

Museum gifted copies of The Night of the Stirling

By Kristena Schutt-Moore

Seventy-eight years ago on March, 29, 1943 a North Hastings boy by the name of John Francis James McCaw and his six crewmates were shot down in their Short Stirling Bomber aircraft as they returned from a successful bombing trip to Berlin. They were flying over Lake Markermeer just short of four kilometres southeast off Marken Island in Almere, Holland and crashed into the lake where they sank and all remained until the plane's tail was hooked by a boat anchor belonging to some fisherman in 2008.

This past year what remained of the plane and crew were brought to the surface. The Stirling III BK716 plan parts were placed in a museum and what could be found of the crew were put to their final rest in a Second World War Cemetery in Holland.

The records show that Sgt Ronald Kennedy (flight engineer), Sgt Leonard Shrubsall (mid-upper gunner), F/O John Michael Campbell (radio operator), F/O John Harris (pilot), F/O Harry Farrington (navigator), Sgt Charles Bell (bomb aimer) and F/Sgt John McCaw (tail gunner) were shot down by German ace night fighter pilot Werner Rapp gunned their plane down on March 30, 1943 at 4:49 a.m.

The crew and plan's return to the service was made possible by a team of volunteers called the Aircraft Recovery Group. They are a team of researchers, army and air force technicians, and civilian recovery specialists that work to recover lost war planes and their crews.

The work to find McCaw, his crew and his plan started last August and work went on for six weeks as the Group hoped to find all pieces of the plane and any human remains by sifting for anything larger than eight millimeters in a 75 square meter area around the main wreckage site.

The speed and force that the plane hit the water sent pieces of all sizes over great distances, as far as 400 meters, to rest on the muddy bottom of Markermeer Lake. This made it impossible to dam the area and drain the excavation site.

This left the plan to use both computers and human hands to sift such a large area underwater. This is to ensure that as much as possible can be found of both the Stirling III BK716 and its crew.

There is now a statue made from one of the plane's engines and a copper statue of a crewman sitting on it in Bos der Onverzettelijken Park. The park was created in 2006 as a national monument in remembrance of war, and the trees and vegetation in the park represent people of the resistance. Each year a memorial designed to teach children about the Second World War takes place in the park.

A memorial was held by the City of Almere on March 30, 2021 and the crewman's family were invited to attend. During the memorial the statue was unveiled. A factual book was also created about the plane and the process of retrieving it, this was given to local Almere schools to add to their curriculum.

The Province of Flevoland in Holland and City of Almere have asked documentary company Moondocs to make a documentary of the recovery of Stirling III BK716 and crew. The date of release is currently unknown, but it is to be released in both Dutch and English.

On Tuesday, Oct. 4 the Bancroft North Hastings Heritage Museum was presented with another book that was commissioned by the Holland government and their support in honour of the Canadians that helped to free Holland. This fictional book called The Night of the Stirling is inspired by the last flight of the Stirling BK716 and its crew and while fiction, it is based on historical facts.

In The Night of the Stirling the reader follows for people who experienced the final flight of a Sterling bomber.

The first is the crew on their bomb mission to Berlin, then two young girls who witness the impact of the bombing operation, then the German fighter pilot who shoots down the Stirling, and the last character is a Dutch girl who witnesses the crash of the plane into Lake Markermeer.

The book was presented to the museum on Oct. 4 by Cornelius VanEssen and Martin VanDenzen of the Dutch/Canadian Association. As part of the Association's celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Liberation of Holland they had planned to hold a parade last year. Unfortunately, with COVID-19 they were unable to. So instead they are using the funding to honour Dutch/Canadian connections. One of the connections they found was the story of the Stirling III BK716 and F/Sgt John McCaw (tail gunner).

VanDenzen has done presentations to schools about his experiences during the war, and how as a child he would eat tulip bulbs because there was no food. So when he heard about this book *The Night of the Stirling* and thought it would be a great addition to area schools.

The Association reached out to the Holland government and asked if English copies were made. When they were told yes, they ordered 500 copies for the schools, libraries and museums throughout Ontario.

The books VanEssen and VanDenzen brought to the Bancroft North Hastings Heritage Museum will be delivered to area schools and libraries from the museum in time for Remembrance Day. One copy will remain on display at the museum in honour of John Francis James McCaw.