

## Flying Officer Ferruccio Giuseppe Giacomelli -“Fritz”

Fritz was born in Hamilton, Ontario in 1920, a first generation Italian-Canadian. He was a star athlete in high school and broke all inter-school pole vaulting records. He was also a talented football player and was good enough to try out for the Hamilton Tiger Cats after the war. One of the reasons he served in the RCAF is that he thought it would make things easier on the home front for his Italian-Canadian family to have a son in the service...and he was right.

He enlisted in Hamilton in April 1941 and was selected for training as an Observer. After Manning Depot in Toronto he spent over a month at McMaster University RCAF Detachment in Hamilton brushing up on his mathematics.

Once he had completed a navigation course at No.1 Air Observer School at Malton, Ontario, he learned the second part of his trade at No.1 Bombing and Gunnery School at Jarvis, Ontario. He was awarded his Observer Wing in March 1942. He was then off to New Brunswick to further study navigation at No. 2 Air Navigation School at Pennfield Ridge.



Fritz Giacomelli at 14 OTU in Cottesmore 1942 with Hampden bomber



**Fritz's air and ground crew with 149 Squadron Stirling at Lakenheath**

Upon arriving in England he flew with No. 9 Advanced Flying Unit (Observer) before being posted to 14 Operational Training Unit at Cottesmore. It was here that he teamed up with New Zealander Laurie Blair who would become his first tour pilot. The two of them went to 1657 Conversion Flight at the end of October 1942. In December they were posted with a complete crew to 149 Squadron RAF at Lakenheath, destined to fly the Short Stirling. This was less than three weeks after FSgt Ron Middleton RAAF of the squadron had performed the actions for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross.

Fritz's tour with 149 Squadron got off to a disastrous start. In early January 1943 and prior to the crew's first operation, they suffered a failed overshoot attempt while trying to land after a training flight to the local bombing range at Rushford. Both inboard engines lost power and incredibly, in the dark, with the pilot unable to see anything outside of the cockpit, the Stirling crash-landed onto a local playing field in the village of Lakenheath. The nose and cockpit of the aircraft caught fire. Only the pilot remained conscious among the front crew members and he tried to extract Fritz out of the overhead escape hatch. Fortunately, a Mr. Fredrick Sharpe Bullen of the Royal Observer Corps, ran to assist in the rescue. Sadly the bomb-aimer died in the crash and subsequent fire. The rest of the crew suffered minor injuries. Mr. Bullen was awarded the British Empire Medal for his heroics.

All but one of the surviving crew members remained with their pilot when the time came in late February to begin their tour. The wireless operator had transferred to another crew and was sadly lost during operations.



### Fritz in cockpit of Stirling bomber

Historians refer to this phase of the bombing campaign as The Battle of the Ruhr. During their third operation, this time to Munich in early March, they achieved the almost impossible. A JU-88 crept up in the dark to within 150-200 metres but the gunners spotted him just after he opened fire and ordered the pilot into a steep Rate 4 turn. The JU-88 followed the Stirling's tight turn but then flattened out. It was then that the Stirling's defensive fire hit him in the port engine. Fire broke out immediately and the fighter was last seen diving toward the ground out of control where it exploded. All crew members except Fritz observed the action. The Stirling suffered one bullet hole to the port tailplane.

They then continued on to bomb the target. Since a great deal of fuel was expended after the action to get back up to operational height for the bomb run, they decided to divert to West Malling instead of returning to Lakenheath.

The excitement for the night was not yet over. After landing, the rear gunner was the first out of the aircraft but he hurried back inside and plugged in to the intercom, "Are you sure we're in England, Skipper? There's a FW-190 parked beside us! "A few seconds later he came back on the line and stated that all was as it should be. The FW-190 was one of two conducting a hit and run raid on London, had become confused in the concentrated British fighter defence, and had landed at West Malling by mistake. The second one to land realized his error and tried to get back into the air. Ground defences, however, always on the alert, blew him to pieces. As Laurie said "It was all go that night." It doesn't take a great deal of thought to imagine the state of mind of the rest of the crew upon hearing that they were parked beside a FW-190!

The JU-88 was claimed as a kill at the debriefing. Since they were still considered a "sprog" crew (it was only their third op together), they felt that Intelligence looked at them a little bit sideways. When two weeks later they were informed that 'their' JU-88 was confirmed destroyed near Ammerzee, it was a great day for them all.

More operations followed...many were noted in the crew's logs as 'a rough trip'. On their first trip to Berlin on 27 March there were 'heavy searchlights' and they were attacked by two fighters. At Duisberg on 13 May they were 'coned 5 minutes by searchlights over the target'. The next night at Bochum the 'flak was very heavy along with many searchlights, hit by flak over target, rough trip, almost had a head-on collision with another Stirling'.

At Dortmund on 24 May the crew observed '5 aircraft shot down amid very heavy searchlights, coned 10 minutes by searchlights'.

The crew was assigned a Gardening operation on 1 May; mine-laying off the coast of Bordeaux, France. This turned out to be no sinecure. They were also flying with a new bomb



**Fritz under the nose of a Stirling at 1651 HCU Waterbeach**

aimer on his first operation.

The mines were successfully laid as ordered. As they began their return trip across the Bay of Biscay they were jumped by a JU-88, receiving quite a bit of damage, mainly to the port inner engine and the radio. The wireless operator was very lucky he was not hit. After shaking off the night fighter they ran into electrical storms that rendered the compasses unreliable. On top of this severe icing was encountered.

The wireless operator managed to re-activate the radio after a fashion and they were ordered to land at West Malling. This turned out not to be possible since the cloud base was never

higher than 200 feet. Laurie remembered haystacks flying past the side windows during his attempt to land!

At this point the only option was to bale out as fuel shortage was becoming an issue. The crew conducted an orderly exit over Sussex and the pilot was the last to leave. Fritz helped the 'new' bomb aimer on with his chute as he hadn't put it on quite right. Fritz was first to leave the escape hatch under the nose. He later told his son David that if he wasn't first it would be very difficult to follow someone out of that noisy hole in the floor.



Fritz with a commission, a tour wing and a caterpillar

Fritz heard the Stirling roar away from him and as the chute opened it cut his face, covering it in blood. His descent was rather long and at one point he saw two small lakes and thought he was going to land in one of them, but his luck held and he landed between them. Upon landing, and after a short sleep wrapped in his parachute, Fritz made his way to what appeared to be a minor military installation. The authorities there noticed him wearing a bracelet given to him by his future wife which stated his name as Fritz Giacomelli. Fritz was a nickname for Ferruccio but this was too much for the guards who thought they had just captured a German/Italian spy! The rest of the crew survived the jump and were treated like kings by the locals but then none of them had such a threatening sounding name.

The crew's luck had held. They were not so popular, however, when they arrived back at Lakenheath. The pilot was placed under open arrest for 'disobeying orders'. These were to fly due north as there was clear weather ahead but this order came in when they were down to 20 minutes of fuel. Fortunately, after investigation, nothing came of the charge.

After 12 operations and much to his chagrin, Fritz was posted to 1651 Conversion Unit as an instructor on navigational radar as they were short of

experienced staff. The remainder of the crew carried on and were 'screened' after a total of 17 trips. Apparently the Commanding Officer must have decided that this crew had been through enough. All survived the war except the mid-upper gunner Ronnie Zambra RAF who was killed while with 31 Squadron, South African Air Force in August 1944 during resupply flights out of Foggia, Italy to the city of Warsaw during the uprising. All received their operational tour 'wings' award and a 'caterpillar' pin for having saved their lives using an Irwin parachute.

Toward the end of his tour at instructing Fritz was commissioned. In August of 1944 he was granted special leave and he returned to Canada to get married. After returning from Canada he volunteered for a second operational tour and began the long process of crewing-up and converting to Lancasters, this time as bomb-aimer.

To a man, Fritz's all-Canadian second crew only accepted those who had already served one tour...they didn't want to take any unnecessary chances at this late stage in the war. Near the



Lancaster BX - KB772 - J for Jiggs with over 70 operations to its credit

end of the training process the crew was posted to 419 (Moose) Squadron of the RCAF's 6 Group but not before enjoying the delights of the Aircrew Refresher School (ACRS) at Norton, Sheffield. While at 1666 Conversion Unit at Wombledon, Yorkshire, the crew decided unanimously that the weather was too thick to permit flying one night and so stayed out late partying. Upon their return to base they learned to their collective disbelief that flying training was indeed on and that they had missed their flying duty.

The entire crew found themselves on their way to the 'Glass House', the ACRS at Norton for wayward aircrew. This experience largely consisted of lectures, drill, athletics and more drill. The Secretary of State for Air considered it "a most valuable school". He said "It is natural that some of even the most gallant officers have tendencies to slackness and to disobedience of orders at times. A course at this school has enabled many of those officers to take a grip of themselves and to render splendid service to the R.A.F. and to the country."

Having been suitably chastised, the crew reported to 419 Squadron at Middleton St. George in early March 1945. It was flying the Canadian-built Lancaster BX. They may not have realized it at the time but their little sojourn to the ACRS may very well have saved their lives because they were able to only manage three operations before the war ended.

Two of these operations, to Schwandorf and Wangerooge were daylight trips and both times Fritz saw numerous Lancasters involved in mid-air collisions.



Safe arrival in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia - June 1945

While with the squadron they took up a veteran Lancaster - J - Jiggs ( with the character Jiggs as its nose art) with over 70 operations to its credit on an air test. As they were about to land the horn sounded signalling that the landing gear was not down and locked. The pilot jinked the aircraft about the sky to force the gear to lock and did a low flypast near the tower so the staff could try to ascertain the position of the wheels. Finally they set about to land. The gear held only for a short time and then let go. The flight engineer was thrown forward and was injured and they all made a 'quick exit' according to the pilot's log. Poor old 'Jiggs' was scrapped.

Fritz volunteered to serve in the Pacific theatre with Tiger Force when the European war ended and the crew was selected to fly their Lancaster back to Canada in June. While departing the Azores on the third leg of the trip they lost an engine on take-off and were very fortunate not to have crashed with a full load of gas on board. The pilot proved his grading of 'Above Average' earned at the conversion unit that day. His log book simply states 'Close'.

Following an engine change in the Azores they completed the Atlantic crossing after having to shut down yet another engine that was overheating and subsequently having to change its radiator in Gander, Newfoundland. The pilot then decided to 'beat up' the street on which his mother lived in Nova Scotia prior to landing after the last leg of the journey!

After the war Fritz worked for the Canadian Post Office and became a Postmaster, ultimately retiring as the Public Relations Officer at the main branch of the Hamilton Post Office. He married Jean Anderson Buist of Toronto and they had two sons, David and Patrick. Fritz enjoyed fishing and bird hunting, but his real love was training and judging dogs in obedience. At one point he was unquestionably the most sought after judge in North America and was often away weekends judging either in Canada or the USA. He also wrote a monthly column on dog obedience training for a national magazine, Dogs in Canada.

Ironically, one of his closest friends in the dog obedience world was an ex-U Boat POW who spent the rest of his war in Canada after his boat, U-35, was sunk in November 1939.

Fritz died in 1981 in Stoney Creek, Ontario.