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FEATURE

# A Halifax

## The Story of MZ 899

DAVID J. BERCUSON

*Abstract: We know a great deal about the Royal Air Force's (RAF)'s bomber offensive. There is also an extensive library of autobiographies, memoirs and other primary sources telling the personal stories of a great many aircrew, some famous—such as Guy Gibson who led the Dam Busters Raid of 1943—and others not so famous—such as Howard Hewer's In For a Penny, In for a Pound, the story of a young man who flew in Nos. 148 and 218 Squadrons of the RAF. But few of those works have focused on the aircrew of individual aircraft because of the dearth of primary source material available to tell their stories. This is the saga of one such crew who flew a Halifax Mark III with No. 433 Squadron, Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and who did not survive the war. The heart of this story is based on the personnel records of these men, held at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa.*

THE OLD Royal Air Force/Royal Canadian Air Force bomber base at Skipton-on-Swale lies to the left as one drives north from Skipton on the A167 road about four miles west of the town of Thirsk. Today, Skipton is a small city of roughly 15,000 people in north Yorkshire with many historical sites and attractions visited by tourists in the summer. In the town is a small memorial commemorating a No. 433 Squadron, RCAF Halifax which crashed in the town in 1944 while trying to reach its base, killing two crew members and a child. The memorial plaque reads: “This cairn, in the shade of a Canadian maple tree, is erected to honour all those who served with the RCAF Six group squadrons at Skipton on Swale during WWII, and the many civilians who supported them. May



Abandoned Nissen huts at the site of RAF Skipton-on-Swale. [Image courtesy of [www.lancashireatwar.co.uk](http://www.lancashireatwar.co.uk)]

their enterprise, courage and devotion to duty be remembered and serve as an inspiration to all.”<sup>1</sup>

The base from which they flew is now mostly gone, converted to farmland for crops and poultry. But there are a few reminders of what Skipton-on-Swale was when it was a bustling bomber base in 1944. The ruins of the old control tower sit not far from the remnants of the three main runways, in the shape of a triangle, that can still be seen on satellite photos. Here and there stands an old Nissen hut or two, a barracks, an old concrete shed and even an odd bit of paved runway, or perimeter track, that launched so many bombers on so many operations over Europe some eighty years ago. Originally scratched out of the rich soil of north Yorkshire in 1941 with two grass runways, one 1,400 yards long and the other 1,100 yards long, it was then too small to host the growing fleet of heavy four engine bombers coming into RAF service by the end of 1941. So the base was completely redesigned and rebuilt with longer concrete runways, dispersal areas and a winding perimeter track that the Halifax, and later Lancaster, bombers would follow as they left their hard stands and wound their way to the head of the main runway. Norma Claudet, who was an

<sup>1</sup> “Skipton-on-Swale Memorial,” 433 Squadron (RCAF) 6 Group Skipton-on-Swale, accessed 6 October 2021, [http://thewhpfamily.com/wwout2/pages/Skipton%20on%20Swale%20Memorial\\_jpg.html](http://thewhpfamily.com/wwout2/pages/Skipton%20on%20Swale%20Memorial_jpg.html).

RAF driver at Skipton, would later describe the base this way: “The living quarters at Skipton on Swale were of a temporary nature and consisted mostly of Nissan huts which were very cold in winter and extremely hot in the summer. At Christmas time we would decorate our huts with silver garlands made from the ‘window’ strips, cleverly folded aluminum foil strips, which the Lancaster bombers used for dropping over the target as an Anti-Radar device.” Claudet was one of the drivers who drove the crews from pre-flight briefings to their bombers. She would later remember: “They were always very quiet before take-off but their mood changed completely when they returned and landed.”<sup>2</sup>

As they reached the head of the runway the bombers stood—engines running, control surfaces set for take-off—as they waited for a signal from an Aldis lamp from a small hut beside the runway. That was their sign to power up their engines and roll down the concrete until wings, air and engines lifted the heavy bombers into the crowded skies over Yorkshire and another operation could begin.

On the evening of 16 August 1944, one of those aircraft was a Halifax Mark III carrying the squadron letters BM painted on the side before the RAF roundel with the letter D after the roundel. In smaller characters, just before the tail, was the designation “MZ 899.” BM were the letters assigned to No. 433 Squadron RCAF, whose symbol was a porcupine. All RCAF bomber squadrons were attached to a geographic location in Canada which adopted or sponsored the squadron; for example, No. 405 City of Vancouver squadron and No. 434 Bluenose squadron. No. 433 was sponsored by the town of Timmins in northern Ontario. Known for the prickly porcupines which were so abundant in the area, the squadron motto was “Qui S’y Frotte, S’y Pique (Who opposes it gets hurt).” No. 433 came into being at Skipton-on-Swale on 25 September 1943 under the command of Wing Commander Clive B. Sinton, an Englishman who had served in the Royal Navy but had joined the RCAF on the outbreak of war. No. 433 was part of No. 6 Group (RCAF) which

<sup>2</sup> Norma Catherine Claudet, “With the Canadians,” WW2 People’s War: An Archive of World War Two memories – written by the public, gathered by the BBC, 26 June 2005, accessed 12 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/64/a4278864.shtml>.



Norma Claudet on another 433 Squadron bomber, Halifax MZ807 "Corkscrew Charlie." Savard's crew also flew this aircraft. [BBC WW2 People's War, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/82/a8124482.shtml>]



A reproduction of Corkscrew Charlie's nose art by Clarence Simonsen. [Photo courtesy of Bomber Command Museum of Canada]

encompassed all RCAF bomber squadrons in the UK and had been stood up on 1 January 1943.<sup>3</sup>

MZ 899 was a new aircraft. Powered by Bristol Hercules XVI radial engines, unlike earlier Halifax models that had used the ubiquitous Rolls Royce Merlin engines, this model of the Halifax performed much better than earlier Mark II and Mark V models.<sup>4</sup> Built by English Electric, the bomber had been turned over to No. 433 Squadron on 3 August 1944.<sup>5</sup> It was rare in Bomber Command for a single crew to use the same aircraft on every operation. Although some crews emblazoned “nose art” on the left front of a bomber’s fuselage, most aircraft were used by different crews on different operations. On 16 August, MZ 899 was flown by Sergeant (Sgt.) Joseph G. M. Savard; the evening before it had been flown by Flying Officer P. H. Holmes and his crew.<sup>6</sup>

All fifteen aircraft of No. 433 squadron winding their way along the perimeter track were to fly to Kiel that evening, but instead of bombing the port (which was assigned to Bomber Command’s main force) MZ 899 and the other squadron aircraft were assigned to “gardening” or minelaying operations in the Bay of Kiel.<sup>7</sup> Kiel was a key port on the Baltic, the site of several shipyards and U-boat construction facilities as well as the main port for ships passing to and from the Kiel Canal that connected the Baltic with the North Sea. The first of the aircraft, MX 268 was to take off at 2115 hrs. The other aircraft would follow at about five-minute intervals. One by one, the Halifaxes trundled forward on the perimeter track to the head of the main runway where they awaited the signal to advance throttles, build up speed and slowly lift off into the late evening sky. The first aircraft began to roll a little early at 2105 hrs, the flight engineer calling off the gathering airspeed until the pilot lifted the

<sup>3</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel J. S. R. Bastien, *433 Squadron History* (Belleville ON: Hanger Bookshelf, 1985), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Gunston, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Combat Aircraft of World War II* (New York: Bookthrift Publications, 1978), 104-05.

<sup>5</sup> Halifax Mark III MZ 899, Form 78 Aircraft Movement Card, c.1944, Bomber Command History, accessed 12 October 2021, <http://lancasterbombersinfo.ipage.com/Data/Form-78s/Halifax/MZ855-MZ927/mobile/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Royal Canadian Air Force Operations Record Book [OPR], No. 433 (RCAF) Squadron, 15 August 1944, RG 24 E 7, reel C-12308, Library and Archives Canada [LAC], [https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac\\_reel\\_c12308](https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_c12308). All No. 433 Squadron operations are listed by day in this source.

<sup>7</sup> OPR, No. 433 (RCAF) Squadron, 16 August 1944, RG 24 E 7, reel C-12308, LAC.



bomber off the runway and into the blue sky; the sun was still up at 2100 hrs, English double summer time.

These aircraft did not carry bombs, but aerial mines. An aircraft mine was cylindrical shaped, approximately seventeen inches in diameter and nine feet long including the wood or metal fairing. The weight averaged 1,500 lbs (680 kg) of which 750 lbs (340 kg) were explosive (amatol or minol). A small parachute attached at the end facilitated vertical entry into the water and the nose fairing prevented deflection during its flight through the air, disintegrating upon impact with the water. Two devices prevented accidental arming of the mine while in transport: a safety fork prevented the closing of the arming switch while aboard the aircraft and manual removal of the fork was optional just prior to jettisoning the mine from the aircraft.<sup>8</sup> Each mine was capable of destroying a single large ship.<sup>9</sup> During August 1944, the mining effort was greatly increased; in the words of the RAF Air Historical Branch narrative: “Minelaying in the Baltic was re-opened on a large scale and nearly 200 mines were laid off Kiel... Almost half these Baltic mines were planted on the night of 16/17 August.”<sup>10</sup> Four No. 6 Group squadrons—Nos. 433, 424, 427 and 429—figured prominently in the mining operations.

On the afternoon of 16 August, the crews of No. 433 and the other mine laying squadrons were told in their pre-flight briefing: “The Baltic gardening tonight is planned with the intention of completely dislocating the enemy’s seaborne military traffic to the Russian front and again disrupting the supply of raw materials from Scandinavia.”<sup>11</sup> This was in reference to the traffic of both iron ore and ball bearings from Sweden, most of which entered Germany through the Port of Kiel. The specific area that was assigned to

<sup>8</sup> “Gardening with Bomber Command,” RCAF 434 Squadron 1943-1945, accessed 12 October 2021, <http://www.rcaf434squadron.com/gardening/>.

<sup>9</sup> Martin W. Bowman, *Bomber Command: Reflections of War*, Volume 4: *Battles with the Nachtjagd, 30/31 March-September 1944* (Barnsley UK: Pen and Sword Books, 2013), 196-97.

<sup>10</sup> Great Britain, Air Ministry, Air Historical Branch, *The RAF in Maritime War*, Volume V: *The Atlantic and Home Waters, The Victorious Phase, June 1944-May 1945* (n.p.: 1947), 130.

<sup>11</sup> Carsten Petersen, *Three Nights in August 1944*, 21, accessed 12 October 2021, [http://www.luftkrig1939-45.dk/pdf/August\\_1944/001.pdf](http://www.luftkrig1939-45.dk/pdf/August_1944/001.pdf). This source is in Danish; a Google Translate version has been used.

MZ 899 was referred to as “Young Forget-me-not,” which lay at the entrance to the Kiel Canal.<sup>12</sup>

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MZ 899 was the third aircraft lined up for take-off. Inside the fully loaded bomber was a crew of seven men. The pilot was Sgt. Joseph Georges Marcel Savard. He sat in the left-hand seat of the bomber’s cockpit. Savard was born in St. Catharines, Ontario, on 22 August 1924. He moved to Montreal with his family when he was nine years old. He attended Catholic school in Montreal, completing his junior matriculation at the Roman Catholic English-speaking Darcy McGee High School in 1942. He was fluent in both French and English. Well built at 5’8”, he played baseball, hockey and golf and loved skiing and camping. He had a brother in the RCAF and he himself joined on 29 July 1942. He showed an aptitude for flying and was trained as a pilot, beginning in Canada and continuing in the UK after he arrived on 16 October 1943. He wanted to be a fighter pilot but he was assigned to fly bombers.<sup>13</sup>

Early in his recruitment progress, Savard impressed his medical officer as a “Cheerful young fellow...wiry and athletic. Good motivation...Should do very well.” Indeed, in his single engine training he was assessed as a “first class youngster that will [*sic*] develop into a top notch aircrew” but at Elementary Flying Training School in Canada, one instructor noted that Savard was “weak in recovery in spins.” Nevertheless, he was kept on as a pilot trainee, completing Service Flying Training School in September 1943 and shipping out for the UK the month after. There he progressed to No. 14 Advanced Flying Unit where he was evaluated as “a little underconfident but should lose this with more experience. Has been well disciplined throughout the course.” Savard was eager enough but flying a Wellington twin engine bomber in training in April 1944, he overshot the runway and experienced engine failure due to “inexperience.”<sup>14</sup> Most Canadian air crew were processed through No. 22 Operational Training Unit (OTU) (RAF Wellesbourne Mountford, Warwickshire) where they were thrown together in a large reception

<sup>12</sup> Petersen, *Three Nights in August 1944*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Pilot Officer Joseph Georges Marcel Savard personnel file, RG 24, vol. 28590, LAC.

<sup>14</sup> Savard personnel file, LAC.



centre and sorted themselves into crews. This is where Savard and the other five Canadians who crewed MZ 899 came together.<sup>15</sup> Sgt. George Lilley, from the RAF Reserve, joined them toward the end of June.<sup>16</sup> At the end of May 1944, Savard completed training at the OTU. On mustering out, he was judged “quite keen and adaptable” but was not recommended for a commission. He did the traditional first two operations as second pilot or “Second Dickie” on 18 July; one in the morning to Caen, Normandy, the other in the evening to Wesseling, on the Rhine, in Germany. But on his first flight as an aircraft commander on 21 July 1944, his Halifax swung three times on the take-off run; Savard managed to straighten the aircraft twice but lost control on the third swerve, running off the runway and into “several obstructions” before coming to a stop. The investigating officer attributed the accident to “over correction...aggravated by a slight crosswind from the starboard.”<sup>17</sup> At just nineteen years of age, Sgt. Savard was one of the youngest pilots in Bomber Command.

Sitting next to him on a jump seat was Flight Engineer Sgt. George Henry Lilley, RAF Reserve. He was the second youngest of the crew at age twenty.<sup>18</sup> At that point in the war, almost all flight engineers on RCAF Halifax or Lancaster bombers were RAF because very few flight engineers were being trained in Canada. After take-off, Lilley would climb down from the cockpit to sit in front of his large instrument panel, facing aft, where he would monitor the engines and shift fuel from one tank to another as the aircraft consumed its 100 Octane Aviation Gas while droning on towards the target. In effect, Savard flew the plane, but Lilley was responsible for the engines and other systems.

Lying flat in the Perspex nose of the bomber was Flying Officer Joseph Louis Baillargeon. He had a single .303 calibre Browning machine gun sticking out through the Perspex in front of him.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Murray Peden, *A Thousand Shall Fall: The True Story of a Canadian Bomber Pilot in World War Two* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1988), 166-71. Peden describes the “crewing up” process.

<sup>16</sup> Joe Baillargeon to Mrs. Roy English, 21 June 1944. All letters from the Baillargeon family are courtesy of Tiffany Brown.

<sup>17</sup> Savard personnel file, LAC.

<sup>18</sup> “Sergeant George Henry Lilley (1571830) of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve,” Royal Air Force Commands, accessed 12 October 2021, <http://www.rafcommands.com/database/wardead/details.php?qnum=27003>.

<sup>19</sup> Flight Lieutenant Joseph Louis Baillargeon personnel file, RG 24, vol. 24782, LAC.

Behind him and sitting at a small table underneath Savard was Warrant Officer Bernard Bercuson. He was the Wireless Operator/Air Gunner (WAG) whose main responsibility was to work the large radio on the desk in front of him, communicating via Morse Code with the base on the outward leg of the mission, listening to messages from Skipton-on-Swale and giving the aircraft's position while flying back to England. Bercuson was also trained as an air gunner to man one or more of the bomber's .303 Browning machine guns in the event one of the gunners was killed or wounded.<sup>20</sup>

Sitting behind the pilot was Flying Officer Henry Grimble, the navigator whose task was at least as difficult as that of Savard. On night missions, the bomber stream flew toward the target in a large gaggle of aircraft that was many miles long and several miles thick. On very dark nights, a crew often never saw another aircraft even though many hundred were flying in the bomber stream. Grimble had to determine just where the bomber was at any given moment using electronic assistance devices such as GEE or Oboe and, when necessary, he might determine the aircraft's position by taking star shots through the Perspex dome over his position. Grimble also had to calculate airspeed, drift, wind velocity and other aerodynamic factors.<sup>21</sup> Several metres behind Grimble was Sgt. Maurice Elmer Fairall. He was the mid-upper gunner who stood on a folding platform with head and shoulders inside a Perspex turret. He manned a pair of Browning .303 machine guns.<sup>22</sup>

In the tail turret, with its four .303 machine guns, was Sgt. Alfred Wallace Jack Drennan.<sup>23</sup> His job was to keep careful watch to the rear of the aircraft to detect enemy night fighters approaching in the dark. If he detected starlight bouncing off whirling propellers or saw a slight shadow, his first job was to yell into the intercom "corkscrew" left or right so that Savard would immediately push the yoke forward in a screaming dive to left or right followed by an abrupt climb in the opposite direction. This gave the bomber more of a chance against a predator than firing his four .303 calibre pea shooters which barely had the range or the hitting power to knock down night fighters. Commander of Bomber Command Air Vice Marshal Arthur Harris

<sup>20</sup> Pilot Officer Bernard Bercuson personnel file, RG 24, vol. 24842, LAC.

<sup>21</sup> Flying Officer Henry Grimble personnel file, RG 24, vol. 27649, LAC.

<sup>22</sup> Pilot Officer Maurice Elmer Fairall personnel file, RG 24, vol. 27481, LAC.

<sup>23</sup> Pilot Officer Alfred Wallace Jack Drennan personnel file, RG 24, vol. 27413, LAC.

had long disparaged both the design of the rear turret, which he rightly believed did not give his rear gunners enough of a downward view, and the .303 machine guns, which he considered useless. In fact, some Bomber Command aircraft had new rear turrets installed that mounted two Browning .50 caliber machine guns, such as those mounted on American bombers.<sup>24</sup>



When Savard saw the green light from the Aldis lamp, he and Lilley began the take-off run. Flaps set, trim tabs positioned, engines running smoothly, Lilley moved the throttles forward as Savard steered the aircraft down the long runway, lifted MZ 899 gingerly off the runway and began a slow climbing turn to the east. As the bomber ascended over Yorkshire, the darkening skies to the east hinted at the night ahead. Soon Savard switched off the landing lights and as the Halifax climbed, the crew were told to put on their oxygen masks. Higher and higher they flew in a slight southeasterly direction until one by one the other bombers were swallowed up by the deepening darkness. An astounding 954 aircraft were on the move across the North Sea that night: 461 Lancasters to bomb Stettin on the German Baltic coast; 348 Lancasters, Halifaxes and Mosquitos to bomb Kiel; a diversionary force of 145 Mosquitos, Halifaxes and Lancasters to lay mines in the Baltic, Kiel Harbour and other locations; and a small force of Mosquitos to attack Berlin as a diversion. A Pathfinder squadron was to cross Jutland north of Kiel, then swing almost due south to arrive at Kiel before the main force.<sup>25</sup>

The flight to and from the target was to take a bit more than five hours. Savard's job was both simple and demanding. Simple because for the first part of the trip his navigator guided him where to go and his job was to sit with his hands on the yoke and point the bomber in the right direction, keeping to the right course.

<sup>24</sup> Roy Irons, *The Relentless Offensive: War and Bomber Command 1939-1945* (Barnsley UK: Pen and Sword Books, 2009), Chapter 5, location 1531, Kindle edition.

<sup>25</sup> Bomber Command, Operational Research Section, Final Reports on Operations, Night Raids, Report No. 691, "Night Operations 16/17 Aug 1944," AIR 14/3412, The National Archives (UK). Mission descriptions from Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries: An Operational Reference Book, 1939-1945* (Leicester: Midland Publishing, 1995), 569.



Pilot Officer Joseph Savard (left) and Flight Officer Henry Grimball. [Savard and Grimball personnel files, Library and Archives Canada]

Demanding because the air around MZ 899 was being churned up by hundreds of unseen aircraft and Savard had to control his bomber without power-assisted equipment of any kind. His eyes were constantly on the instruments in front of him to ensure he was keeping on course and at the right height.

Navigator Henry Grimble was busy all the way to the target. On a mission like this it was his responsibility to track the progress of their aircraft as they crossed the North Sea. “Line of sight” beacons in the UK were soon out of reach and Grimble had to figure out the bomber’s position by a combination of dead reckoning and wind drift, occasionally checked by a star shot. Grimble was 5’10” tall, weighed 141 pounds and wore glasses. He was born 3 July 1924 in Sturgeon Creek, Manitoba, making him only twenty years of age. Educated in Winnipeg at Woodhaven School and St. Paul’s College, he had joined the army reserves—the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles—just two weeks after his eighteenth birthday. At the time he was employed as a bank clerk at a Royal Bank of Canada branch. He transferred to the air force on 12 October 1942. One of his instructors assessed his “ground and air work both well above average.” He was “quick to learn and a willing student.” Another evaluated him as a “quiet type, unattracted to sports,” who liked reading. He was thought to be “impressionable” but “fairly stable emotionally.” His

records noted that he “obtained a good deal of encouragement from [his] father who was a vet from [the] last war.”<sup>26</sup>

Behind Grimble, in his small radio compartment, was Bernard Bercuson. Born in Calgary of immigrant parents on 2 July 1916, he was the old man of the crew. Bercuson had attended Western Canada High School and joined the Second Battalion of the Calgary Highlanders on the outbreak of war. At the time he was working as a stenographer in an oilfield machine shop in Royalties, a small hamlet in the oil fields southwest of Calgary. He was the only one in Savard’s crew who was married. He and his wife Adele, a girl from Regina, had married in Montreal on 4 June 1942 because his Calgary parents had temporarily moved to Montreal after his dad’s menswear shop went bankrupt in the Great Depression. Adele was a pretty girl with a twin sister. She stayed with her parents in Regina when Bernard went overseas. One of his instructors wrote of him: “Intelligent, sedentary Hebrew. Seems composed but does not impress as having much drive. Doubtful Pilot.” Another instructor thought of him as “most cooperative...rather shy and quiet and has a speech hesitation indicating he might be nervous.” His wireless instructor believed him to be an “above average W/op. [wireless operator] who has worked extremely hard during his course at this unit...Is suitable for early recommendation for a commission.”<sup>27</sup>

Behind and down from Savard sat Sergeant George Henry Lilley, twenty years old, the flight engineer. Born on 4 May 1924, Lilley came from Newcastle, North Shields, Northumberland. His occupation at the time of enlistment was listed as “foreman,” though it is hard to see how one so young could have had such responsibility. Lilley was short at 5’7” with gray eyes and a dark complexion. He joined the RAF Reserve on 6 August 1942 and went before a number of candidate selection boards. He was twice categorised as “not recommended for aircrew” in May and August 1942. But in July 1943, he was chosen for flight engineer training. Obviously, the heavy casualties in Bomber Command were causing selection boards to review some of their earlier decisions. In February 1944 he began final training and was assigned to No. 433 Squadron on 14 July 1944, completing the Savard crew.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Grimble personnel file, LAC.

<sup>27</sup> Bercuson personnel file, LAC.

<sup>28</sup> Sergeant G. H. Lilley, RAF Record of Service, Air Historical Branch, Royal Air Force, provided by Sebastien Cox, Air Historical Branch, UK Ministry of Defence.



Sergeant George Lilley (left) and Pilot Officer Maurice Fairall. [Lilley and Fairall personnel files, Library and Archives Canada]

Farther back in the middle of the fuselage was the mid-upper turret where gunner sergeant Maurice Elmer Fairall stood peering into the dark. Born in Toronto on 8 October 1920, Fairall had worked as a shipper for Canadian Pacific Railway before enlisting in the air force on 10 October 1941. He had completed three years of high school in Toronto. Fair haired with a “medium athletic build,” he played for a local hockey team, enjoyed music and collected stamps. On joining the RCAF, one of the recruitment officers described him as “neatly dressed, quick, alert, keen to fly, industrious, sincere, dependable” and thought Fairall would “do well on course” but his medical officer thought less of him: “a trifle slow mentally....didn’t have what it takes...alertness questionable.” After completing his initial training in Canada, Fairall embarked for the UK on 5 March 1944 and arrived on 14 March. He was assigned to an operational training unit on 11 June 1944 where he and the other Savard crew members joined up.<sup>29</sup>

Back in the tail of the aircraft sat Sgt. Alfred Wallace Jack Drennan, peering intently into the dark. Between him and the rest of the crew were two doors that swung out at the back of the turret. His parachute rested in a small open container just before the doors. Like the rest of the crew, he did not wear his parachute in the plane

<sup>29</sup> Fairall personnel file, LAC.





Pilot Officer Alfred Drennan (left) and Flight Officer Joseph Baillargeon. [Drennan and Baillargeon personnel files, Library and Archives Canada]

but was expected to grab it and put it on if the bomber was mortally damaged. Some gunners removed the flat plexiglass sheet at the rear of the turret, despite the extreme cold they were exposed to, to see better out at night. He looked for the flash of starlight on whirling propellers, flame from an unshielded exhaust, any sign of a night fighter sidling underneath the bomber.

Born in Windsor, Ontario on 6 September 1921, Drennan had two brothers and three sisters. He was “tall, lean [and] wiry,” in the words of his medical officer, at 5’11  $\frac{3}{4}$ ”, weighing 145 pounds. A second medical officer described him as “good build. Alert. Fair Intellect... Good appearance and personality.” He enlisted on 22 December 1942. After completing grade school, he went to work as a machinist at the Chrysler plant. On completion of gunnery school, his commanding officer noted that Drennan “requires more experience but he has proved himself to be capable & certainly uses initiative. A steady and reliable type” and recommended him for a commission.<sup>30</sup>

In the nose of the aircraft, down from the cockpit, was Sgt. Joseph Louis Baillargeon from Port Arthur, Ontario, born 31 October 1917 in Gainsborough, Saskatchewan. Of average height and build, and sporting the wisp of a moustache, Baillargeon graduated with

<sup>30</sup> Drennan personnel file, LAC.

a junior matriculation from high school in Delisle, Saskatchewan in 1937 and entered the labour force, eventually working for Canadian Car and Foundry in Port Arthur as an aircraft fitter when he enlisted in Winnipeg on 27 July 1941.<sup>31</sup> Joseph was one of three Baillargeon brothers, all of whom volunteered for active service in the war. Older brother Edmund Emile, born on 12 September 1915, joined the Canadian Active Service Force on 24 July 1940 and went into the artillery. Younger brother Lawrence, born 24 December 1919, was living in Tecumseh, Ontario and was working as a waiter when he joined the Essex Scottish on 5 September 1939. All three brothers were overseas in June 1944: Lawrence in the infantry and Edmund Emile as a lieutenant with the 52nd Anti-Tank Battery, both in Normandy. It is no exaggeration to say that the Baillargeon family gave its all in the Canadian war effort.

Joseph loved playing hockey; he also played tennis, swan and took up softball. He aimed to be a pilot but was trained as an air bomber, or bomb aimer in RAF terminology. Instructors had good opinions of him: “A steady, hard-working A/B [air bomber], who obtained very consistent results. Quiet but plenty of confidence.” “A keen worker of slightly better than average ability, both in air and ground subjects.” “Quite good map reader. Got through all his work without any trouble. Steady all-round worker. Stick-bombing. Very good. Got nav[igator] to take more care with his winds.”<sup>32</sup>



Sgt. Savard’s crew embarked on its first operation on 23 July 1944. The target was Donges, an oil refinery and storage complex near the Loire River. They took off at 2200 hrs and returned at 0315 hrs. The sky over the target was partly cloudy but they bombed the red target indicators at 12,500 feet. This was their first trip to France but it was not their last.<sup>33</sup> From then until 14 August, they did a total of nine operations, including one to Stuttgart on 25 July and

<sup>31</sup> Baillargeon personnel file, LAC.

<sup>32</sup> Baillargeon personnel file, LAC.

<sup>33</sup> Middlebrook and Everitt, *Bomber Command War Diaries*, 549; OPR, No. 433 (RCAF) Squadron, July 1944, RG 24 E 7, reel C-12308, LAC; and photograph of Savard and Crew and list of operations, RG 24 G-3-1-a, R112, box 142, file 181.009, LAC, courtesy of Richard Kovall.

one to Hamburg on 28 July. The remaining seven were to Normandy in support of ground troops.

Joseph Baillargeon was a faithful letter writer, mostly to his half-sister Jean English and her husband Roy in Port Arthur who he had lived with before enlisting.<sup>34</sup> His letters form a good picture of his career in the air force. In early June 1943, he wrote: “I am now on my air bombers course and really believe I am going to like it. That bomb sight is a very interesting instrument. By the use of it alone one can allow for the airspeed, wind, air resistance and drift of the aircraft so as to drop a good bomb on a target from heights of 1,000 to 30,000 feet.”<sup>35</sup> Six months later he wrote: “I had 10 days leave which I spent in London. I met Larry there New Years Eve and with escorts we went pub crawling. Some of these English girls are pretty nice, anyway I think the ones we had are.” As to his training he wrote: “I haven’t as yet started to fly but expect to very shortly and I can say I am really anxious to get started.”<sup>36</sup> As for base living: “Our rooms are quite alright and in each we have a stove, about the size of one of your kettles, so it is pretty cold getting up in the morning.”<sup>37</sup>

When Joseph and the other Canadian members of Savard’s crew arrived at No. 22 OTU, the crewing up process took place: “Things are going fine now and we are getting in plenty of flying lately. I like it very much and I think we have a good crew. One gunner is from Windsor and the other gunner is from Toronto. The pilot from Montreal and wireless operator from Calgary and navigator from Winnipeg. They are a good bunch of fellows. The navigator and myself are the only commissioned ones and the W.A.G. [wireless air gunner] is a WO2 [Warrant Officer 2].” At the operational training unit the crew practiced operational flying, usually in a twin-engine Wellington, once the mainstay of Bomber Command but now obsolescent. On 21 June Baillargeon wrote: “It won’t be long now until I have finished here and go on to a squadron. We expect to be on a squadron by 3 weeks or less. From there on our flying will be more serious and exciting or maybe exciting isn’t the word....a person is excited when they are so scared the words practically fail them [*sic*] but after a few trips we should be able to control our feelings much

<sup>34</sup> Liz Broadbent to the author, 27 January 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Baillargeon to Jean and Roy English, 3 June 1943.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Baillargeon to Jean and Roy English, 17 January 1944.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Baillargeon to Jean and Roy English, 17 February 1944.

better.”<sup>38</sup> Still, Savard and his crew had not yet started operational flying and there was plenty of time to take in the local surroundings: “Last week our crew went to a nearby village and had a feed of chicken, ham, one egg and chips. There wasn’t much more than a taste of each for approx. \$1.25 but it was sure good. Then we took in a pub, had a few scotches and finished off with beer when the scotch sold out.” Joseph also relayed the news that he had been promoted to Flying Officer.<sup>39</sup>

By mid-July 1944, a considerable amount of Bomber Command’s efforts were aimed at eliminating German V1 flying bomb sites which were launching dozens of jet-propelled missiles at London every day. Joseph flew his first operation as a bomb aimer on one of those missions on 14 July, without the rest of the Savard crew who were on an attack on flying bomb sites in Anderbelck and Les Landes in France.<sup>40</sup> Joseph wrote home: “Things have been rushed lately. I am on operations...and dropping some heavy loads on [unreadable]... I find this life on a squadron fast and very exciting. One just has to be right on their toes when necessary but otherwise it is free and easy.” He added, “I have a seven days leave coming in a month. Every six weeks here we get 7 days leave. I hope to make Scotland this time.”<sup>41</sup> The pace of operations continued to be heavy as Arthur Harris, commander in chief of Bomber Command, balanced attacks to aid the campaign in Normandy, strikes on flying bomb sites and raids into Germany. On 23 July Joseph joined the rest of Savard’s crew for a raid on Donges.<sup>42</sup> Joseph wrote home: “Our kite was named ‘I Dood It’. I saw the target coming up very nicely and said ‘well, dad, this is it’ and pressed the tit and said to the crew ‘I dood it’ and I didn’t miss. We didn’t get back to base that night as we had to land shortly after crossing our coast on the return trip.”<sup>43</sup>

On 25 July, the crew attacked Stuttgart on an eight hour and forty minute operation: “we saw 6 enemy fighters but got away without a hole.... We were on our toes thinking any minute we may be caught but, Jean, someone apparently watched over us and saw

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Baillargeon to Jean and Roy English, 21 June 1944.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Baillargeon to Jean and Roy English, 27 June 1944.

<sup>40</sup> Middlebrook and Everitt, *Bomber Command War Diaries*, 543.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Baillargeon to Jean and Roy English, 15 July 1944.

<sup>42</sup> List of operations, RG 24 G-3-1-a, R112, box 142, file 181.009, LAC.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Baillargeon to Jean and Roy English, 24 July 1944. “I Dood It” was the title of a popular song and movie in 1944.

to it we got back after being in the air nearly nine hours...during a raid you realize you are just a small pebble of a great organization, and when you see you are being shot at you wish you were a grain of sand.”<sup>44</sup> On 15 August, after a six day leave, Savard and his crew were part of a large force attacking German night fighter airfields in Holland and Belgium.<sup>45</sup> Joseph wrote: “We...brought back a few holes to show we were there. Sometimes I think they are really trying to hit us...when you see aircraft blow up and others go down in flames it does make you realize a war is still on and you wonder who he was.”<sup>46</sup> The next night they embarked for the Bay of Kiel.

Joseph’s older brother Edmund Emile was attached to the 52nd Anti-Tank Battery with the 4th Canadian Armoured Division then battling down the road from Caen to Falaise, trying to close the Falaise Gap. Edmund Emile wrote home: “Weeks of life here in Normandy – several weeks at the front – have conditioned me to a new way of living. We walk and sleep amongst death...spaced between fox holes...are fresh crosses that name the men who died yesterday. We took one town a few days ago and there, I believe, I began to realize how awfully grim this war is -Jerry fights over every foot of ground. Newspapers or the film will never give a true picture of war... Even now as I write Jerry is shelling the far end of this wood. A few weeks ago I would have certainly taken cover – now – well what does it matter?”<sup>47</sup>



At three minutes to midnight, MZ 899 and the other minelaying crews of No. 433 Squadron were supposed to fly over the west coast of Denmark heading southeast toward Kiel. After a few minutes they turned right to fly directly towards the mouth of the bay. Somewhere in the dark, Flying Officer William Henry Novick from Montreal was piloting Halifax MZ 818. He too was from No. 433 Squadron with orders to drop mines into Kiel Bay. Many years later he would remember: “At the same time we were dropping mines in the canal [*sic*] the bomber force was bombing the city of Kiel, which was a

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Baillargeon to Jean and Roy English, 27 July 1944.

<sup>45</sup> Middlebrook and Everitt, *Bomber Command War Diaries*, 563.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Baillargeon to Jean and Roy English, 15 August 1944.

<sup>47</sup> Edmund Baillargeon to Jean and Roy – Donna and Joan, 13 August 1944.



MZ 899 crashed into the Baltic Sea south or southwest of the island of Langeland.

little off in the distance. So we could see...all the searchlights, the anti-aircraft fire and everything going on sort of ahead of us alright because that was the rest of the bomber force bombing the actual city, so you could lose a lot of planes but if you weren't hit you weren't bothered you may not see anything at all. We occasionally, we would see planes being hit, we occasionally would see people bailing out but remember at night this was not the easiest thing to see. I had to keep my eye on the instruments.<sup>48</sup>

Another No. 433 Squadron Halifax—MZ 808—flown by Flight Lieutenant J. Morgan was also on a mine laying run at about the same time. The tail gunner in Morgan's plane was Phillip Joseph "Babe" Marchildon, twenty-one years old, from Penetanguishene, Ontario. Marchildon was an ace right-handed pitcher for the major league Philadelphia Athletics. As they headed for the drop area, MZ 808 was hit by a night fighter. First an engine then a fuel tank caught fire. Morgan got on the intercom and ordered the crew to bail out. Two men escaped, Marchildon and Flying Officer George Gill. They were at about 18,000 feet when they left the aircraft and both men

<sup>48</sup> Telephone interview with W. H. Novick, 28 June 2020.



were captured when they hit the ground, spending the rest of the war in a German prison camp. Morgan and the other five crew members perished.<sup>49</sup> Savard's bomber was flying at 17,700 feet when it suddenly came under fire from an enemy night fighter. The enemy night fighter pilot was Oberleutnant Arnold "Fritz" Brinkmann<sup>50</sup> flying a Junkers Ju 88 G-5 based at Westerland on the island of Sylt. He was with 8 *Nachtjagdgeschwader* 3 Squadron. Brinkmann was twenty-nine. He is believed to have survived the war with a total of sixteen bombers shot down.<sup>51</sup> MZ 899 crashed into the sea; all seven crew members were lost.

On the night of 16 August, as MZ 899 set off for Kiel, Edmund Emile Baillargeon's 52nd Anti-Tank Battery came under German shellfire somewhere on the road to Falaise in Normandy. Edmund Emile was struck by a shell fragment and died of his wounds the next day. A local newspaper carried this story: "With news reaching him that one son has died of wounds received in action and that a second son is missing following air operations, Edmund Baillargeon, Ford plant worker at 425 Pitt Street West, today knows the meaning that war can spell to the home front."<sup>52</sup>

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No. 433 Squadron lost three aircraft that night but overall the mission was a critical success. As Carsten Petersen has observed: "The air raids on Kiel and Szczecin [known as Stettin in this period] on the night of 16 and 17 August 1944, as well as the mining, had a rather large effect on the Kriegsmarine's use of their scarce resources

<sup>49</sup> Mike Gill, "F/O George H. Gill," World War II – Prisoners of War – Stalag Luft I: A Collection of Stories, photos, art and information of Stalag Luft I, accessed 6 October 2021, [www.merkki.com/gillgeorge.htm](http://www.merkki.com/gillgeorge.htm)[www.merkki.com/gillgeorge.htm](http://www.merkki.com/gillgeorge.htm).

<sup>50</sup> Theo Boiten, *Nachtjagd Combat Archive, 1944*, Part 4: 24 July-15 October 1944 (Walton on Thames UK: Red Kite Publishing, 2021), 45.

<sup>51</sup> "Arnold Brinkmann," Kracker Luftwaffe Archive: Axis Powers Pilots and Crew, Aircrew Remembered, accessed 12 October 2021, <http://www.aircrewremembered.com/KrackerDatabase/?q=brinkmann+arnold>.

<sup>52</sup> Clipping provided to the author by Elizabeth Broadbent. See also "Worker's Soldier Son Dead and Flying Son is Missing," n.d. [1944], "Lieutenant Edmund Emile Baillargeon," Canadian Virtual War Memorial, accessed 12 October 2021, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/2955320>.

in the Baltic Sea.... The Swedes stopped sailing to German ports... until the next major attack on the 26 of August.”<sup>53</sup>

Pilot Officer Joseph G. M. Savard (all had been promoted after their deaths) washed ashore in Magleby parish on the island of Langeland, Denmark and was handed over to the Wehrmacht. He was laid to rest in Magleby Cemetery on 12 September 1944. Pilot Officer Bernard Bercuson was found near Lindelse on Langeland and was buried beside Savard on 19 September 1944. They are still together. Pilot Officer Maurice E. Fairall washed ashore on the island of Bogø and laid to rest in Bogø Cemetery on 11 October 1944. Sergeant George H. Lilley was found at Asserballeskov on the island of Als on 17 September 1944 and was buried in Aabenraa on 19 September 1944. Flying Officer Henry Grimble, Flying Officer Joseph L. Baillargeon and Sergeant Alfred W. J. Drennan were never found and their names are commemorated on the Runnymede Air Forces Memorial in Surrey, England.<sup>54</sup>

After seeing a picture of Bernard's grave marked with a cross, Bernard's sister Pat Bercuson Hector wrote to the RCAF that the family wished to have a Star of David on Bernard's headstone. The RCAF wrote back that the cross had been erected by the citizens of Magleby and that a Star of David would be erected by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. On 5 May 1948, a commemoration ceremony and dedication service were held in the church at Magleby. American and British air attachés attended along with Ross Campbell of the Canadian Legation to Denmark. After a brief ceremony in the little church, about one thousand people from the surrounding area retired to the churchyard for the unveiling of a memorial wall to honour the airmen who had lost their lives in the war and were buried there. There were seven American flyers from a B-17, two British airmen and six members of the Royal Canadian Air Force in a portion of the church cemetery.<sup>55</sup> The Americans were disinterred a year later and reburied in cemeteries in the United States. The Canadians and Britons are there still.

<sup>53</sup> Petersen, *Three Nights in August 1944*, 21.

<sup>54</sup> Søren C. Flensted, “Halifax BIII MZ899 crashed in the Baltic Sea southwest of the island of Langeland 17/8 1944,” *Airwar over Denmark*, accessed 17 September 2021, <http://flensted.eu.com/1944094.shtml>.

<sup>55</sup> W. R. Gunn to Adele Bercuson, 23 June 1948, Bercuson personnel file, LAC.



Pilot Officer Bernard Bercuson. [Image courtesy of the Bercuson Family]

Adele Bercuson stayed with her parents in Regina for a while before moving to Toronto. At a convention of B'nai Brith in Peterborough, Ontario, she met Joseph Rogow. They married soon after. Joe was rather fragile with a congenital heart condition, not robust and diminutive in size. They had no children, but Adele doted over him for the rest of his life. He died in 1986; she outlived him by twenty-one years. Apparently the Rogow family never learned about her first husband.<sup>56</sup> And the remains of MZ 899 lie at the bottom of the Baltic Sea.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**David Jay Bercuson** specialises in Canadian military and diplomatic history and Canadian defence policy. He was the Director of the Centre for Military, Security and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary from 1999 to 2019 and is former Director of Programs of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, a Calgary-based think tank. He served on the Board of Governors of Royal Military College. He has published on a wide range of topics specializing in modern Canadian politics, Canadian defence and foreign policy and Canadian military history. He is an Officer of the Order of Canada and has two honorary degrees. His latest book is *Our Finest Hour: Canada Fights the Second World War* which was published in October, 2015.

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<sup>56</sup> Adele's information courtesy of Norm Broadbent, with the aid of Ellin Bessner; and correspondence to the author from Robin Roger and Sharon Levy-Cohen, 7 September 2020.