

Number 5 Bombing and Gunnery School

Dafoe, Saskatchewan

By

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Introduction and Acknowledgements

Born as children of the Roaring Twenties and growing up as adolescents of the Dirty Thirties, they were men mostly in their late teens or early twenties when World War II broke out. They enlisted in the air forces of the British Commonwealth. Their reasons were as individual as they were, for some it was a way to escape the joblessness of the Thirties, for others it was patriotism and a chance for adventure, for some it was peer pressure, or it may have been a combination of any of those. After completing their basic training in their homeland they were sent to Canada to train in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

Of course, the vast majority of these young men went on to serve in various theatres of war after completing their training in Canada. Sadly, too many of them never returned to their homes. The British Commonwealth Air Training Program had an extremely good safety record and 131,553 aircrew were trained. Most of the accidents that occurred were minor, but some were serious, and some fatal. 856 trainee airmen were either seriously injured or killed. At #5 Bombing and Gunnery School near Dafoe, Saskatchewan one hundred and twenty-three accidents were recorded, most were minor.

Because those who were killed were not casualties of theatres of war their sacrifice is sometimes forgotten. Nevertheless, they gave their lives in the service of their countries. Like those who gave their lives overseas, those who died in training accidents in Canada left their families and homes voluntarily to serve their countries. The ultimate sacrifice is still the ultimate sacrifice whether it happened in Canada or overseas.

When Remembrance Day rolls around every year there seems to be a tendency to focus only the sacrifices of those overseas, but there are those who died on their way to the war who are buried in cemeteries across Canada. In Saskatchewan alone there are the graves of 171 young men from other Commonwealth countries who died in training. They too must never be forgotten. So, on Remembrance Day remember those who gave their lives overseas, then go to your local cemetery and give thanks too to those who lie there, many, many miles from their homes.

Doing so can be a profound experience. You don't see the graves overseas, but standing in the presence of those graves in your own community drives home the reality of war and sacrifice like nothing else can.

Presented here are the stories of those young men who died in accidents at #5 Bombing and Gunnery School located north of Dafoe, Saskatchewan. They rest in cemeteries scattered from Nova Scotia to British Columbia.

Many sources were utilized in compiling the stories of these young men, but I wish to especially thank Dr. Rachel Heide for her kind permission to use her research on Number 5 Bombing and Gunnery School at Dafoe, Saskatchewan.

Part 1

The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan in a Nut Shell

December 17, 1939 was Prime Minister MacKenzie King's 65th birthday. It was also the day he chose for signing the agreement with Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand that would launch the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. King was given to superstition, and to him signing this important agreement on his birthday would bring good luck to the project.

The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan would provide badly needed pilots and aircrew for the war effort. Also, according to King's thinking, it would provide a major part of Canada's contribution and lessen Canada's responsibility to provide front line troops. In turn, this would help reduce Canada's casualty rate and thereby reduce the likelihood of any call for conscription in Canada. King wanted to avoid the grave divisions the issue of conscription had caused in Canada during the First World War. The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan was a key part of his strategy.

The plan saw the rapid expansion of existing Royal Canadian Air Force bases along with the construction of over 100 new bases all across Canada. In addition, 11,000 aircraft would be needed, many to be built in Canada. Along with all of the other economic spin-offs that would come from the plan came jobs, wealth and prosperity that would lift Canada out of the depression years.

Saskatchewan had especially been ravaged by the Great Depression. 21 new training bases would be constructed there, the most of all the Prairie Provinces. In addition to the economic benefits Saskatchewan would receive from the construction, there would be the increased population the staff of the new bases would bring, and they would have money to spend. Thousands of service men and women would be coming to the province to serve at the training schools, and, of course, thousands of trainees would be coming as well. The trainees and staff came from Britain, New Zealand, Australia, India and other Commonwealth nations as well as Canada. The news of these new training schools gave Saskatchewan a significant boost in 1939 and was widely cheered by communities across the country also.

Saskatchewan would receive two Initial Flight Training Schools, seven Elementary Flight Training Schools, nine Service Flight Training Schools, one Air Observer School, and two Bombing and Gunnery Schools. The schools would be distributed among 14 communities. In

addition to that Number Four Training Command would be located in Regina and be responsible for overseeing all of the training schools in western Canada.

The largest training schools in Saskatchewan were the two bombing and gunnery schools dedicated to training bomb aimers and aerial gunners. One was located near Dafoe and other near Mossbank. There were also nine Service Flying training schools dedicated to training pilots, they were located near Saskatoon, Moncton, Weyburn, Yorkton, North Battleford (2), Moose Jaw, Estevan, and Swift Current. These varied in size from 1,100 to 1,500 permanent staff as well as 240 trainees. They also employed 100 to 150 civilians. Taken altogether, all of the training schools in Saskatchewan, large and small, had a total of approximately 14,800 permanent military staff and approximately 2,000 trainees at any given time. That was a significant population increase for a province that had seen its population steadily dwindle during the depression.

Pilots were trained at the Initial Flight Training Schools, Elementary Flight Training Schools, and Service Flight Training Schools. Normally a trainee progressed from one school to the next in the order given. After completing their Service Flight Training the new pilots were assigned either to overseas duty, an Operational Training Unit in Canada, or instructor positions in one of the flight training schools. Some were assigned duties as airborne chauffeurs for those training to be bomb aimers, aerial gunners, or navigators in Canada. Most new pilots wanted the overseas postings because, after all, they joined up to fight and they did not appreciate being assigned duties at home.

Navigators were trained at the Air Observer School in Regina and practiced their craft aboard training aircraft piloted by graduates of the Service Flight Training Schools, or by seasoned military pilots who were between tours of duty overseas. Bomb aimers and air gunners were trained at the Bombing and Gunnery Schools and, like the Navigators, practiced their skills aboard training aircraft flown by graduates of the Service Flight Training Schools. Radio operators learned their trade in Winnipeg and at Observer Schools or Bombing and Gunnery Schools.

All of the various schools in Saskatchewan were under the jurisdiction of the Royal Canadian Air Force. Moose Jaw, Swift Current, Caron, Assiniboia, Yorkton, North Battleford, Estevan, and Weyburn were operated by the Royal Air Force, but were still under the jurisdiction of the Royal Canadian Air Force. Personnel from various Commonwealth countries staffed the schools, so there were Canadians on staff at Royal Air Force operated schools and Royal Air Force personnel at R.C.A.F. schools.

Not only would the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan bring desperately needed economic prosperity, it would bring a sense of pride to Saskatchewan that the depression dust storms had swept away. Saskatchewan would now be playing a very important role in the war effort by providing the training ground for pilots and airmen who would go on to serve on the front lines overseas. The knowledge that it was making a large contribution directly to the war effort gave the province a much needed morale boost.

The skies of Saskatchewan became a beehive of activity as the thousands of new trainee airmen took to the air. The bright yellow Harvards, Tiger Moths, Ansons, Cranes, Bollingbokes, and Battles carried out hundreds of training missions a day year round.

Part Two

Number 5 Bombing and Gunnery School, Dafoe Saskatchewan



Opening on January 7, 1941, Number 5 Bombing and Gunnery School (#5BGS) was one of two such schools in Saskatchewan, the other was located near Mossbank. In all there were 11 Bombing and Gunnery Schools across Canada. The purpose of these schools was to train bomb aimers and aerial gunners for duty in Bomber Command overseas. The motto of #5 BGS was “We aim to teach, we teach to aim”.

The school was staffed mainly by members of the Royal Canadian Air Force, though at times there were instructors from Great Britain’s Royal Air Force and from other Commonwealth countries. The school consisted of two main groups, the instructors and support staff, who were there permanently and seldom transferred to other locations, and the students who came and went as their training programs required. The students came mainly from Canada, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and other Commonwealth countries such as India. But there were also some from the United States, Poland, and free France. Gunnery students typically came to Dafoe by way of Winnipeg where they first completed their training as wireless operators. After

completion of their training they became wireless operators/air gunners, or more commonly referred to at the time as WAGS.

Both bomb aimer and gunnery students had to complete classroom courses in such subjects as aircraft recognition, armament, care and maintenance of an aircraft's guns, and gun turret operation.

These schools were more than just military establishments; they were places where everyday human activity played out. These training schools were communities of their own, and all of them forged some ties with the local civilian communities as well. In short, the training schools were human places too. The streets of #5 BGS were named after the Dionne quintuplets who were quite famous in Canada at the time. There was Annette, Cecile, Emilie, and Yvonne Streets. The base had a band made up of members of the school's staff and they played noon concerts in the airmen's mess as well as for dances on the base. There was an indoor swimming pool where swim meets were staged with teams coming from other bases to compete. The pool also served as the emergency water supply in case of a fire on the base. Only the bombing and gunnery schools at Dafoe and Mossbank, Saskatchewan had pools. There was a library, and #5 BGS had its own magazine, the Digest, which was published quarterly. The staff put on plays and hosted traveling shows. There was a bowling alley and sports grounds for baseball and soccer in the summer and for hockey in the winter months. #5 BGS was not all work and no play, though the trainees seldom had time for leisure activities.

The base also had its own hospital, and it sometimes served the local civilian population when winter conditions did not permit them to travel to their own hospital. #5BGS was a complete small town of its own except for one thing – there were no quarters for married personnel. Some of the permanent staff were older, and married so this lack of accommodation presented a bit of a problem. Dafoe itself, being only a small village, offered very limited opportunities for housing. This situation was at least partly solved by the boomtown that sprang up outside the gates of the base. Some small shops also sprang up there. Life in the boomtown was primitive. There was no running water; the shacks were crude, uninsulated, drafty and frigid in the extreme cold of Saskatchewan winters. There were outdoor toilets, coal oil lamps, wood, and coal stoves, washboards, and hand-operated washing machines. Furniture was often makeshift, made from old crates.

By the summer of 1942 there were 142 residences in the boomtown. Some were owned by local farmers and some were owned by airmen who bought shacks and grain bins from area farmers and paid to have them moved into the boomtown where they rented them out to other airmen and also to the civilian staff of the training school. They rented easily, seldom standing vacant for a few days. Rents escalated to the point where a rentals committee was appointed by the War Time

Prices and Trade Board to review the situation. They selected 32 residences at random and found that a 10 by 20 foot shack with a small furnace was renting for as much as \$15 to \$20 per month and a small 6 by 10 foot space was going for \$5 per month. A “good house” was renting for \$35 per month.

The rentals committee ordered the rents cut by one third to one half. The average reduction in rents was \$8 per month. So, that “good house” mentioned previously was reduced to \$28.50 per month. Meanwhile a garage that had been divided into three residences and was renting for a total of \$67 per month for all three residences, was reduced to \$38.50 per month total.

While wives struggled with day-to-day chores in the boomtown, husbands were engaged in the deadly serious business of #5BGS. There were 41 fatalities from the time the training started on May 26, 1941 until its closing on February 17, 1945. Some of these were the result of mechanical failures. The aircraft, particularly in the early years, were obsolete and had been heavily used prior to becoming training aircraft. Some aircraft were just not suited to the Saskatchewan environment and the particular demands placed on them. Some aircraft, like the Bristol Bolingbroke for example, had idiosyncrasies that could be deadly if not respected by the pilot. Other accidents were the result of human error, even though all of the pilots had been well trained at other bases in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, or were military veteran pilots. The pilots were human, and sometimes made errors in judgement that had disastrous consequences.

#5 Bombing and Gunnery School is now privately owned farm land with little remaining of the structures that were there. Some remnants of the boomtown also remain across the road from where the main gate of the school was.

Part Three

Fatalities at Number 5 Bombing and Gunnery School

December 1, 1941



Fairey Battles

The winter of 1941/42 was the first taste of a Saskatchewan winter for #5BGS. The weather played a key role in two fatal crashes.

The first fatal accident at #5BGS occurred on Monday December 1, 1941 with the tragic crash of Fairey Battle 2068. The Fairey Battle was a single engine light bomber that had a dismal service record and was withdrawn from active service early on in the war. It was low and slow and an easy target for the much faster and more agile enemy fighters. It was retired to training duty. It, like other bombers of the day, was designed for long missions with cool down time between them. However, in the training environment the missions were short and there was little cool down time before the next one. The constant cycle of cooling and heating resulted in engines cracking and losing coolant, resulting in overheating, fires and spraying crews with scalding hot glycol.

On this day the pilot of Fairey Battle was Sergeant Joseph Cote, R.C.A.F., who had already flown this machine twice that very afternoon. After each flight he had reported that the plane was in satisfactory condition and fit to fly another exercise. Two gunnery students, Leading Aircraftmen Colin Coles and Ronald Crothers, both members of the Royal Australian Air Force, climbed aboard for their turn at live firing exercises. The air temperature was just above freezing and the sky was clear as the Battle ascended into the sky heading for the target area at Big Quill Lake.

Once over the frozen lake the exercises began with each student taking turns firing at a target set up on the ice below. After completing the first pass, the Cote banked and circled the plane as he had done many times before. While making his turn, a stream of white smoke issued from Cote's plane. Cote straightened the plane out and was flying straight and level at approximately 300 feet of altitude when another pilot in the area saw Cote's Battle bank over almost vertically, stall and roll over on its back. It then dove onto the ice of the lake at high speed trailing white smoke. Upon impact the plane caught fire and burned. Cole and Crothers were killed instantly. Cote was gravely injured, badly scalded, and burned, he died shortly after arriving at the base hospital. Snow accumulation in the area had hampered rescue crews attempting to reach the crash site on the lake.

During the investigation that followed the crash, the Chief Aero-Mechanic of #5BGS commented that the Merlin engine, which powered all Fairey Battles, was "not adapted to being used in a climate where the temperature is continually changing". The constant taking off and landing required during a typical training day caused heating and cooling stresses on the engine components that would lead to glycol coolant leaks. In the course of the crash the engine of Cote's plane had broken loose and fell through the ice, sinking to the bottom of the lake. Because of that any telltale signs of white deposits characteristic of a glycol leak had been washed away making it impossible to determine with certainty that such a leak was the cause of the crash. However, burns on Cote's face corroborated the conclusion that a sudden, major glycol leak had occurred. The redness of the burnt skin would not have been caused by gasoline, and the fact that the eyeballs had not been damaged lead investigators to believe that these burns to Cote's face had occurred before the crash and not in the fire that resulted from the crash itself. It appeared that Cote had been scalded by hot glycol streaming from the engine. This, in turn, caused him to lose control of the aircraft. However, the evidence gathered from the crash did not prove this conclusively.

Cote was considered a capable pilot who did above average work. It appeared that the Battle had stalled during a high speed turn at low altitude and there would not have been enough time to recover. Upon investigating the wreckage, inspectors found that the rudder was in full port

position, indicating a hard turn. Investigators considered that this could have aggravated the stall at high speed during the turn. In the end, the Accident Investigation Branch could not draw a decisive conclusion as to the exact cause of the crash.

Given the testimony of the other pilot who was in the area and witnessed the events leading up to the crash, and the medical evidence gathered from the body of Sergeant Cote, it appears that a mechanical failure resulted in the pilot becoming disabled and unable to maintain control of the aircraft at very low altitude with the result that it crashed onto the ice. The cold Saskatchewan winter climate had played a factor in causing the mechanical failure that started the whole tragic chain of events by causing the rapid cooling of the aircraft's engine between flights, leading to cracking the engine block and allowing the glycol coolant to leak out.

Sergeant (pilot) Joseph Landre Cote was from Montreal, Quebec, age 19. He is buried in Notre Dame Roman Catholic Cemetery, Ottawa, Ontario.

LAC Colin Alfred Coles was from Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, age 23. He is buried in Humboldt Municipal Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

LAC Ronald Kenneth Crothers was from Parramatta, New South Wales, Australia, age 19. He is buried in the Humboldt Municipal Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

March 23, 1942

At Bombing and Gunnery Schools trainee Air Gunners were taught air-to-air firing. This was accomplished by use of a drogue that resembled a very large windsock. The drogue was towed behind an aircraft to which it was attached by a steel cable. The aircraft towing the drogue was referred to as a target tug. The trainee Air Gunner would be in a second aircraft. The pilot of the second aircraft would make passes at the drogue while the trainee fired at it.

On March 23, 1943 two target tugs and two Fairey Battle aircraft carrying trainee Air Gunners were to fly air-to-air firing exercises over Big Quill Lake. In Fairey Battle number 1892 were trainee Air Gunners LACs George Gerald Hower and Donald Francis Hood, along with their pilot. The other aircraft, carrying trainee Air Gunners was Fairey Battle number 2069 that had LAC Emerson Phillip Harris and his brother, LAC Gordon Harris, as well as their pilot, Flight Sergeant Harry Naoum. All involved were members of the R.C.A.F.

The Fairey Battle had large blind spots for the pilot. He could not see above and behind, or directly down, or over the nose and down. This shortcoming, combined with a disregard for standing orders, was to lead to tragic results on more than one occasion.

All four planes were to meet at the rendezvous point over Big Quill Lake but one of the target tugs was delayed by radio problems. Fairey Battle 1892 was the first aircraft to reach the rendezvous point and the pilot circled around for about ten minutes waiting for the other three aircraft. Finally he spotted a target tug approaching, and since he could see no other aircraft in the area, he began to make his approach on the drogue behind the target tug. Suddenly, Fairey Battle 2069 appeared and crossed in front of 1892 and seemed to be making for the drogue but instead flew alongside the target tug. Then the pilot of 2069 positioned his aircraft above 1892 and jockeyed up and down as if trying to signal something to 1892, but the pilot of 1892 had no idea what the signal might mean. Fairey Battle 2069 then disappeared from the sight of the pilot of 1892.

The pilot of Fairey Battle 1892 now thought 2069 had cleared the area and he was alone. 1892 hit an updraft and rose slightly in the air, the pilot heard a loud bang and his aircraft started to spin down toward the lake. Fairey Battle 2069 had been immediately above Fairey Battle 1892 and the propeller of 2069 had chopped the tail off of 1892. The propeller, engine, and engine cowling fell off of 2069 and the aircraft fell into a flat spin heading for the ground. The pilot of Fairey Battle 1892, Flight Sergeant W.M. Haggart, managed to parachute to safety. LAC Gordon Harris, brother of LAC Emerson Harris, was in 2069 and was injured when he was thrown clear

of the wreckage. Gordon Harris survived his injuries. Flight Sergeant Naoum and LACs Hood, Hower, and Harris were killed when the two mangled aircraft hit the ground.

The investigation into the crash determined that the first aircraft at the rendezvous point had priority over the target drogue. That aircraft was Fairey Battle 1892. There was no explanation found as to why Flight Sergeant Naoum in Battle 2069 had flown in what appeared to be such an erratic manner, but his actions were a breach of flying regulations. That breach cost not only his own, but three other lives as well.

LAC Emerson Phillip Harris was 22 years of age, from Speers, Saskatchewan. He is buried in Speers New Ottawa Cemetery, Speers, Saskatchewan.

LAC Donald Francis Hood was 21 years of age, from Vancouver, British Columbia. LAC Hood is buried in the Ocean View Burial Park, Burnaby, British Columbia.

LAC George Gerald Joseph Hower was 21 years of age, from Allentown, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. He was a member of the R.C.A.F. LAC Hower is buried in Sacred Heart Cemetery, Whitehall, Lehigh County, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.

Flight Sergeant (pilot) Harry Naoum was 26 years of age, from Montreal, Quebec. He is buried in Mount Royal Cemetery, Montreal, Quebec.

July 23, 1942

In a clear sky Fairey Battles 1925 and 2066 were returning to #5 BGS after completing their gunnery exercises. The pilot of Fairey Battle 1925 began his approach to runway #1 from an altitude of 1,500 feet and began descending to 1,200 feet. In his aircraft's blind spot was Fairey Battle 2066, already at an altitude of 1,200 feet. The pilot of 1925 was unable to see 2066 directly below him. The two aircraft were only about forty feet apart as they approached the runway. When both aircraft lowered their flaps and landing gear at the same time it became obvious to those on the ground that both aircraft were about to attempt to land at the same time. The aircraft were still about a mile distant from the runway when the control tower flashed a red Aldus lamp to signal them not to attempt to land. Neither aircraft responded to the signal and were rapidly approaching and descending. The control tower fired a red Very flare to warn them off, but by this time the aircraft were down to about thirty to fifty feet in altitude. Seeing the flare, the pilot of 2066 applied power and the Fairey Battle rose and collided with Fairey Battle 1925. The propeller of 1925 chopped off the back end of 2066. The two aircraft were then locked together and fell to the ground, bursting into flames one hundred feet short of the end of runway #1. The pilot of Fairey Battle 1925 escaped from the wreckage and, despite his injuries, attempted to save the lives of the others still in the burning wreck, for that he was recommended for the British Empire Medal. Pilot Sergeant Eustace Dunn, R.C.A.F., and LAC Osborne Nickerson, R.C.A.F., a trainee Air Gunner, were killed in Fairey Battle 2066. LAC Joseph Bail, R.C.A.F., also a trainee Air Gunner, was killed in Fairey Battle 1925.

At the inquiry into the crash, the survivors testified that no one had seen the Aldus lamp signal and that the pilot of Fairey Battle 1925 did not see Fairey Battle 2066 below and slightly ahead of him. The investigation found that the pilot of Fairey Battle 1925 had violated standing orders by starting his approach at 1,500 feet instead of the ordered 1,200 feet. It was pointed out at the inquiry that the pilot of 1925 had a record of dangerous flying practices since his arrival at #5 BGS.

The pilot of Fairey Battle 2066, Sergeant Dunn was killed in the crash, so it was not known whether or not he had seen the signals to abort his landing. However, witnesses noted that after the flare was fired Dunn's aircraft rose slightly, which may have indicated that he did see the flare. But, if that was the case he also violated procedure that called for a pilot in that situation to increase speed, maintain the same altitude and fly straight ahead. Witnesses testified that Dunn had gunned the engine of his aircraft as the flare was fired, but with the flaps still down for landing, that caused the aircraft to rise slightly, and since there was very little separation between Dunn's aircraft and the one above him, the slight rise was enough to cause the two aircraft to come into contact with each other.

Sergeant Eustace Hedley Dunn was 22, from Burnham, Saskatchewan. He is buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Swift Current, Saskatchewan.

LAC Joseph Philippe Arthur Bail was 25, from St. Lambert, Quebec. He is buried in St. Lambert Roman Catholic Cemetery, St. Lambert, Quebec.

LAC Osborne Victor Nickerson was 26, from Pleasant Lake, Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia. He is buried in the Nickerson Family Cemetery, Pleasant Lake, Nova Scotia.

December 9, 1942



Bristol Bolingbroke

Again the Saskatchewan winter played a role in this tragic crash. Quickly changing weather and short daylight hours were key factors.

It was a cold and partly cloudy day as Flight Sergeant Jack Phillips, R.C.A.F. took off in Bolingbroke 9924 for another routine training exercise. The Bolingbroke was the Canadian made version of the Bristol Blenheim light bomber. It was a twin engine aircraft and was being used as a frontline bomber overseas as well as for training purposes at home.

The Bolingbroke had a limited ceiling of operation and was slow in comparison with the newer frontline aircraft. Designed to fly straight and level, the Bolingbroke did not take kindly to any sort of attempt at aerobatics, even mild ones, and it could be very unforgiving. Also, its heavy engines and relatively small wing surface area meant that it had a high landing speed.

Aboard Phillip's aircraft were LACs Morgan and Selfe, both members of the Royal Air Force. While out over Big Quill Lake a sudden snow storm intensified before Phillips could make a return to the base at #5BGS. Visibility became greatly reduced as was the daylight. Phillips became disoriented, unable to tell up from down. The falling snow, low clouds and the white fields below made everything look the same and he could not make out a horizon with which to orient himself. Thusly disoriented, he let the aircraft slip into and inadvertent spin. Since he had been at a low altitude to begin with, there wasn't enough altitude to recover control and the aircraft slammed into the lake killing all three men on board instantly.

The investigation noted that Phillips had not had any instrument flying practice for a month previous to the crash except for a routine two hours practice in the base's Link flight simulator. However, more instrument flight training may not have changed the result in this particular situation. The Commanding Officer of #5BGS, Air Commodore Rodger Amedee DelHaye, testified that "there is a very dangerous period during changing over from visual flying to instrument flying, and a pilot is very apt to disregard what his instruments indicate and attempt to fly the plane by sense of direction as well as by instruments. This error has proved fatal in many instances." The crash was officially attributed to pilot inability.

Flight Sergeant Jack William Phillips was 22, from Fort William, Ontario. His wife, Lois, was living in the boomtown outside the gate of #5 BGS at the time of the crash. He is buried in Mountain View Cemetery, Thunder Bay, Ontario.

LAC Reginald Ivor Morgan was 26, from Surrey, England. He was survived by his wife and their two children living in Surrey. He is buried in the Humboldt Municipal Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

LAC Frederick Walter Selfe was 26, from London, England. He is buried in the Humboldt Municipal Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

January 10, 1943

At the controls of Bolingbroke 10000 was Sergeant Terry John Sugrue, Royal New Zealand Air Force. He was a combat veteran, having served one tour of duty overseas flying Bolingbrokes and Blenheims accumulating 648 total flying hours, 129 of those on Bolingbrokes. He had been a staff pilot at #5BGS since the previous May. On board with Sugrue was another pilot, Sergeant Raymond Chappell, also a member of the Royal New Zealand Air Force.

Their trainees for this exercise were LAC William Moisley, another New Zealander, and Corporal James Meneilly of the R.C.A.F. The training exercise progressed without a hitch until, on the way back to Dafoe from Big Quill Lake, the aircraft suddenly rolled and spun into the ground. The engines exploded and all four on board were killed. The crash occurred four miles southeast of the Village of Quill Lake. Roads leading to the crash scene were blocked with snow, delaying the rescue party from reaching the wreckage.

The cause of the crash was never determined, but the accident investigators speculated that the two pilots may have been switching seats. If the plane rolled and fell into a spin while the pilots were out of their seats neither pilot would have been able to get into a position where they could operate the controls in order to recover from the spin. The Accident Investigations Branch could only remind pilots “that Bolingbroke aircraft must be flown with caution and only within its allowed limits of maneuvers at an adequate speed, and in accordance with all pertinent flying regulations.” The Bolingbroke was to show its unforgiving nature many times during the existence of #5BGS.

Sergeant (pilot) Raymond Charles Chappell was 23, from Auckland, New Zealand. He is buried in the Humboldt Municipal Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

Sergeant (pilot) Terry John Sugrue was 22, from Greytown, New Zealand. He is buried in the Humboldt Municipal Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

LAC William Raymond Moisley was 23, from Auckland, New Zealand. He is buried in St. Augustine Roman Catholic Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

Corporal James Alexander Meneilly was 26, from Biggar, Saskatchewan. He is buried in the Bigger Cemetery, Biggar, Saskatchewan.

March 29, 1943

With Sergeant Edward Walsh, Royal Air Force, at the controls Bolingbroke 9935 thundered down the runway and rose into the clear morning sky over #5BGS. Aboard were two trainee bomb aimers, LACs Cecil McKenzie and Reginald MacFarlane, both members of the Royal Canadian Air Force. Their mission was to act as a target for a second aircraft in a camera gun exercise. In addition, McKenzie and MacFarlane were to practice their skills pinpointing bombing targets.

Sergeant Walsh had his aircraft performing “lazy eights”¹ above and behind the second aircraft that carried the trainees using the camera gun when one of the trainees in the second plane noticed a flame come from the port engine of Walsh’s craft. He dismissed this as just normal exhaust emissions. When black smoke appeared from both of Walsh’s engines those watching from the other aircraft realized there was something seriously wrong with Walsh’s Bolingbroke. Walsh ceased doing the lazy eights and his aircraft began losing altitude. White smoke was now streaming from the aircraft as it headed for the ground. With his cockpit full of smoke Walsh ordered his passengers to abandon the aircraft. McKenzie bailed out but was killed. Walsh jumped too, but by that time he was too close to the ground and his parachute did not open in time to save him, he was killed. MacFarlane was unable to get out of the aircraft in time and was killed when it crashed to the ground.

Engulfed in flames, Bolingbroke 9935 had glided to the ground six miles south-east of Humboldt. As it hit the ground the flaming wreckage bounced onto a hay wagon being driven by Alois Fahl. The plane exploded spraying gasoline over the straw in the wagon and the two horses that were pulling it. The horses and hay wagon were destroyed. Mr. Fahl was badly burned, but survived. His 8 year old son had managed to jump clear of the hay wagon just in time and was not injured.

The investigation into the crash revealed that the fire had begun in the port side wheel well and it was believed that a split in the fuel tank on that side allowed gasoline to leak and cause the fire. The impact of the crash had split open both fuel tanks and the ensuing fire had damaged them so severely that conclusive evidence pertaining to the condition of the fuel tanks before the crash had been destroyed. The Accident Investigation Branch stated “ it is considered that splitting of the tank could have resulted due to a strain being transmitted by the baffles to the tank shell as a result of gasoline surging caused by the lazy eights movements.” The Accident Investigation Branch had already recorded a number of accidents where gas tanks cracked or split because of gas sloshing about in the tank as the aircraft moved about and this, in turn, caused the outer skin

¹ A lazy eight is a series of opposing 180 degree turns combined with climbs and descents. Looked at from the side of the aircraft’s path the pattern resembles an 8 laid on its side.

of the tank to break. The records of the Bolingbroke Walsh had been flying showed that a leaking fuel tank had been replaced in the past. More frequent and meticulous inspections of this type of fuel tank were recommended while modifications to fuel tanks on Bolingbrokes were being completed.

Sergeant (pilot) Edward Walsh was 29. He is buried in the St. Augustine Roman Catholic Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

LAC Reginald Robert MacFarlane was 22, from Vancouver, British Columbia. He is buried in Mountain View Cemetery, Vancouver, British Columbia.

LAC Cecil Malcolm McKenzie was 20, from Turtleford, Saskatchewan. He is buried in the Turtleford Cemetery, Turtleford, Saskatchewan.

July 8, 1943

Young Canadian men volunteered to join the Royal Canadian Air Force with the purpose of serving overseas. Whatever their personal motivation, the goal was the same; to fly and fight. The way they saw it, they did not join up to spend even a portion of the war chauffeuring trainees around Canadian skies. However, particularly during the early years of the war, there was a desperate need for instructors in Canada at all levels of training and many of the best and brightest of the graduates of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan were assigned postings in Canada as instructors and staff pilots. This predicament spawned feelings of frustration that sometimes spilled over in disastrous ways.

Pilot Officer David Alexander Colvin, Royal Canadian Air Force, flying Bolingbroke 10071 on July 8, 1943 had been a responsible pilot, but after spending fourteen months at the same station flying exercises as a staff pilot, he grew increasingly restless in his job. On this day his assignment was to take two gunnery trainees, LACs John Harries and Walter Dorrell, both members of the Royal Air Force, on an air-to-air firing exercise. For both the trainee air gunners this was supposed to be their last exercise before graduating.

In air-to-air firing exercises two aircraft were involved, one carried the trainee gunners who took turns at the gun mounted in their aircraft. The other aircraft was known as the target tug, and it pulled a target consisting of a retractable drogue that streamed at the end of a cable attached to the rear of the target tug aircraft. The trainees would then fire colour coded ammunition at the drogue and their score would depend on how many marks bearing their colour were left on the drogue.

Colvin spotted the target tug aircraft and started his approach. He began a turn to the right so as to align his Bolingbroke with the target tug so that the exercise could begin. Colvin banked the Bolingbroke into a sixty or seventy degree angle and in doing so struck the tow cable. His aircraft nosed down and went into a slow flat spin from an altitude of 1,500 feet. Colvin was unable to recover the aircraft in time and it crashed into a field three miles north-east of #5BGS. All aboard were killed.

Inspection of the wreckage clearly showed that no mechanical defects led to the crash. Witnesses had noted the unusually steep turn, and fellow pilots cringed at the thought of making such a tight turn in a Bolingbroke without sufficient speed and altitude to permit time for recovery should the aircraft go into a spin. It was believed that the steep turn either caused Colvin to blackout or put his aircraft into a spin that was uncontrollable. Striking the tow cable contributed to spinning the aircraft also.

Colvin's action was an error in judgment. He had routinely flown dangerously, and in breach of flying regulations, for the last three months of his career. His fellow pilots testified that he had made a habit of making steep and tight turns in all maneuvering situations. In gunnery exercises, when the gunnery aircraft would be following the target tug in close formation, he would wait until the tug was half way through a turn before he would begin his turn, thus making it all the steeper, tighter and more spectacular. Also, during camera gun exercises he flew, Colvin made his lazy eight maneuvers in such an exaggerated fashion that they became almost aerobatic. He avoided stalling the aircraft at these times by flying much faster than he was supposed to. Colvin had even attempted a loop in a Bolingbroke on a previous occasion, an incredibly dangerous maneuver in that aircraft.

Colvin had told colleagues that he never watched his air speed. He bragged about making stall turns and about having an air speed as low as 90 to 100 miles per hour in some turns. Friends had tried to warn him of the dangers of his flying habits, but with no effect. The Flight Commander told the inquiry that Colvin gave him "the impression that he was thoroughly bored with flying on exercises having been at this work for fourteen months at this station." It was recognized that this posting had been longer than the usual nine to twelve months, but sometimes the lack of available staff pilots required postings to be extended.

Deliberately dangerous flying was clearly the cause of this fatal accident, but dealing with pilot dissatisfaction did not end with the crash of Bolingbroke 10071. Because the Flight Commander had been unable to get a positive response from the unhappy Colvin, and because he had not brought the problem to the attention of the Officer Commanding Flying, or the Chief Instructor, or the Commanding Officer of #5BGS, the Flight Commander found himself in a difficult situation. The inquiry recommended that inquiries be made routinely by the Officer Commanding Flying and the Chief Instructor as to the flying habits of pilots in order to ensure that breeches of discipline did not go unnoticed again.

Pilot Officer Alexander David Colvin was 20, from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. He is buried in the South Hill Cemetery, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan.

LAC Walter William Dorrell was 19, from Manchester, England. He is buried in the Humboldt Municipal Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

LAC John Gordon Harries was 23, from London, England. He is buried in the Humboldt Municipal Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

November 26, 1943



Avro Anson

It was a cloudy afternoon when Flight Sergeant William Hill, Royal Canadian Air Force, took off on a routine wind velocity training exercise in Avro Anson 11287. Also on board were bomb aiming instructor Sergeant Peter Galgan, Royal Canadian Air Force, and LACs Thomas Crosthwaite and John Barnes, both members of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.

Farmers in the area of the village of Leroy reported seeing an Anson flying only approximately 100 feet above the ground. The port side propeller was not turning, but the plane was flying level and straight. With a number of fallow and stubble fields close by the witnesses expected the plane would be able to make a safe forced landing if needed. Then they saw the plane bank to the left, the same side as dead engine. It appeared to recover and level out once again but the left wing dipped again and the plane burst into flames. It plummeted toward the ground, disappearing behind a small hill. The witnesses then saw billows of black smoke as the plane struck the ground. The Anson exploded on impact and was completely destroyed in the ensuing fire. The crash had occurred eight miles north of Leroy. All aboard were killed.

Earlier that day, Anson 11287 had passed its daily inspection and it had been flown on three previous routine training flights. However, only two days earlier the same Anson had been

declared unserviceable due to internal damage in the port side engine. The next day it was repaired, inspected and tested before returning to service.

The investigation into to crash revealed that the #2 piston in the port side engine had broken and the link rod attaching it to the crankshaft had broken free with pieces of it falling into the crankcase. All of this had caused gouging and scoring in the #2 cylinder which, in turn, caused the engine to seize and stop turning. Since the propeller was unable to turn freely, it caused considerable drag and loss of air speed.

So, a serious mechanical failure had occurred but the question remained whether or not it had to result in such a devastating crash. There were vacant fields around that were suitable for a safe forced landing, yet Sergeant Hill made no apparent attempt to land in any of the fields. Hill had accumulated 476 hours of flying time, 357 of those in Ansons. He was considered to be a conscientious and reliable pilot and had not been involved in any flying accidents previously. In fact, he had just recently been tested by a Visiting Flight and found to be an average pilot, able to fly safely by night or day.

Because pilots knew that one does not turn in the direction of a failed engine, and because Hill should have made a forced landing in an empty field, the investigators concluded that pilot error had been the cause of the crash. The exact of cause of the accident can never be known because there may have something else wrong with the Anson that forced Hill to turn toward the failed engine when he knew that he shouldn't. Any evidence of what that might have been was lost in the fire.

The accident investigator recommended that a separate forced and precautionary landing field be established so that staff pilots could practice emergency landings away from the regular traffic of the training base.

Flight Sergeant (pilot) William Leslie Hill was 23, from Lenore, Manitoba. He is buried in the Breadalbane Cemetery, Lenore, Manitoba.

Sergeant Peter Edward Galgan was 29, from Dana, Saskatchewan. He is buried in St. Maurice Cemetery, Dana, Saskatchewan.

LAC John Barnes was 19, from Cheltenham, England. He is buried in the Humboldt Municipal Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

LAC Thomas Banks Rendell Crosthwaite was 19. He is buried in the Humboldt Municipal Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

February 8, 1944

The Bolingbroke aircraft was the Canadian made version of the Bristol Blenheim light bomber being used in Europe. It was an aircraft that needed to be flown fast and it needed to be landed at high speed in order to avoid stalling, which would result in a crash at low altitude. The high landing speed could result in the pilot overshooting the runway. The Bolingbroke was not an easy aircraft to land safely.

While returning to #5BGS from a routine gunnery exercise, Bolingbroke 10195 with Flight Sergeant Pilot Douglas Wilson, Royal Canadian Air Force, at the controls overshot the runway while attempting to land. Wilson opened the throttles to gain enough altitude to make another attempt at the landing. At that point one of the two engines failed and the Bolingbroke stalled, crashed, and burned a half mile south of #5BGS. Flight Sergeant Wilson was killed on impact, while Sergeant Raymond Hemmingway, a gunnery instructor with the Royal Air Force, was seriously injured. Three trainees from New Zealand were also aboard and they managed to escape serious injury. Sergeant Hemmingway succumbed to his injuries the following day in the hospital at #5BGS.

That same day saw another accident at #5BGS when Bolingbroke 9993, on a routine gunnery exercise, was forced to make a crash landing in an open field. An engine cowling had blown off, causing the aircraft to lose speed and altitude. The Bolingbroke was a write-off, but the crew all survived with only one man slightly injured.

Both of these crashes showed the same potentially deadly idiosyncrasy of the Bristol Bolingbroke: sufficient air speed was critical to keeping it in the air. The inquiry into the crash of Bolingbroke 10195 concluded that Flight Sergeant Wilson had waited too long before deciding to abort the landing and go around again. The aircraft was only fifteen feet above the ground, with wheels and flaps down. His airspeed was too slow to gain the speed needed to climb. The inquiry found that it would have been impossible for the Bolingbroke to go around again on just one engine and with the flaps and landing gear down. A stall, and subsequently a crash, would have been inevitable as it indeed was in this case. Pilots at #5 BGS were reminded that airspeed was critical to the safe flying of Bolingbrokes.

Flight Sergeant (pilot) Douglas Kitchener Wilson was 27, from Vancouver, British Columbia. He is buried in Brookside Cemetery, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Sergeant Raymond Hemmingway was 23, from Leeds, Yorkshire, England. He is buried in St. Augustine Roman Catholic Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

May 24, 1944

May 24, 1944 was a particularly dark day for #5BGS with the loss of 5 airmen. Pilot Officer Frederick Butcher of the R.C.A.F. was assigned to Bolingbroke 9881 for a routine camera gun exercise. On board with him were Warrant Officer Air Gunner William Mitchell, R.C.A.F., LACs Stephen Newton, Royal Air Force, Stanley Steeden, R.C.A.F., and Howard Rolls, R.C.A.F.

Pilot Officer Butcher was very experienced, having completed a tour of operations in Europe during which he accumulated 297 hours of flying time in Bristol Blenheims, the British version of the Bolingbroke. He had also completed a refresher training course before joining #5BGS as a staff pilot. He had been flying Bolingbrokes for #5BGS for six months prior to the date of this accident and had accumulated another 172 flying hours in them. He was known by superior officers to be a steady, safe, experienced and competent pilot.

The crew of Bolingbroke 9881 completed their camera gun exercise at approximately 9 a.m. Butcher seen flying straight and level as he headed back toward #5BGS.

However, a number of area farmers reported seeing Bolingbroke 9881 climbing and diving as well as banking steeply to the left and the right. Then they witnessed the aircraft's right wing suddenly dip and the plane fell into a spin from an altitude of approximately 4 to 5 thousand feet. During the spin the engines sputtered and then quit. A couple of hundred feet above the ground the aircraft ceased spinning and dove straight into the ground at a high rate of speed. All aboard were killed on impact. The crash occurred six miles south-west of #5BGS.

After hearing what the witnesses had to say, the accident investigators concluded that the pilot had been engaging in prohibited aerobatics. Both the Officer Commanding Armament Training and the Officer Commanding Gunnery Flight testified to the investigation that Butcher was a safe and reliable pilot with a good deal of experience on the type of aircraft he was flying that day. The investigating officer stated "there can be no doubt that a pilot of the ability of (Butcher) would not attempt to spin a Bolingbroke from such a low altitude." Still, mechanical failure was ruled out as the cause after inspection of the wreckage. The engines had quit because they had been switched off. Butcher had turned them off in order to prevent a fire when the aircraft struck the ground and so increase the chances of at least some on board surviving. No fire had occurred as a result of the crash.

The Accident Investigation Branch concluded that the spin had been inadvertent and its exact cause could not be determined. However, examination of the wreckage did show that the pilot's harness had not been fastened, which was contrary to the station's standing orders. Because the pilot was not strapped in, he would have been thrown out of his seat by the force of the spin and therefore would have been unable to regain control of the aircraft. Even experienced, veteran pilots made fatal mistakes.

Pilot Officer Frederick Lloyd Butcher was 24, from Solsgirth, Manitoba. He is buried in Birtle Cemetery, Birtle, Manitoba.

Warrant Officer William David Mitchell was 23, from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. He is buried in South Hill Cemetery, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan.

LAC Stephen Newton was 21, from Yorkshire, England. He is buried in the Humboldt Municipal Cemetery, Humboldt, Saskatchewan.

LAC Howard John Rolls was 26, from Moorefield, Ontario. He is buried in Fairview Cemetery, Listowel, Ontario.

LAC Stanley Edward Steeden was 18, from Colonsay, Saskatchewan. He is buried in the Colonsay Cemetery, Colonsay, Saskatchewan.

October 31, 1944

On the night of October 31, 1944 five Anson aircraft took off between 7:30 p.m. and approximately 8 p.m. Four were going on bombing exercises and one was on a familiarization flight. Fog was expected to appear about 10 p.m., but at 7 p.m. visibility was good and the ceiling unlimited. It was expected that all five aircraft would be safely back before the fog was expected to roll in.

The first aircraft to return landed at 9 p.m. and the pilot reported seeing ground fog, as did the Duty Pilot in the control tower. The remaining four aircraft were recalled by radio, but only three of the four responded to the call. The radio aboard Anson 6389 had malfunctioned. His broadcasts could be heard, but it appeared he was not receiving any broadcasts from either the control tower or any other aircraft. The pilot of Anson 6524 watched as Anson 6389 descended into the fog that now shrouded the aerodrome. After a short wait he decided to attempt landing also.

At an altitude of 400 feet the pilot of Anson 6524 found himself still in the fog and still descending. When he reached what he thought to be 150 feet he stopped his descent and turned on his landing lights, which only made visibility worse due to the glare of his lights. When he started a turn to the left the wing of his aircraft struck the ground and the aircraft crashed into some trees just outside the aerodrome's western boundary. One trainee, LAC Stanley Harold Ling, a student Bomb Aimer, was seriously injured and later died in the hospital at #5BGS. The pilot and two other trainees were able to escape the burning wreckage.

Anson 6389 had also crashed in the fog, some 200 yards off the western boundary of the aerodrome. The pilot, Sergeant Ronald Ellis Fox, R.C.A.F., and his three trainees, LACs George Horst, Lars Cyril Jansson and Henry Loewen, also members of the R.C.A.F., were killed. Horst was a student Bomb Aimer and Jansson was a student Air Gunner.

There were still two other Ansons in the air. Both diverted to the BCATP base at Regina and landed safely, though one of them, Anson 6458, had experienced radio failure similar to that which occurred aboard Anson 6389.

The investigation into the crashes revealed that the Duty Pilot and the Officer in Charge, as well as the meteorological observers, were lax in monitoring the weather conditions that night. The Duty Pilot erred in estimating the ceiling at 300 feet and in giving permission to Anson 6524 to

land. Also, three of the pilots flying that night admitted that they did not read the posted weather reports before taking off.

The investigation also found that the Duty Pilot should have fired red flares forbidding landing that night and should not have relied solely on radio contact with the aircraft. The pilots of the two aircraft that attempted to land were also found to be at fault for attempting to land instead of diverting to another aerodrome. The Chief Instructor and the Officer Commanding #5 Bombing and Gunnery School were also sanctioned for the faulty organization that resulted in the two crashes. However, at the same time, the leadership ability of the Officer Commanding was not called into question because he alone had the presence of mind to divert the remaining aircraft.

Sergeant (pilot) Ronald Ellis Fox was from Lloyminster, Saskatchewan, age 20. He is buried in Lloyminster Cemetery, Lloyminster, Saskatchewan.

LAC George Horst was from Rosthern, Saskatchewan, age 25. He is buried in Rosthern Cemetery, Rosthern, Saskatchewan.

LAC Lars Cyril Jansonn was from Crestwynd, Saskatchewan, age 17. He is buried in Rosedale Cemetery, Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan.

LAC Stanley Harold Ling was from Sardis, British Columbia, age 21. He is buried in Carmen Cemetery, Sardis, British Columbia. His brother, Frank James Ling, was a Flight Lieutenant in the Royal Canadian Air Force and was killed in action March 15, 1945 on a mission to Lutskendorf, Germany. He was 29 years of age. Flight Lieutenant Frank James Ling has no known grave, his name is inscribed on the Runnymede War Memorial, Englefield Green, Egham, Surrey, England.

LAC Henry Loewen was from Rokeby, Saskatchewan, age 20. He is buried in Yorkton Cemetery, Yorkton, Saskatchewan.