

Nanton WWII Bomber Command Memorial

My wife Ka Hyun MacKenzie Shin and I paid this week a meaningful, emotionally moving visit to Nanton, Alberta's marvellous WWII Allied Air Forces Bomber Command Memorial and Museum. It's an hour's drive on the freeway south from Calgary.

Nanton's Memorial and Museum preserve and honour the memories of the brave and selfless young Canadians and those of our Allies who died in the slaughterhouse that was Bomber Command. These airmen gave their young lives in enormous numbers defending freedom and defeating tyranny in World War Two.

The centrepiece of this magnificent Museum is its beautifully restored Lancaster. My earliest memories as a young boy include eagerly anticipating seeing this Lancaster sitting beside the highway in Nanton when we'd drive south from Calgary to visit my Mom's sister, my Aunt Dorothy Lancaster, and her family in Lethbridge. That's right - "Lancaster"! Aunt Dorothy married Ken Lancaster from the Isle of Wight in England.

Now the Nanton Lancaster no longer sits beside the highway battling the elements including Alberta's winters. Now it's housed in a beautiful hanger with other aircraft, including a Tiger Moth. The RCAF in WWII taught my Dad to fly in a Tiger Moth.

The Nanton Lancaster now attracts worldwide attention because all four engines have been restored. Huge crowds gather when this Lancaster is taken outside and all four engines are fired up. It's very dramatic. Perhaps one day this Lancaster will again fly. Today only two Lancasters fly -- one is at Hamilton Airport in Ontario. The other is in the Battle of Britain Flight in the United Kingdom.

The Nanton Lancaster is hugely meaningful to me for a very special reason. In October 1983, my Dad and I stopped in Nanton to see this Lancaster en route to Lethbridge for Aunt Dorothy's funeral. After learning of my Dad's WWII Bomber Command service from me, Museum staff gave the two of us exclusive access to this Lancaster. We were alone aboard this Lancaster with each other for about a half an hour.

Then something extremely important happened. On the drive from Nanton to Lethbridge, Dad told me about 95% of everything he ever told me about his service in WWII. He told me in painstaking detail exactly how each of his 33 missions from England to Nazi controlled Europe worked.

Dad explained how a handful of Lancasters from each Bomber Command Squadron would assemble, usually over the North Sea, to create armadas of Lancasters. These sometimes numbered over a thousand aircraft flying in tight formations into enemy airspace. He told me how the margin for error was often zero -- any mistake could result in death. He told me about death in Lancasters from flak, and about Luftwaffe night fighters shooting down, and German anti-aircraft installations blowing up, our Lancasters.

Dad told me the RAF high command exhibited no real knowledge of post-traumatic stress disorder. It was dismissed as cowardous.

Dad told me that, on one particularly dreadful occasion, a young pilot seriously traumatized by his mission was insanely forced by the RAF back into his Lancaster cockpit the next night. As airborne they assembled into tight formation, this young pilot lost his nerve. He yanked his joystick. That sent his Lancaster up where it ripped out the belly of the Lanc above it. In the ensuing chaos, six Lancasters crashed, killing everyone on board.

My Dad Roland W MacKenzie DFC of Calgary was a Lancaster Pilot and Deputy Squadron Leader of Royal Air Force 166 Squadron. Dad flew 33 Combat Missions April to August 1944. In Dad's 166 Squadron, 944 men average age 23 were killed. Of these, 133 were Canadians.

To understand the magnitude of the sacrifice Canada made in Bomber Command, look at the numbers. Bomber Command lost more personnel and planes in a single night than Fighter Command lost in the entire Battle of Britain. Over a million Canadians volunteered to fight for Canada in World War Two. Of these, about 45,000 were killed. But of the 50,000 Canadians serving in Bomber Command, almost 11,000 were killed.

Veterans Affairs Canada's website declares point blank:

The efforts of the approximately 50,000 Canadians who served with the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and Royal Air Force (RAF) in Bomber Command operations over occupied Europe was one of our country's most significant contributions during the Second World War.

Bomber Command had the single highest casualty rate of any unit of the Armed Forces of Canada, the US and the UK. The Air Force and others repeatedly questioned the appalling loss of men and aircraft we continued to sustain in Bomber Command.

Churchill's government's reply was to insist the Bomber Boys carry on regardless of casualties, because Bomber Command:

1. was the only way we could carry the war into Germany between Dunkirk in May 1940 until D-Day in June 1944; and
2. struck devastating blows to Germany's capacity to wage war through destruction of armaments factories, military targets and Germany's railways and ports.

It was Bomber Command Churchill repeatedly pointed to in answer to Stalin's demands for a second front in western Europe.

I've become extremely interested in Bomber Command, what it accomplished and how it was so unfairly maligned post war. I intend to write about this.

In September 2018, my sons Guy Roland MacKenzie and Ruaridh MacKenzie and I will be in England as "VIP Invited Guests" at the Church Service and Memorial Garden Ceremonies in Lincolnshire of Bomber Command Royal Air Force 166 Squadron of which Dad was Deputy Squadron Leader.

I've now visited Nanton Memorial Museum several times over the years. I've always been impressed with the fine, enthusiastic young people working at this Memorial Museum. They add so much to the experience.

Samantha and Courtney this week were perfect examples of this. Courtney was marvellous showing Ka Hyun and me the Lancaster, and taking the attached photos we're in.

Sam meanwhile was equally marvellous showing me the Museum's gift shop books and selling me \$250 of them. Both young women are a credit to the Museum, and to the sacred memories of the fallen airmen.

Attached are my smartphone photos, and Courtney's of my wife Ka Hyun and me.

Yours faithfully,
Roddy MacKenzie