, *The Hampden File*.
21. Richards, *The Hardest Victory*, p.181.
22. Greenhous, et al., *The Crucible of War*; Moyle, *The Hampden File*; Richards, *The Hardest Victory*; Middlebrook and Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries*.
23. Denis Richards and Hilary St. George Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-1945*. Vol. 2 (London: H.M.S.O, 1975).
24. Bashow, *No Prouder Place*; Dan McCaffrey, *Battlefields in the Air, Canadians in the Allied Bomber Command* (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1995); Richards, *The Hardest Victory*; John Terraine, *The Right of the Line, The Royal Air Force in the European War 1939-1945* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985); Charles Webster and Noble Frankland. *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany 1939-1945*.
25. Moyle, *The Hampden File*, p.29.
26. Greenhous, et al., *The Crucible of War*; Terraine, *The Right of the Line*.
27. Leslie Roberts, *There Shall be Wings, A History of the Royal Canadian Air Force* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1959), p.170.
28. Richards and Saunders, *Royal Air Force* vol. 2, p.99.
29. Information on Bill's time with 408 Squadron comes from the squadron's Operations Record Book.
30. Extract from "Toronto newspaper", April 1942, on <[www.torontoaircrew.com](http://www.torontoaircrew.com)>
31. Howard Copeman, 1995 letter to Millerd family.
32. *Toronto Star*, 11 November 2007.
33. Ibid.
34. Translated by Søren Flensted, 22 July 2006.
35. Over 8,000 Americans joined the RCAF before Pearl Harbor and the United States declaring war on Germany. Many transferred to the US armed forces after Pearl Harbor but over 4,000 completed their service with the RCAF. Robert Hurst, "British Commonwealth Air Training Plan," <<http://www.rcf.com/archives/archivesfeatures/bcatp>>.
36. Moyle, *The Hampden File*; Søren C.Flensted, "Hampden I crashed in the sea south of Samsø 16/5-1942," *Airwar Over Denmark* <<http://www.flensted.eu.com/194222.shtml>>.
37. Søren C.Flensted, "Hampden I crashed in the sea south of Samsø 16/5-1942"; Commonwealth War Graves Commission.
38. Commanding officer, 408 (RCAF) Squadron to Millerd family, 18 May 1941.
39. RCAF letter to Millerd family, 16 November 1942.
40. RCAF telegram to Millerd family, 16 January 1943.
41. RCAF telegram to Millerd family, 7 February 1943.
42. Denmark was invaded by German in April 1940 and, facing overwhelming force, quickly capitulated. Initially Germany left the Danes to run their own internal affairs, within limits. Danish authorities, including the police and army, continued to function. In 1943, however, with the growth of a resistance movement and strikes occurring, Germany took over complete administration of the country. W. Glyn Jones, *Denmark, A Modern History* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).
43. Letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Danish consulate in Vancouver, 28 March 1947.
44. At that time the usual length of a first operational tour was 200 flying hours, equivalent to 30 operational trips. After six months of training or staff work this was to be followed by another operational tour of the same length. At the loss rate of early 1942 the probability of surviving two tours was only 12.4 percent. In May 1943 tour lengths were officially set at 30 operational missions, followed by a six month break and then 20 more operational missions. An aborted missions or recall did not count as a completed operational mission. Bashow, *No Prouder Place*.
45. Information on losses is from David Bashow. "The Balance Sheet: The Costs and Gains of the Bombing Campaign." *Canadian Military History* 15, no.3 & 4 (2006), pp.43-70; Middlebrook and Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries*; and Mike Varley, Aspects of the Combined British and American Air Offensive Against Germany 1939 to 1945, Including an Assessment of RAF Bomber Command and the 8th and 9th US Army Air Forces' Casualties and Losses in World War II <<http://homepage.ntworld.com/img/varley/StrategicAirOffensive.pdf>>.
46. Mark K. Wells, *Courage and Air Warfare, The Allied Aircrew Experience in the Second World War* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), pp.115, 210.
47. Leslie Roberts, *There Shall be Wings, A History of the Royal Canadian Air Force* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1959), pp.132-3.
48. English, *The Cream of the Crop*, p.147.
49. Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p.1.
50. Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, p.682.
51. This is close to the overall Bomber Command loss rate during this period, 3.65 percent from 22 February to 30 May 1942. Middlebrook and Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries*.
52. This information is derived from 408 Squadron, *Operations Record Book*. Fractional losses occur when one or more crew members survive a crashed, damaged, or downed aircraft.
53. William Millerd, letter to father, 5 March 1942.
54. William Millerd, letter to mother, 24 April 1942. This letter was before departing on a mission that night, and was received by his mother on 20 May 1942, after she had received notice that he was missing.
55. William Millerd, 25 April 1942, written just after he returned from an operational mission, the bombing of Rostock, Germany.
56. William Millerd, letter to mother, 11 May 1942.

Frank Millerd, born in Vancouver, is a professor emeritus at Wilfrid Laurier University. He was with the Department of Economics, teaching and undertaking research primarily in the area of natural resource economics.

Dear Roger,

You have wondered about my involvement with the Hendershot brothers, whose letters, donated to the War Museum by the family, formed the basis of the excellent article by Eric Brown and Tim Cook, "The Hendershot Brothers in the Great War" (Spring 2009 issue).

I first met Warren Hendershot in the late 1950s when I was courting his niece, Elizabeth Haslam, when we were high school students in the adjacent towns of Kingsville and Harrow, Ontario. Liz's mother, Kathleen Hendershot Haslam, was Warren's sister, the youngest and the only girl in a family of six children. Liz's uncle Warren owned a flourishing Steadman's "dime" store (goods offered mostly for 5 cents to a dollar) in Harrow, and was an outgoing man with a twinkle in his eye who liked a good yarn. Liz told me that Warren had been a fighter pilot in the First World War and that his brother, Charles, had been killed in that war.

In 1963 I married into the family, and continued to know Warren casually until his death in 1983. I knew him as the most liberal and genial of the Hendershot clan, a bit more worldly than his sibs, but underneath a small-town storekeeper and a family man, as his father had been before him. When I asked him about his war experiences, he would shrug them off without much elaboration. Kathleen, my mother-in-law, would be more forthcoming, saying that Charles had died in a flying accident and that Warren had shot down several German planes. Their mother had kept Warren's and Charles's letters home during the war, and they had passed on to Kathleen. On first reading I realized that the letters were of historical value and urged Kathleen to be careful to preserve them. She would have anyway, for the letters were her one link to her dead brother, Charles.

When Kathleen, by then the last of her family, moved into a retirement home in 2002, Liz and I persuaded her that it would be a good idea to give the originals of the family letters to the Canadian War Museum. I had been encouraged to do this by my friend Jack



Granatstein, whose over-all service to the Museum, to Canadian military history, and for that matter to Canada, is hard to overpraise. Without Jack's enthusiasm and facilitation, and his obvious revivification of the War Museum as a keen and active collector, we might have let the matter slide indefinitely. We were also conscious of the modest but reasonably significant income tax deduction Kathleen would be able to claim when the papers were donated and appraised, an entirely appropriate way of recognizing gifts of value to our country's history.

This is how the Hendershot letters went to the War Museum and became the basis of the Brown/Cook article. About the same time as our donation, and partly through Liz's urging, Warren Hendershot's family also gave documents in their possession to the Museum, including the family photo album.

For years I had toyed with the idea of writing about the Hendershot brothers in the Great War, but never got around to it. Just as well, because Cook and Brown, as professional historians of the war, did a far more thorough and complete job than I would have of setting Warren and Charles's experiences as Canadians in

the Royal Flying Corps in perspective. What a good use of archival material. (I only wish we had more material to give apropos of my wife's family. As the family historian-in-law I am still trying to learn why Liz's father, Bob Haslam, born on Prince Edward Island in 1898, did not serve in the war; unfortunately there is a huge gap for those years in his mother's diaries, which we also inherited and have donated to the Public Archives of Prince Edward Island; Liz thinks Bob's mother wouldn't let him go).

Cook and Brown several times mention that young Warren Hendershot had been restless in his job behind a counter in his father's store in Kingsville, and that he saw the war as a way of moving into a bigger world. In fact Warren married his high school sweetheart and spent most of the rest of his life behind a counter in Harrow, eight miles down the road from Kingsville. He seldom reminisced about the wars, and then only to stress the funny outcomes, such as when he crash-landed in a tree. Kathleen remembered that Warren had had nightmares about the war for several years afterwards. He did keep in touch with many of his fellow flyers.

Kathleen, the beautiful little girl in the picture you published of the Hendershot children, also lived in Harrow. When she died in 2008 in her 99th year, it was clear that about the only effect the Great War had had on her had been to claim one of her brothers' lives – to the end of her life she would tell us that she missed Charles. Even Warren, who had served King and country in both wars, with dedication and a kind of grim heroism, did not live a life markedly different from his father's. He and Charles had been among the youth from the mariposas of Ontario, who had gone off to fight when they were told their country needed them. Having done their duty, the survivors then lived out peaceful and often ordinary lives in the little towns that flourished in the Canadian sunshine.

Michael Bliss  
Professor Emeritus,  
University of Toronto