

An Orkney Island Miracle.

Nicholas Donald (Don) Franko was born on June 7th, 1924; in the Province of Saskatchewan, Canada. He enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force, as an Air Crew candidate in late 1942, at the age of eighteen years.

Don Franko trained at No. 2 ITS, Regina, SK, and No. 6 EFTS, Prince Albert, SK.

Pilot Officer
Donald Franko
RCAF
June, 1945



LAC Donald Franko completed Advanced pilot training, flying twin-engine Cessna `Crane` aircraft, and received his Pilot Wings at No. 11 SFTS, Yorkton, Saskatchewan, Canada in



Cessna T-50 'Crane'
Aircraft no. 7862 - Code '4'
No. 11 SFTS, Yorkton, SK - 1943

September 1943. He was nineteen years old. Possibly because of his young age, he did not receive a Commission on graduating – but was promoted as a Flight Sergeant; and after a two-week embarkation leave, Franko sailed from Halifax, NS - to England.

Cessna 'Crane'
1/72nd Scale model
(by Author).

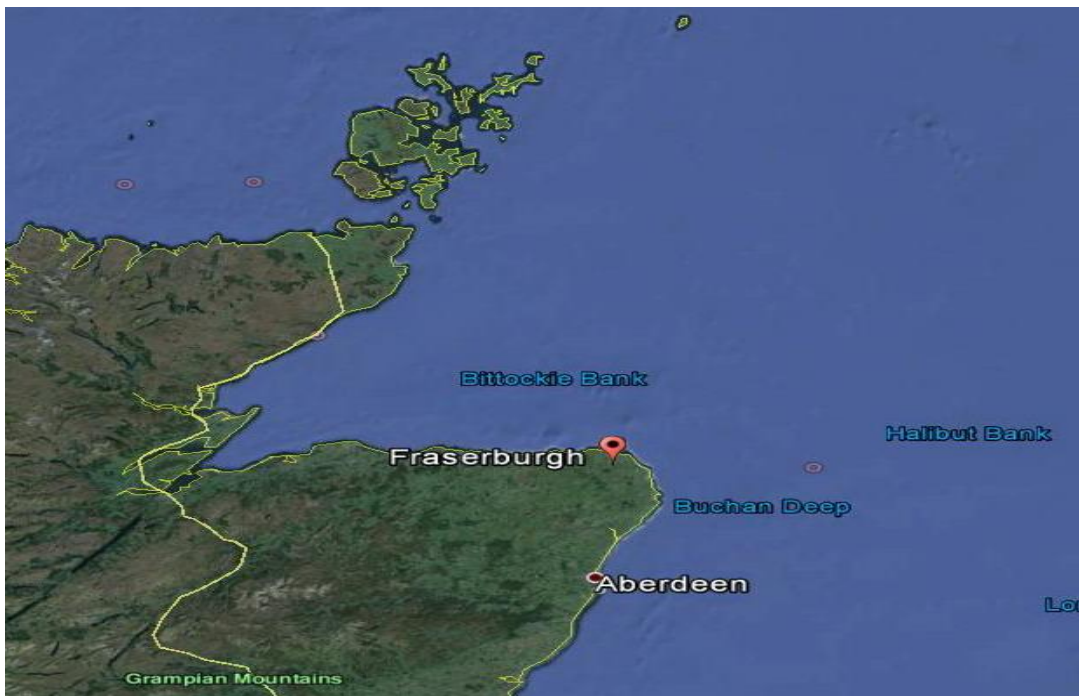
The RCAF and the RAF were aware that most BCATP pilots had been trained to fly and navigate in relatively good weather conditions, over an area of hundreds of square miles of flat land in Western Canada.

Authorities realized that further Pilot training was required, with several weeks experience flying and navigating in challenging and changing weather conditions; over the terrain of northern England and the North Sea.

The additional weeks of Pilot training were on twin-engine aircraft, prior to being posted to an Operational Training Unit; and eventual posting to an Operational Bombing Squadron

In accordance with that policy; on arrival in Great Britain in November of 1943, and at the age of nineteen years, Flight Sergeant Donald Franko was *Posted to*:

*No. 14 (Pilots) Advanced Flying Unit
RAF Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire – in mid November of 1943
Flying Airspeed 'Oxford', twin-engine advanced pilot training aircraft.*



The location of No. 14 (Pilots) Advanced Flying Unit, RAF Fraserburgh. Aberdeenshire. (The Orkney Island group, containing the Island of Aukerry is just off the tip of the Scottish mainland, at the top centre-left of this Google Earth photo)

Very near the end of that three week course, on December 16th, 1943 - F/S Franko was assigned a solo, Night Navigation Exercise over the sea to the north of *RAF No. 14 AF Unit Fraserburgh*. The aircraft that he flew on that assignment was an *Airspeed AS.10 'Oxford' Mk.II*, *RAF serial no. V3631*.



*Airspeed AS.10
'Oxford' V3388 –
RAF Museum,
Duxford, UK.*

*(Wartime
camouflage
paint scheme)*

During the course of that flight weather conditions began to deteriorate rapidly, and F/S Franko realized that he would be unable to return to the Fraserburgh RAF base. Due to the extensive cloud and fog coverage over the entire north coast of Scotland, he had become disoriented and lost.

Unknown to F/S Franko, strong southerly winds had blown his aircraft well to the north of the Scottish mainland. After nearly two hours in the air, the aircraft fuel supply had become critically low, and an emergency landing in the North Sea seemed inevitable.

Descending slowly over the North Sea, with the wing landing light turned on; he had a quick glimpse of waves breaking white at the bottom of cliffs, and what he thought might be a small area of flat, unobstructed land. Franko quickly reversed course, and descended to almost sea level. When he saw the land appear again he dropped full flaps; pulled off power on both engines; and made a very rough wheels-up landing on a small area of hard turf. Fortunately, and probably due the fact that there was almost no fuel remaining in the aircraft tanks – there was no fire. The aircraft remained essentially intact.



*Auskerry
Island,
Orkneys,
Scotland.*

*Lighthouse
at southern
tip of the
Island
(Google Earth
photo)*

Nineteen year old F/S Donald Franko had acted with a great deal of skilful airmanship; in his first reaction to the sight of the white sea-breakers, and the quick 180 degree turn to make a rather hard, but successful wheels-up landing. He had one chance of survival, and he succeeded.

Flight Sergeant Franko had force-landed on *Auskerry Island* - the smallest island in the Orkney's group. *Auskerry Island* is less than one mile long, and about one-half mile wide. The *Island* is located at 59/01/54.49N and 2/34/09.96W, and is 18 miles ENE of the town of Kirkwall in The Orkney Islands Group.

F/S Franko had landed safely on Auskerry Island in the middle of the night, but he had no idea of *where* he had so fortunately come back to terra firma. He decided that he would not try to explore his new surroundings until daylight – believing that there were steep cliffs to the sea close by. He popped open the fastenings of his parachute, and wrapped himself in the voluminous folds of cloth; and fell asleep sitting in the cockpit of the aircraft. Vastly relieved, after several hours of considerable distress while in the air.



*Airspeed 'Oxford' –V3631 – after emergency landing on Auskerry Island
Pilot F/S Donald Franko RCAF. Little damage to the aircraft; wooden propellers broken.
(photo by Lighthouse Keeper, George Mainland - Dec. 17, 1943)*

At daylight, on the morning of December 17th, 1943, F/S Franko was awakened by a knocking on the cockpit window. The Auskerry Lighthouse Keeper, *George Mainland* - had heard the sounds of the aircraft during the night, and the noisy wheels-up landing, but thought that the aircraft must have gone into the sea. The Lighthouse Keeper was very surprised to find the aircraft sitting on the middle of the island, and the pilot alive and uninjured - and F/S Franko was delighted to find that he was not alone on a barren island.

Because of war-time conditions, and the absence of regular Allied sea shipping activity in that area of the North Sea, the Lighthouse on the Island of Auskerry was temporarily inoperative on the night of December 16/17, 1943.



Auskerry Island is located in the top/right hand corner of this Google Earth Map.

George Mainland invited F/S Franko to his residence at the Lighthouse on the southern tip of Auskerry Island; and news of the incredible arrival of the aircraft on Auskerry Island was soon transmitted to RAF authorities at Fraserburgh. However, weather and sea conditions prevented the rescue of F/S Franko from the island for a further ten days.

Don Franko was pleased to discover that the lighthouse residence had an extensive library - that he very much enjoyed during his extended stay on the Island.

He remembered invigorating walks around the island, in the brisk, salt filled air and winter breezes of the North Sea – and the unique



experience of having Christmas Day, December 25th, 1943 - at a remote North Sea Island Lighthouse. The young RCAF pilot was treated royally by the lighthouse keeper, and they became friends.

The RAF decided that Airspeed 'Oxford' V3631 could not be salvaged from the Island. However, eventually the RAF did recover both engines and the instrument panel. They then burned the remainder of the aircraft, to prevent its being a distraction to other aircraft flying in the vicinity in the future.

After his repatriation from Auskerry Island, F/S Franko completed the Orientation Course at No. 14 Advanced Pilot Training, at Fraserburgh Scotland. After a one-week Leave he was posted to:

- January 1944 – Operational Training Unit – *Vickers-Armstrong Wellington B.Mk.III*
No. 20 OTU - (RAF) Lossiemouth, Scotland.

F/S Franko was at No. 20 OTU for three weeks in January, 1944 – and flew on several short-range operations into enemy territory, as 2nd pilot on V.A. Wellington B.Mk.III bombers.

- March, 1944 – Heavy Conversion Unit No. 1664 – *H.P. Halifax B.Mk.III*
No. 6 Group (RCAF) - No. 61 Training Base - Dishforth, Yorks.

F/S Franko transitioned from flying the twin-engine 'Wellington' Bomber, to the larger four-engine HP 'Halifax' B.Mk.III, with three weeks training at the Dishforth, RCAF base.

- April, 1944 – No. 6 Group (RCAF) - No. 432 (Leaside) Squadron, RCAF.
East Moor, Yorks. – *Halifax B.Mk.VII*. - To May 15th, 1945.-

F/S Donald Franko was promoted to the rank of Pilot Officer; and posted as a qualified 'Pilot in Command', to No. 432 (Leaside) Squadron RCAF, - No. 6 (RCAF) Group, Bomber Command; and assigned to a crew flying Handley-Page 'Halifax' B.Mk.VII – serial No. NP697, Squadron Code F.

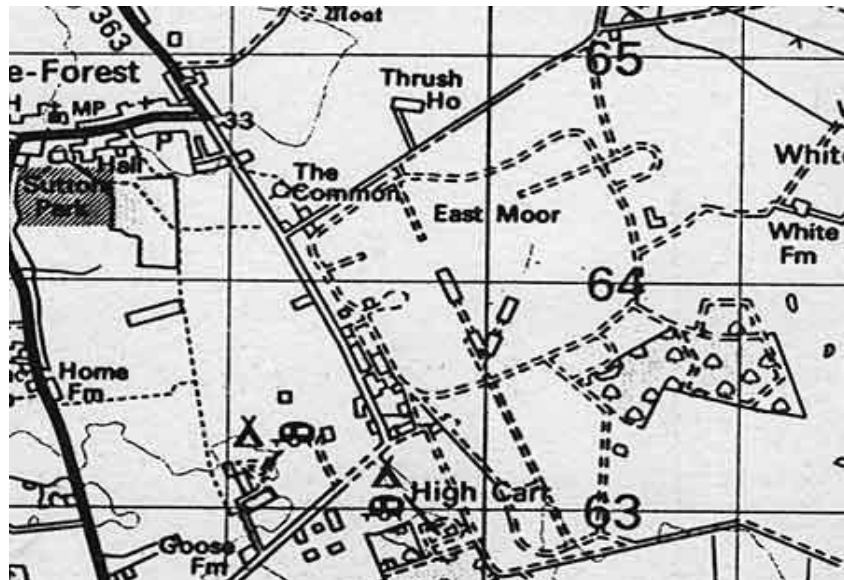


Handley-Page 'Halifax' B.Mk.VII. **NP697 Code F 'Ferdinand II'**. (1/72nd scale model by author)

The 'nose art' on the model aircraft is the head of a 'raging bull' – with steam or smoke coming from the nose. ('Ferdinand The Bull' was a popular 1938 Disney film cartoon character)



Saeviter ad Lucem
(Ferociously towards
the light)



No. 62 (RCAF) Base, East Moor, Yorks., UK
(Showing planned 1941 perimeter track and runways layout)

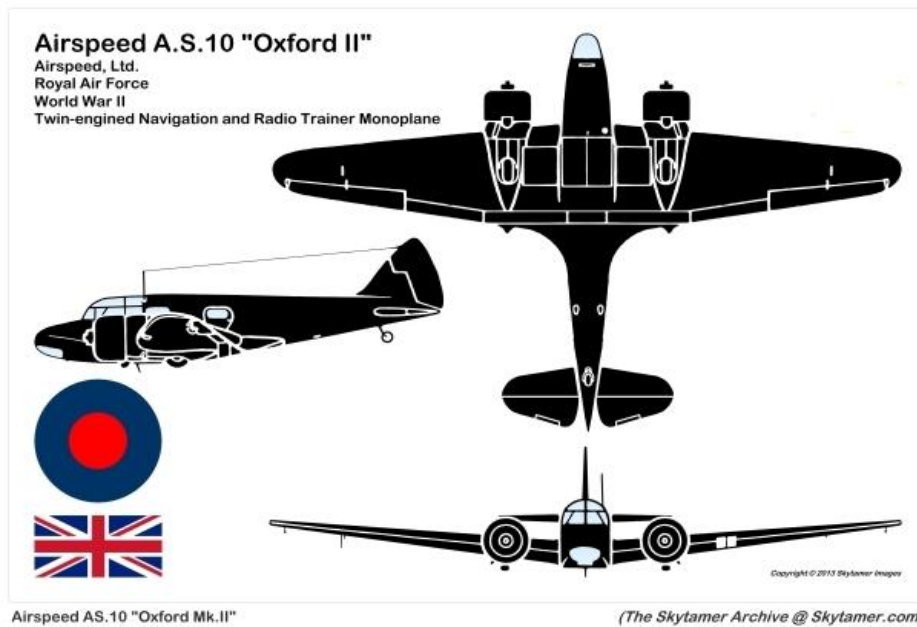


2014 Google Earth photo of former No. 6 Group RCAF Air Base – East Moor, Yorks., UK.
(Remains of abandoned wartime runways and perimeter track still visible)

P/O Donald Franko completed a Tour of thirty-four (34) Operational Flights into enemy territory in Handley-Page 'Halifax' B.Mk.VII - NP697, from April 1944 to May 1945. At the end of the war he was repatriated to Canada in June of 1945. He was just twenty-one.

Don Franko (at the age of seventy-four); his wife Charlotte, and their daughter Betty – travelled to Kirkwall, Orkney Islands - and to Auskerry Island in May, 1999. They were given a very warm reception by the people of the Orkneys, as they visited the site of Don's miraculous landing on that small Island; fifty-six years earlier in December, 1943.

That was the 'first ever' landing of a *fixed wing* aircraft on the Island of Auskerry..!



Authors Notes:

Information about Donald Franko's RCAF career, and the landing on Auskerry Island in 1943; is from personal interviews with Don Franko by the author, in 1992 and 1993.

Detail of `F for Ferdinand II` nose-art on the model of Halifax B.Mk.VII NP697 from Don Franko in 2001. Decal by author.

Additional information, including the photograph of Pilot Officer Donald Franko; from his daughter, Betty Tripp of Ontario.

Donald Franko died in Ontario, Canada in 2010, at the age of eighty-six years.

Okotoks, AB

William J. Cameron - November 11th , 2015

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