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Manitoba Mennonite Ace Air Gunner by SL T. C. McCall, PRO

With R.C.A.F Bomber Group Overseas

Young Peter Engbrecht is perhaps the number one paradox of the Royal Canadian Air Force. He is to be found with a member of a religious sect, one of whose tenets denounces participation in wars. Then again, in his being flows blood which 100 percent Germanic.

His early career in the Air Force hardly prepared him for the role of a hero, since it involved waiting on tables in the officers' mess and later serving as a batman.

Today, only partially finished with his first operational tour, the 21-year-old bomber gunner can claim a record unparalleled in the R.C.A.F. He has personally destroyed five enemy aircraft and probably destroyed a sixth. One of his victories was scored under the almost incredible circumstances of having three of his four guns inoperative, yet scoring bull's-eye on an attacking fighter with the one still functioning.

As any experienced bomber man will tell you, an air gunner's job is not primarily to shoot down fighters. It is to prevent his own aircraft from being shot down by spotting enemy marauders in advance of attack, guiding his own pilot by instructions for evasive actions when and if an attack develops, and as a last resort using his guns to defend his plane, if the enemy persists.

Beneath his air gunner's wing Peter Engbrecht wears one of the rarest decorations in the armed forces, the ribbon—white and dark blue—of the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal, roughly the equivalent to the Distinguished Service Order which can be won only by officers. When awarded the CGM by His Majesty the King at an open-air ceremony on one of the Canadian bomber Group stations, Peter Engbrecht was still a sergeant. Shortly after this event he became a flight sergeant and has recently been commissioned.

A sturdily-built, fair-haired young man, Pilot Officer Engbrecht, is self-conscious about this speech which he insists still bears traces of German accent. German had always been spoken in his family and until recently his letters home had been written in that language. Now he writes them in English because of the complications which were constantly arising out of his use of the enemy's language.

Actually his family home was for many years in the Duchy of Luxembourg. Then they moved to the Ukraine and in 1928 the Engbrechts crossed the ocean to settle in Whitewater, Manitoba, members of a Mennonite community. There they head of the family, Nicolas Engbrecht, established himself as a blacksmith and in due course was joined in the business by Peter after he had finished public school.

The outbreak of war brought problems to the Engbrecht family. Peter, the oldest son, wanted to enlist when he reached 18, and a family council was held

GOT BISHOP'S PERMISSION

"We finally consulted the bishop," he says. "My father couldn't refuse me permission to go since he had himself fought for seven years in the Russian army and during the revolution. The way we decided it was that Canada deserved fighting for, and I was allowed to join up. I was the first Mennonite, so far as I know, to do so."

The embryo gunner ace enlisted in March 1941, but was not called until November of that year. He went to the service flying school at Brandon and worked as a waiter in the officers' mess and as a canteen steward. Then he was transferred to Summerside, P.E.I., and was a batman in the officers' quarters. In December, 1942, he was posted overseas and after arriving in Great Britain served as a G.D. and later as an armorer's assistant. Late the following year he was permitted to re-muster as an air gunner and won his wing in October. It was not until May, 1944, that he joined the Tiger Squadron of the R.C.A.F Bomb Group.

His first operational sortie was flown on May 26th when his aircraft, piloted by Flight Officer Keys, an American, was one of a force of Halifaxes, which attacked Le Havre. The trip was wholly uneventful.

The next night the Canadian crew got the sort of target which they really relished: A German military camp at Bourg-Leopold, Belgium. It was on this trip that Engbrecht destroyed his first two German fighters.

It was during the engagement that three of Enbrecht's four guns "packed up". At the same time the rear-gunner reported that all four of his guns were unserviceable. To complicate matters further, Engbrecht's intercom equipment was not working, so he was unable to communicate with other members of the crew.

At this moment a FW190 came tearing in on the port quarter. There wasn't much to the engagement according to Engbrecht.

"He didn't fire at all. I started to fire with the one gun that was operating and saw him blow up about 100 yards from our kite. Think I must have hit his petrol tank underneath. The way it turned out, I figure that every bullet must have hit him; the stream just seemed to pour into the fighter."

It was exactly two weeks later that Skipper Keys took his crew to bomb railway yards at Versailles-Matlot, near Paris. Returning from the target about half way between Pars and Cherbourg, the sky was suddenly illuminated by a fighter flare.

"An Me109 came out from behind the flare,; Engbrecht relates, "and I saw him silhouetted. Then I gave him a short burst and he caught fire almost immediately and exploded right behind us. Just than an Me110 came in on our starboard side and I opened up again. He caught fire and started down. Then he disappeared in a cloud and suddenly there was a bright flash and the cloud lit up, as though by an explosion."

The next event of importance on the Engbrecht calendar was award of the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal and its presentation by the King. That was on August 11th. The next night he was detailed for an attack on Brunswick.

"We saw a couple of fighters on the way in to the target but they didn't attack us,; Engbrecht says. "Even though you are not attacked, when you know that there are fighters around, it makes you all the more alert. Then I saw an Me210 get a four-engine bomber and start for us. The three of us opened fire all at the same time—the fighter, our rear-gunner and myself. We could see our bullets bounding off him as he came in. Then he caught fire and we watched him all the way down to the deck."

Shortly after this incident, as a result of which Engbrecht and Sgt. Gillanders, the rear-gunner, claim "half" and aircraft destroyed, the rear-gunner shot down and got credit for second enemy aircraft destroyed.

Four nights later, returning from Kiel, Sgt Gillanders claimed a "probably" when their aircraft was attacked over the sea.

As a youngster, Engbrecht spent much of time hunting rabbits with a .22 rifle and finds that there is a marked parallel between his childhood sport and the present grim business. At the same time, he has his own theories about operational technique.

"In a fighter attack, I am never conscious of sighting. It seems to be something that you do automatically. You lay on deflection, moved ahead of the target and hold your aim there until ready to fire. I think I can honestly say that I've only missed the one time; that was when I got a probable. The Jerry was at extreme range and it was more by good luck than good judgment that I hit him at all."

Engbrecht, be ready and steady, gives the impression of a man who has matured far beyond his years. He speaks deliberately and well and has given a good deal of thought to the post-war period. Primarily, he would like to remain in the Air Force and if possible, train as a pilot although he has a good craftsman's pride in his present air gunner's trade. He would like to obtain a better education and possibly take some part in public life. As a side-line to his work of assisting his father in the blacksmith shop, he had operated a small fuel supply business, and in all probability will return to that after the war. He was married while stationed at Summerside and is fully conscious of his family obligations, particularly in view of the fact that his father is advancing in years and may need his help at home.

One of the things that irritate him is the interest of strangers and new acquaintances in the fact that he is of German origin. They invariably ask he says, "how does it feel to shoot down Germans?"

"I have no love for the Nazis at all," he says. "But I have met good Germans as well as bad ones. What we should have to do after this war is over, is to take them in hand and teach the younger generation the right way of life in the same way that Hitler has tried to teach them the wrong way. That's the only way we'll ever straighten them out."

Peter Engbrecht regards himself as a Canadian and looks to Canada as a land of unparalleled opportunity for young men such as himself.

“for a man who is not afraid to work you can get ahead in Canada even without a formal education,” he observes. “The men who want to hold down office jobs will find it harder. But if you really want to work, you can get ahead in Canada.”