

Memoir for Sylvan Ellwood Weaver - Born August 5, 1915 - Killed in action April 4, 1943

Written by Larry Weaver, his younger brother, Armand's son – Larry Weaver

So, because Sylvan did not write his own autobiography, nor could he relate any details of his life after the fact, there are only stories my Dad told me, actual letters Sylvan wrote home after being posted to England, and military records by which to write this memoir. I am not a writer by any stretch but, I like you have an imagination. When I read a story or watch a movie, I get so immersed in the story that I cannot tell the difference between myself and the character(s) I am reading about or watching. In my imagination I am them. This engrosses me in the story so much so that I don't want it to end. My interest in this as an Uncle I never knew piques my interest even further because it is so mysterious.

So, based on this, I will write it in the first person based upon how I imagine Sylvan would have felt. So when it is about Sylvan doing something I will type it as I(S), and when it is something I am doing I will write it as I(L). It will be a bit like a novel when I am going off my Dad's memories of his character related to me (he has passed away) and the military's records. Since I am blessed with his DNA though I am quite sure my thoughts and feelings will make it a truer story. I am quite sure our sense of humor is the same! I can still have a good laugh today regardless of how many times I have heard this story Dad told us of Sylvan: the family going for a drive in their car of that age, three kids in the backseat and Mom and Dad in the front, Grandpa driving, and Sylvan pipes up from the back with "Dad can you drive this thing any faster?" Grandpa replies with "No son, why do you ask?" To which Sylvan replies, "Well there's a guy behind us pushing a wheel barrow and he's trying to pass us!"

So, I(L) think that every human born regardless of race, religion, family or color, has pretty much the same basic human needs i.e. To feel needed, noticed, loved and safe. When that gets interrupted, it comes as a shock to the human psyche. I(S) felt that way for sure. I seemed most concerned about safety. At the age of six, I was in for a major shock! First of all though it was a good surprise – my little brother Armand was born. I didn't get jealous of him taking over my place because a more onerous situation arose. My Mommy didn't come bouncing back as I hoped she would. She wasn't the same as before. In fact, she got weaker and weaker, unable to be my mother and unable to nurse and attend to my new brother. Then, after four months – Kaboom! She died! We were devastated. How could this be? Everybody wept and wept. There was no consoling us. My Dad though he was quite a man. He just held us a little closer, turned to the Bible even more than before. Tried to explain it on those terms – like she had gone to heaven. Up in the sky. She had gone to be with God! Well, who was this God that would take my Mommy away? Did he need her more than me and especially more than my new brother? Could she come back out of the sky and keep us all safe again?

I forgot to tell you I had an older sister (2 years) Reta. She was just as devastated as anyone but then I saw what a strong soul she was at 8 years old. She pitched in and with Daddy's instruction, started washing clothes and diapers and even cooking a little. There were neighbours and friends who would come over and do some of the chores and bake bread and the like but our family had been pretty devastated. Daddy couldn't keep up with all of this so he sent Armand away to live with some relatives in Didsbury. What a shock! I no longer had my Mommy – she was up in heaven and I no longer had my brother. Didsbury felt like the other side of the world. At least it wasn't up in heaven! This made me pretty anxious and introverted (although I didn't know that word at the time). I couldn't understand it really and just sort of shrivelled up inside myself.

Well after a couple of years I(S) sort of got used to life the way it was. School took my mind off my

little brother and sister Reta was doing her best cooking and washing clothes and mothering me. Pretty soon though Dad got interested in another German/Mennonite girl from church. A few months in they got the idea that maybe they could get Armand repatriated. It had been long enough that Dad thought that Armand would have forgotten him altogether, so he and my new Mom, Hannah decided to go to Didsbury and see if Armand even remembered him. They sort of thought if he didn't, they'd just turn around and leave! Luckily for me, as soon as Armand saw Dad, he dropped his toys, screamed "Daddy" and went racing to his outstretched arms. Phew! I felt safe again. I not only had a new mother but an estranged brother back again.

Life normalized somewhat in that weren't more shocking events taking place, I(S) grew to 24 years. It was 1939 and Armand had gone off to University of Alberta in Edmonton to study Medicine. That's how he dealt with Mom's unnecessary death – by learning how to ensure that women could be healthy after giving birth to children. I suppose he carried a great deal of guilt thinking that his birth caused her death. That was true I guess but I had come to think that these are bigger matters in our Creator's hands. Not something we humans have much control over. I'd been working for various farmers, had worked at an elevator for three months but that wasn't my 'cup of tea'. Even tried painting for a year but that didn't seem to have much future in it. Now sister Reta was dating a guy and threatening marriage. Next year – 1940 she left home to get married to Bob Holloway. Now there was just Dad, my step-mother Hannah and me. I was 25, without a steady job and still calling Castor home. What was I doing to help put meals on the table?

So the question of being useful/needed and contributing to safety in life came back to haunt me again. How can I feel useful at just 25 hanging around home, uneducated, no girlfriend, eating up Dad's hard earned money and broke most of the time? The answer seemed pretty obvious when the Canadian government was doing its best to entice young men into the military services. So I talked it over with Dad and Mom. They said that it was not without risk but that the decision had to be mine. Whichever way it went they would be totally behind it. So, my mind was sort of stuck at 6 years old when Momma died and flew into the sky but if I did it, I come back down to the ground! The writing was on the wall and I headed to Calgary to take the first steps to enlist in the Air Force.

I(S) took the train to Calgary in June of 1940 to get the ball rolling. By all the testing you had to go through I just couldn't believe the requirements to enlist. You'd think that for getting people (guys) to enlist in something that could very well take their lives that they'd be happy to get anyone who could walk, hold a rifle, pull the trigger etc. and then from that point forward they would train you on the finer details. No! You had to be almost perfect or you weren't suitable! Well I stayed in the Empire Hotel in Calgary where the testing was done. That's where all the guys who were enlisting stayed while going through the ropes to get in. It took from June of 1940 to Nov. 23 before I could see my name as soldier. If there's anyone who thinks signing up for the military is a joyride where you are going to see the world or get rich, I'll let you in on a little secret! Five days after enlisting I made up my will! Yup all the guys had to. And don't think there was going to be any huge estate, no not when a Leading Aircrewman got \$1.50 a day and when you became a Sergeant that increased to \$3.45! (I(L) was shocked to read what Sylvan accrued up until his death. Total Qualifying service - \$210, Qualifying Overseas Service - \$34.25, Supplement for overseas service - \$30.61 for a grand total of \$274.86! That's what a life is worth for defending your country?) I(S) didn't go into war thinking the odds for survival were high but I did get some satisfaction I was giving a service to my family and to other families within our country that not everyone could. All these guys I signed up with were in the family called Canada as far as I was concerned.

Now as I(S) said before I didn't record any of this stuff. That's where my nephew comes in. He had the family stories but I(L) didn't have the facts around Sylvan's military life. These were recorded on 25 various sized sheets and cards by the government of Canada. These are available on the internet for anyone who wants to look them up. But then the fun begins. How do you make sense of the gibberish recorded on them? They didn't make records like: Enlisted – Calgary then took Basic Training at Brandon. No, they had to simplify it, make it secret by making it more complicated! How did they do that? Well I(L) looked on the internet again and discovered there is a list of Military abbreviations. Now I don't call this a list; I call it a book! Because it's 189 pages! So how simple it would be to read this book right? I'll give you one example: D.R.O. could mean District Recording Officer, Divisional Routing Order, District Routine Orders or Daily Routine Orders. So take your pick! Luckily for me (L) I had studied Mandarin Chinese where there is not conjugation of verbs so you just have to figure out tenses from the context. Most D.R.O.'s refer to Divisional Routing Order. Before I(L) get into actual training I'd like to share some of my Uncle's medical and personal history. I know he wouldn't mind.

As I(S) said earlier most of the guys who actually got enlisted were pretty close to perfect health-wise. Otherwise they didn't want you. In spite of this I(L) can't figure out why Sylvan was hospitalized 4 times. Twice in the Colonel Belcher in Calgary, once in the University hospital in Edmonton and once in the Station hospital at Currie Barracks. To actually get to the Colonel Belcher and enter it through the front door and into a bed (be enlisted in the hospital), a S.L.T.W. would need to be issued. That's a Special Leave Travel Warrant to be exact. The mode of travel was not a comfortable ambulance with sirens blaring; it was maybe an unceremonious, bumpy ride in an army truck/Jeep or one of those gigantic 5 ton trucks you sometimes see. Before you stepped into or got carried by stretcher into it, the military record says you were S.O.S. i.e. Struck off Strength (taken out of the barracks), then MFB227 – medical history of an Invalid. Well I guess you are not a strong soldier anymore riding to the hospital in an ambulance. You are an invalid! And possibly more of an invalid after a dizzying ride in an ambulance! Maybe having bounced around some in a Cessna Crane or Avro Anson made the ride more bearable. But for sure, after surgery of some sort requiring weeks and weeks to recuperate from, you are still an invalid. But maybe if the ambulance was anything like Dad's car going slow enough for wheelbarrows to get past, it may have been a slow and enjoyable ride!

I had a few moral vices contrary to my Mennonite upbringing. The most obvious one was that somewhere after enlisting I took up smoking. Mind you it was just ten smokes a day. I(L) think when it started it was far less as there was not the stress in training. We were not facing death directly. Purely on a moral basis I(S) knew it was not acceptable in our family and whenever I went on leave I didn't smoke at home. When we went overseas life became much more serious and that's when 10 smokes a day helped me breathe a little easier. Eg. After flying a sortie and getting shot at or flying through flak it just calmed me for the unexpected. Let me (S) tell you about these mid-air flak bombs. They are similar to a suicide bomb I(L) think. They come from a Flak 36 or 41 cannon at the rate of 25 rounds per minute. They didn't explode until they reached their pre-determined altitude. When the anti-aircraft rounds finally exploded, the high explosives inside launched jagged metal fragments in a circle around the projectile, tearing through any aircraft that happened to be in the vicinity. The high explosives in the Flak rounds also left a telltale poof of black smoke hanging in the air so when we saw those we would know we were in firing range of them before we even started our bombing runs. It also helped the shooters know if the height determined was correct or not. If we weren't shot down and survived some of the guys developed all kinds of symptoms – one of the worst was Parkinson-like tremors. A guy can't go through an experience unscathed. So that's why I smoked!

Back to before the action; I liked baseball, hockey and hunting. My records say that I was a pretty good shot. Of course that was the records not just my word, so I must have been good. Thinking (L) back over it I probably hunted fowl (geese, duck, and pheasants) to help out with putting food on the table. I(S) especially liked skeet shooting after I got in the military because as an Air Gunner you were always shooting at moving targets. There was a big skeet range at Currie Barracks within Calgary city limits but the shot would not travel beyond the range. I did receive an Exemplary Gunner's Proficiency Badge just like when I was hunting for fowl so it's not something to boast about. It was just a way to help put food on the table.

Now for a little world history: When the war broke out in Europe, Britain had the enemy at its doorstep, so to speak so that is why training schools were set up in Canada. They couldn't very well do training in airspace outside Britain because the enemy was already there. Especially after France fell England was alone in the European continent. Added to that was the fact that the Germans could not attack schools training men in Canada. There was excellent flying conditions, immediate access to American industrial parts and aircraft plus there was good access to transport men and airplanes to England via the North Atlantic. Under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan – B.C.A.T.P. signed December 17, 1939, by our then Prime Minister MacKenzie King, 107 training schools were set up across Canada. Pilots and air crewmen would come from England, Australia, New Zealand, as well as from within Canada to train under this umbrella. The plan's objective was to train Pilots, Navigators (Observers), Bomb Aimers, Wireless Operators, Air Gunners, and Flight Engineers. As a result, 131,000 air crewmen including French, Czechs, Norwegians, Poles, Belgians and Dutch were trained between 1939-1945 making this one of Canada's great contributions to Allied victory. U.S. President Roosevelt dubbed Canada the "aerodrome of democracy".

So the schools were divided into ones specifically for skills in bombers and fighters: flying, bombing and gunnery, air observation, air navigation, radio operations, or flight engineering. There had to be bases then to figure out which direction to send a guy for training after learning the basics. So, after Basic Training at Brandon, I(S) am still waiting for others to make a decision what position I could best fill. So that is why I got sent to Medicine Hat. The Military abbreviation calls it TCSF which upon first writing I(L) thought it meant a Training Center. Now I(L) see it as a Transit Camp. See how those abbreviations mess you up? Trainees began their training in the soldiering basics at a M.D. Manning Depot where we learned to bathe, shave, shine boots, polish buttons, maintain their uniforms and behave properly. We also received two hours of physical education daily added to instruction in marching, rifle drill, foot drill, saluting and other drills. I(S) found this sort of silly that these things would have to be taught. Was it a matter of becoming a soldier by virtue of having good manners? Or how do you class proper behaviour? Or was it just a military regimen that to be one in purpose we would do everything the same way? Sort of like the family that shines their shoes this way, polishes buttons this way (or even sees the importance of having shiny buttons). I(S) didn't understand then that this whole arrangement was being set up and funded by Royalty i.e. Great Britain/Royalty (that's where good behaviour is deemed to be important). Now I(S) can see the sense of that – just to keep us together and focused in the same direction. Same as Mennonites with their rules to be a good person.

So I(S) was first sent to Brandon, Manitoba a Manning Depot (M.D.) for Basic training January 2, 1941. Because this Depot was not yet set up for training purpose I just took up my post as a Security Guard. Every base had a Guard house (gate) and Jail to keep things orderly and secret on the inside. All military related things were considered 'Secret' so it felt good to know that things were somewhat veiled here because in wartime you never knew who the enemy was at least from the outside. So in

Basic training all the guys starting out were ranked as AC2 (Aircrew), the lowest rank in the Air Force. Nothing special really; just meant you were in the Air Force and soon to be designated to an area of expertise. So by the 28th of March, I got off of guard duty and did a little 'experimenting' in bombers and fighters to figure out where best the Air Force could use my "strength". Sure, most guys wanted to be pilots but this military regimen was a team effort. There were other positions to fill. But until you actually tried shooting or operating a radio, or plotting a course, you still didn't know.

One of the planes I(S) got introduced to in Medicine Hat was the Avro Anson. Can I tell you a bit about them? They were manufactured in Great Britain built specifically for the R.A.F. They were first used as a trainer but I hear they used them soon on in the war as light bombers and in Coastal Command. They soon found out though that they were severely limited in range, fire power, and bomb load so were limited to training and transport. We needed a lot more than we had to train in so in August of '41 Canada started producing them in Montreal. It seemed kind of funny though that because of shortages of steel and aluminum, they featured a considerable use of plywood! Another plane here at the Hat was the Oxford. Hundreds of these had been sent over from England. We jokingly called these lumbering planes ox-boxes. If I showed you a picture I'm sure you'd agree they looked like a box! Maybe they used plywood to make them too? So they would be a wooden box! So, me (S) being a prairie boy with not a lot of excitement in my life, it was fun flying around in these planes just to get a feeling of flying. And I could see by the lay of the land what a good place this south country was for flying, except maybe for the wind! So flying has not much to do with the ground! Let's say (L) it was the wide open space and blue sky that made the Hat and Lethbridge good choices for Flight Schools.

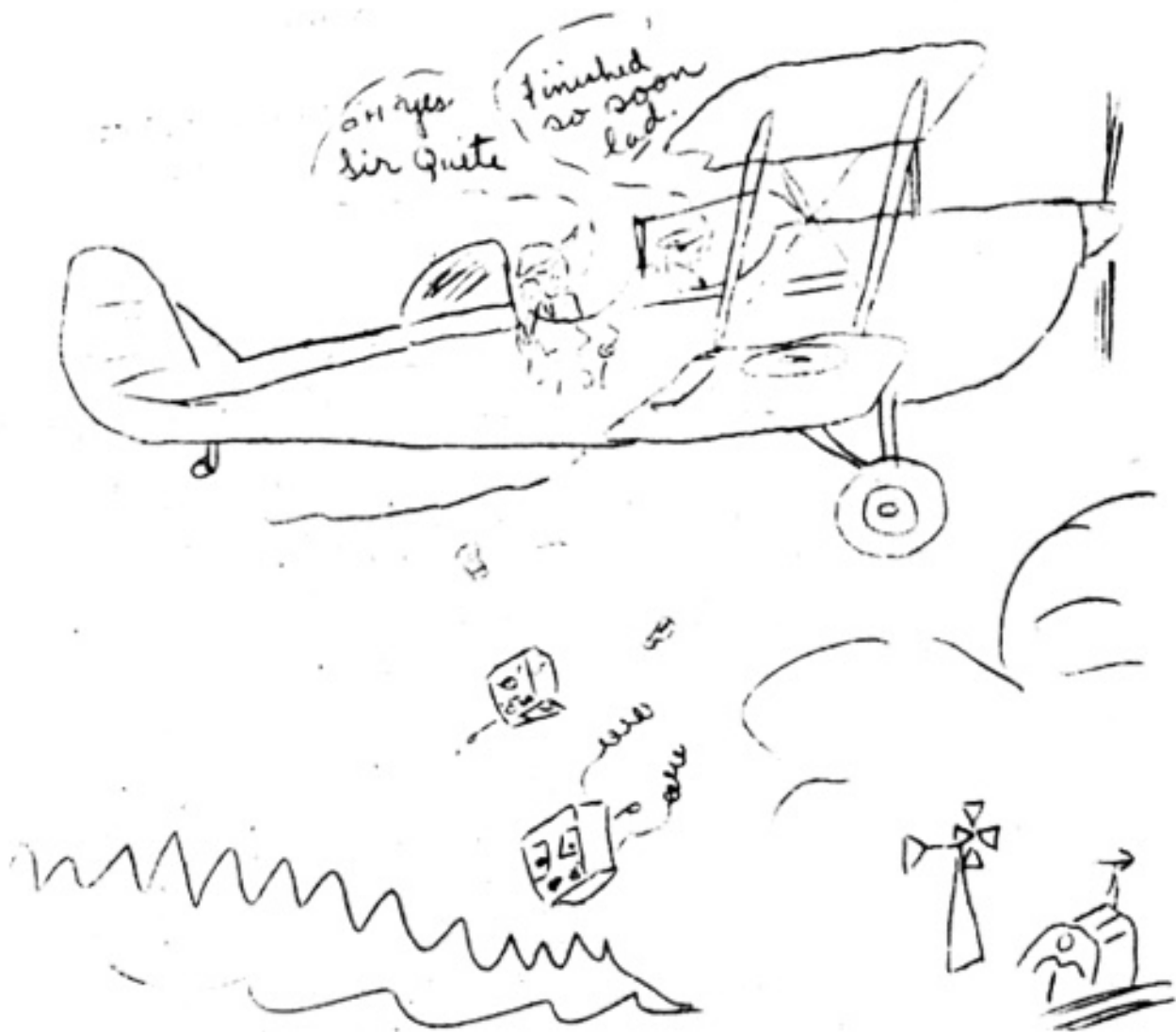
After a month here it was recommended that I would make a good W.A.G. (Wireless Air Gunner) maybe because of my interest in hunting so April 29, 1941 was sent directly to #2 Wireless School in Calgary. The actual building that accomodated us was Institute of Technology (now SAIT) and their students had to relocate to the Stampede Grounds. The first group of guys were already in training, that having started March 17. When I(S) got to Calgary they only had ten Norseman trainers, all having been shipped in from Montreal. They looked sort of like a bush plane. Well that's really what they were. Their primary function was for air sickness training and air navigation (air experience) flights. We trained in them as well as the Menasco Tiger Moth Mark 2's. The Tigers were well named, the moth part anyway. A pilot and me couldn't weigh more than 150 lbs each because with a wireless transmitter and receiver weighing in at 160 lbs and a full fuel tank they could just barely get off the ground!

There was a little newspaper set up on the base and it shows a W.A.G. Cartoon character on his first day at #2 Wireless School with these captions floating around him: Volyage! Ionization! Primary Cells! Degrees of Priority! Ohms Law! Morse Code! Resistance! Polarization! EMF! Induction! And the guy was trembling from head to toe. I couldn't help but notice all those industrious trainees with books under their arms and bags under their eyes rushing here and there to this lab and that lab. They called them workshops and that they were. For three and a half hours at a go, I'd cram my frame into a box with not much elbow room and try to send and receive. To get out of the workshop and into the real thing we had to be bussed from Currie Barracks down to R.C.A.F. Shepard around what is now called Mindapore.

The main function of a Wireless Operator on a multi-engine aircraft was to maintain contact with base stations using C.W. (Continuous Wave) Morse Code. It was a great deal more difficult to send and receive code while airborne, than in stable, land-based stations. After getting out of the workshop and

down to the Shepard Airfield we would cram ourselves into the back seat of a Tiger Moth and go through seven and a half hours of torture.

Here is a cartoon depiction of this taken from the Barrack's newspaper W.A.G. You'll see in the fourth line from the bottom, reference to entry class #8 which I(S) was in from the 4th of April '41



The wireless operator air gunners were increasingly becoming the aircraft specialist in radio work as well as a gunner in defending the aircraft from enemy attack. The total training in radio and gunnery now extended to thirty-four weeks and many students could not develop the adequate skills to pass the wireless course. This is again featured in a WAG Signal cartoon by LAC D.J. Smith one of the very students taking the course, and he fully understood the huge challenges facing all trainees. From 16 September 1940 until 23 July 1942, Calgary No. 2 Wireless School graduated 2,382 students with 503 failing the course. All student wireless air operators beginning with entry class #8, 4 April 1941 until March 1942, completed their air training in the D.H. 82C-4 Menasco Tiger Moth Mk. II trainer. The first Fleet Fort arrived 8 January 42, and by April 1942, nine new Fleet Fort 60K trainers were on strength at Calgary and slowly the under-powered Menasco Tiger Moth Mk. I and Mk. IIs would be replaced.

Before we got out of the Moths though one crashed killing two of my buddies! Another shock that was better kept secret! The next trainer we 'graduated' to was the Fleet Fort, the only aircraft designed and built by Canadians in the war. The Fort was intended as a cheaper version of the Harvard. They weren't good for training pilots – too simple and underpowered to properly transition to Hurricanes and Spitfires. But they were better suited to Wireless Air Gunners, though still underpowered for 2 men and equipment. Oh well, in spite of fuel tank caps vibrating off and fuel being siphoned overboard we kept pressing onward in this very difficult training.

In my course #8 there were 73 students. I placed 22 with a mark of 79.2%. I was pretty proud actually though I never boasted about it. We were taught at home that bragging was not a good thing for sure. Don't be proud! But I was humbled by my thankfulness to still be alive after all the in-training accidents I saw. Graduation day – May 25, 1942 I was authorized to wear the Wireless Operator's badge. Maybe it was my grades I(L) and leadership abilities, I'm not sure but I(S) ranked as a L.A.C. - Leading Aircraftman.

The day I(S) graduated, the records show I turned up at #8 B.G.S. (Bombing Gunnery School) in Lethbridge. Little did I(S) know then it was the same place nephew Larry (the author of my biography) showed up for his first job in 1968. If we had been able to get together then in 1942, I(L) am sure we would have talked about our surprise at the wind! I(L) would have warned him that if he was to have lost his hat/beret (from the pictures I(L) see of soldier's berets sitting on the right sides of their heads – half on and half off) in a wind, not to bother chasing after it! Just keep trying on other hats flying by until you find the right size!! (Doesn't that sound like Sylvan asking if Grandpa could drive any faster?)

The records show it was exactly a month I(S) spent here and that training was not intense. By that I(L) mean that it appears to be part theory and part practical. On the written test I(S) got 77%, on the practical and oral (wasn't too bright in language comprehension so theory weakened my overall standing) – 53%, and on Ability as a Firer – 76%. To obtain those practical grades I did actually fly a total of 12 hours 20 min. In a Fairey Battle. These yellow painted monoplanes (single winged) look somewhat like an American Harvard trainer albeit, more streamlined. These planes have one .303 machine (automatic) gun in the starboard (right) wing and one Vickers 'K' gun in the fuselage ahead of the rear cockpit. It was mounted on a swivel housing so you could shoot over top of the pilot's cockpit. To operate this type of machine gun you would actually slide the cockpit plexiglass back and stand up in the windstream (for sure you couldn't keep your hat on - probably wore a helmet and goggles) and fire away. It could fire between 950 and 1200 rounds per minute. Now you talk about PTSD! The racket was deafening. But between this and the starboard machine gun (on the ground – 196, air to ground – 160, and air to air – 1800) I came up with 76%. Little did I(S) know it then that we wouldn't use a 'K' gun anyway – we would use one that was enclosed in its own turret. You wouldn't need helmet or goggles to protect you from the wind; you'd just need them to prevent injury! Anyway, June 22, 1942, I was officially authorized to wear the Air Gunners Badge.

I was able to go home to Castor for a few days and see everyone I knew there. That's where I(S) had my picture taken at the door of my home. That picture you can see on the pages of this writing with the letters I would later write home. I didn't have long here, maybe 10 days, before boarding the troop train down east. These trains still burned coal for the steam power so I(S) remembered my youth through the smell of burning coal. It took me back to the family home – its warmth from coal heat as well as many meals rendered around Momma's cook stove. Well, there was lots of camaraderie despite the sadness of saying 'Goodbye' yet again! But this time, it was me(S) leaving, into the great unknown.

After the longest train ride of my life on the CPR troop train, I(S) came to Pennfield, N.B. We had gone past my dear Momma's birth place of St. Jacobs, Ontario, and where my Dad, David, met, courted and married her. In spite of all the laughing and joking on the train, this war business was extremely somber. Little did I know that I was part of memory and/or history. Oh well, such is life!

It was July 7, 1942 and I was TOS (Taken on Strength – yes, after some re-grounding at home in Castor I had regained some strength) and assigned to #34 OTU (Operational Training Unit) Pennfield. This unit had just been transferred from Yarmouth N.S. of that year. By the time we arrived the base was just getting up and running and so the protocol had not yet been established. The airfield lacked the infrastructure to function as a training unit. It also severely lacked accommodation and so 200 men were left behind in Yarmouth. This detachment would be responsible for armament training which included gunnery and bombing. Some of the men left behind in Yarmouth were key teachers so this was to be a huge impact upon our training. (Not that we(S) knew it at the time – it was only recognized and recorded later.)

In addition to Venturas (totally new to our group) our Unit had various other aircraft. One of these was a Lysander whose primary use was towing gunnery targets that we could practice shooting at. Problem with them were that they were slower than the two-engined Ventura plus they did not have the ideal towing gear. This couldn't help but affect our morale in spite of some resolution. Another thing that would throw off pilots was the idea to incorporate 'ferry' training so qualified pilots could fly the airplane overseas. (My nephew will include a picture of our Unit taken sometime in summer of '42).



Files Pennfield Parish Military Historical Society (with permission) – "C" Flight 1942

So this is what our group looked like. We were in Course #2. Me(S) am fifth from the right in the back row. I(L)'m not sure if this group included Pilots, Navigators and WAGs or not, but you can see the Instructors (4) in their peaked hats and the airmen (50) wearing their tilted berets.

The purpose of training at Pennfield, N.B. was for last step (advanced/premiere bomber crew training) before full operational deployment in the theatre of operations. This date – July 7, 1942, there were 60 of us Aircraftmen who arrived from the prairie provinces 'green' as grass because we were unfamiliar with the American Venturas and so we had a crash (not accidents) course in converting all our skills to flying these birds. Also Avro Ansons were in the mix which some of us had some familiarity with. Our group was divided into three groups, each with two squads – A & B. The Pilots were 15 guys, Navigators – 16, and WAGs – 29. There usually 2 WAGS per crew since they covered two duties – Wireless Operators and Air Gunnery/Bombing. That's a whole weight of responsibility on one's shoulders, I'd say. Anyway four to five us made a team. The course number just referred to the time frame of our training. Course #1 started training in June and graduated in Sept. Course #2 started in July and graduated in Oct. The courses started a month apart and over the course of the war had 31 trainings.

So, as I said, it was difficult to keep up our morale. All kinds of things were taking place. Eg. Air crashes! Yep, that's right. I(S) didn't know it but there would be a total of 59 airmen to be killed at this base. They weren't MIA (Missing in Action), no – they got killed in training! Well, for one thing, they were a converted transport aircraft – from the Lockheed Model 18 Lodestar meant to replace the Lockheed Hudson bombers. These planes – the Venturas had drawback issues from increased weight by virtue of larger motors. Larger motors meant more speed so one huge drawback was increased landing speed. They gave us the feeling of comfort and safety perhaps because of toilets and cabin heaters and ventilation. Things we plain folks weren't used to such as an automatic radio compass, an autopilot, a set of gyroscopic instruments, and an inter-phone felt rather luxurious. Each plane carried a sophisticated camera set up. There was armour everywhere (except behind my seat when operating the radio! The pilot's visor + the rear turret window were made of bullet-proof glass. But we knew that training was not the same as action. We, just knew that these cumbersome birds (they were dubbed by my buddies and me as 'flying pigs' because they had such cavernous fuselage space, but this also meant they were an easier target for fighters to shoot at) needed fighter escorts for sure, and the noise of their motors and immensity of their hulk for daylight attack – would alert defences rather quickly! But, on the other hand, a horizontal stabilizer would make it easier to fly on only one engine. Lots of my buddies can tell you about that. Well I'd just rather not shock myself by thinking about it! You get the picture? We weren't the only ones who thought like this. Our Commanders were also asking for changes and by the time I left – Oct. Of '42, 18 B-25 Mitchells were brought in and Ventura inventory dropped from 54 to 39.

So, these cumbersome, short range, noisy birds were very difficult to fly even in the best of conditions. And there had never been intensive testing of their maneuverability. They were just meant to fly freight in a straight course without erratic moves to gain position. They weren't forgiving like any of the trainers we had flown in. The average accident rate was 2.5 airframes per month and you were lucky if you survived that! They're not like a car where you can change tactics at the last second! That's the trouble with airplanes. You can go faster or slow down, but you can't back up!

Then there was the court martial court cases. Just in case you thought these guys you were going to be fighting with were like brothers, think again! Of course, I also don't blame a guy for wanting to bail from a sure death trajectory. Even if it meant a dishonourable discharge you'd still be able to go back home on your own two feet vs an honourable discharge i.e. into a grave. And I'd already heard of my comrades discharged into 'no known grave'. Now can you see more reasons why most soldiers smoked and drank?

The program at Pennfield was designed over three phases. Conversion (to different aircraft pilots had previously trained in) training - 30 hrs., Operations - 35 hrs. And Armament - 35 hours for a total of 100 hours for pilots under training. Navigators and WAGs didn't need the conversion training other than for different armament. The wireless radios were exactly the same - most of us had that part nailed. We needed more training in the types of guns used so considerable time was spent in ground lectures. Subjects included Airmanship, Army Air Support, Bombing, Gunnery, Instructional Fuselage, Intelligence, Meteorology, Navigation, Operations Photography, Signals and Tactics. Our instructors came from Greenock, Scotland so I had to learn through a foreign accent. These men were all experienced RAF tour expired Pilots and Aircrew men. Still, it didn't help that their tours were not spent on Venturas. These were American-made and understood best by Americans. That was a major stroke against us right there. Mind you, the Americans helped as much as they could whenever a new airframe was flown up to Pennfield from south of the border. The glaring fact against Venturas was they were not designed for low-level flying/bombing and many machines were damaged and even brought down by bird strikes. (It's a good thing my nephew is writing this and not me(S) because he sounds more fearful and perhaps less faithful than me. I(S) just didn't worry and fret over danger because there was nothing I could do about it).

So, finally training was complete and we could get into operations. Oct. 25, '42 we left Pennfield and took the train to Halifax Trainees Pool - Pier 21. Sort of a gathering place for all graduating trainees to head off to war. The scope of this next step was something else to behold. There had to be enough accommodation for at least as many men that would board ship embarking (at least 15,000) as well as returning vets both injured and well. Then add to that mass all the POWs captured in Europe and being sent to Canada's POW camps. I(L) personally cannot really fathom how all this could take place in one terminal. Oh yes, and did I mention the merchant marines not only from Canada but all over the world having to pass through this nexus? The end of the CPR rail line was also here. So all the ready-for-combat soldiers graduating from training and transferring overseas would disembark from troop trains and head to Pier 21.(For some reason known only to the military, all records of those fantastic crossings were destroyed in 1951. So, my nephew was able to piece together snippets from the internet as well as bits from my(S) military records.)

From what I(L) can figure, the November crossing Sylvan was on was one of the largest. It involved 8 Troop ships (converted cruise ships from around the world) ferrying 14,023 troops. This was only to be outdone the following year by the Queen Elizabeth cruise ship carrying 14,313 all in one ship across the North Atlantic. It took from Oct. 27 to Nov. 6, '42 to get everyone on board, and all the supplies loaded, the filing of all individual military Top Secret records compiled. We all had to pass through the #3 PRC (Progress Review Committee) just to figure where we going to in England. I(L)'ve got to look at this strange way of military secret codes entered in each soldiers records. I(S) was again TOS (Taken on Strength) into the PRC. They kept RCAF troops together, as well as Army and Navy men in their groups.

No escort was needed upon embarkation, but if no wires got crossed, 2 days from arriving on the other side, RAF planes would escort us in. (Of all the numerous crossings, only one ship out of thousands was lost/sunk and that is because it was not escorted.) Life on board soon got into a routine. Most of us needed some R&R from the rigours of training but that was just a dream. In staterooms designed for two guests on a cruise, 10 men were assigned. Rooms meant for three, got 15 men. That was no worse than what we were accustomed to in Barracks. It was a good way to get acquainted, share some history, some jokes etc. I got the low down on what the weather would be like where we were headed because

my crew's Pilot – Robert Steedman knew it was like where he had received his formal training in Nanaimo and Victoria, B.C. He said the south of England was much the same. Meal times were a step above daily rations – we didn't have to cook our own rations in a mess kit but could get in super long queues for two well cooked meals per day. Three meals would never have fit into one day. (It was Napoleon Bonaparte who quoted “an army travels on its stomach”. Something most of us overlook in considering logistics of war is how to feed soldiers and how to preserve the food they will consume. So, you will see by my(S) letters that the thrill of our existence in Operations would be the receipt of canned chicken mailed from home!)

Being on the ocean was brand new to me(S). I didn't get seasick at all; I had done all the barfing I needed to flying in training. I(L) think there must have been vomit bags on our(S) trainers or the rear cockpits would have been filled with it. You put a prairie boy used to driving a team of horses and pulling a wagon into an open cockpit as a Tiger Moth with his head down trying to work a radio and add a few down drafts or swoops up or sideways, and what do you think will happen? I(L) surmise (by the fact our Flight Group was heading to Feltwell, south of London) that our ships sailed into Southampton, then took another train (or possibly bus) across the southern tip of England to Feltwell. Our Top Secret records say we were S.O.S. (Struck off Strength i.e. Discharged) from #3 P.R.C. And T.O.S. to R.A.F. Feltwell. I(L) would like to give you a little background history here. If I don't I'm quite sure the average person would never ever have any reason to look at this. If we don't at least take a glance all this important information will disappear into nothingness.

Feltwell was originally an RAF base in WW 1. When WW 2 began, its use was continued RAF Squadron 75 originally flew heavy Wellington bombers. The most attacked city was Hamburg. Just in 1941 alone, 230 aircrew lost their lives flying out of Feltwell. Most of these would be younger than 23 years. Sylvan's squadron – RNZAF #487 was formed as a light bomber unit in August 1942 as part of Bomber Command's Group #2. Most personnel were from New Zealand, the rest from the RCAF and RAAF (Australian). Initially this squadron was equipped with Lockheed Venturas – the “flying pigs”. These aircraft did not match their German counter-parts. #487 commenced Operations December 6, 1942 with Operation Oyster. (This was 10 days before I(S) arrived with our Canadian group. This sortie was meant to hamper the Reich's manufacture of radar parts sp. vacuum tubes vital for all radar sets. The squadron had prepared for this raid for one month. The plant located in Eindhoven, Holland, had produced the world's supply of vacuum tubes up until the start of the war. This “radar war” had been going on since 1933 (in which anyone involved was sworn with their lives to secrecy/including the military) and had progressed by 1940 to the installation of 29 ground based stations protecting England's southern and eastern coasts. What was still sorely needed was the production of radar sets on airplanes. When the severity of this need was expressed to the Dutch, 25,000 sets + 250,000 EF50 pressed glass vacuum tube bases were quickly manufactured and hastily sent to England hours before Germany bombed Rotterdam and Holland fell to their occupation. Now this precious commodity was in German hands!

So, Operation Oyster was a raid carried out by RAF Squadron #21, RAAF Sqn. #464 and RNZAF Sqn. #487 flying Venturas at low altitudes (for which they were not designed) in daylight so as to not kill Dutch civilians. In spite of this precaution 150 were casualties. There was Allied casualties as well but the attack set the plant's production back 6 months.

I(S) arrived Dec. 3 in Feltwell but was not TOS (Taken on Strength) until Dec. 16th. This lag time between arriving and TOS gave me time to get acquainted. I learned that Feltwell had a 'sister' airfield

3 miles NE at Methwold. When this base was set up Aug. 15, 1942 RAF Squadron #21 moved from Bodney to Feltwell to train our Squadron #487 of the RNZAF and Squadron #464. #21 was stationed at Methwold, in the countryside north and east of Feltwell. I heard of this farmer (Don Palmer) who had a dairy farm nearby. Don's Dad had managed a farm in Australia before the war, and when that became common knowledge amongst the Aussies of the Squadron, many of them started showing up at his farm. Most of them were off farms themselves so they showed up to give a hand with milking. Don's only regret was, there sometimes weren't enough cows to go around! Now that's my(S) kind of 'Castor' humour!

Operations for me (S) started in Jan. '43. Below is a picture of me and 22 of my RCAF buddies that arrived from Pennfield, NB taken early Jan. '43. I'm the guy 5th from the left back row.



There were successful sorties and unsuccessful ones, as well of lots of cancellations/stand downs. During the winter months Feltwell/Methwold squadrons continued to fly 'circus' bombing raids on France and the low countries. Circus was the RAF codename where Bombers were sent out with heavy fighter escort to engage the Luftwaffe fighters into combat. It was an offensive tactic to draw the Germans into battle. In late February/early March 1943, the Venturas were taken off bombing operations to take part in "Operation Spartan" a major training exercise for the invasion of Europe. The Feltwell units would make mock attacks on 'enemy' positions within the U.K. March 2, a Canadian piloting a Ventura crashed near home base and all crew were killed.

March 28, 1943, I(S) took part in one of the most successful raids made by our Group 2 Bombers. Our Squadron #487 + Squadron #464 attacked the shipping yards at Rotterdam. Six ships were reported damaged, three of them by direct hits. The next day all three squadrons made two more separate attacks

causing considerable damage to port installations and shipping.

April 1 – 3, '43 our #487 Squadron moved from Feltwell to Methwold, about 3 miles away. This new base was not as well appointed as the peacetime station at Feltwell. Daily Diary records say: It did not take long for us to settle down and were soon agreed that it wasn't too bad a place. After all, Captain Kippenberger (a New Zealander) was still 'King of the Castle' and that meant quite a lot.

The move was completed by the evening of April 3 but I(S) did not know that I would be able to enjoy my new 'digs'. The following day – April 4th, the Squadron sent 12 Venturas to attack Caen aerodrome. That evening another 12 including my(s) Ventura were sent to bomb the docks and shipping yards at Rotterdam. We were in some sort of trouble (maybe already hit by flak or engine trouble) but Robert Steedman pressed forward to target to deliver our bombs. When we turned back for home and crossed the coast of Holland flying westward, inadvertently flew over an enemy convoy and were attacked by their escorting fighters. It was from this point onward our flight was doomed. 2 other panes were attacked with ours, but we took the brunt of it with fire breaking out. Robert did his best to keep going but our shallow dive into the water was the end. It was reported by our fellow crews watching that our plane hit with a giant splash putting out the fire but that the German fighters shot the frame full of holes and she sank. It was reported on John Williamson's military records, that planes were sent out the next morning to see if there were any rafts or anything left, but nothing was found.

I(L) will include the letter from the Under Secretary of State of the British Air Ministry as the next page. Following that will be the similar letter sent to John Williamson's folks as it gives another slant to it. Following that is two pages including Sylvan's picture taken approximately July of '42 before heading to Pennfield. The third letter was written March 3, 1943 nine days before he went on a nine day leave to London. It appears that perhaps in his few trips to London he may have visited the RAF hospital in Uxbridge (a borough of London) where his 'mysterious' Canadian operation was checked. In the Feb. 28th letter he commented that he did not go to church because he was either in bed (unaccustomed to cold, humid weather there) or over at the hangers (there were lots of mechanical issues as well as damage to the aircraft) at that time of the morning. The last line in that letter telling his folks not to worry about him (getting into trouble) because the village (of Feltwell) there was just about as dead as Castor. You couldn't go wrong if you tried! Reference to Eddie Dorval was probably a friend from Castor. The mention of canned chicken sent over from Calgary (home of their Pilot's folks) and Castor helps us understand the bore of army rations.

Sqn. #487 stopped using Venturas after a disastrous raid on Amsterdam May 3, '43 in which 10 of 12 aircraft were shot down, one aircraft returned to base with mechanical defects, 28 crew were killed and 12 were captured by Germans and sent to POW camps. The Squadron Captain, Leonard Trent (a New Zealander) was the man responsible for getting rid of the soil dug up under the camp in The Great Escape. Unfortunately, right after their escape, all were recaptured. 50 POWs were executed, but Trent was put into solitary confinement, after immediately surrendering.

The motto of Sqn. 487 was "Ki te mutunga" which in Maori means "through to the end". This was the fate of this squadron.

I(L) count it such an honour to 'weave' this account of a great and noble man Sylvan Ellwood Weaver.

Reference:-
A87S/S. 504/1/Fl.

P402527
Copy 5/11/43
12-4-43
No. 487 (RNZAF) Squadron,
R.A.F. Station, METHWOLD.
6th April, 1943.

The Under Secretary of State,
Air Ministry P.4. (Gas),
London, W.C. 2.

Weaver A.E.
R77581

(4)

Sir,

I have the honour to refer to my signal AO.16 dated 5-4-43 and to submit the following report:

On the day of 4th April, 1943, Sgt. R. Steedman was captain of Ventura Mk.II. A.E. 957 and was detailed to carry out an operational sortie. The aircraft took off at 18.00 hours and set course along with 11 other machines for target.

The aircraft appeared to be in trouble before he got to the target but the pilot went on and bombed.

Considerable A.A. opposition was met over the target and over a convoy just off the Dutch coast.

On return journey, about 5 minutes on the way, he was seen to be in a shallow dive, and he got within 200 ft off the sea when two enemy fighters attacked him together. Tracer bullets were seen to enter the water near the machine. He was seen to hit the water with a big splash and the water was being churned up round him by what appeared to be cannon fire.

Owing to a low mist and increasing distance he was not seen again.

The position was taken and particulars handed to Intelligence Officer on return.

It is presumed he was first hit by flak and as a result lost height when he was finished by fighters.

Nothing further has been heard of him.

Crew - R122165 Sgt. Steedman, R. - Pilot, R.C.A.F.
R114634 Sgt. O'Connor, S.T.-Nav. R.C.A.F.
R77581 Sgt. Weaver, S.E. - WO/AG. R.C.A.F.
R95454 Sgt. Williamson, J.A. WO/AG. R.C.A.F.

/Over.

402545.
Copy to Ottawa

R95454 SGT. WILLIAMSON NO 487 Squadron.
J.A. Methwold.
Norfolk.

(2)

Reference:
4873/509/1/B.1.

8th April 1943.

Dear Mr Williamson,

Before you receive this letter, you will have had a telegram informing you that your son Sergeant/Wireless Operator/Air Gunner John Andrew Williamson has been reported missing as a result of air operations.

He and his crew were detailed along with more of his colleagues for an operation on the 4th April from which, his and one other crew did not return. It was reported by eye-witnesses that after leaving the target, over which there was considerable A.A. fire, your boy's machine appeared to be in trouble, and was seen on the return journey to be losing height and eventually it hit the water. A search was made afterwards in the hope that they may have been able to get into the dinghy, but it is with deep regret that I must tell you that they could not be found nor has any further news been heard of them.

Your son and his crew were a grand type of man, and were certainly doing a big job and doing it well, as I well know from their past operational work and also from the reports that I had from time to time from his immediate superiors. All his work has given satisfaction and cheerful spirit will be sadly missed on this Squadron.

His effects have been gathered together and forwarded to the Royal Air Force Central Depository, when after a maximum period of six months they will be sent to you through the Administrator of Estates, Ottawa.

May I now express the great sympathy which all of us feel with you in your anxiety, and I should also like to assure you how greatly we all honour the gallant sacrifice your son has made so far from his own country in the cause of freedom and in the service of the United Nations.

R.O.A.F.
OVERSEAS HEADQUARTERS

Yours sincerely.

J. L. ...
Group Captain, Commanding.
No 487 Squadron, METHWOLD.

Mr. W. H. Williamson.
Brandon. Manitoba.
CANADA.

18 APR 1943
IN

In Memory of Flight Sergeant Sylvan Ellwood Weaver

Serial #: R77581



Killed in action on April 4th, 1943

Son of a Mennonite family, Sylvan Weaver, born August 5th, 1915, grew up on a farm in the Fleet district. He joined the Air Force in Calgary in November of 1940 and after completing his training in Canada as a Wireless Operator and Air Gunner he was sent to England on November 6th, 1942. He was posted to the #487 New Zealand Squadron in December. While stationed in England he wrote several Letters home:

England
19 -2-43

Dear Folks,

Received your letter of Jan. 17 yesterday. Sorry to hear mother isn't feeling well. I am fine but still have a bit of a cold. I'll have one as long as I'm in this country.

You want me to tell you where I am and what I'm doing. Well, I really can't. We are in a New Zealand Squadron and on operations. That's about all I can tell you. There is nothing exciting happening here and especially around our station. I go to a show every night, either down in the village or on the camp. When we aren't flying, which is pretty often, we sometimes do a bit of skeet shooting. The weather is bad today so we are having a stand down which is O.K. because all week we have been flying pretty regularly.

We have finished that parcel I received. The cake was really good and the cookies were even better than that. The coffee lasted about 2 days. Just about every Canadian in the camp was in my room making coffee. Over here it's mostly chicory and is really terrible. So far I haven't received any cigarettes. It takes quite a while for them to come. Keep sending 300 per week.

Well, I can't think of anything to write about so will close.

Love and Kisses,
Sylvan

In Memory of Flight Sergeant Sylvan Ellwood Weaver . . . Continued

England
28-2-43

Dear Folks,

Well, I received another letter from you the day before yesterday so had better get busy and answer it. We had a pretty busy two weeks except for one day off. Sunday is the same as any other day in the week here. We have a church service at 9:15 Sunday morning but I have never gone as I am either in bed or over at the hanger at that time of the morning.

This must be a pretty cold winter over there! The weather here isn't bad but it is too damp. The air is always damp and if you don't have a fire on, the room and your clothes are all wet in the mornings.

The mails must not be getting over to Canada very well from this side. My Pilot's folks don't get half of the letters he writes and he sends 3 or 4 times as many as I do. I don't get the Castor paper. There is a new regulation isn't there about sending the paper over?

Our observer, Staff O'Connor, had a quart of chicken sent over. We heated it in our mess tins over the fireplace. It was really lovely. Hope my box gets here soon. We still get plenty to eat but it is the same thing day after day. I've been longing for some sauerkraut; if you could send some over, I'd really enjoy it.

Don't worry about me not taking care of myself. The village here is as dead as Castor; you couldn't go wrong if you tried. Well, will close. Hope this gets to you O.K. All the best.

Love and Kisses,
Sylvan

P.S. Had another letter from Eddie Dorval. He hasn't received any mail from home for over 6 weeks. If his folks haven't had any from him, tell them he's O.K. and having a good time at Gibraltar. By the way, I don't believe we will be going to the East. The planes we would be in are terrible so we will stay here if possible.

Sylvan

England
15/3/43

Dear Folks,

Well, I had better get this letter written before I go on leave. We are going the day after tomorrow for nine days.

I received the parcel with the chicken in it. We ate it that night and it was really lovely. Staff O'Connor, our observer, got two parcels the same day so we are pretty well fixed for food for a few days. I also received 300 Buckingham's from you and today another 300 from Armand. Thanks a lot and keep them coming. Cigarettes don't last very long because the boys are always bumming when they run out of Canadian smokes. I can't kick because I do the same myself.

We had a 48 hour pass this weekend but didn't go anywhere as we are going to London on the 17th. The only thing I don't like about London is that the subways quit running at 12 o'clock.

Well, there isn't much I can tell you. I am fine and the doc says I am in good physical condition. I was called into the hospital for a check-up on my operation and it's O.K. When we come back from leave we should really start to work hard. If I ever get back to Canada, I will tell you all about it.

Love and Kisses,
Sylvan

THE LOCKHEED VENTURA IN BOMBER COMMAND

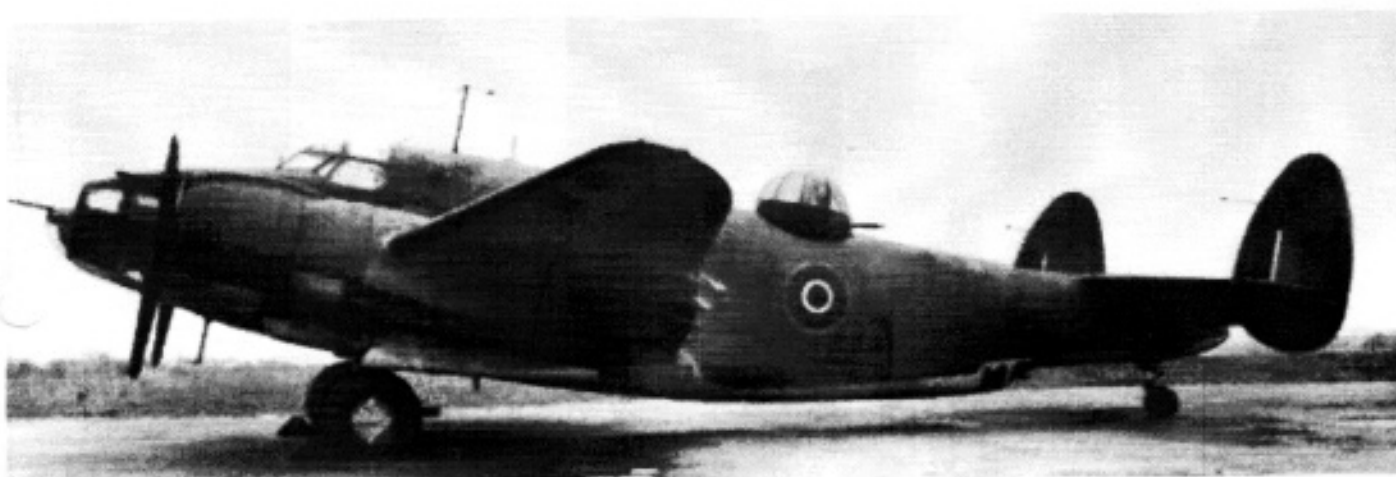
The American-built Lockheed Ventura played a limited role with Bomber Command. The Ventura was developed from the Lockheed Lodestar transport, as a replacement for the Lockheed Hudson. They were used for daylight attacks against short-range targets in occupied Europe.

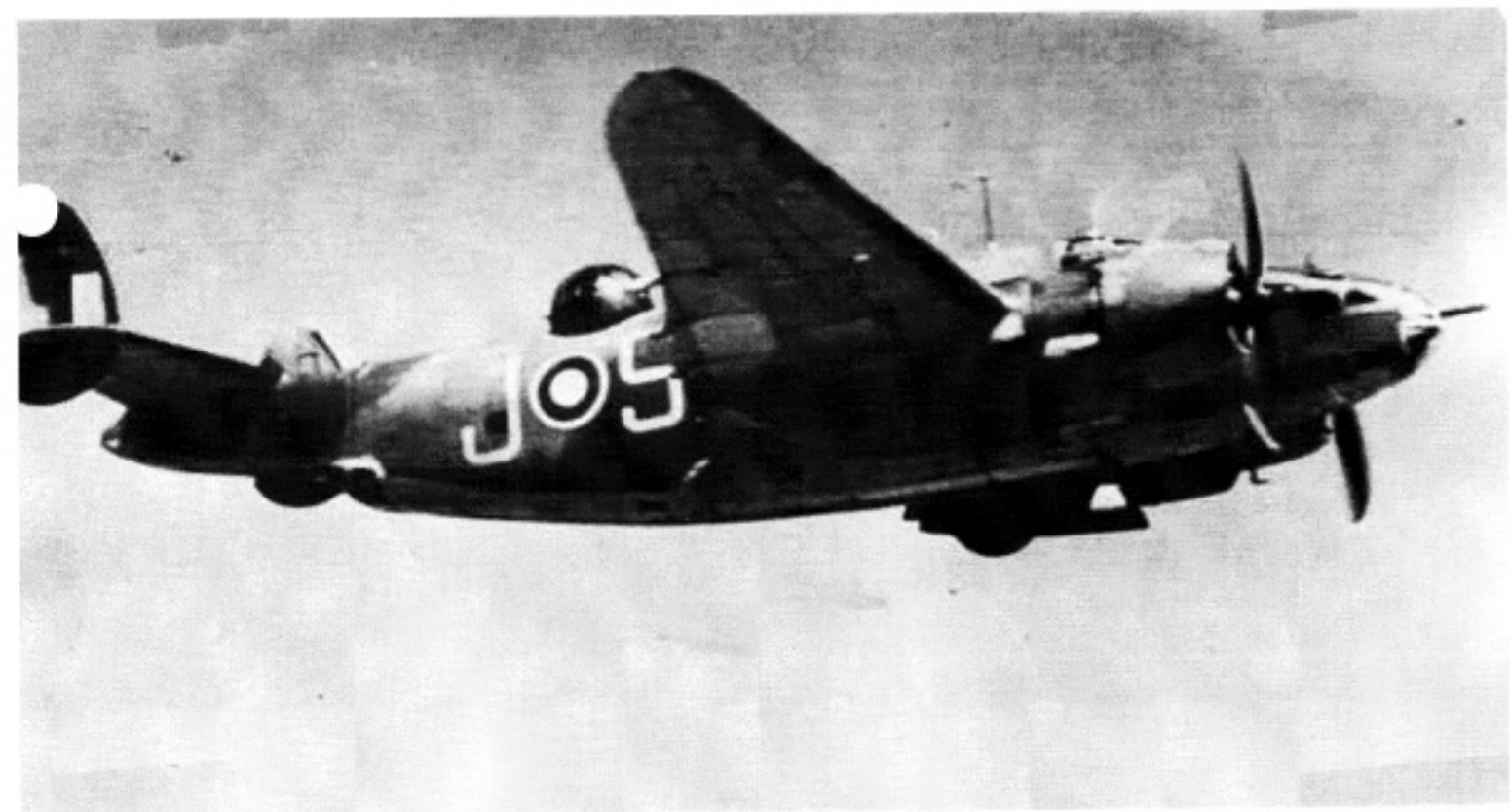
Delivery of Venturas to the RAF began during September 1941 and the aircraft served with 21 Sqn (August 1942 - September 1943), 464 (Australian) Sqn (September 1942 - July 1943), and 487 (New Zealand) Sqn (September 1942 - June 1943). Bomber Command considered these units as 'light, day squadrons) operating within 2 Group.

Venturas flew their first combat operation on November 3 1942, an attack by three aircraft of 21 Sqn against a factory at Hengelo which was diverted to become a raid against railway lines instead.

The first larger scale raid took place on December 6 1942 when 47 Venturas from all three squadrons took part, along with Mosquitos and Bostons, in a daylight, low-level attack against the Philips radio and vacuum tube factory at Eindhoven in the Netherlands. The raid did not go well - nine of the Venturas were shot down and 37 were damaged, 10 of them by bird-strikes.

Following these major losses, the Ventura squadrons switched to medium-altitude operations and attacked numerous targets in occupied Europe. On April 4, a formation of 24 Venturas were sent to bomb the Caen/Carpique airfield while another 24 Venturas were sent to attack the shipyards at Rotterdam. Five of the Venturas were shot down. On April 21, when Venturas of 21 Sqn hit the marshaling yards at Abbeville, three more were shot down by fighters.





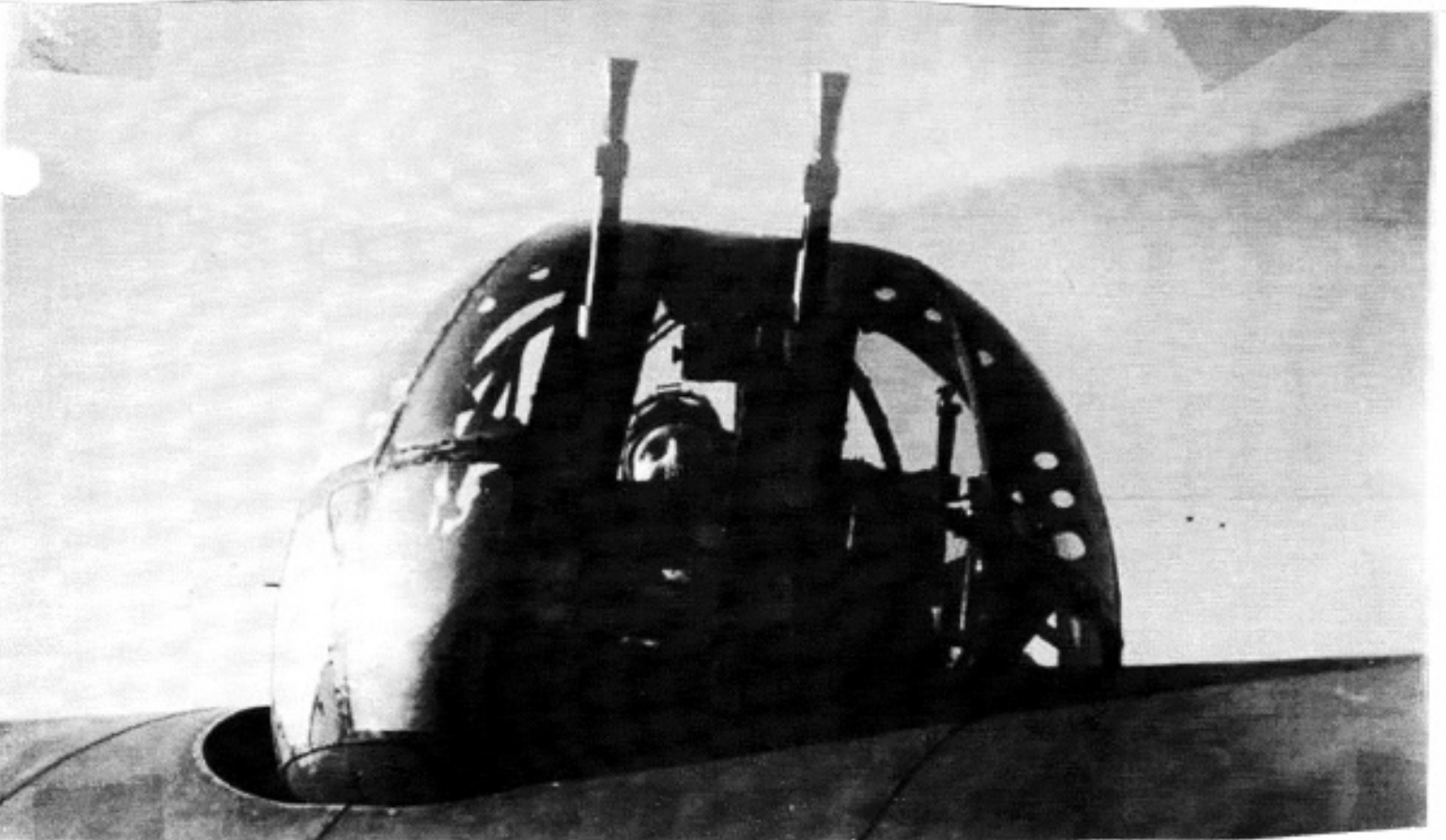
Ventura of RAAF Sqn. 464



Lockheed Ventura - loading incendiaries
1942-43



Venture of Sqn 464 Feltwell, England



Rear Turret