

Heroes walk new paths of gratitude

The last sugar beets and tulip bulbs had been clawed out of muddy fields and devoured raw. There was no heat, no power and no glass in shattered windows to ward off the dampness rolling in from the North Sea.

Emaciated corpses lay in the streets and the pangs of imminent starvation gnawed at empty bellies across the captive land. Amid this misery, a 15-year-old Dutch boy, driven by fear and desperation, set off to scrounge for scraps from the enemy that might keep his family alive just a little longer.



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Little did Peter Buttenaar know that he was about to experience the most exquisite moment of his life, shimmering seconds of pure, intoxicating joy that will forever warm his heart.

In the blink of an eye, in the instant the bomb bay doors of an RAF Lancaster swung open on that April morning in 1945, Buttenaar witnessed salvation.

As food rained down from the sky mere metres from his head, he was transported from physical terror to the giddy knowledge that he and loved ones had been liberated from hunger's cruel grasp and would survive the war.

Youthful excitement

Fifty-two years later, you can still hear youthful excitement in Buttenaar's voice as he describes the wondrous contents of those burlap bags —powdered milk, powdered eggs, flour, big tins of Spam, even glorious chocolate, something he hadn't tasted since the German invasion of Holland five years earlier.

There's another image Buttenaar will never shake from his memory. When he looked up from the ground, where he'd fallen in panic as two Lancasters came thundering toward him at tree-top level, he saw a crew member waving to him from the bomb aimer's position in the nose. Then the food started tumbling down.

Last November, *The Windsor Star's* Rob Hornberger documented an improbable series of coincidences that brought Buttenaar, now a successful Ontario land developer, proud Canadian and father of four, face-to-face with the waging bombardier, Bill Gray of London, and the pilot, Bob Upcott of Windsor.

"It was something I've always wanted to do **some time in my life, and here we are,**" said Buttenaar when they met at the base of the Lancaster memorial in Jackson Park. It's amazing to meet these guys. It's unbelievable."

But Buttenaar wasn't content to share drinks and swap war stories with men who'd put their necks on the line to save him and countless other Dutch civilians. He wanted to do something lasting to express his gratitude.

Named in honor

Mission accomplished. Last month in the historic Lake Huron town of Southampton, which bills itself as the oldest port on the Bruce coast, eight streets in Buttenaar's new retirement community were named in honor of the Lancaster and its five surviving (including Upcott and Stan Jones from Windsor) and two departed crewmen.

Lancaster Drive. Bob Upcott Drive. William Gray Court. Bill Walton Court. Orville Blower Court. Stan Jones Court. John Corner Court. Bill Demo Court.

Buttenaar and Southampton did themselves proud. The five survivors and relatives of Demo and Corner were honored at unveiling ceremonies. There were pipers, VIPs, a parade through town, a flypast, visitors from Holland, countless thank you's and one riproaring party when the serious stuff was done.

"I had a four-page speech ready to deliver. But I got through only two lines and had to stop, said Buttenaar of the emotional gathering which left many too choked to speak. "They deserved it. If it wasn't for these guys, we wouldn't have made it. We were on our last legs. And they didn't know if they were going to be shot out of the air or not."

Overwhelmed by fuss

Upcott said crew members were overwhelmed by the fuss made over them. "It was quite a do. We were really impressed with the citizens up there. The whole town came out for this celebration and people were really interested. They wanted to know all about those food dropping missions.

"Having a street named after you in this manner and under these circumstances. Well that's as big an honor as you can get for an ordinary joe blow."

Upcott, who received the Distinguished Flying Medal (DFM) from King George VI during the war, said the Southampton gathering easily beat being invited to Buckingham Palace.

"I was extremely happy for the crew. Over the years I got a little bit of attention for wartime stuff. But none of the crew had had that experience and it was just marvelous for them. They kept hearing 'thank you very much.'"

The two Lancasters were guineau pigs. They flew directly over the pointed barrels of German anti-aircraft guns to find out whether they would be shot down. When they weren't, Operation Manna began delivering thousands of tonnes of food.

"We weren't heroes. We were just doin' a job," explained Upcott.

Tell that to the Dutch.

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