

One Who Almost Made It Back

by Peter Celis



Following the release of his recent book, Peter Cellis of Belgium briefly sketches the life story of a man who unquestionably is one of Canada's unsung heroes, SL Edward W. "Teddy" Blenkinsop, DFC, Croix de Guerre (Belgium), RCAF.

Brave men are not fearless. Brave men are ordinary men with normal fears who accomplish their dangerous duties or missions in spite of their fears. This is the story of one such man.

I must have been nine or 10-years-old when I first asked my grandfather about the stranger who was being remembered in our hometown of Meensel-Kiezegeg, Belgium. Each year, this tiny village remembers the heinous crimes committed in Aug 1944 by Flemish collaborators who encircled the community and let loose atrocious brutalities on its innocent inhabitants. My late grandfather who lost many of his best friends in these raids, visited the memorial cemetery regularly. The many faces on the individual headstones intrigued me, in particular, the headstone inscribed with a foreign flag. When my grandfather explained to me that this man was a Canadian pilot, my interest was aroused and I never gave up repeatedly asking questions about "the Canadian pilot." Nobody in the village was able to provide satisfactory answers to my inquiries about this aviator. Several years later, when I was in high school, my grandfather became a bit tired by my incessant cross-examination, and said to me, "Why don't you find out him yourself?"

In 1984, I began writing letters to archives and institutions in England and Canada. Little-by-little the story came together, and before long it became apparent that "the Canadian pilot," Teddy Blenkinsop, had been a most remarkable individual. Supported by his family, I accepted the task of sorting out the story so I might write this book. Teddy's first cousin, John Neroutsos, a retired Canadian air force brigadier-general, deserves the credit for motivating me to complete the project after so many years and to have the story translated from my native language into English.

Teddy Blenkinsop was born on Oct 8th 1920 in Victoria, BC. His father, Hubert Blenkinsop, son of an established family in the English city of Warwick, was a horseback dispatch rider in the British Army during the Great War. When the war ended, Hubert emigrated to Canada and started a cattle ranch near Big Creek, in the Chilcotin region of British Columbia. Teddy spent the first years of his life on the ranch.

Having many role models within the family had a great influence on Teddy Blenkinsop's early character development. One might say he became imbued with the *"right stuff"* with which to face life's arduous challenges, especially the perilous events that were soon to follow. He had always been fascinated by his father's exhilarating WWI experiences; the daring accomplishments of his mother's cousin who died in aerial combat over Flanders in the Royal Flying Corps; and by the actions of his uncle, who died leading a charge from the trenches in the Great War. But the one person who would have the greatest impact on Teddy's early character development was his grandfather on his mother's side, known as "The Skipper." Teddy was intrigued by his grandfather's gallant exploits *"before the mast"* - rounding Cape Horn five times in full-rigged ships before the age of 18. Later he was one of the few to survive a shipwreck after striking an iceberg, Teddy learned his lesson well.

In 1926, Teddy moved with his family from the ranch to Victoria where he grew up and attended school. He began to give some thought to volunteering for the air force in the late summer of 1939. When Canada declared war on Germany on Sept 10th 1939, Teddy was articling to become a chartered accountant, but he enlisted before completing his final qualification. He was to report to No.1 Manning Depot in Toronto, in June 1940. After only three weeks of basic instruction he was transformed into uniformed raw material suitable for further training. Those in Teddy's draft were sent to No.1 Initial Training School at the Eglinton Hunt Club, also in Toronto. The pace was hectic, but the curriculum was clearly linked to flying training. Teddy excelled in all the subjects, but he especially outclassed everyone in navigation. Teddy graduated 20th out of 485. Ted's group was the first class of pilots under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan trained at No.8 Elementary Flying Training School (8 EFTS) at Sea Island Airport in Vancouver. On graduation he stood second in his class and registered his preference for bombers. His request was granted, and on Oct 11th 1940, he and his classmates were on a train to Saskatoon, Sask, reporting for duty at No.4 Service Flying Training School (4 SFTS).

The pace at SFTS was no slower than it had been at EFTS. and Ted became a stand-out in the class. The navigational instructors began using Teddy as an assistant whenever Ted had finished his own assignments. He was one of six students to obtain a distinguished pass. Much to the students' dismay however, 33 of the new graduates were posted to the Central Flying School at Trenton, Ont, to become flying instructors, while the remaining five were transferred to the recently-opened No.1 Air Navigation School (1 ANS) at Rivers, Man, to take an advanced navigation course. Ted was amongst the latter group. The purpose of sending Ted and his four colleagues to Rivers was undoubtedly to produce navigation instructions. Ted was pretty disappointed. He had hoped to be sent overseas and into action, and he felt the course at Rivers was costing him valuable time. He again obtained top marks. While being proud of his results, he could not but regret the inevitable consequence - the school wanted to retain him at Rivers as a navigation instructor. His new position included classroom instruction and also had him assigned as a check pilot to test the air competency of non-flying ground school instructors.

In July 1941, Ted was informed of his next posting. Despite the urgent appeal by the leadership at Rivers to retain him there, the commanding officer in charge of setting up the new 2 ANS at **Pennfield Ridge, NB**, made a special request for P/O Blenkinsop... the commanding officer would not be put off. The astro navigation course at Pennfield Ridge had to be an exact duplicate of the course at Rivers, and Ted was thought to be the perfect man to make that happen. He arrived there in Aug 1941, and immediately began instructing astro navigation to newly graduated navigators.

In Mar 1942, Ted received a new and unexpected assignment. He was sent to New Zealand to inspect the navigational training procedures in the Royal New Zealand Air Force, and to implement a new air navigation program as required. For over six months he toured facilities in New Zealand. Returning to Wellington, he reported and put forward his recommendations. Although the New Zealanders wanted to extend his stay, he was ordered back to Canada. He desperately wanted to be posted overseas. Now a flight lieutenant, he felt he had done his time on instructional duties. Once in Ottawa, his plea was acknowledged; he received orders to report to No.1 Embarkation Depot in Halifax, the last stop before airmen embarked for overseas. He left Canada on a troop ship on Jan 4th 1943.

On arrival in England, Teddy was dispatched to No.3 Personnel Reception Centre in Bournemouth, an orientation facility where he awaited further assignment. Word came that there was an opening for a contingent of pilots at No.3 (Pilot) Advanced Flying Unit at Long Newnton near Tetbury. Flying Airspeed Oxfords, he now began the last hurdle to becoming an operational bomber pilot. During the weeks that followed Teddy forged his new crew into a combat-ready-team. Right from the start the "Blenkinsop Crew," as they were referred to, connected exceptionally well. They knew nothing or almost nothing about each other's past. Everybody minded their own business, as the rapid sequences of events did not leave much time for chitchat. But, they were all keen, all itching to get on with the job and all in harmony.

On June 5th 1943, when Ted and his crew showed up expecting to be sent on a high-level bombing exercise, they were in for a surprise. Ted's name was on the ops board for flying that night on a "nickel" raid, the code name for a leaflet-dropping mission. The target was Vichy, a town lying

some 200 miles south of Paris. Exactly three years and one day after Teddy had joined the armed forces, he was now embarked on his first combat mission.

Shortly thereafter, Ted and his crew received news of their next posting. They were to be transferred to North Africa as a replacement crew.

Early in Apr 1943, the Air Ministry requested that three bombers squadrons from the Canadian 6 Group be moved to North Africa. Canada selected 420 "Snowy Owl," 424 "Tiger" and 435 "Alouette" Sqns, to form 331 RCAF Wing, which was assigned to take part in the Sicilian campaign. Canadian G/C Clarence R. "Larry" Dunlap was to command the new wing. This formation was subordinated to 205 Group of the British-American North African Strategic Air Force, commanded by the illustrious MGen "Jimmy" Doolittle.

German forces in retreat had left behind intact airfields around Tunis. These facilities were now available for operational use by the Allies from which to bomb targets in Italy. Air Marshal Dunlap, a former chief of the air staff and a Canadian Aviation Hall of Famer, would later recall those days: "There were four Wellington wings surrounding Kairouan, three of them RAF and one RCAF. No.331 Wing was the last to arrive on the scene. Hence, we had slim pickings as regards to location. Nothing survived by way of shrub or bush. The only shade was beneath the wing of the aircraft. In that shade the temperature on occasion rose to more than 50° Celsius."

Teddy's crew was posted to the French-speaking 425 Sqn RCAF - the "*Alouettes*." On July 28th Teddy and his friends flew their first mission as a crew. Many more missions followed in quick succession, and the Blenkinsop crew quickly established a name for themselves.. Air Marshall Dunlap recalled: "Teddy Blenkinsop arrived in North Africa in Jul 1943 while my wing left there in October. The overlap was brief but quite long enough for me to recognize his talents as a pilot as well as those of his crew. Indeed his worth as an operational pilot was so quickly established that he and his crew were selected as "target illuminators" - illuminators are a sort of pathfinder - on six separate occasions during the month of September, an assignment reserved for the best crews."

425 Sqn returned to England, disembarking on Nov 6th 1943. Orders were received to report to their new station - Dishforth in Yorkshire, where individual postings came through on Dec 6th. Teddy wanted to get on with business and immediately applied for a second operational tour. In Feb 1944, he replaced W/C Baxter Richer and temporarily commanded 425 Sqn, now flying four-engine Halifaxes. Shortly after, his long held aspiration finally came through, and he was posted to an elite Pathfinder ((PFF) unit and the only Canadian Pathfinder squadron - 405 (Vancouver) Sqn. During this same period, the coveted Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) was awarded to Teddy as a result of his standout performance while serving with 425 Sqn in North Africa.

Again, Teddy faced the task of gathering a crew before the obligatory Pathfinder conversion at RAF Warboys. Very experienced Canadians he knew from North Africa formed the nucleus of his newly-picked crew. They were all second-tour veterans and Teddy was extremely pleased with this team's potential. On Mar 30th 1944, the Blenkinsop crew appeared for the first time on the Pathfinder Force operations order. Their first "op" as a crew was to a memorable one. It was Nürnberg. It was the biggest Bomber Command loss of the war and the Nürnberg raid was assessed a complete fiasco. Their maiden trip as a Pathfinder had been a nerve-wracking and harrowing experience and the entire crew realized they had been fortunate to return unscathed. Teddy and his crew were now firmly entrenched members of the Pathfinders.

As the crew gained experience - i.e. survived - they became visual markers or blind marker-illuminators.

Visual markers were actually at the top of the PFF crew assignment hierarchy. They were the most experienced crews and had to identify and then mark the aiming point visually. No matter how much flying time a PFF crew logged, they might never achieve the position of visual marker if they did not possess above average stick handling skills, great night vision and the ability to concentrate. At the apex of the hierarchy were those who possessed exceptional flying skills and leadership qualities - the deputy master bomber and master bomber.

The Blenkinsop crew's star was rapidly ascending and, for their fifth PFF operation, squadron senior leadership had a choice assignment for the talent septet. They were selected as one of only two visual marker crews in a force of 14 Pathfinders and they were going to lead a raid on the railway at Lens, France. Wing Commander Reg Lane , Teddy's commanding officer in 405 (PFF) Sqn, was

the master bomber for this attack. The late LGen Lane, DSO, DFC, also an Aviation Hall of Famer, having known Teddy in Victoria, was pleased to have him in the squadron. "He was a first-class pilot and crew captain and quickly established himself as a leader. I was, at that time, looking for someone to replace me as the squadron commander as my own tour of operations was nearing completion and Teddy was the obvious choice."

In quick succession squadron leadership had another top assignment in store for the Blenkinsop crew on Apr 26th. On that night, some 900 bombers attacked three different targets: the important German industrial cities of Essen and Schweinfurt and the major French railway centre of Villeneuve-St-Georges near Paris. Teddy and his crew were part of six 405 Sqd aircraft detailed for the latter attack and were assigned the role of deputy master bomber. In less than a month, after a mere seven operational Pathfinder sorties, they had risen to one of the two top assignments in Bomber Command. The progression and completion of the raid was going to be largely in their hands as the deputy master bomber crew.

The raid went very well and the performance of the Blenkinsop crew won great approval and further recognition from their superiors. In fact, upon their return to the squadron ops room, Teddy was asked to prepare for a new mission as deputy master bomber the following night. Instead of getting the customary 24 hours off ops duty, the crew would be ready for briefing again in about 12 hours. Bomber Command's main targets for the night of Apr 27th-28th were important Panzer engine and gearbox factories near Friedrichshafen in Southern Germany. In the other attack, 144 aircraft were to bomb an important marshalling yard on the Antwerp-Aachen rail line at the Belgian border town of Montzen near Aachen.

While the first German night-fighters were unleashed to intercept the Friedrichshafen raiders, the Montzen force was unaware that German night-fighter controllers were alerted to multiple targets that night. Some of the *Luftwaffe* night fighters, delayed by a diversionary raid, never reached Montzen in time to strike. Others, however began causing havoc amongst the vulnerable target-fixated bombers.

Wing Commander Lane, master bomber of Montzen, devoted most of his efforts to ensure that the Main Force pressed on right into the target and not release their bombs prematurely. Consequently, the attack on Montzen went very well, although 10 of the bombers were downed in the immediate vicinity of the target or shortly after starting their return leg. For the next hour, the German night-fighters would aggressively attack the withdrawal of the Montzen force over the Low Countries, claiming another five victories. Towards the end of the attack and with most of the Main Force on the way home, W/C Lane called his deputy by radio and told him to return home as the raid was nearly over. Then, less than 25 minutes after leaving the target area, all hell broke loose. A Messerschmitt ME110G night fighter piloted by German ace *Oberleutnant* Georg-Hermann Griener and his crew aggressively attacked Teddy's Lancaster, JA976. A moment later, combustible flare material board the stricken aircraft ignited and Lancaster "S-for-Sugar" became an airborne inferno. The whole attack lasted only 10 seconds. Wing Commander Lane, flying about six miles behind Teddy, was the nearest observer of the tragedy. He witnessed Teddy's Lancaster explode, a horrifying sight that he clearly remembered for the rest of his days: "It was with horror and shock that I watched him shot down while returning from the attack on Montzen. Teddy was my deputy and would have taken over control of the attack had anything happened to me. The attack came to an end and it was shortly thereafter that he was shot down. I was able to identify his plane by the colour of the pyrotechnics that blew up as his plane exploded. His and my aircraft were the only two carrying that colour."

The remains of the Lancaster came down in the village of Webbekom, a suburb of the Belgian city of Diest. Miraculously Teddy Blenkinsop was blown clear of the cockpit by the force of the explosion. All the other seven crew members were killed and buried at the local cemetery of Webbekom. Teddy managed to survive. Although injured, he evaded capture by the Germans and went into hiding. Teddy Blenkinsop was helped by valiant members of the Belgian resistance, who risked their lives and those of their families by ignoring the decree of the SS that all parachuting Allied airmen were to be handed over to the German authorities without delay. He ended up in early July 1944 in the caring hands of the Pypen family in the rural town of Meensel-Kiezegem. The Pypens made several fruitless attempts to put him on an escape line back to England but a bitter disagreement between local Resistance leaders, as well as other jurisdictional problems within the

Belgian underground in 1944, led to Teddy's prolonged stay in this small Belgian

A series of very unfortunate events involving local Resistance members and German collaborators brought tragedy to the town of Meensel-Kiezegem. These events led to two extremely brutal raids by German and Flemish SS troops in early Aug 1944 - just weeks before the arrival of the Allied liberation armies. Three men were murdered, a fourth burned alive and an incredible 91 villagers arrested. Teddy Blenkinsop, together with a son of the Pypens, tried to escape and break the siege of the town, but they were captured and added to the group of detained resistance members. After being severely mistreated by the Gestapo in Brussels' St-Gillis prison, 71 of these hostages ended up in the German Neuengamme concentration camp. Teddy was one of them. He was never regarded as an Allied officer, as the Geneva Convention stipulated, because the Gestapo wrongfully charged him as an active member of the Meensel-Kiezegem Resistance.

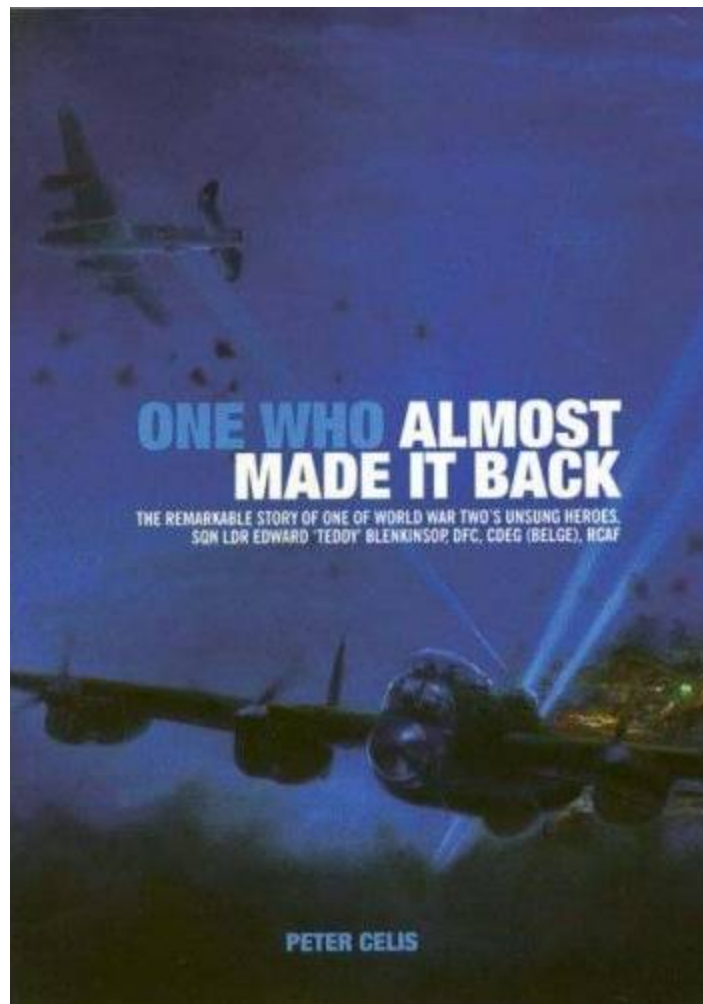
From the Neuengamme camp Teddy, along with hundreds of fellow prisoners, was sent to the Hamburg shipyards and armament factories as a forced labourer. In appalling conditions and during the coldest European winter in a century, his physical condition waned and he became moribund near the end of 1944. Lacking any medical care or adequate food, his French friends in his prisoner's work party tried valiantly to comfort and support him, but Teddy died of exhaustion and TB in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in early 1945... sadly so close to liberation. His body was cremated in the ovens of that notorious extermination camp, and his ashes scattered as fertilizer. Eight months later his parents were officially informed of his demise.

After the war, a paltry eight men returned home to Meensel-Kiezegem alive. Families in the town were virtually wiped out, leaving only 32 widows and 95 orphans. For decades Meensel-Kiezegem would be a "silent" town, where its inhabitants were unable to tolerate any talk of the war. But the town's postwar generation vowed to never forget.

Lieutenant-General Reginald Lane, summarized: "Teddy Blenkinsop was a remarkable man whose loyalty, dedication and devotion were brought to light through a dreadful war in which he played a significant part." He went on to say: "Ted Blenkinsop was never recognized by his own country for his great unselfish determination and final sacrifice. His story should be added to the many others of gallantry that, for whatever reason, did not come to light and hence went unrecognized."

The book recounts the short life story of S/L Edward Weyman Blenkinsop, DFC, C de G, from his first till his last. The book is built around hundreds of testimonials, family letters and archive material from Canada, Belgium, England and Germany. I have attempted to develop and connect the events that were uncovered which I believe nurtured this future Pathfinder into what one can only judge to be a most remarkable individual. One has to read the entire book to fully comprehend the story and the man, Speaking as a Belgian, I can only say, Canada, you must be so proud to have this man as your native son.

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Ed note: Peter Celis is an F-16 fighter pilot in the Belgian Air Force. His book "One Who Almost Made It Back," ISBN 9781906502164, is published by Grub Street Publishing, London, 260pp illustrated, hardcover.

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