

## December Meeting

Topic: Night Madness: A Rear Gunner's Story of Love, Courage, and Hope in World War II

Speaker: Richard R. Pyves

Reporter: Gord McNulty

Our annual Christmas Gift Exchange meeting began with CAHS Toronto Chapter President Dr. George Topple introducing our guest speaker. Richard (Rick) Pyves (pyves@interlogo.com) is a published author, avid historian and genealogist. He grew up in Montreal. A graduate of Concordia (Sir George Williams) University and McGill University, Rick holds both a Bachelor of Science and a Master's in Business Administration in Marketing.

Rick's first book, *Night Madness: A Rear Gunner's Story of Love, Hope and Courage in World War II*, was published by Red Deer Press in October, 2012, after a five-year effort. With interviews, painstaking archival research, and a long-distance love affair captured in daily correspondence, Rick weaved together his father's account into a touching love story and one man's very personal war.

Prior to embarking on a writing career, Rick held a senior management position with a major financial services company as SVP Marketing responsible for both marketing and public relations. He has held board positions as a Director of Tourism Toronto (1992-2007) and more recently as a Director of Credit Canada (2005-2011) and has chaired the Board Marketing Committee for both organizations.

Rick is currently working on his second, non-fiction book, *The Silent Sixtieth: 60<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Victoria Rifles of Canada) in World War I*. To be available coincident with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the First World War, it is the story of Rick's grandfather, Edward Lewis Pyves, and his Battalion during World War I. Edward was decorated with the Military Medal "for the skillful manner in which he strengthened the British defence at Hill 60" in August 1916.

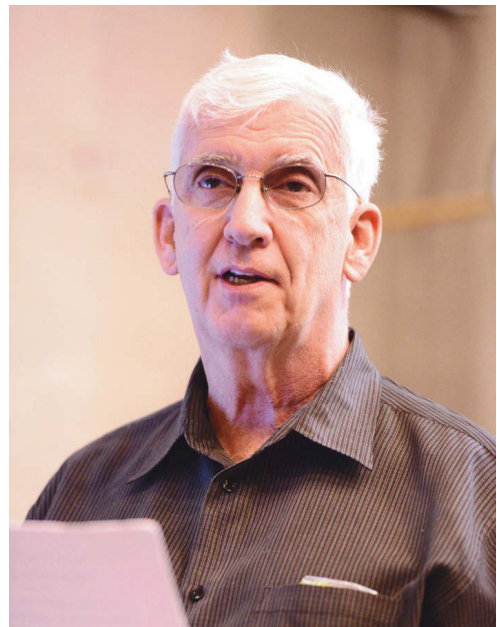
Rick traced the inspiration for his excellent 321-page *Night Madness* to the death of his mother, Kay, in December 2006. While clearing his mother's apartment, the family found 230 letters between his father, Ron, who died in 1987 at age 62, and Kay covering the period before they were married and through the war. The 650 pages of correspondence presented an eyewitness perspective of the war, as seen by two teenagers, from the homefront in Montreal to Bomber Command operations over Europe.

Kay was 18 at the time, and Ron was 19 when he left Halifax for England in 1944. *Night Madness* chronicles three stories. One is the incredible story of Ron as a young tail gunner who completed 35 combat missions over Europe in the final seven months of Bomber Command, from September 1944 to March 1945.

The second story involves the problems of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Ron was involved in the controversial bombing of Dresden on Valentine's Day, 1945. It's estimated that at least 25,000 residents and refugees who were fleeing the Russian advance into Germany died at Dresden in one night. That compares to the deaths of an estimated 300,000 Germans during the entire five-year bombing campaign over Germany. Staggering casualties at Dresden, involving children and civilians, troubled Ron for years.

The third theme is the love affair between Ron and Kay and how their correspondence sustained Ron through the war.

The book title reflects the fact that 25 of Ron's missions were at night. He and his crew endured deadly flak, brilliant light from probing searchlights, German fighters and fear night after night. Another author, who was a Lancaster pilot, told Rick *Night Madness* summed up exactly how he felt on operations over Germany.



Speaker Richard Pyves  
Photo Credit - Neil McGavock

Rick noted the average age of World War II veterans is now 89. About 1.1 million Canadians served, including 731,000 in the army, 249,000 in the air force, and 106,000 in the navy. The numbers have dwindled to around 140,000 and are dropping quickly. Rick interviewed three of the six crew members who served with his father, though they all died before the book appeared. About 45,000 Canadians were killed in action, and about 53,000 wounded, in World War II.

More than 56 million people lost their lives in the war, including 35 million civilians. Twenty per cent of all dwellings in Germany were either completely destroyed or heavily damaged, displacing more than seven million Germans. RCAF losses in the war totalled 17,000 aircrew killed, including 3,000 who died in training.

More than 125,000 aircrew served in Bomber Command, of whom 55,000 or 44 per cent were killed and another 20 per cent were wounded. In Ron Pyves' squadron, only about 30 or 40 of the first 200 aircrew survived either death or injury. Losses were especially high at the beginning when bombers flew without escort. The probability of surviving a tour of 30 operations was less than 20 per cent. However, the bombing campaign remained highly dangerous for the duration. Rick estimated that his father's probability of survival throughout the war was only 48 per cent.

Rick checked the draft of his book with crew members who flew with Ron, especially the bomb aimer, Frank Welsh. Other sources included crew logbooks, each with personal observations, and treasured keepsakes. Valuable information came from operational record books for 434 and 431 squadrons, which flew from the base at Croft, combat reports and night raid reports. Websites, notably [www.6groupprcaf.com](http://www.6groupprcaf.com) and [www.rcaf434squadron.com](http://www.rcaf434squadron.com), were key, as were military reports from the Directorate of History and Heritage. Some crew members were reluctant to open up about wartime memories until they built a level of trust with Rick.

The publisher asked Rick to write a chapter specific to PTSD, and another chapter on the personal recollections of German civilians, notably people who were in Dresden during that fateful attack in 1945. Rick found 10 such recollections on the Internet, then called two people in Berlin who shared their memories. Goetz Bergander was a TV journalist and an expert on Dresden from a German perspective. Lothar Metzger was 10 years old at the time of the bombing.

In addition to Frank Welsh, Ron Pyves' crew members, flying either the Halifax or the Lancaster, were F/L Bob Henry, pilot; F/O Alan Coleman, navigator; F/O Hal Ward, wireless operator, and the only married man; F/Sgt Joe Casavant, Flight Engineer, at 26 the oldest crew member, and WO Second Class Bill Thomson, mid-upper gunner. Ron was fortunate to have Bob Henry as his pilot. Previously a flight instructor in Canada before going overseas, he had more than 1,000 hours of flying experience.

Ron originally wanted to be a pilot. However, a depth perception problem caused him to have hard and unsafe landings training in the Tiger Moth. He was reassigned to air gunnery, where he excelled, placing eighth in a class of 88 students.

While in England, Ron corresponded with his girlfriend, Kathleen (Kay) Eason, 18. They had dated only three times before he went overseas. He received a nice photo of Kay, written to "Ronny, all my love, Kay" just after he arrived in England. In training, Ron's crew were almost killed four times. Each time, he would show the picture to his colleagues and say it was only because of the photo, his personal "good luck charm," that they had survived. Ron's Lancaster, WL-D, displayed "Kathleen" nose art for inspiration.

After writing the book, Rick learned that Bob Henry's brother, Jack, flew out of the same base. Bob flew in 434 "Bluenose" Squadron, while Jack flew in 431 "Iroquois" Sqdn. Both were pilots who remarkably flew on a combined 72 combat missions. As Rick said, one can just imagine the tension on 20 operations when they flew separate bombers in the same formation and didn't know what the outcome would be.

Ron's 434 Sqdn. was formed in June 1943 as part of Bomber Group 6. Canada was the only nation that had its own bomber group, with the RCAF contributing 15 squadrons. From June of 1943 to April 1945, 434 Sqdn. was wiped out almost three times. Normally, they had a complement of 25 aircraft; they lost 68 during that period and literally had the highest losses of any squadron in the Group. They had to fly farther from their base at Croft, the second most northerly Bomber Command airfield, and suffered from inexperience.

Ron understandably didn't feel good about 434's reputation as the "chop" squadron when he joined. In June 1944, just before he began, they lost eight aircraft in one month. Rick noted that 55 per cent of all 434 losses took place within the first five missions, and 76 per cent were within the first 10. While every trip was very risky, and some crews were lost on their final mission, the odds of survival seemed to increase after the first 10. More experienced crews were often reluctant to talk to the new arrivals who they felt wouldn't be around for more than a few weeks if that. In fact, nine 434 crews were lost on their first mission.

Rick read an excerpt about his father preparing for his second bombing mission, on Sept. 25, 1944, aboard a different Halifax than the one they normally flew. It was the third of four daylight raids set for Calais, primarily to damage harbour fortifications. Frank, the bomb aimer, recalled later what transpired immediately after the briefing:

"While taking the time for a cigarette we watched the antics of Ron and Bill, the gunners, as they struggled with their gear. As Ron and Bill would be exposed to the freezing air in their open gun turrets, they pulled on their bulky, electrically heated suits... they also had to pull on an inflatable life-jacket and parachute harness making it almost impossible to move without an effort... finally, Bob took one final puff and threw down his cigarette and stood up. That was the signal for the crew to get moving...

"The planes were widely scattered around the airfield to minimize damage in the event of an air raid. We were accompanied by three other crews in the truck and a chaplain who rode with the crews out to their planes... the ground crew greeted Ron and the crew. They watched as Bob did his final walk around the plane and I checked that the proper fuses had been attached to the bombs... as Bob started up each of the four engines, the racket was almost mind numbing. It was a noise that we would have to endure for the entire trip...

"Just after 9:40 a.m., Bob turned Halifax WL-A (for "Able") into the wind and they were ready to roll... two minutes later they were airborne in this different Halifax – which to the superstitious was not a good thing." Rick displayed a photo taken just after the third Calais bombing mission for Ron and his crew. It showed the 7,000-foot height at which they bombed, the load of nine 1,000 pound bombs and four 500-pound bombs, the date and time, the aircraft number and the pilot. The Public Archives has 44,000 such photos.

One mission, called Operation Hurricane, Oct. 14-15, 1944, was intended by the Allies to demonstrate the combined might of the RAF/RCAF and U.S.A.A.F. Three waves of bombers hit Duisburg, an industrial city. Ron flew on the first and third waves, all within 24 hours. After the first raid, he was able to grab two or three hours of sleep, and eat, only to return for the third raid. Ron's crew was in the air for about 12 hours. Ron remembered it as one of the most gruelling days.

Although the .303 Browning machine guns on the Lancaster and Halifax could each fire 1,200 rounds per minute, they were outgunned by German fighters like the Me-109 whose firepower included cannons. Of his 35 missions, Ron had two where he was directly attacked by a German fighter. Rick read an excerpt, describing an attack on Neuss to disrupt German communications: "Targeting German cities in the well-defended Ruhr Valley was definitely not a welcome assignment. In fact, Ron felt a gnawing ache in the pit of his stomach knowing that the target would be well-defended by massive concentrations of enemy search lights and flak barrages, and a protective umbrella of fighter aircraft.

"Two weeks had passed since the crew last flew Halifax WL-D, their main aircraft. Once aboard, the crew immediately recognized the smell of oil that permeated every part, a familiar perfume unique to 'Kathleen'... All the crew were nervous as they tried to get back into the combat routine, knowing once again that each trip might be their last. WL-D left the runway just at sunset... 19 planes from 434 Squadron and 17 from 431 rose from Croft like birds of prey. They were joined by aircraft from 12 other Canadian bomber squadron ...

"The skies were overcast over Neuss with the clouds topping out at 6,000 feet. Visibility was poor. Bob approached the target area at an elevation of 19,000 feet. Using sky markers as the aiming point, Frank dropped his load, plummeting to the hidden target below. Almost immediately Frank could see fires and very large explosions through the clouds. The crew experienced moderate to heavy flak on their final approach to the target. Though they had completed 15 earlier missions, they were still not comfortable with the black, menacing clouds of smoke reaching up toward them...

“Just seconds after Bob made his last turn, they were attacked from behind by an Me-109 travelling almost two and a half times faster than WL-D. The enemy pilot was intent on knocking out Ron to make it more difficult for the bomber crew to defend itself from subsequent attack. The enemy fighter was first spotted by Ron 900 feet from his position and closing fast on the same level as the bomber. With no lights on, Ron found it difficult to pick out the approaching fighter against the dark sky. He quickly yelled to Bob to ‘corkscrew to port,’ which he did immediately.

“It was only the intense and instinctive need to shoot down the attacker that prevented him from throwing up from nervousness. Bob’s corkscrew involved a steep dive following a downward spiral to gain airspeed and make it more difficult for the Messerschmitt to hit the plane. He then reversed the dive into another corkscrew while climbing in altitude to keep the fighter pilot off balance.

“...Ron desperately tried to get the fighter in his gun sights. He fired off two short bursts... suddenly Ron’s guns jammed. And while Bob continued diving, Ron managed to clear the stoppages despite the sweat pouring down from his forehead. Bob was able to shake loose from the pursuing Me-109... but the crew could not afford to relax... some German fighters teamed up in pairs, with one acting as a decoy while the other went in for the kill. “After almost three unbearable hours with the gunners straining every nerve and eye muscle, the crew finally arrived over Yorkshire... they touched down at 10:43 p.m... The next day Ron wrote to Kay.

*“Dear Kay, I received your swell letter yesterday. I just got back from my leave a few days ago, and the first thing I did was to go to the mess and see if there was any mail from you dear. When there isn’t any, it makes me lose interest in everything, but darling when there is a letter there for me from you, it makes all the difference in the world. I’ve got 16 ops done now. If my luck holds out for another 14, I’m sure it will, I’ll be finished. My luck’s just got to hold out. Love, Ronny.”*

Rick emphasized how the rapidly changing, highly stressful circumstances facing bomber crews, who went from sheer terror over Germany to relaxing moments in a pub back in England, wore on them over time. After 27 missions, Ron and crew were thrown a curveball when the RCAF extended its original requirement from 30 missions to 35. In fact, it could be as much as 40 if any crew members had not completed as many trips for health reasons, etc. “It was almost like a death warrant to complete 27 missions and then be told it had to be 35,” Rick said, noting that much unrest occurred among the crews. A number of airmen in 434 Sqdn. went beyond 30 but didn’t make it to 35.

What was supposed to be Ron’s final flight, in Lancaster WL-D, on March 22, 1945, began ominously when a Lancaster in front of them, WL-F, was caught in a crosswind during takeoff. It swung wildly and ran off the runway. The undercarriage collapsed and an engine caught fire. The fire on the fully loaded bomber could not be extinguished but the crew of WL-F escaped safely. The pilots of WL-D and six other bombers scrambled to put distance from the burning aircraft, jumped through the escape hatches and ran for their lives. WL-F then exploded with a huge blast and a mushroom shaped cloud, but fortunately everyone escaped safely.

The book covers numerous incidents, including one operation where the crew were caught in St. Elmo’s fire, an electrical weather phenomenon which left a violet halo around the engines and windows of their Wellington. Ron once had a dangerous training experience in a Wellington. Crawling to the rear turret, he slipped off the narrow walkway which led to the back of the bomber. One of his legs broke through the canvas skin of the Wellington. It dangled precariously outside the plane several thousand feet above the ground, until fellow crewmates heard his yells for help and pulled him back to safety. Once, in a Lancaster, Ron’s crew was coned by German search lights. Bob put the bomber into a maximum dive, taking it to the limit of about 350 mph, as they evaded the cone and completed their bombing run.

It was common for a bomb to hang up, and crews had to bring it home. Ron once saw a Lancaster with a 4,000-pound “cookie” which had not released over target. Bob took evasive action to avoid the Lanc. Ron then saw the hung-up bomb tumble from the Lanc, only to hit a Halifax below it with devastating results. Navigator Al Coleman survived 35 trips and remained as navigation instructor in England, only to find himself on a Lanc that ran into severe fog and crashed. Four of the eight crew members died. Al survived but spent months in hospital. Recalling Dresden, Rick described how the city was hit over 26 hours by three waves of RAF, RCAF and U.S.A.F. bombers followed by a second RAF/RCAF wave which Ron was part of.

Bomber Group 5, the first wave, specialized in precision, low-level bombing to maximize their high-explosive and incendiary bombs. They created a firestorm. Many people who were hiding in shelters were killed by lack of oxygen as the air was literally sucked out to feed the raging fires. In addition to the toll of residents and refugees, 78,000 dwellings were destroyed in the horrific maelstrom. Was the bombing necessary? Historic Dresden was a key manufacturing centre, with 110 factories and 50,000 workers producing instruments of war including aircraft components, munitions, anti-aircraft and field guns. More importantly, the Russians had invaded Germany in January, 1945. Dresden was also a communications and transportation hub and the Germans were moving dozens of divisions to the Eastern Front to confront the Russians. From a strategic, military perspective, it was felt important to stop the Germans from reinforcing the Eastern Front.

Rick read excerpts from Lothar Metzger, a child living in Dresden, describing that night: “There were nonstop explosions. Our cellar was filled with fire and smoke and was damaged, the lights went out and wounded people shouted dreadfully. In great fear we struggled to leave this cellar... we did not recognize our street any more. Fire, only fire, wherever we looked. Our 4<sup>th</sup> floor did not exist anymore. The broken remains of our house were burning. On the streets there were burning vehicles and carts with refugees, people, horses, all of them screaming and shouting in fear of death. I saw hurt women, children, old people searching for a way through ruins and flames.”

After his tour, Ron married Kay in March of 1946 and they raised a family. In the early 1960s, however, Ron experienced depression and began to drink a lot. Rick noted that PTSD wasn't identified by the American Psychiatric Association as a mental disorder until the early 1980s. This followed about 30 per cent of returning Vietnam War veterans suffering some form of PTSD in reliving wartime experiences. To be diagnosed with PTSD, an individual had to either experience or witness an actual or life-threatening event, such as combat or a car accident. Many individuals may unconsciously repress memories of traumatic events, and try to avoid situations that might revive such memories.

Ron, for example, didn't like fireworks shows or war movies. Individuals may become depressed, self-medicate themselves, or try to commit suicide. PTSD can be treated successfully. The sooner it is diagnosed, the better the chances of successful treatment. Support groups and/or cognitive-behavioural therapy – which may include helping the patient to relive parts of the traumatic experience under controlled conditions – are used. In 2002, a Canadian Forces study found the incidence of PTSD among regular forces who had been deployed three or more times was 10.3 per cent, or about 35 per cent higher than among civilians. The study found PTSD to be the fourth most prevalent mental illness behind depression, alcohol dependence and social phobia. More recent data suggests that between 15 and 20 per cent of Canadian Forces members deployed return suffering from PTSD. Rick hopes his book will help people recognize the symptoms of PTSD and ask for help; encourage the government to bolster services for military personnel and first responders; and provide more help for all Bomber Command aircrew and groundcrew veterans.

In 1996, Kay found an old pamphlet of Ron's with information on pensions for veterans. Ron had planned to revisit the issue of a veteran's pension. Kay decided to explore whether she had pension entitlement as the spouse of a veteran who she felt had died prematurely as a direct result of his wartime experience. She was rejected on her first request and appeal, and again on a final appeal. Undaunted, Kay finally won reconsideration, using forensic information which the government had for seven years at that time. Kay was at last granted a full pension, but only after she was 78 and had worked on the claim for almost eight years. Rick noted how problems continue, even though the Veterans Act states that in weighing uncontradicted, credible evidence, any doubt should go to the veteran.

Rick fittingly dedicated his book to all those who served in Bomber Command and especially the crew of WL-D. He answered lots of questions and sold a number of copies of his book. Program Support Volunteer Bob Winson presented a gift to Rick on behalf of the Chapter and thanked our speaker for a spellbinding presentation.