

North Hastings fallen honoured in Holland



By Kristena Schutt-Moore

In 2008 the remains of the Stirling III BK716 plane that was carrying Sgt Ronald Kennedy (flight engineer), Sgt Leonard Shrubbsall (mid-upper gunner), F/O John Michael Campbell (radio operator), F/O John Harris (pilot), F/O Harry Farrington (navigator), Sgt Charles Bell (bomb aimer) and North Hastings' own Flt/Sgt John Francis McCaw (tail gunner) was found.

During September 2020 the work started to retrieve the plane and a search effort went underway to find the crewmen and bring them home.

Records show that after a successful bomb raid over Berlin on March 29, 1943 German ace night fighter pilot Werner Rapp gunned their plane down on March 30, 1943 at 4:49 a.m. on the plane's return trip to the British Isles. After being shot they crash landed in Markermeer Lake, roughly four kilometres southeast off Marken Island in Almere, Holland. It wasn't until 2008 that the plane was found by fisherman then they had dropped their anchor and a piece of the plane came to the water's surface with the anchor when all these details came together.

Once the Aircraft Recovery Group heard about the found plane the planning to retrieve the plane and any crew members that might be left got started. They are a volunteer organization that works to find First and Second World War planes and other wrecks to help bring history to life and closure to families. To bring the plane and crew to the surface the volunteer group teamed up with other researchers, army and air force technicians, and civilian recovery specialists. They sifted for anything larger than eight millimeters in a 75 square metre area around the main wreckage site. The speed and force that the plane hit the water sent pieces of all sizes over great distances, as far as 400 metres, to rest on the muddy bottom of Markermeer Lake.

At the time of printing it is unknown how many human remains were found during the recovery process in September 2020. Once the remains from the dive site were removed from the lake they were all moved to a Holland museum. It is there that all human remains that were found went through a forensic identification process to be properly identified. Flt/Sgt McCaw's nephew Richard McCaw is still waiting for confirmation from the British Commonwealth Cemetery where the military burial will take place. Initial view is October 2022 however the pandemic has created a backlog for proper military funerals, including aircraft flyover, military band, 21 gun salute, etc.

McCaw and his wife Diane were in attendance last week when the city of Almere held a celebration and memorial for the crew of

the Stirling III BK716 in the town's memorial field at the Bos der Onverzettelijken Park, which translates to 'The Forest of the Unyielding Park.' The forest was planted in 1992 with a tree for every resistance fighter who was executed during the Second World War. The celebration included the unveiling of a statue called Rize created by Almere artist Laura O'Neill.

O'Neill used part of the plane's found engine block as the base and created the statue of a member of the air force rising and walking from the wreckage. The statue bears a strong resemblance to Flt/Sgt McCaw and O'Neill says that, that is because she had his photograph hanging in her studio because he was the youngest member of the crew. The airman is faced towards the descendant of the Anne Frank tree. On the base of the statue 'We Commemorate the Crew of the Short Stirling BK716 - Who Died During the Second World War - They Paid the Ultimate Price - So We Can Live in Freedom Today' is engraved.

'It's an overwhelming recognition by the Dutch for the McCaw family to see a monument of great artwork in the Netherlands with my Uncle Francis name on it with his other aircrew members. He wasn't any more heroic than anyone else. I doubt any other veterans from Hastings County (Bancroft/ Belleville) have similar recognition in the Netherlands. It's taking time for me to absorb everything that has happened in the last couple of weeks,' explains McCaw.

The McCaw family had always been told that Flt/Sgt McCaw was missing in action and that his plane had disappeared. It wasn't until 77 years later in 2008 that they were able to learn what had happened to him. Now he and his fellow crewman will forever be immortalized and remembered in the Forest of the Unyielding.

National Geographic has made a documentary, in both Dutch and English, about the process of the plane's recovery. At press time it was unknown when the documentary would be aired or on which of the National Geographic channels it would be shown. Those interested in watching the documentary will have to call their television supplier or contact National Geographic online.