

THE JOURNEY BACK

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(Reference: Roundel, March 1964, Vol. 16, No. 2)

A WARTIME serviceman, given the opportunity to visit in peacetime the places he knew so well in war, is invariably disappointed to find that nothing looks the same. Towns and villages have been rebuilt, new districts added, roads widened and new traffic interchanges constructed. Norman Welwood, a wartime flier with the RCAF, found this out recently. But, he was luckier than most; he found the place he was looking for.

Mr. Welwood was the sole survivor from an RCAF *Wellington* shot down near Hamburg on the night of 9 Nov. '42. Ever since, he wanted to visit the graves of his crew and, if possible, the crash site itself. He knew his crew-mates were buried at Sage Military Cemetery, near Oldenburg in northern Germany, but finding the crash site would be a problem as he had little information to begin with.

On the night of the crash Mr. Welwood was serving as a radio operator with No. 425 (Alouette) Sqn. flying from Dishforth, Yorkshire. After bombing Hamburg his aircraft headed for home. It didn't make it. North-west of Bremen the forward compartment of "Q" for Queenie received a direct hit by a heavy anti-aircraft shell. Another shell burst just astern. As the stricken bomber plunged downward Sgt. Welwood called to the other crew members on the intercom. There was no reply.

He knew he had but minutes to save his own life. His parachute was stowed overhead on a rack but the explosion had knocked out the lights. He groped desperately in the dark wondering if he could locate the parachute and find the escape hatch in time. Thankfully he located the parachute, snapped it on the rings of his harness and gripped the handle of the hatch. It would not open. Precious seconds went by as the aircraft plunged downward. Finally he was able to pry up the hatch and jump through. The ground rushed up to meet him. In seconds he hit the ground in a ploughed field, a scant 60 yards from the fiercely burning aircraft which had crashed seconds before he landed. Sergeant Welwood did not know whether any of the others had been able to jump from the aircraft before it crashed.

He buried his parachute and moved away from the scene. He could see the lights of a farmhouse in the distance. It was a cold night and he knew he must find shelter, food and civilian clothing. As he approached the farmhouse a dog started barking so he moved on. Other farm buildings were nearby. Eventually he found a small building, some distance from the rest, with a loft filled with hay. Here he spent the night. He was awakened several times by the sound of ammunition exploding.

The following day the fields surrounding the crash were alive with Luftwaffe investigators collecting documents from the crashed *Wellington*. He was unaware that they had recovered the bodies of his five fellow crewmen; they in turn were unaware that a sixth man had survived the crash and was hiding nearby.

That night Sgt. Welwood crawled away from the barn. Before he left he made a meal from some potatoes he found in the building and as the night was bitterly cold he took an old coat hanging from a hook. He tucked his flying boots under the coat and started walking down a country road toward the railway line which he knew was not far away. He had heard train whistles all day and knew the line was fairly busy. A train heading west would take him into Holland within a few hours and there he knew he could contact the Underground who would hide him and eventually help his escape.

Evading capture for four days, Sgt. Welwood was finally discovered in the railway yards at Leer, a few miles from the Dutch border. During two and a half years of imprisonment he participated in several unsuccessful escape attempts and survived a long trek on foot across Northern Europe in the closing stages of the war.

After the war Mr. Welwood learned from the family of the dead pilot that his crew had been buried in the civilian cemetery at Bad Zwischenahn, then re-interred in the British War Cemetery at Sage. And, with this much information to go on, Mr. Welwood last year made the journey back.

Along with Mr. Ed Blake (also an RCAF veteran), he set out to visit the graves of his crew and, hopefully, the crash site. The two men had little difficulty finding the cemetery but locating the crash site was to prove more difficult than they had imagined. The aircraft had crashed at night. In addition he had walked in the dark avoiding heavily-travelled roads so he did not see landmarks that he might remember 21 years later.

Mr. Welwood made his first call at the police station at Bad Zwischenahn. There, to his astonishment, the present police chief, Herr Winter, remembered investigating the crash of a *Wellington* with a Canadian crew in 1942. The aircraft crashed near the farming community of Azschhausen, five miles east of town. He remembered that there were five bodies in the wreck. Many of the details tallied with Mr. Welwood's memory of the crash. The police chief was most surprised when Mr. Welwood told him he had been aboard the aircraft that night and had hidden within 300 yards of the crash. The police chief offered to take him to the scene.

At the crash site, the German farmers were positive the aircraft had come down during the afternoon of a hot day in July 1942. Mr. Welwood found this hard to understand because he knew Canadian bombers were not conducting daylight bombing operations in 1942. Furthermore, he didn't recognize any of the buildings and when the farmer produced a metal dinghy paddle at the scene, the two RCAF veterans recognized it as belonging to an American *Liberator*. Mr. Welwood was disappointed but after coming so far was unwilling to give up.

It was getting dark as he continued his inquiries over a three-mile radius. He thought the land looked familiar. Eventually he found a country road leading down to a railway track. At the railway yard in Bad Zwischenahn he recognized the siding near the edge of town where he had boarded an empty boxcar. Working his way back along the rail line Mr. Welwood was sure the country road was the correct one. He drove north for about two miles and started enquiries again. Eventually he found a man who remembered an aircraft crash at night during the fall of 1942.

One lead led to another. Finally at 10.30 p.m. he arrived at the farm of Herr Frederick Hotz. The farmer's wife clearly recalled a night in November when a big aircraft crashed on their farm. Her husband was serving in the German Army at the time. Mr. Welwood asked the farmer if he could see the crash scene in the dark. The farmer showed him where the bomber had crashed and within a few minutes Mr. Welwood picked out the hedge where his parachute had tangled, pointed to the farmhouse where he had taken shelter. Herr Hotz invited him to come back in the daylight when he could take some photographs.

The following morning Mr. Welwood and Mr. Blake visited the farm where Sgt. Welwood had taken shelter. The former airman immediately recognized the small barn. The loft was filled with hay and there were potatoes in a big bin. He knew this was where he had slept that night. He climbed up into the loft and looked through the cracks in the loft door. Twenty-one years ago he had looked out through the same cracks to see the *Wellington* burning, its ammunition exploding.

Hopeful that he might find a part of the downed bomber, he and Mr. Blake started an exhaustive search of the area. After an hour the two men found a crumpled rectangular box made of metal. It looked familiar. Mr. Welwood scratched the surface and found it made from an aluminium alloy. It appeared to be an ammunition box from one of the *Wellingtons* machine guns. Taking a small section as a souvenir, he headed for home. The journey back was over.