

Honouring a wartime pilot

By ELIZABETH McMICHAEL



"Get out, get out now" were the last words spoken to his crew by Flying Officer Gerald Conroy as he piloted his flaming and wrecked Halifax bomber to the ground over southeastern Germany near midnight on March 24, 1944. Conroy, a native of Middle Stewiacke, was on his second operational tour of duty and was participating in what was to be the last major Allied raid on Berlin, also known as "the night of the strong winds."

After graduating from high school, Gerald worked in a number of forestry jobs and then, in mid-1940 at the age of 19, joined the Canadian Forestry Corps with his closest friend Rupert Fisher. Following a year in the Army, he transferred to the Royal Canadian Air Force and, in early December 1941, was awarded his pilot's wings at 8 Service Flying Training School in Moncton, N.B. Posted overseas, he became a member of RCAF 429 (Bison) Squadron of the famous Canadian 6 Bomber Group in December of 1942 and flew Wellington bombers.

Bomber crew losses were high, both in training flights, and as they flew at night over occupied Europe. In the words of the Supreme Allied Commander, their contribution "weakened" the enemy forces and led to the success of D-Day in June of 1944.

It seemed as if Conroy led a charmed life. He was involved in two accidents while a student and instructor. At the start of an operational mission, his plane crashed at the end of the runway, killing one of his crew. In mid-June 1943, he was shot down over Dusseldorf, Germany, and all his crew were killed. He evaded capture and with assistance from members of the Underground, he found his way across Europe to Spain and Gibraltar and back to England in the autumn. Following a month's leave spent with family and friends at home and in Montreal, he returned to England early in January of 1944 and elected to go back to his former squadron – this time as the pilot of a Halifax Mark III bomber.

Following several successful bombing missions, his luck ran out at last. According to a surviving crew member with whom I have met, at first all went well on that March night 65 years ago: The takeoff was good and Conroy piloted the plane on course towards Europe. Despite the strong winds, the bombs were dropped over Berlin. After a short flight south from the German capital, they turned west to head back to their base at Royal Air Force Station Leeming in northeast England.

Suddenly, the plane was hit, part of the right wing was blown away and half of the cockpit cover disappeared. On order from Conroy, the crew began to "get out." One member remained behind to help the pilot, but then he was ordered to get out as well. With Conroy still at the controls, the flaming and broken plane landed in an open field near Merbitz, a small village near Halle, at 11:30 pm. Eyewitnesses reported that Conroy was dead in his pilot's seat, with obvious wounds to his head and back, just short of his 23rd birthday. The remainder of the crew spent the rest of the war in a German Air Force prisoner of war camp.

The local residents removed the body from the wreckage, built a coffin and buried him in the churchyard in a ceremony presided over by the minister. Flowers were placed over the grave. He remained there for three years before being transferred to the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery in Berlin. Our research has led us to the German pilot who, quite probably, shot down Conroy's plane.

On the 65th anniversary of his crash, my husband and I will be in Merbitz to participate in a ceremony designed both to remember my uncle who died in the service of Canada and Canadians, and to thank the citizens of Merbitz and area for their kindness to him after his death.

We will stand in the field where he crashed. Representatives of the Canadian Embassy in Berlin will be present, as well as some surviving witnesses to the crash, their children and other German citizens. We will affix a plaque brought with us from Canada to a stone monument arranged by the local historical society.

Gerald Conroy died on our behalf. We will remember him!

Elizabeth McMichael and her husband Alex Morrison live in Cornwallis Park.