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The Story of F/O Raymond Gran, DFC

by BGen (Ret'd) Terry Leversedge, CD



The Tirpitz was based in the fjords of Norway in an attempt to protect it from attack. - (USN photos)

Thousands of Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) aircrew served in the Royal Air Force's (RAF) Bomber Command throughout the Second World War. And although fifteen RCAF squadrons existed within that formation, a significant number of these RCAF personnel actually flew in non-RCAF units, including with those RAF squadrons that attacked the formidable German battleship, *Tirpitz*.

Eight per cent of all aircrew involved in the three Lancaster bomber missions against the *Tirpitz* were members of the RCAF (29 in all). Some

men flew only once against the *Tirpitz* while others flew twice. Only four Canadians participated in all three attacks. One of them was Raymond Gran.

Joseph Cyriac Raymond Gran was born October 14, 1922 in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. He enlisted in the RCAF in Saskatoon on January 31, 1942 and was posted to No. 2 Manning Depot in Brandon, Manitoba. From there he proceeded to No.5 Bombing and Gunnery School in Dafoe, Saskatchewan on 11 April 1942 on non-flying duties. He commenced his flying training (as a pilot) with No.4 In-



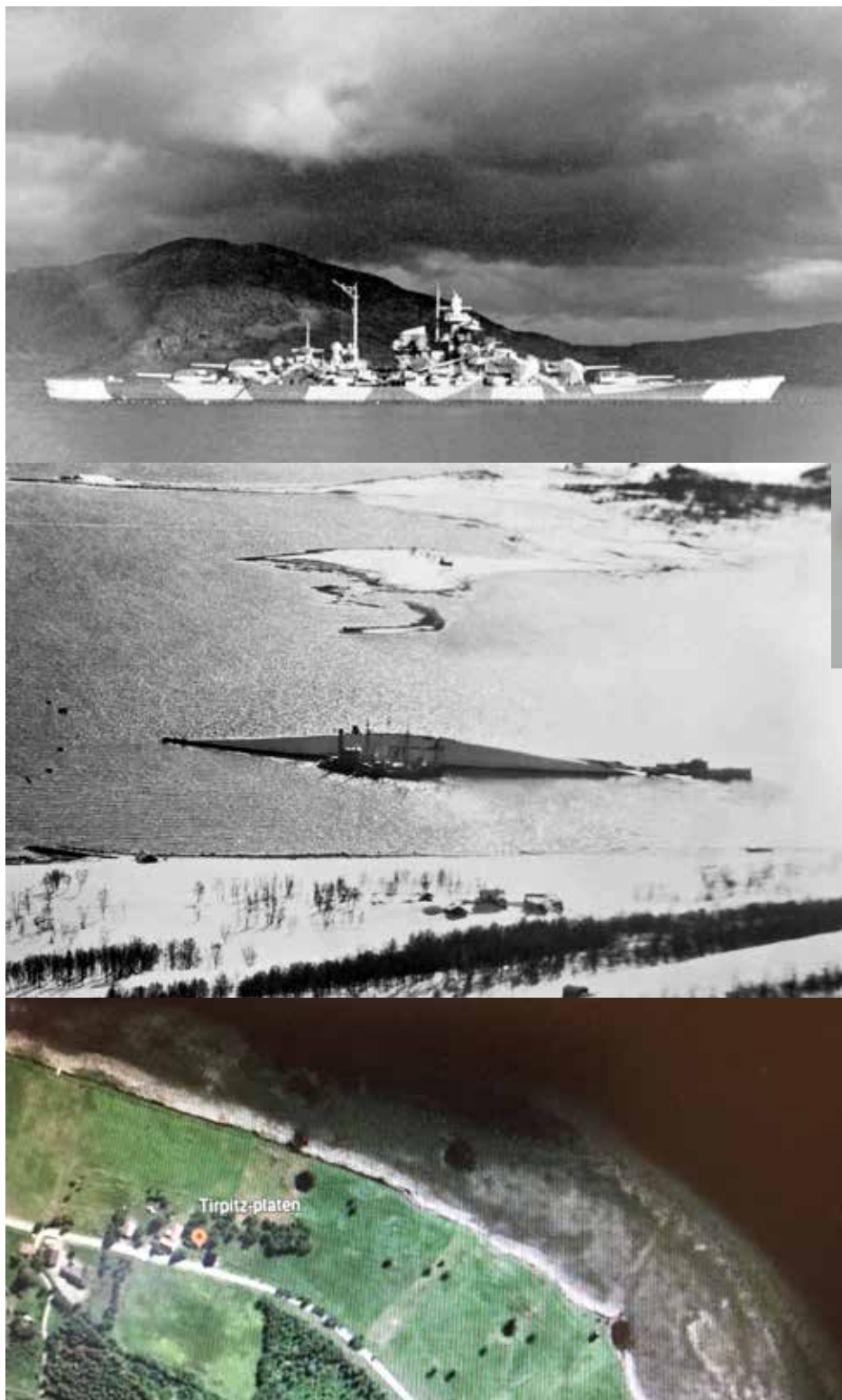
A wartime portrait of Raymond Gran - (photo courtesy of Donald Kapusta)

itial Training School in Belleville, Ontario on May 25, 1942, where he graduated and was promoted to Leading Aircraftman (LAC) rank on 31 July 1942. He was not posted again until September 12, 1942 when he was sent to No.19 Elementary Flying Training School in Virden, Manitoba. Unfortunately, his training as a pilot here did not go well and he ceased training, on March 9, 1943, and was posted back to No.2 Manning Depot. However, he returned to No.5 Bombing and Gunnery School, on April 2, 1943, this time as a bombardier trainee. He moved on to No.1 Central Navigation School in Rivers, Manitoba on June 26, 1943, where he graduated and was promoted to the rank of Sergeant on August 6, 1943. From there, he was off to the United Kingdom as of August 25, 1943. (He was later commissioned as a Flying Officer (F/O) on July 3, 1944.)

Throughout his training, Raymond Gran would have heard of the *Tirpitz*. The *Tirpitz* was a sister ship to the more famous *Bismarck* battleship. Originally launched in April 1939, but not battle-ready until 1941, the *Tirpitz's* main armament of eight, 15-inch guns, high speed of 31 knots, and heavy armour made her a deadly sea-borne threat. In May 1941, the *Bismarck* had proven to be immensely difficult and costly to sink and, consequently, the Royal Navy (RN) had to maintain four battleships at the ready to meet *Tirpitz* should she ever sail against the North Atlantic convoys. Hitler was well aware of how



Six Tallboy bombs in a bomb dump at Bardney, Lincs prior to being loaded on No 9 Sqn RAF aircraft in Oct or Nov 1944 - (photo courtesy of Australian War Memorial)



Top: The Tirpitz was based in the fjords of Norway in an attempt to protect it from attack. - (USN photos). Centre: The Tirpitz lying capsized near Tromsø after the final attack by the RAF - (RAF Photo). Bottom: Even today the faint outline of the Tirpitz is still visible near Tromsø along with Tallboy bomb craters - (photo courtesy of Google Maps)

the ship tied down RN resources, but, after the loss of the *Bismarck*, was also fearful of what her loss would mean for German morale. He consequently ordered that *Tirpitz* should never sail except in conditions that guaranteed her safety. The ensuing *Kriegsmarine* (German Navy) strategy was to base *Tir-*

pitz in Norwegian ports, therefore being able to threaten Allied convoys to the Soviet Union, while at the same time being protected by the difficult terrain of the Norwegian fjords and by the significant distance from the RAF bases.

This stalemate ensured that the Al-

lies would have to seek "the beast in its lair." In planning the warship's destruction, RAF and RN Admiralty staff considered any and all options. Between January 1942 and November 1944, there were a total of seven bombing attacks directed at the battleship; six by the RAF, and one by Soviet aircraft. There were

also five separate attacks by RN Fleet Air Arm aircraft (one while the *Tirpitz* was at sea, and four more while it was in port) plus one further attack by RN midget submarines.

But on the night of June 8-9, 1944, the RAF attacked and destroyed a major railway tunnel using a new secret weapon; the massive new



Distinguished Flying Cross

Tallboy bomb, a 12,000-pound

weapon of immense power that had been conceived by the brilliant British engineer of dam-busting fame, Sir Barnes Wallis. Against land targets, the Tallboy could penetrate concrete structures or drill into soft ground before exploding, with results that mimicked a small, but devastating, earthquake. Throughout the summer of 1944, these bombs were very successfully used against various submarine bases, on "V"-weapon sites, and on dams and canals. The success of this new weapon meant that Bomber Command and Tallboy bombs were soon to be focused on the *Tirpitz*, and that a considerable number of RCAF aircrew serving in both Nos. 9 and 617 (RAF) Squadrons (Sqns), the Tallboy specialist who employed specially modified Lancasters to deliver the weapon, were destined to attack *Tirpitz*.

On September 11, 1944, in Operation PARAVANE, both of these RAF squadrons deployed to Yagodnik, near Archangel, in the Soviet Union, and then on the September 15th they attacked the *Tirpitz* in the Kaa Fjord. No. 617 Sqn dropped Tallboys while some of No. 9 Sqn's aircraft also used "Johnny Walker" mines, which were designed to explode under a vessel. The RAF attacking force achieved surprise because enemy smoke screens had only just begun to spread across the target when the bombing commenced. Unfortunately, enough smoke obscured the vessel that returning aircrews were uncertain as to what they had achieved. In actual fact, one Tallboy had struck near the bow while other near-misses had seriously damaged the engines. From then on, the German *Kriegsmarine* actually considered *Tirpitz* beyond "seaworthy" repair. She was consequently moved south to Tromsø where she es-



Top: A wedding photo of Raymond and Marcella Gran. Bottom: Raymond Gran's postwar career was as a commercial pilot. — (photos courtesy of Donald Kapusta)

entially became a floating gun battery. That move, however, also placed her 200 miles closer to RAF bases in the UK.

Unaware the *Tirpitz* had been permanently crippled, RAF Bomber Command launched yet another attack, codenamed Operation OBVIATE, this time from Lossiemouth, Scotland, on October 29. Both No. 617 and No. 9 Sqn dropped Tallboys, but cloud and smokescreens shielded the target and no hits were scored. And so, once again, on November 12, Nos. 9 and 617 Sqn returned to Tromsø in Operation CATECHISM. This time the *Tirpitz* was directly hit by two or three Tallboys. A violent explosion ensued and the "mighty beast" capsize.

During these three attacks, the two squadrons had lost a combined total of eight aircraft, most of which crashed or were abandoned in the Soviet Union during the September operation. The only loss involving fatalities during these same attacks was a Lancaster of No. 617 Sqn. It crashed in Norway on September 16, while en route from the Soviet Union to the UK. Nine men died and among them was Canadian Pilot Officer (P/O) Allan F. McNally of Minaki, Ontario.

So what was Raymond Gran's involvement in these strikes? Like all new bomber crew arriving in the UK at that time, Raymond Gran first completed his bomber training in a Heavy Conversion Unit, followed by a short "finishing school" on Lancasters where he completed six missions against "softer" targets in France. Gran must have developed a good reputation. He was posted to No. 9 (RAF) Squadron, which was, by this point in time, an elite bomber unit using the most sophisticated weapons in the RAF's arsenal against the most challenging targets. Moreover, he became part of the crew piloted by the unit's commanding officer, Wing Commander (W/C) James Michael Bazin, DSO, DFC. Unusually, W/C Bazin was an ex-fighter pilot (and a confirmed ace with 10 victories) who had converted to heavy bombers in 1944, right about the time Raymond was completing his own heavy conversion training. W/C Bazin assumed command of No. 9 Sqn in June 1944 and Gran joined his crew as the bombardier for their first mission together against the target of Gelsenkirchen, Germany on 21 June 1944. Gran flew another five missions with W/C Bazin over the next several months culminating in the first mission against the *Tirpitz* in Operation PARAVANE on 15 September 1944. The results for the this first attack by Bazin's crew were succinctly summed up as follows in the squadron's operational record: "primary [target] attacked; no results seen." In actual fact, the Gran directed multiple runs over the obscured target in an attempt to drop the Tallboy as accurately as possible and, as we now know, the *Tirpitz* was effectively crippled in the attack.

Thereafter, (for unknown reasons), Raymond Gran switched crews and joined fellow Canadian pilot, Flight Lieutenant (F/L) George Clark Camsell, as a member of that pilot's crew. Camsell and Gran flew together for the next two oper-



Top - The Cessna 180 finally on the lake surface after its recovery. Above - A final group portrait of some of those who contributed to the salvage operation. Bottom of page - Raymond Gran's commercial pilot licence was in remarkable condition - and, at left, Raymond Gran's long lost wedding ring was miraculously recovered during the salvage operations - (photos courtesy of Donald Kapusta)



ations against the *Tirpitz*. In Op OBVI-ATE on Oct 29, 1944, Camsell and crew attacked and successfully dropped their Tallboy bomb on the *Tirpitz* (again after several runs over the target) but no results could be observed because of the smoke screen. Camsell and Gran combined once more during the third and final sortie against the *Tirpitz* in Op CATHECISM. Unfortunately, for them their base in Lossiemouth, Scotland had been hit by a severe snowstorm the night before and despite the best efforts of all the ground crews, some of the squadron's aircraft were severely delayed in their take-off. (The squadron was only able to launch 13 of a planned 20 aircraft for the mission). Camsell's crew was one of two aircraft who finally managed to take-off but well after everyone else. Having taken off very late, Camsell and crew arrived at the rendezvous point approximately 100 miles short of the target to discover that the rest of the squadron were nowhere to be seen, having long since departed. With radio silence imposed for the duration of the mission, and no one else in sight, Camsell therefore elected to return to base with his precious Tallboy bomb intact.

Raymond Gran flew his next fifteen missions with F/L Camsell. Several times Camsell acted as Deputy Leader of the squadron on daylight operations and more than once as leader, a task he fulfilled very successfully. For his own efforts during this time, Camsell was eventually also awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). Gran was Camsell's bombardier all through this intense period. During a night attack on Munich on November 25, 1944, while over the target, Gran's aircraft was attacked by three single-engine night fighters, but Camsell was able to out-maneuvre two of the fighters, while the third was driven off by gunfire. Most of these missions were Tallboy sorties where Gran's skill as a bombardier came into play. Two of his sorties were against dams (the Sorpe and Urft dams) and yet another two were against railway viaducts. Gran also participated in another aborted mission on 15 April 1945 against another German warship, in this case, the German heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*; in this particular case, the ship was heavily obscured by poor weather and none of the squadron's aircraft were consequently able to attack. Gran's penultimate mission with Camsell was almost their last. On March 22, 1945, No. 9 Sqn launched 17 bombers against the German city of Bremen. Enroute to the target, Camsell and Gran's Lancaster, #LM220, was hit by flak - both starboard engines were hit and holes were punched in the wings, bomb doors and the fuselage. Camsell thankfully guided the crippled aircraft back to a safe emergency landing at Ludham, in Norfolk, England.

Gran's last wartime sortie (his 34th combat mission) was a long flight (8 hours and 18 minutes) to the German city of Pilsen on April 16, 1945. He did not fly this last mission with Camsell, having flown this culminating sortie with a F/O Buckley. For his efforts, Raymond Gran (like his primary pilots, Bazin and

Camsell) was awarded the DFC. Gran's DFC has no detailed citation other than he completed... "numerous operations against the enemy in the course of which [he has] invariably displayed the utmost fortitude, courage and devotion to duty". This recommendation was dated March 13, 1945 when he had flown just 29 sorties (totaling 171 hours, 49 minutes), during the period from May 27, 1944 to March 14, 1945; (Gran actually completed 34 sorties totaling 204 hours, 18 minutes). With the cessation of the war in Europe, Gran was repatriated to Canada as of July 7, 1945 and he was then released from the RCAF on October 3, 1945.

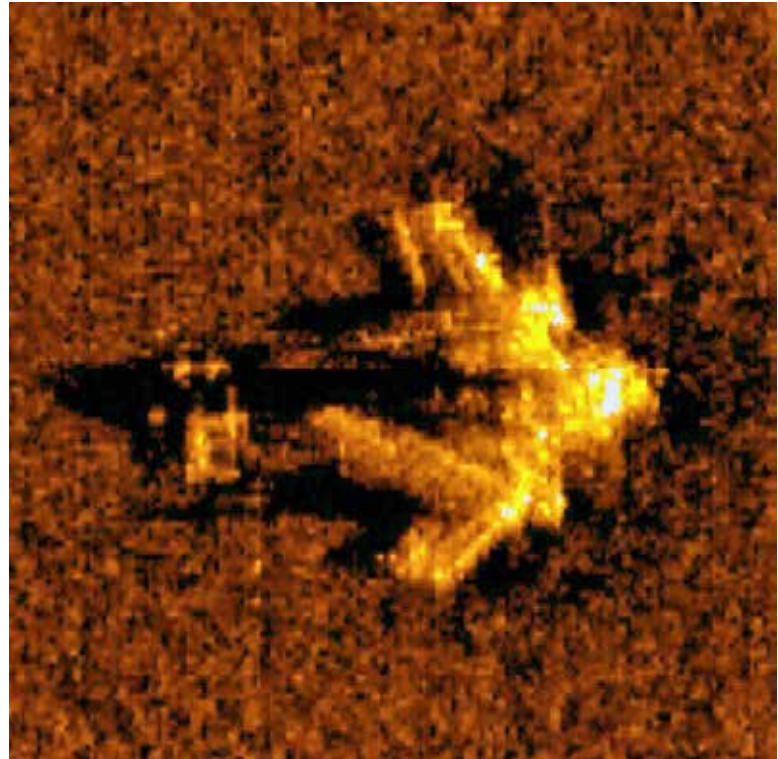
Gran's affiliation with flying did not, however, end with the war. Returning to Saskatchewan, Gran at first turned to some prospecting work but, very quickly, he returned to the air, this time as a commercial pilot, flying float planes into remote areas in Saskatchewan. By the late 1950s, Raymond was married to Marcella Gran and they were expecting their first child. By this time, Raymond was an experienced float plane pilot flying for Saskatchewan Government Airways (SGA). Initially, Marcella often accompanied her husband on flights but as her due date approached, prudence dictated that she should stay home.

On August 20, 1959, Raymond Gran was piloting a SGA Cessna 180 floatplane when he took off from Buffalo Narrows, SK, (about 500 km north of Saskatoon) on a short flight on a two-fold mission to investigate some poaching reports and to deliver mail to La Loche, SK. He was accompanied on the trip by a Saskatchewan Conservation Officer, named Harold Thompson. Fog had initially delayed their departure, and Gran had purposely delayed taking off to let it clear. It is then believed that the fog unfortunately began to thicken enroute and Gran then attempted to land at Peter Pond Lake, part way to the intended destination. The aircraft and its occupants was never seen again.

News stories from the time period indicate that the initial RCAF search for the missing aircraft lasted about 10 days. Accident witnesses were interviewed. The lake was dragged and a diver was also sent down on a search. The RCAF formally concluded the plane had crashed into Peter Pond Lake and that everybody on board had died. That same winter, a snowmobile towing a metal detector also traversed the lake's ice looking for any signs of the missing plane, but the wreckage was never located.

Raymond Gran's widow, Marcella, was left with only memories and photos of her husband as she welcomed the birth of their daughter, Linda. For 59 more years, Raymond Gran and Harold Thompson's precise final resting place remained a mystery. Raymond's daughter, Linda, grew up and married a doctor by the name of Don Kapusta, and they settled in Toronto, ON.

For years, Raymond Gran's wartime portrait along with his medals and his DFC hung proudly in the family home. In



Top - A sonar image of the Cessna 180 lying upside down in the depths of Peter Pond Lake. Centre - Ray Gran, left, is seen with his brother, on Aug. 10, 1959, near the Saskatchewan Government Airways Cessna 180 which disappeared ten days after the photo was taken (photos courtesy of Donald Kapusta). Bottom - A view of Lancaster LM 220 from No. 9 Sqn on which Raymond Gran, DFC served as a crewmember. (image created by Jens-Ole Kjølborg)

2017, however, Don Kapusta decided it was time to try and find the wreckage site in Peter Pond Lake and eventually called upon Garry Kozak, a side-scan sonar expert specializing in shipwreck and aircraft searches. As a Canadian Press story by Rob Drinkwater from August 2018 further explained: Kapusta said one of the reasons they decided to search was that Gran's widow was 87 years old. "This was something she had thought about over the decades and never really had an answer to; so we thought this was as good a time as any to do it."

Kapusta bought a 7 metre-long boat and towed it to Buffalo Narrows, SK. Kozak, who was based in New Hampshire, flew with his sonar gear to Saskatoon and then joined Kapusta. Kozak had told Kapusta to gather as much information about the crash as possible to narrow down the area of the 552-square-kilometre lake that would need to be searched. Donald Kapusta said a key witness' testimony in 1959 led them close to the site. Cyril Aubichon had been fishing on Peter Pond Lake when he heard the crash. Based on his information, Kozak plotted an area of about 50 square kilometres and divided it into four quadrants to be searched over a four-day period. Fortunately, they found the aircraft on the first day after accidentally crossing into another quadrant. It appeared to be intact and lying upside down on the lake bottom in over 16 metres of water. Kapusta later said the good news about finding the plane was tempered with great sadness: "It was pretty late that night so we thought we would let Marcella know the next morning, not knowing that 10 hours after we had found the aircraft, Marcella had passed quietly in her sleep and she never knew."

Because the wreckage was a grave site, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) was called in to dive upon the wreckage but their initial efforts resulted in further frustration. The RCMP deemed the wreck too dangerous to dive upon because of the depth, poor visibility and underwater currents. Pressed by the family to continue, the RCMP agreed to dive upon the wreckage during the following winter when the conditions would be more favourable. In January 2019, the remains of Raymond Gran and Harold Thompson were recovered by RCMP divers and de-

livered to their respective family members. Raymond Gran was then interred together with his beloved wife, Marcella.

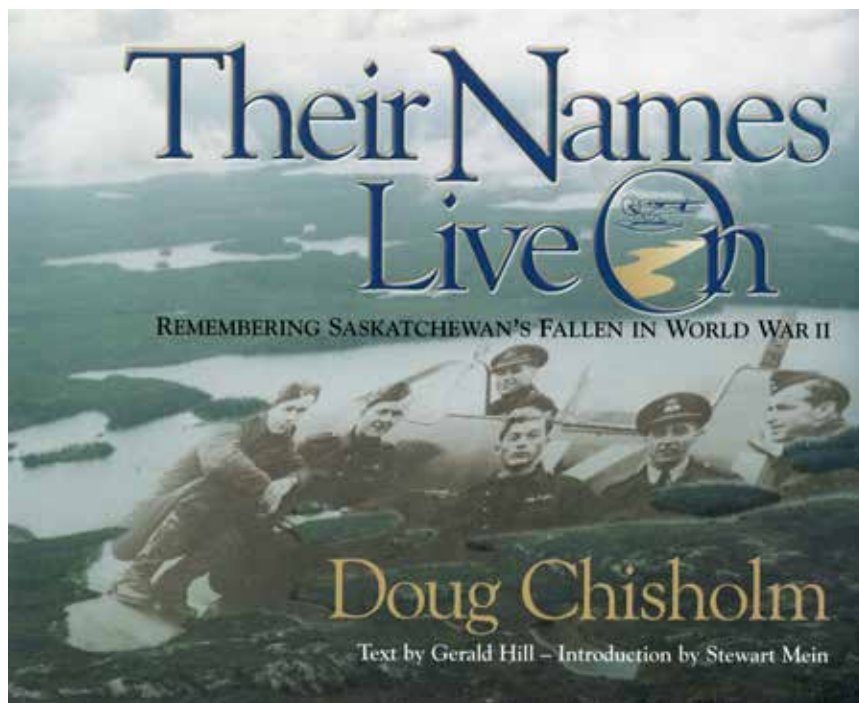
But the story doesn't end there. In March 2019, a Kapusta / Gran / Thompson family-led expedition returned to Peter Pond Lake. The Saskatchewan Aviation Museum was intending to assist with the recovery of the plane from the bottom of the lake with the help of National Geographic diver, Mike Fletcher, along with volunteers from the surrounding villages of Buffalo Narrows, Michel Village and Dillon. Buffalo Narrows volunteers ploughed an ice road at no cost for the group. When that road became too muddy to use, volunteers

approval, the wreckage was prepared to be raised. When the plane arrived at the surface, they had to cut the wings to fit the plane through the hole in the ice. The wings were cut and then hoisted up vertically. As the wings emerged, someone saw the ring. It was balanced on the edge of a wing. It was both a highly emotional and spiritual moment for Donald and Linda Kapusta and the rest of the Gran family to have a memento of Raymond Gran returned.

The Cessna 180 was then delivered to the Saskatchewan Aviation Museum in Saskatoon, where it was viewed by members of the public the following day. The museum board's president indicated that it

will initially put it on display "as-is" for about a year before undertaking any restoration efforts. Raymond Gran's legacy as an accomplished bombardier and pilot will now live on in both the public forum and in the hearts and minds of the Gran / Kapusta families.

The author is indebted to Canadian Press writer, Rob Drinkwater, for his initial assistance and especially to Donald Kapusta for his willingness to share both information and photos to make this story possible. Further information on the Tirpitz attacks can be found in books like Jan Forsgren's 2014 book "Sinking the Beast - The RAF 1944 Lancaster Raids against Tirpitz" or John Sweetman's 2000 book titled "Tirpitz: Hunting the Beast" and further information on the SGA Cessna 180 recovery can be found at: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/peter-pond-lake-plane-crash-recovered-aviation-museum-1.5079067?_vzf=medium%3D-sharebar



For those who would like to learn more about the province of Saskatchewan's compassionate project honouring those from Saskatchewan who fell during the Second World War, the editor recommends author Doug Chisholm's book, Their Names Live On: Remembering Saskatchewan's Fallen in World War II. The crew featured on the cover is from 403 "Wolf" Squadron (City of Calgary), with Roy Wozniak in the cockpit, two "erks" (technicians) crouched on the wing and three other pilots including George Aitken in the centre wearing a peak cap. Warrant Officer Ronald Dunbar (pilot) is believed to be the hatless pilot in the centre. Dunbar was shot down in May 1943, and is today remembered via the naming of Dunbar Point. 55° 10' 0" N, 104° 39' 2" W.

from Michel Village, SK, made another road from the other side of the lake. The local communities also chipped in providing home-made food and other support to the recovery team. The recovery effort also included a search for items not previously recovered by the RCMP dive team. This latest search revealed items like a key holder believed to have been Harold Thompson's, pieces of leather, a wristwatch and even Raymond Gran's commercial pilot's license. One key item the Gran / Kapusta families were hoping for was Ray Gran's wedding ring. It was a long shot after so many years under water, but they were hopeful. But after pulling items for days, diver, Mike Fletcher, was not able to locate a ring and finally with the family's



Raymond Gran, DFC - (photo courtesy of Donald Kapusta)