

'THE LONG RETURN'

AUTHOR Bob Porter

A True Adventure Story dedicated to the Dutch Underground

Precis: The book documents the Author's unique adventure with the Dutch Underground during World War II. Following his miraculous survival when his Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) Lancaster bomber was hit and exploded at 22,000 feet over Holland. For seven months, Bob Porter hid in the house of a Dutch policeman and his family. By night, the policeman was a leader in the Dutch Resistance Organisation. The book describes the many dangerous exploits that the author experienced, while being sheltered by these tremendously courageous Dutch people who defied the German Nazi occupational authorities. While trying to cross the no-man's land (between the German and Allied Lines), he was captured and he was imprisoned for three months in a concentration camp and tortured by the German SS and Gestapo. He never identified his Dutch friends. In all this time his wife and parents did not know whether he was alive or dead. The RCAF officially declared him 'Missing in Action.' Near the end of the war, he was transferred to a Prisoner-of-War camp, experienced forced marches and liberated by General Patton's troops. Fifty years later, he was able to participate in the great memorial celebration in Holland, where he re-met many of the courageous Dutch underground people who had sheltered him.

The Story: My story commences on September 1, 1939, the day Canada declared war against Germany. At the time, I (the "Author") was sixteen years old and was most keen on enlisting in the RCAF. Two years later, I signed up and began my military service as a Mechanics' Apprentice at the Fairbanks-Morse building in Vancouver, BC.

About the time of my eighteenth birthday, my group was sent to the Manning Depot in Toronto where I completed basic training, before being sent on to St. Thomas, Ontario. The RCAF trained technical and trade's personnel at this base. Upon graduation, in February 1942, I was transferred to McLeod, Alberta. In September 1942, being somewhat bored and impatient at not seeing action, I re-mustered to aircrew duty and completed my training as a "Bomb Aimer."

pilot that we had to bail-out. Unfortunately, the escape hatch in the nose of the plane jammed and we became stuck there. As we were trying to abandon the aircraft, there was a massive explosion, the gas tanks exploded (at twenty years old I stared death in the face.) I was now unconscious and I was miraculously blown out of the aircraft. The Flight Engineer and I were the only survivors. I fell almost four miles without a parachute and regained consciousness just before hitting the ground. I managed to pull open my parachute and, almost at the same time, I landed in a tree. Two of the crew were carbonised in the plane and three were found dead on the ground with their parachutes not opened. They had not come to...

Our Lancaster was shot down over Zeist, in Holland. I made contact with the Dutch Underground the next day in Driebergen. This was the start of a seven-month odyssey and journey with the Dutch Resistance. I had a brief stay in Utrecht then moved to Groenekan, a small village on the road to Hilversum. I spent seven months here in the home of a Dutch policeman, his wife and their two children. In the book, I describe in some detail my many hair raising adventures while evading capture. Without the help of the courageous Dutch people who were involved in the Resistance Organisation I would not have survived. I had my own "Persoonsbewijs" (Identity Card). I became "Henk DeGraff" a deaf and dumb farmer using papers officially that I did not have to work in Germany as a slave labourer.

This was my life until a few weeks before Christmas of 1944, another series of adventures commenced. I and a group of Army fellows received orders to attempt an escape through the German lines and back to England. It was a desperate attempt. As we tried to cross the river we were captured by the Germans as we were trying to reach the approaching Allied Armies. The capture took place on a river bank just south and west of Upheusden.

When captured, I was in civilian clothes, with no identification, so I was turned over to the Gestapo and the SS as a spy. They sent me to a concentration camp (which was for Jewish people and political prisoners) where I endured over three months, yes over three months of starvation, ill treatment and solitary confinement. They wanted to know who had been hiding me and where, for the previous seven months. When I gave my name, rank and serial number, (as we are required by the Geneva Convention.) To my surprise the German interrogators knew who I was, where and when I had been shot down.

Later the German SS and Gestapo went back to Berlin and I was recognized as a Prisoner of War (POW). I was then transferred to a POW holding camp with aircrew who had just been shot down. The new aircrew prisoners I was now with (some of whom may have just left England the day before) did not want much to do with me. This was because over a period of three and a half months I had not washed or changed my clothes. I was very dirty. I smelt and

I was finally shipped 'overseas' on September 1943. I was sent to a holding unit in Bournemouth, England, where I waited to join an OTU (Operation Training Unit). I was then posted to Long Marston and then Honeybourne where the flight crews were formed. We got to know one another very well. We were just like a brotherhood; eating, sleeping, partying and flying together. It was at Long Marston that I first met 'Ginger,' who was later to be my wife.

At the OTU, we started flying twin-engine aircraft and received additional ex-tenure flight training. One of our assignments was to fly over France and drop what we called "their Newspaper" (which the Germans opted not to publicise).

After graduation, our group was sent to Yorkshire for further training in a 'Conversion Unit.' Initially, we flew twin-engine Halifax bombers and then converted up to four-engine Lancaster bombers. The planes were getting larger and larger. Our intensive training included extensive flying, bombing, navigating, gunnery and the general conditions of flight over Europe. It was getting real serious as we neared the time to bomb Germany (which all our training was preparing us).

Before going to a designated squadron, we had to complete a Commando Course. This was three weeks of advanced Commando Training given by the British Army. Everything was on the double to get us in shape so that in case we were shot down we could fend for ourselves. Upon completion of Commando Training, Ginger and me were married (the girl I had met at Long Marston). Immediately after our two-week honeymoon, I was posted with my flight crew to the RCAF 419 Squadron (known as the Moose Squadron) just out of Middleton St-George. The RCAF crews operated as part of the British Air Command that did the night bombing.

It was very exciting. I was now in a Bomber Squadron and ready to go on bombing runs over Germany. We started on short runs but soon we were doing the long hauls that were very dangerous. On 'D Day' (June 6, 1944), I was on the second wave of bombing flights over the Normandy defences. It was almost daylight when we were returning home. I recall the sky being filled with American bombers (which operated during daytime) en route to do their bombing.

It was on my ninth operation over Germany, a sortie to Sterkrade (in the Ruhr Valley,) that trouble occurred. We had bombed a ball-bearing factory. We encountered heavy enemy attack by fighters and flak both on the way in and on the way out. The flak (exploding shells from anti-aircraft guns on the ground) was everywhere, exploding all around us, we had small hits numerous times. We were flying at 22,000 feet altitude when flak or a fighter plane that had hit us caused a fire in the body of our Lancaster. I ran back with an extinguisher but it was too late. There was a big ball of fire. I called to the

I was still wearing my wooden clogs. I finally got in touch with the Red Cross who organized a shower and some clean clothes for me.

As the Allies advanced, the Germans moved the POWs away from the front. We were transported in boxcars but sometimes when the railway tracks were bombed we had to walk. We were always going south and a little east and finally to a big POW camp in Nuremberg, in southern Germany. We had only been there for a very short time when we were told one night that we were all moving out in the morning, maybe ten thousand of us. Some said there were even more. The Germans had us marching ahead of the American Army, using us as pawns. We marched south for almost three weeks in the rain and cold. Thank God for the Red Cross parcels as food from the Germans was almost non-existent. We ended up in Mooseburg, just north of Munich, in POW Camp #7A.

Our group from the march had only been in Camp #7A for a short period. During the first week of May 1945, the American Army and General Patton came through the front gates of the camp and liberated us. What a great relief!

Please note that in my book I describe in detail the above-mentioned events up to the time of my release and my return to England. I had been officially listed as "Missing in Action" for the prior eleven months. My mother received a telegram from me on Mother's Day, 'Arrived safe and well in England'. She had not heard anything from me for those eleven months.

I have kept in touch with many of the Dutch people who helped me and with whom I have visited on several occasions. The time I spent in Holland resulted in many life-long friendships that have lasted to the present day. My book is dedicated to the Dutch Underground. The last chapter covers what happened to all these people fifty years later. To make the book as realistic as possible the facts are well illustrated with photos and documents. This is a story of one Canadian Airman's experiences in W.W.II.

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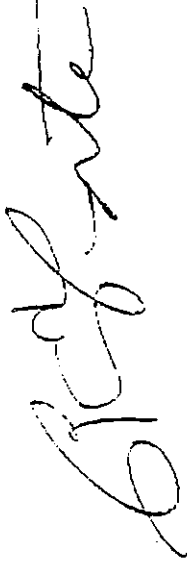
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R.E. (Bob) Porter