

CHRISTMAS  
MISSION HOME



The  
**CHRISTMAS  
MISSION  
HOME**

**LANCASTER LED THE WAY TO A HAPPY HOLIDAY**

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**A**fter four days of maintenance delays, my jet was finally ready for the flight home. Sitting at the threshold of Runway 12, Canadian Forces Base Comox, I impatiently awaited takeoff clearance. All other flying operations at the Wing had ceased hours earlier. Only 442 Search and Rescue Squadron stood any serious chance of a launch, and then only to extricate the unlucky or the desperate. To the southeast lay the Strait of Georgia, beyond that the Coastal Mountains. In front of me runway lights glowed brightly in the fresh snow, a rare occurrence in the temperate Comox Valley.

Somewhere on the flight line and in hardened bunkers sat two CF-18s and their crews. The Hornets would be loaded for "Bear", their pilots' mission to intercept Russian nuclear bombers. But not even the Russians were flying this evening, for this was the most special of nights. It was Christmas Eve, 1992 and I was a young air force pilot on my way home for the holidays.

"Cobra 52, are you up?" The voice in my helmet broke the spell. It was the BATCO, Base Air Traffic Control Officer, on the radio. Having released his staff hours before, his job was to clear me for take off, then hand me over to departure control. I was to be his last aircraft movement of the night. Once underway, Vancouver Centre would further clear me to Flight Level 370 — thirty seven thousand feet, more or less — for the 1:24 minute flight to Calgary. "Cobra 52, winds are 090 at 15, contact Vancou-

ver Centre airborne, Runway 12, cleared for takeoff." Breaking military radio discipline, I responded with "Merry Christmas, Sir," and began my takeoff roll.

Airborne. With a reassuring clunk, the landing gear disappeared into the Tutor's underside and the little jet accelerated to 220 knots. I checked in with Vancouver Centre and began my climb to altitude, vectored over the mountains and north of the city. Gulping fuel at about 20 pounds per minute, tonight the Tutor could stay aloft about 80 minutes before the low fuel light illuminated, indicating 19 minutes to dry tanks. That left me about 15 minutes of fuel to spare, tight but doable.

Radar vectors from Vancouver Centre put me on course just east of Hope. From there I'd track jet airways to Calgary. A high-speed descent into YYC airport would follow. After putting the little jet to bed, I'd jump in a rental >>

car for the three-hour drive to Lethbridge and a family Christmas, arriving well before the Old Elf. Meanwhile, nearly seven miles beneath me, the lower mainland was slipping away. Children of all ages were tucked in their beds, awaiting Santa's visit, while Vancouver and the rest of western Canada braced for a snow storm.

Late night flights are truly peaceful affairs. Overhead the stars blazed in the black eternity, beneath me was a thick layer of cloud. Heaven meeting Earth, a full moon was rising, flooding the undercast with a brilliant white light. From 37,000 feet the world seemed perfect. Below me it was a different story. The terminal forecast for Calgary called for snow. A low pressure area had stalled in southwest Saskatchewan, its counter clockwise rotation pushing moist air westward: upsloping, as the Met Office technically phrased it. After a second day, that moisture had saturated the atmosphere, turning into a snow that was blanketing the region.

The frequency was eerily quiet, devoid of any radio chatter, not unusual given the late hour. Soon I'd be speaking to Edmonton Centre who would clear me for descent. This called for a groundspeed check. I noted my distance measuring equipment display and started my stopwatch. At the 36-second mark, I'd multiply the mileage covered by 100, giving me my groundspeed in knots. At 36 seconds elapsed time, my eyes went back to the DME counter. It was frozen. No problem...the alternate method was to check with ATC. "Vancouver Centre, Cobra 52, request groundspeed." Silence.

The usual side tone in my helmet was also missing, as was the reassuring sound of air flowing into my oxygen mask. My radio was dead. In short order so too would be much of my instrument panel. The tach generator, producing its own energy, showed engine RPM. The airspeed indicator and altimeters, similarly independent, gave me basic flight data. Everything else was electrically powered and failing by the second.

This called for swift action. I pulled out my flashlight and emergency check-

list, referencing the Generator Reset procedure. It read: "To reset generator, select Off, then On." Checklist complete, I looked for electrical power to return. Nothing. I was now running solely on DC power. At this temperature, minus 42 degrees Celsius, how long my battery would last was anyone's guess. The cockpit had already begun to dim.

Covering ground at seven miles a minute, I needed to consider my options quickly. There was little to be gained from returning to the West Coast. Without a radio, the prospect of a GCA talk-down, a ground-controlled approach at Comox was zero. Neither was there a chance of flying the localizer and glideslope, the ILS for Calgary's runway 34. Electrical power was needed for that as well.

*The decision was made: I would "jump" before the engine quit.*

Suddenly fear gripped me. At 37,000 feet over the Canadian Rockies on Christmas Eve — the happiest night of the year — I was in a military jet that was facing a certain electrical demise. Unable to navigate or determine my position, I reduced thrust to holding speed to conserve fuel. That would buy me a few extra minutes aloft. When my fuel was finally exhausted, the engine would flame out and I'd be forced to eject.

That option held precious little appeal. The other choice was to loiter in the Calgary Airport arrival area, then form up on an inbound airliner. I could readily match its speed and so large a target would be easy to follow, even at night and in thick cloud. With a hitchhiker on his wing, the unknowing commercial pilot would fly his approach minimums and land, unaware he had guided me in as well. That airplane would be my Shepherd, as they were once known.

When no aircraft arrived and I was down to 19 minutes' fuel remaining, I

finally admitted to being lost and my heart sank. Abandoning the aircraft now seemed inevitable. Rather than the valiant action many believe ejection to be, it can be a dangerous, often deadly maneuver.

Once I pulled those yellow and black handles, a rocket charge would send the seat flying upwards in a ride lasting scant seconds. The "G" loads from that alone were enormous and instantaneous, and many pilots blacked out from the sudden acceleration. With luck and split-second timing, the aircraft's canopy should have blown clear first, meaning the seat's canopy cutter wouldn't have to shatter its way through the clear bubble. Once the seat was clear of the aircraft, another series of ballistic charges would detonate, sending my five-point harness exploding off my lap. Sequentially and milliseconds later came "man-seat separation." Crews referred to this as the "butt kicker." A retracted pair of straps conforming to the seat's shape would instantaneously tighten, sending me hurtling into space and clear of my seat.

Assuming I was still conscious, I might see the dark world spin end-over-end, all the while hoping the altimeter on my parachute would trigger an automatic opening. The final insult would be landing in total blackness on frozen ground or even worse, in trees, probably breaking one or both legs. If still alive and conscious at this point, I could then cling to the hope Search and Rescue would find me at night and in heavy snow before I froze to death or succumbed to my injuries. In the end it all came down to praying for the best.

The decision was made: I would "jump" before the engine quit. Known as a controlled ejection, my chances of survival this way were far greater. Once again I pulled out my Emergency Checklist and prepared to abandon the aircraft. Except for the light from my flashlight, the cockpit was now pitch black. I struggled to push back the wave of panic I felt building inside.

Feeling as dark as my little jet and with a minute to go, my thoughts turned to the family I might never see again. Fear

had been replaced with a great sadness. I sat upright as the ejection procedure dictated, and then gripped both handles tightly, counting down, 3, 2.... Suddenly I detected motion. There, five or six thousand feet below was the dark form of an aircraft. Rather than the inbound commercial airliner I had pinned my hopes on seeing, this was something very different. Releasing the ejection handles carefully, I once again grabbed the stick and thrust lever and dove the Tutor down and to the right. It took a few seconds to process what was before me.

There, at 15,000 feet, high above the Rockies on Christmas Eve, was a Second World War Lancaster bomber. It was matching my turns above the snow-white undercast. With the moonlight reflecting off the cloud, the shapes of the crew through the cockpit windows were easily visible. Its pilot turned to look at me, then with a brisk wing waggle of his wings signaled, "Form up on me." Following his instruction, I immediately added thrust and pulled in tight.

I couldn't believe my luck. One of the flying museums in the province must have been up on a Christmas Eve flight and got caught above cloud, forced to recover by instruments into Calgary. The radar controllers handling his arrival had then seen me wandering about the cloud, apparently lost, and vectored the Lancaster towards me to lend aid.

Hoping the crew was military trained, I held up a closed fist, invoking the HEFOE code for aircraft with no radio: Hydraulics, Electrics, Fuel, Oxygen and Engine. I then re-extended my fist, this time with three fingers showing. This meant a fuel emergency. The Lancaster pilot acknowledged, and then held an extended thumb to his oxygen mask, making a drinking motion: "What is your fuel remaining?" I once again extended my fist, this time with just one finger showing: "Ten minutes...or less." He nodded, and with that we began our steep formation dive into the cloud.

In the eternity that followed, I considered the great error I had just made. If I

came up short of fuel, it would mean an uncontrolled ejection over the city. Cursing this reckless choice, I shouted an unkind sentiment into my dead mike, hoping somehow the mea culpa might earn me consideration in Eternity should this all go badly.

It seemed impossible that so white a cloud could be so black inside. The glow from the exhaust stacks of the Lancaster's engines became my only reference. I could feel us turning in formation, and never before was I so focused on holding station. "Come on man, go, GO!" I shouted into my dead microphone, knowing my little jet was now literally minutes from running out of fuel. If this happened, my airspeed would rapidly decay to a stall and I'd be forced to attempt a low altitude

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ejection. These seldom ended happily.

We were descending. With speed brakes out I could just match the Lancaster's speed. Suddenly the main gear swung down from the bomber and I realized we were only seconds from landing. The other pilot then turned to look at me, with pointed fingers motioning "Land there, straight ahead." With that he pulled up hard and to the right, disappearing in the darkness. My head spun to the view in front of me and I dropped my own landing gear, hoping it would extend, straining to see approach lights — or anything — through the heavy snow. Suddenly a runway light appeared in my windscreen, then another, then a few more. I chopped thrust, slamming the jet onto the ground. Bam, bam, bam. Rather than bouncing I was plowing through snow banks and finally skidded to a stop.

Silence. When the Tutor finally came to rest, I realized the engine had flamed out. I sat for a second, not knowing where I was except that I was on the ground and alive.

Expecting to recover at an international airport, the damned fool had dropped me at some little field, God knows where. With a snow-covered runway and marginal lighting, I could have been killed. Then I remembered my engine had died just seconds after touchdown. His decision had saved my life.

I climbed out of the jet and followed my tire tracks down the runway. It was like walking in a giant snow globe. As I trudged along through the deep snow, my parachute's straps cut uncomfortably into my legs and my oxygen mask, now cold and clammy, hung off my face. My helmet was suddenly heavy and uncomfortable, its clear visor frosted over, causing me to stumble as I walked. The hot sweat that had only minutes before drenched me now turned icy cold on my back. Shock was setting in and I began to shake uncontrollably. I would be that way for several minutes.

Homing on a single light, I arrived to find a dilapidated Second World War hangar. There a weathered airport sign welcomed me to Claresholm, Alberta, "a British Commonwealth Air Training Plan Aerodrome and former RCAF Station." Locating a payphone, I called RCC, Rescue Coordination Centre in Trenton. Not surprisingly, Calgary ATC had reported me overdue and presumed down. Next, the operator connected me with Edmonton Centre. Speaking with the ATC shift manager, I explained I had just landed at the small airport south of the Calgary and its main runway now featured a dead Tutor jet, stuck in the snow. The controller listened carefully, making notes as we talked.

I grimaced at what would come next — a mountain of reports and a Flight Safety investigation. Quickly I reminded myself that only minutes before I was praying not to die, alone on Christmas Eve. Official details exchanged, I asked him for information on the Lancaster that had guided me to landing. I wanted to thank the crew personally for saving my life. A long, awkward silence followed my question. "We have no flight plan on any





Lancaster in our airspace," came his reply. "In fact, Calgary International closed shortly after you departed Comox... in heavy snow, Vancouver Centre tried to contact you. The whole region is getting hammered."

I pressed him again: "You mean you have nothing on a World War II bomber in your airspace on Christmas Eve?" My insistence now bordered on rude. "No Sir," he replied. "Just one primary radar target — you. No one else." Then more details were exchanged, ending with, "RCC has apparently dispatched the Mounties to the Claresholm Airport to lend assistance. Anything else, captain?"

"No — thank you," I replied, hoping to sound appreciative of his efforts. I ended the call with "Merry Christmas," and hung up. At that exact moment the runways lights went black. I checked my watch. It was officially Christmas Day. I hardly noticed the RCMP cruiser pull up, lights flashing.

Nanton, Alberta. Six a.m. Christmas morning. The old man awoke, swallowed a handful of pills, then dressed

and slipped out the back door. The heavy overnight snow was giving way to a brilliant sunrise. Driving through the uncleared streets, his early morning objective was the Bomber Museum. Turning on his truck radio, he listened to news of what was being hailed a Christmas miracle. A stricken Canadian Air Force jet had landed in Claresholm the night before, guided in by an unknown aircraft. The media loved such stories and this one was custom made for the season.

He parked his pickup in front of the museum as he had on this day for the past 33 years. There she sat: Lancaster FM-159, the Nanton Bomber, glistening in the early morning sun. Arriving in Europe just as the war ended, '159 returned to Canada, flying with the RCAF until 1959. Destined for the salvage yard, she instead ended up in this small town. For the past 33 years the bomber sat, never to fly again.

Climbing aboard the Lancaster, he made his way forward to the cockpit. This was his quiet time to remember the

friends he had lost almost fifty years ago. Sitting in the pilot's seat, he ran his hand over the control wheel. Alone with his thoughts, his mind transported him back to another time.

He remembered those he had flown with, the sons of farmers and ranchers, local boys who had volunteered for the RCAF. More at home on horses than in aircraft, they grew into a fearless crew, one he was proud to lead. Many had trained at nearby Claresholm before deploying to England. This fearless group of cowboys and farmhands had flown 17 missions over Europe. The old man had been their pilot. He swore a solemn promise they'd all make it home. Then came the night his Lancaster took heavy flak and he sustained a near-fatal injury. That ended his flying tour in England, and the old man was sent home. Shortly after he had returned to Canada, he received word his crew had been lost in action, Christmas Eve, over Nazi Germany. He never forgave himself for abandoning them and not making good on his promise.

The old bomber was suddenly a cold and very lonely place. As he turned to leave, he noticed the aircraft's logbook, sitting to his right on the flight engineer's seat. He picked it up. Someone must have mistakenly left it on board the bomber.

His fingers traced over the names and missions in the logbook. Once again was back in the skies over Europe and the raid where he himself had nearly died.

Suddenly his expression froze and his eyes welled up with tears as the presence of his lost crew suddenly filled the airplane. Then a peace he had not known in many years came over him, and he closed his eyes for the last time.

Those who found him said the former Flight Lieutenant, RCAF, had the look of someone who had left this world a content man. Still open was the Lancaster's logbook, clutched close to his chest. No one could explain the meaning of the final entry, nor how it got there.

It simply read: "We finally made it home. Merry Christmas." **CF**