

November Meeting



Speaker Ted Lowrey
Photo Credit Neil McGavock

Topic: “Prisoner of War Interviews”

Speaker: Ted Lowrey, Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum

Reporter: Gord McNulty

As Remembrance Day approached, CAHS Toronto Chapter Treasurer Paul Hayes opened the meeting with a minute of silence to remember our fallen comrades in the sea, on land, or in the air. As Paul said, “At the going down of the sun, we will remember them.” Chapter Secretary Neil McGavock introduced Ted Lowrey, a longtime, active member and volunteer of the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum, who lives in Hamilton. A retired educator with a 35-year career as a teacher and secondary school principal, Ted has taught at elementary, secondary and university levels. In 1981, as a secondary school teacher, he won the Hamilton Outstanding Teacher Award for teaching excellence combined with contribution to the

community. (The teaching part of the award was for using, in English classes, *The Hamilton Spectator* as the only source for printed word study.)

When Ted retired in 1994, he had not thought of writing as a retirement activity. Most unfortunately, in 1997, he lost both his parents in a car crash. He found needed emotional support by writing a few stories about his father’s Second World War flying experiences as an RCAF navigator, flying Dakota transports in Burma and India. The Canadian Dakotas were supplying British soldiers on the ground in the jungles of Burma. The stories were published in *Flightlines* – the quarterly publication of the CWHM, and proved to be popular. Ted was encouraged to broaden the scope, and continue his writing; the therapeutic needs had been met, and a retirement hobby was started. From his first published story in *Flightlines* in November, 1997, Ted has since published 133 stories --- 90 of them in *Flightlines*. Ted is glad he started interviewing and writing about airmen in 1998. Today, so very few WWII veterans are left to interview. Most stories now come from second-generation memories, and reading through long-lost diaries and logbooks. Ted has taken six of his seven grandchildren flying with him in the CWH Dakota. He wants them to sense how their great-grandfather served Canada in WW II. The seventh grandchild is only one, but his turn for a Dak flight is coming.

Ted noted that his two oldest grandchildren did their 40 hours of high school community service at the CWHM. One, who is very mechanical, worked on the Bolingbroke for 40 hours and loved it so much that he did another 500 hours before moving to a full-time job. His granddaughter, Mary, helps Ted when he takes veterans from Sunnybrook to the museum. Both Neil and Ted serve as ground hosts for passengers on the Lancaster flights. Ted was on duty in November, 2015 when comedian Rick Mercer flew on the Mynarski Memorial Lancaster for a segment on *The Rick Mercer Report*. Mary was thrilled to help Ted and Rick on that occasion! “I’ve never met a finer celebrity person, more mannerly, more concerned, more friendly than Rick Mercer,” Ted recalled. The first PoW described by Ted was a remarkable former Lancaster navigator, Ken Lenz, who was shot down at age 22 on a Lancaster operation, his 26th, on Sept. 11, 1944. A photo of Ken was taken less than 12 hours before he was downed and became a PoW for the rest of the war. Ted was delighted with a picture taken 62 years later on Sept. 10, 2006, when Ken returned to the CWHM to fly on the Lancaster one more time. The photo shows Ken teaching CWHM curator Erin Napier how to safely bail out of a mortally damaged Lancaster. You didn’t jump out; you had to roll out to avoid getting caught up by the tail assembly. Ted always enjoyed the look of appreciation on Erin’s face for the old veteran’s efforts. Ken’s family ---

his wife, Hazel, his children and grandchildren --- thought the flight would be a great way to celebrate Ken's 85th birthday. The Lanc flight that day differed from regular Lanc flights over Toronto and Niagara Falls. The Lanc was flown to St. Thomas for an air show. Four Lanc crew members and four "passengers" were treated to a nice breakfast and shown around like VIPs, a great contrast in food and treatment from 62 years previously. After the Lanc returned to Mount Hope, the two engineering crew took all of the grandchildren inside the bomber so they could better understand their grandfather's history. The grandchildren soon made their experience into a major school project.

Ken, a Hamilton guy, worked at Dofasco. Enlisting in the RCAF in April, 1942, he trained and qualified as an observer. He was assigned to RAF Squadron #582, as a navigator in Lancasters. On his seventh operational flight, his Lanc was severely damaged by ground fire. It became very nose heavy; the pilot couldn't keep it level. They ended up tying a rope around the control column, with Ken and the flight engineer pulling back on the rope with all their strength. The pilot could then fly the airplane, level, but only with his feet braced against the instrument panel. They made it to an emergency landing strip in England for a crash landing. The Lanc was destroyed but all the crew fortunately got out uninjured. That was Ken's seventh op. Ken's luck held until Sept. 11, 1944. Their Lanc was hit at 18,000 feet. Two engines were set on fire, and part of one wing was blown off. All of the crew were able to bail out; all but one survived. Ken and three others bailed out through the main entrance. The Lanc went into a death spiral and crashed to the ground. Ted displayed an unforgettable RAF surveillance photo, taken at 30,000 feet, of the mortally damaged Lanc, with one wing blown off and two engines on fire. Ken always carried the picture with him; that event was such a part of his life. The problem was he couldn't see his Lanc, and with his vision fading with age, he knew he never would see it. Ted, however, told CWH volunteer co-ordinator Rex Russell about the photo. Rex was able, after four attempts, to enlarge the photo on his computer to a point where Ken could finally see the Lancaster. When Ken died, the picture that Rex created was the centre of the photos about Ken's military life.

Ken had survived for a second time, but extreme danger still existed. As Ted noted, "You can imagine the experience of parachuting to the ground into a city you just bombed; if the citizens captured you, revenge on their part was often brutal, and life-ending." Fortunately, the first people to find Ken were German military. To them, he was more useful than German citizens. As a PoW, and with skilled interrogation, he might give up military information of great value. Being captured by the German military, rather than citizens, was Ken's third escape from death. Ken was placed in a jail cell. He always remembered that both the mattress and the pillow on his cot were solid blocks of wood. His first meal was cabbage and potatoes boiled together. Here he was, at 23, having already escaped death three times, facing a most uncertain future. The food was very minimal. Ken weighed 160 pounds when he was captured. When he was freed, a year later, he weighed 120 pounds. Two meals a day were provided: breakfast was some kind of porridge or gruel; supper was something cooked into soup. Red Cross parcels were a blessing in many ways. However, Ken told Ted the food situation could have been much worse. Ken's prison camp in Barth had a section that contained only Europeans --- mostly Polish and Jewish people. They were kept 32 to a room and given very minimal amounts of food. If one of the 32 died, the death would be kept secret from their captors. That way, the remaining 31 would have an extra 1/32nd share of food. It was only when the stench of the decaying corpse became overwhelming that the opportunity for extra food would be given up.

German interrogators were very fluent in English, not the high school variety, but the practical kind that people would have learned on the streets and working in factories. Ken's German interrogator had been an engineer in New York City for 15 years. He'd lived in the Bronx, close to Yankee Stadium, and

returned to Germany just before 1939. He interrogated Ken in English with that particular Bronx accent. We are told, read and see movies about how it was the prisoner's duty to try to escape, and such escapes were glorious and successful. To say it was the prisoner's duty to try to escape might have been fine for some 'suit' working out of his office back in London, having decent food and nice living quarters. Ken suggested the reality was different. If a prisoner escaped, and was recaptured, the penalty was most often execution. By late 1944, it didn't make sense to risk your life in this way. It seemed the war was approaching its end, and the men wanted most of all to return home to family and civilian life. Ken remembered the 10,000 PoWs at Barth were freed by Russians, although freed is maybe not the most accurate of words. One morning, the PoWs woke up and found all their German prison guards had disappeared overnight. Russian troops were just a few miles away, and it was a good time for the Germans to leave. Later that morning, the Russians rode through the camp on horses and in wagons pulled by horses. The Russians left two live cows as food for the starving prisoners and then rode on, leaving the men to care for themselves. The PoWs left the camp on their own, hoping they were headed towards Allies. They found invading American soldiers. Ken remembered being soon loaded into a B-17, and sitting on the floor as the B-17 crew flew the PoWs to England, as quickly as possible, for first-class care. Ken remained an active member of 447 Wing RCAF at Mount Hope. He was well liked by everyone and his funeral was fittingly well attended.



The mighty Lancaster – *Illustration Courtesy pilotfriend.com*

Ted then told the story of Jim Eddy, also a Lancaster navigator, who lives at Sunnybrook Hospital. His Lanc was shot down early on the morning of Jan. 15, 1945. A German night fighter attacked it from below. Jim felt the Lancaster was always quite vulnerable from that position. The exhaust flames from the Lanc's engines lit up the bomber and clearly defined what part of the Lanc the night fighter wanted to hit. Ted noted that some

people have the impression that almost every airman who was shot down escaped, but that wasn't so. In Jim Eddy's case, the fire from the night fighter caused all of the front escape hatches to be blown closed. The "up front" men couldn't escape. The mid-upper hatch was blown out. To this day, Jim doesn't remember whether he consciously jumped out, or was blown out by the explosion and pulled his parachute ripcord by a reflex action. He was the only one to escape and become a PoW; the other six crew members died. The loss of his fellow airmen has always remained on Jim's mind. Jim was in a special bomber: the 100th Lanc built in Canada. It went into overseas service in October, 1944. Two months later, it was gone. Jim described being a PoW as "demoralizing," with a "crappy" word. His PoW camp was freed by Americans rather than Russians and it was quite a show. American General George Patton, packing to pearl-handled pistols, rode through the camp in a jeep, waving to the now former prisoners, letting them know they were free, and it was he who freed them. The Americans stood and cheered him, like he was a rock star. The PoWs freed by the Americans were very quickly put on C-47s, and flown to Rheims, France, to receive immediate medical attention. Jim remembers the C-47 pilot had a bad landing and put the aircraft on its nose. The passengers just laughed, jumped out, and pulled the tail back to the ground in its normal position (and hoped they wouldn't be flown anywhere else by that pilot). Jim was back in Canada by July, 1945.

Ted noted the vets are well taken care of at Sunnybrook. Each room is clean and bright. The staff make sure they have many opportunities to visit outside of the residence. Vets have a chance to visit the CWHM two or three times a year. Ted finished by showing an excellent DVD about PoWs produced by the Voices of the Past Committee at the CWHM. Ted did the script and narration and Neil McGavock helped with the production. They wanted to get four older men to act like they were getting ready for a ride on the Lanc, and also a much younger person, as part of the staging, to emphasize the age of the veterans. A woman who works at the museum offered to do it. The “voice overs” and visuals are done at different times, often weeks apart. The CWHM needed a spot for the sound recordings where there wasn’t any interference from other sounds, even the hum of fluorescent lights which can set off alarms. They found a place in a storage room. The directors and cameramen were often displeased with the first visual produced and wanted to reshoot a scene. They often wanted reshoots. The last three seconds of the DVD showed a veteran starting to climb the ladder into the Lanc. It must have taken 15 minutes, time after time, to shoot the scene until the director liked it. PoWs invariably described their interrogators as speaking perfect English, perfectly dressed and quite clean. While the PoWs were dirty, dishevelled and poorly dressed, they never gave their interrogators one piece of useful information.

As for the reverse story of the enemy prisoners that Canadians interrogated, Ted found a most unusual source: his dentist, (now retired) Dr. Eugene Maikawa. During World War II, Dr. Maikawa’s father served in the Canadian Forces in Burma, as Ted’s father had. Dr. Maikawa’s father, Takeo, was in the Canadian Army, interviewing Japanese PoWs. At the start of the war, Takeo lived in the Vancouver region, a very Anglo-Saxon area then. Canadian-born members of the Japanese community had to speak English as well as they could speak Japanese. After Pearl Harbor, the Japanese people were relocated. Men between 18 and 45 were assigned to road-building camps. Takeo ended up in London, ON, with harsh and low-paying jobs of delivering coal and retreading truck tires. Takeo, however, never once complained, telling Ted only about London residents who went out of their way to help him. As an aside, Ted noted the Japanese never wanted to surrender. General William Slim, the British Army ground commander in Burma, wrote that if you wanted to recapture a ground position held by 500 Japanese soldiers, you had to kill 495 and the last five would kill themselves. By late 1943, the Japanese reconsidered and the Allies began to take Japanese PoWs. The Canadian military began to approach fluently bilingual people like Takeo, now considered to be of value as interrogators of Japanese PoWs. Takeo agreed to enlist, provided he didn’t have to shoot anyone, and interviewed Japanese PoWs who had survived terrible conditions. Takeo, a gentle and

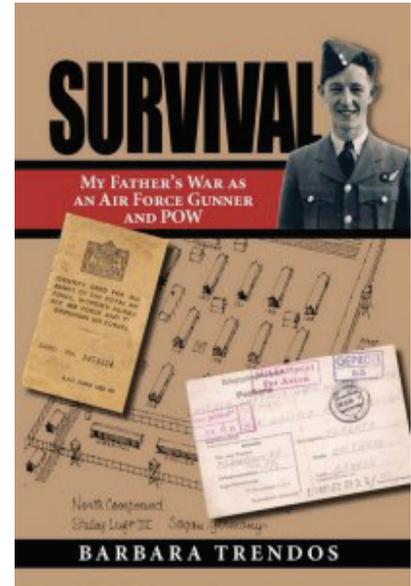
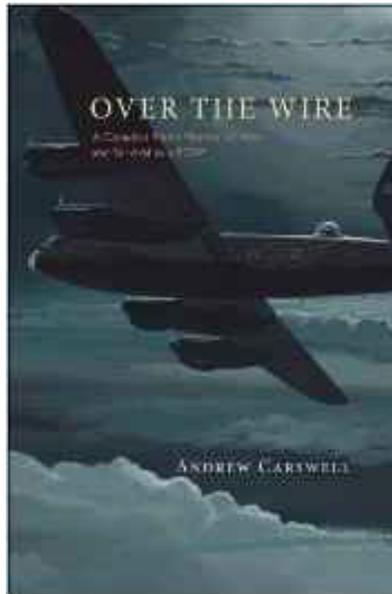
generous man, told Ted he never discovered any information of any value. Once, one of eight senior Japanese officers told Takeo he sensed Japan would lose the war and because of the disgrace he could never return to Japan. When the officer asked Takeo whether he should go to Russia or the U.S., Takeo replied, “Canada is the best place to come.” Ted’s compelling and moving presentation impressed everyone. Sheldon thanked Ted and the CWHM for the Lancaster flight offered to Al Wallace in August and Bob Winson presented Ted with a gift in appreciation.



Speaker Ted Lowrey accepting a gift from Chapter volunteer Bob Winson
Photo Credit - Neil McGavock

PoW Appendix

If you enjoyed Ted Lowrey's account of Canadian PoW's, we would suggest for your further reading two recent books that detail the emotions and experiences of former Canadian PoW's. Remarkably, both are former CAHS Toronto Chapter members and both spoke at regular Chapter meetings. Andy Carswell entitled his book "Over the Wire" with Wiley as the publisher. Albert "Al" Wallace, was fortunate to have his daughter, Barbara Trendos, write about her father's experiences in her book entitled, "Survival". Barbara's publisher was Stone's Throw Publications. Photos of the covers of the respective books are shown adjacent. Please review these excellent books online or contact your local bookseller.



Al Wallace, ex-PoW, seen here post Lancaster flight Aug. 28, 2016 with some of the CAHS Chapter Executive. L-R Sheldon Benner, John Bertram, Neil McGavock, Al, Paul Hayes & Gord McNulty.

Photo Credit - Gus Corujo