

Former Aurora teacher shot down during war

Former Dr. G. W. Williams teacher Alex Campbell was the pilot of a Lancaster bomber during WW II. At least, he was until he was shot down behind enemy lines 65 years ago.

This is the story of that fateful night of July 28, 1944, in his own words.

"We were flying four engine Lancasters out of 514 Squadron in England, and had done twenty-four bombing trips up to that time.

"For this one, there was much concern among my crew that we'd go to Stuttgart, Germany. It was a long, long trip, seven hours and 50 minutes, much of it over enemy territory.

"But at our briefing the curtains were pulled back on this huge map at the front of the room, and there were a few groans, because there, with a big black zigzag line, was the route that was etched in our minds; the route to Stuttgart.

"We had been designated aircraft C "Charlie". It was one of only 300 Mark II Lancasters made. And there'd be one less than that when we got through.

"We took off at 9.40 p.m., and soon joined the rest of the bombers, and flew 'til we were well west of London - lots of trigger-happy anti-aircraft guns there.

"That night we were supposed to have an overcast sky all the way to Stuttgart, but it was not very thick from the looks of it. As we were flying across France within the clouds - this was getting on towards midnight - I said, 'I'm going to go upstairs a little, and see how thick this cloud is'.

"So we just climbed for a minute or so until we broke out into a clear moonlit sky. The moon was bright, and miles of white clouds stretched below us.

"It looked like it extended quite a ways, so we descended, and found



ALEX CAMPBELL

out that the clouds were only about 500 feet in thickness. As I broke out briefly I was able to see the patchwork of the French farming communities and countryside down below - dark and light patches of the fields - and the odd silvery glint of a river.

"By this time, Ben, the wireless operator, had turned on his radar. He could watch a little screen in his compartment, with a rotating beacon - like you see on the TV weather maps or those submarine pictures.

"He said that we had an enemy fighter plane closing slowly, and more company on the port side, and slightly below us.

"They were flying in the clear sky under the clouds, and were following us with their own radar. They could take their time, because they had the advantage of being able to see what we couldn't see; the end of our cloud cover was just up ahead.

"All of a sudden the clouds ended, and we

burst out into moonlight. At the same instant, Sam, the rear gunner, saw the enemy planes and hollered out; "fighter - port - go!"

"So I proceeded to put the Lanc into a violent corkscrew maneuver, rolling completely up on one wing-tip, which drops the nose straight down, and then rotating the aircraft through 180 degrees, and pulling up again back to port where we were before. You describe a corkscrew shape through the sky.

"That was found to be the most successful maneuver to avoid being shot down by fighters. We had done that many times in our previous missions - and escaped successfully.

"So far. "At the same moment Sam saw the fighters, they had already fired. There were shells in the air and they were hitting us violently, entering our port wing from below and leaving several elongated holes that ruptured the metal upwards and forwards. The fuel tanks,

containing 1,000 gallons of high octane gasoline, were ripped wide open and set on fire.

"Explosive shells also came through and took out part of the windscreen in front of me and the compass. I could smell the rank acrid odour of cordite.

"After that first corkscrew it was hard to manage any more evasive maneuvers. Two engines were on fire, and we had quite a fire all along the port side.

"I kept the plane going, although it wasn't really level, and we were still losing height rapidly.

"We had lost power on both port engines, so I shut off the fuel and put extinguishers on them. This subdued the flames for a while, but they were too far advanced, and they flared up again.

"The fighter, which we got a glimpse of off to starboard, was a Junkers 88. He circled around, and I thought, "boy, he's gonna come around again and finish us".

"And that's just what he did.

"He came up from

underneath and behind us, and started firing. He hit the cockpit, and I'm sure the armour plating in the back of my seat was protecting me. I could envision the top of my head sticking out above it, so I got down as low as I could.

"Bob, a new pilot joining us on his first mission, was badly hit. I got some of the spray off of him - bits of bone and shiny metal in the arm and face. It made it look like I was hit too, but I wasn't. How it missed Jock, the flight engineer, I don't know. He was standing right behind Bob.

"Earl, our navigator, was out of his seat and sitting on the floor when those shells came

through. He got two of them in his leg - hurt him pretty badly - and his instrument panel just disintegrated.

"This latest attack put out one of our starboard engines, and the Constant Speed Unit on the one engine that was remaining packed up. I don't know how many thousand RPM it would reach, but it just screamed like a siren.

"With only moments left before we either fell out of the sky, or our bomb load exploded from the flames, it was time for the eight of us to get out while we could - if we could."

Part 2 next week.

Alex Campbell's last mission - conclusion

Former Aurora high school teacher, Alex Campbell, continues the story of his Lancaster bomber being shot down behind enemy lines during WW II.

As we join the narrative, his plane had been shot up by a German fighter plane over France, and was going down in flames.

"I'd already given an order to the crew to prepare to abandon the aircraft. I asked them to acknowledge on the intercom, and they all did except Jonesy, the mid-upper gunner.

"He couldn't because some of the shells from the fighter attack pretty well blew off the mid-upper turret, and out off the oxygen and microphone lines to his facemask.

"I told them all to jump. "The bomb aimer was the first one out. He unlocked the lower escape hatch, which is about two feet wide and about two and a half feet long. He put the hatch up in the front turret out of the way, and he went out.

"Then the second pilot, Bob, he still had his wits, and even badly wounded was able to get out of his seat, and went down the opening in front of him to the escape hatch.

"Then a few seconds later he turned around and attempted to come back up. He had caught his rip-cord on some-

thing and his parachute had opened in the aircraft.

"That's a 24-foot parachute - quite a lot of silk packed in there, and it bounces and springs out when the tension is released. The cockpit and passageway was filled with silk and cord, blowing in the wind that was whistling through the broken windshield.

"Bob was probably trying to get past us to get out of the way, so we could get out. But the flight engineer, Jock, managed to turn him around, and got him back down to the hole, and bundled him up and shoved him out.

"Jock went out next, of course. I remember he gave a little Winston Churchill "V for victory" before he jumped.

"Earl the navigator had been badly wounded. He had taken two shells in the leg, but he still managed to make it up to the front and went out there.

"Meanwhile, the wireless operator and the mid-upper gunner had gone out the side door on the starboard side.

"And all this time the plane was diving, and gaining speed, and on fire. We weren't very high - we started out at only about 7,500 feet. Not much air under you for a rapid descent like this.

"When it came to my turn to get out, Sam the rear gun-

ner was still firing from his turret. "I hollered at him to get the hell out of there.

"Fortunately, he went out the starboard side. I'm sure he must have realized that had he gone out the port side the flames from the two damaged engines would have just engulfed him immediately - burning gasoline and flames. That would be an awful thing.

"After Sam got out, I removed my helmet and intercom and let go of the control column right away. The Lancaster lurched on down faster now, and I flew up in the air and landed in the passageway. Like driving along a country road, and you come up and over a real steep hill, and you leave your seat.

"Then I stepped back out in the companionway, to the top of the stairs to the bomb almer's compartment. The plane's nose was pointing down now, and the floor was more or less behind me, so I made one leap to go down hill in a hurry. As I pushed off, I got jabbed in the stomach, and just hung there.

"There's a telescoping pipe that pulls out in front of the flight engineer to rest his feet on. It was sticking out about six inches or a foot, and it jabbed me in the ribs, and that's what I was hanging on.

"Then a big explosion came - I expect it could have been the port wing collapsing. It flung me against the starboard side of the fuselage, and unhooked me. Down I dropped into the bomb almer's compartment, and onto my stomach with my head about two feet away from the open escape hatch.

"But with all the violent movements the hatch had shifted out of the front of the turret where it had been stowed. It had been sucked by the pull of the air, and become wedged corner ways in the opening.

"All I could get out was my head - just barely out into the slipstream. My shoulders and the rest of my body were inside the aircraft in this triangular shaped opening.

"I thought that would be the end. It'll be a big bang, or a silence, or a horrendous headache - just for a split second.

"Then I got mad and started thrashing and kicking and hollering. Well, I must have

moved that wedged door just enough, because I finally wriggled out.

"I felt this rush of wind over my body - we were going about 300 miles per hour - and both my flying boots were whisked off with the slipstream.

"This huge fiery orange and black shape - our crippled Lancaster - went whipping on past me. I wasn't gonna count even to one-two-three now before I pulled my parachute cord, because I knew now I must be awfully close to the ground.

"I slapped my chest where my rip-cord should be ... and there was no D-ring there.

"No harness.

"Nothing.

"No parachute on at all.

"And I thought "well this is dumb", or maybe a bit amusing - to get out of all that and then end up without a parachute.

"Just about that time something attracted my attention above me - I was going down head-first. It was a chrome buckle on my parachute harness, and it flashed above me. And sure enough there was my harness stretched out behind and above me, and the parachute pack wobbling and spiraling behind that again.

"I went to reach up, bending my knees, and felt a tug at my ankles. It was the thigh straps, which had slipped down to my ankles and were still there.

"I hadn't realized it, but in my panic to squeeze and wriggle out of the escape hatch, my parachute harness had slipped right off my shoulders, and down my body and off my legs and caught around my ankles - which remember, no longer had any boots.

"So I reached up and pulled the harness towards me hand over hand till I could reach the D-ring. Then I dug my fingers into the harness, and gave the D-ring a tremendous pull.

"All of a sudden that chute just went WHACK. A big crack, and it opened - a beautiful canopy of white.

"You land in a 24-foot military chute at the same rate as if you were to jump from a 10-foot wall onto the ground. That's traveling.

"I was hanging upside-down by my ankles, and saw something out of the corner of my eye and thought, "cripes - that looks like the roof of a house".

"So I quickly grabbed for my ankles, and just got my head bent forward, and WHACK! I hit the ground with the back of my head and shoulders at the same time, and crumpled up.

"A perfect landing, really, all things considered. If I hadn't realized the roof was there and prepared myself, I would have been just driven straight into the ground.

"As I lay on my back I realized I was safe.

"Or was I?

"I was in unfamiliar territory, miles behind enemy lines, with no boots or supplies of any sort, surrounded by German

patrols, with the threat of being discovered at any moment.

"The next month would be one near escape after another.

"But that's another story." Postscript: Bob Cliffin died shortly after bailing out. Earl Garland, who had been badly wounded, was taken prisoner, and spent the rest of the war in a POW camp.

Alex Campbell and the rest of his crew spent four harrowing weeks avoiding capture by the Germans before being rescued by the advancing Allies.

Mr. Campbell was back in Ontario in mid-October 1944, and married his fiancé two weeks later.

At least one Aurora resident was upset that the Aurora branch of the Royal Canadian Legion did not have anyone to recite John McCrea's "In Flanders Fields" at the Sunday event at the Cenotaph.

Petra Weidemann supplied The Auroran with a copy of McCrea's famous work, penned in May, 1915 and a bit of its history.

"They didn't recite this poem on Sunday," she said. "Maybe some young people don't know the origin."

In Flanders Fields

In Flanders field, the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from falling hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

During the second Battle of Ypres, a Canadian artillery officer, Lt. Alexis Helmer, was killed May 2, 1915, by an exploding shell.

He was a friend of the Canadian military doctor Major John McCrae.

John was asked to conduct the burial service owing to the chaplain being called away on duty elsewhere.

It is believed that later that evening John began the draft for his famous poem, In Flanders Fields.