

Lorne Willson's War in Bomber Command

By Rod Fraser



*Lorne Willson (second from left) with other crew members
sometime during 1944-45*

This story is indirectly about my last year of the air war over Germany, when I served as a 'Bomb Aimer' in RCAF Bomber Command. My name is Lorne Willson and I volunteered for aircrew in 1943, while

stationed in Canada. After my training, I was sent to England to be part of '*419 Moose Squadron*', a Lancaster bomber squadron with the RCAF.

I play only a minor part in this story. Although I had a few scary flights of my own in the last year of the war, it hardly compares to Andy Mynarski — one of two winners of the 'Victoria Cross' in Bomber Command. To give you a sense of what an evening flight into Germany was like in mid-1944, you can't do better than to read about Andy's bombing run to Chambray, France on June 12, 1944.



I never met Andy Mynarski during my time at '*419 Moose Squadron*', never learned of his heroism and wasn't aware of his tragic death. He was just one of the many young men that didn't return from an operation one morning. It was only after the war, when he was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross that I came to learn of Andy's generous and heroic offer of assistance that led to his death.

Since a RCAF bomber squadron usually consisted of 16 to 20 Lancaster aircraft in 1944, you might find this lack of sociability surprising. With seven crew members in each aircraft, this only amounted to some 112 to 140 young men. Surely it would be

expected we would know one other.

Unfortunately not. We seldom knew anyone outside the crew of our own aircraft (and our ground crew). We stuck together because we knew each other, depended on one another, and for the most part, liked and respected each other. But there were other reasons.

With an average 5% loss of aircraft and aircrew on each operation, it was just too disheartening to know other aircrew well. If they were shot down, captured, wounded or killed, it affected our own emotional wellbeing, and possibly our effectiveness. We found it best to stick to ourselves.

After checking my notes, I realized there was another reason I never met Andy. He died on a bombing raid that took place on June 12, 1944 and I arrived at '*419 Squadron*' on June 17th. Indeed, my aircraft and crew, just coming off advanced training, may well have been a replacement for Andy and his crew.



Andrew Charles Mynarski was born in Winnipeg in 1916 of Polish parents who had recently immigrated to Canada. He had two brothers and three sisters. After a short stint in the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, a

militia unit, he enlisted in the RCAF in late 1941. He trained as an air gunner and was eventually posted overseas to Bomber Command.

By 1944, he was a mid-upper gunner with the crew of Art de Breyne, the pilot of KB726, a four-engine Lancaster bomber with '*419 Squadron*' at RAF Middleton St. George. Pat Brophy, a friend of Andy's, was the rear gunner. Bob Brodie, Jim Kelly, Roy Vigers and Jack Friday were the navigator, radio operator, flight engineer and bomb-aimer respectively.

RCAF and other Commonwealth aircrew (including the Royal Air Force in the U.K.) timed their bombing raids during the dark of night in an attempt to minimize casualties. This being mid-June, the days were long, the nights short and a bombing raid closer to home was in the works to ensure the cover of darkness for the many aircraft involved.

Six days earlier, the D-Day landings on the beaches of Normandy had been a success, but it was still touch and go. It was necessary for the allied air forces to attack rail lines, bridges and other targets, to prevent the German army from bringing supplies, ammunition, tanks and soldiers to the front.

The particular target chosen for '*419 Squadron*' this night was the railway marshaling yards at

Chambrai, in France. This was the 13th operation for Andy and his crew. Their plane took off just before dark and they arrived at the target at midnight.

They encountered some anti-aircraft fire over the French coastline, and as they neared their target, they were briefly 'coned' by searchlights. To avoid these anti-aircraft batteries and lights, de Breyne put the aircraft into a steep dive, climbing again when he felt it safe. As they drew closer to the target, Brophy reported he saw a *Junkers JU 88* aircraft for an instant, then lost sight of it.

Although de Breyne immediately took evasive action, it was too late. The plane was raked with cannon fire from the German aircraft, damaging two engines and setting a fuel tank between them on fire. Hydraulic oil lines in the central fuselage (near Brophy in the rear turret) were also damaged and the fluid set on fire.

De Breyne ordered his crew to abandon the aircraft and held the plane steady until they had done so. Then he jumped from the Lancaster at a height of 800 feet, parachuting to safety.

Friday, Vigars, Bodie and Kelly (as well as de Breyne) all exited from the front escape hatch. Mynarski was preparing to jump from the rear door when he noticed Brophy was trapped in the rear

turret. The loss of hydraulic fluid, mentioned earlier, had caused the turret to jam to the port side.

Mynarski found his way through the fire towards Brophy and attempted to free him. First he used a fire axe to try and open the door to the turret. When that didn't work he used his hands. The door wouldn't budge.

Brophy noticed that Mynarski's clothes were on fire and told him to save himself. After one or two more attempts to free Brophy, Mynarski finally agreed, moving back through the fire to the rear escape hatch.

His clothes and parachute aflame, he stood for a moment at the rear door, turned to Brophy, saluted and said, "Good night, Sir." Then he jumped through into the dark of night.

When I first heard this story, I was a little puzzled at Andy's use of the phrase "Good night, Sir." After some investigation, I found an explanation.

Unknown to Mynarski at the time, he had been promoted from Warrant Officer (a non-commissioned rank) to Pilot Officer a day earlier. Since it was customary for a non-commissioned officer to address a Flying Officer (as Brophy was at the time) as "Sir," his final farewell to Brophy may have been a sign of respect — acknowledging their

difference in rank.

Or was it something different? Andy Mynarski and Pat Brophy were good friends. I expect they joked about their difference in rank from time to time. Perhaps in their final moment together, Andy's "Good night, Sir" was an attempt to make an emotional connection with Brophy — to offer up a private quip that only they knew and understood.



Not far from the ground when he left the bomber, Mynarski landed heavily, severely burned, but alive. French farmers noticed the flaming parachute and quickly came to his rescue. They took him to a German field hospital for care. A few hours later, Andy Mynarski was dead.

Pat Brophy remained trapped in the aircraft as it crashed in a farmer's field. Miraculously, he survived. The impact of the aircraft hitting the ground opened the rear turret and flung Brophy ten feet. He hit a tree and was rendered unconscious. When he awoke, he was surprised to find he was uninjured.

Brophy walked west, hoping to reach allied troops in Normandy. After some time, he met up with three French civilians, one of whom was part of

the resistance. For the next two and a half months, he was hidden from the Germans, moved from house to house, and participated in at least one attack with French resistance forces. In September 1944, a British tank liberated Brophy and he returned to England.

The other five members of de Breyne's aircrew had mixed luck. All parachuted to safety, but Friday and Vigars were captured by the Germans and interned for a time — until liberated by American soldiers. Brodie, Kelly and de Breyne were hidden by the French and shortly returned to England.



In 1945, when the crew gathered together for a reunion, Brophy told the others the details of his final moments on the plane with Andy, and Mynarski's efforts to save him. De Breyne took the matter further. He started the process to have Mynarski recognized for his bravery.

On October 11, 1946, a Victoria Cross was posthumously awarded for "valour of the highest order" to Andrew Charles Mynarski (one of only two awarded to Canadian airmen serving with Bomber Command during the war).

Today, at the Canadian Warplane Heritage

Museum, a rebuilt four-engine bomber (one of two airworthy Lancasters in the world) is painted with the markings of Mynarski's aircraft as a memorial to him.



Some readers might feel this story suggests aircrew didn't face much danger during their night-time bombing raids into France and Germany. It might seem so, in that seven crew members crashed in the above Lancaster bomber. One died and the remaining six aircrew survived, all returning home within months of this terrible tragedy.

This wasn't typical. There were 44,000 Canadian servicemen killed during the war (and 55,000 wounded). Of those who were killed, 40% were RCAF personnel.

Perhaps Murray Peden, a pilot in WWII, said it best,

"[In 1943 and 1944], only 25 out of 100 crews [in Bomber Command] survived their first tour of 30 operations.... [Despite this reality] crews buckled on their chutes and set out with unshakeable resolution night after night."

"They fell prey to the hazards of icing, lightning, storms and structural failure, and they perished

amidst the bursting shells of the flak batteries. But by far the greater number died in desperately unequal combat under the firepower of the tenacious German night fighter defenders."

"Despite the chilling odds, the flow of volunteers never faltered. The price was known to be enormous, but it was a price which continued to be paid with unquestioning courage." It was a debt that will never be repaid, but one that is unlikely to be forgotten.

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