

Search still on for family of airman killed in 1941

A veteran Toronto police officer and amateur historian has made it his mission to hunt down relatives of a Windsor airman whose near-forgotten war-time grave lies on a tiny North Sea island off the shore of the Netherlands.



Joining the RAF Bomber Command was deadly business.

Of 120,000 airmen who served in Bomber Command, 55,573 were killed, including 10,000 Canadians. Only the Nazi U-boat force suffered a higher casualty rate in the Second World War.

Only 10 per cent of those flying with Bomber Command at the beginning survived the war. Of every 100 airmen who joined Bomber Command, 45 were killed, six were seriously wounded and eight became prisoners of war.

More than 12,000 Allied aircraft were lost during nearly 400,000 sorties that saw almost a million tons of bombs dropped over Nazi-controlled Europe and 47,000 mines laid.

A veteran Toronto police officer and amateur historian has made it his mission to hunt down relatives of a Windsor airman whose near-forgotten wartime grave lies on a tiny North Sea island off the shore of the Netherlands.

“He sits there all alone – I just don’t think that’s right,” said Staff Sgt. Chuck Konkell of the Toronto Police Service. Konkell has spent years re-connecting Canadian families to ancestors buried in a Second World War Allied cemetery on Texel Island, but the case of air gunner Vincent Sature has him and others baffled.

It was a dark and cloudy night and the anti-aircraft flak was “heavy and fairly accurate over target,” according to No. 51 Squadron flight logs filed after an Oct. 31, 1941, RAF Bomber Command mission targeting Hamburg.



Chuck Konkel has spent years reconnecting Canadian families to ancestors buried in a Second World War Allied cemetery on Texel Island, Netherlands. He's also a Staff Sgt. with Toronto Police Service.

British pilot Eric Arthur Barsby, 26, was steering his Whitley Mk. V aircraft and five-member multinational crew home after successfully dropping a heavy payload of bombs and incendiary containers on the northern German port city. At 9:36 p.m., four hours after the mission's start, the crew signalled home: "Operations completed."

But it was Flight Z9141's great misfortune on its return from the raid to fly into the path of Nazi Luftwaffe night fighter ace Paul Gildner. Almost all of multi-decorated Gildner's 48 aerial victories were nighttime kills (his streak ended with a fatal fighter crash in the Netherlands in 1943).

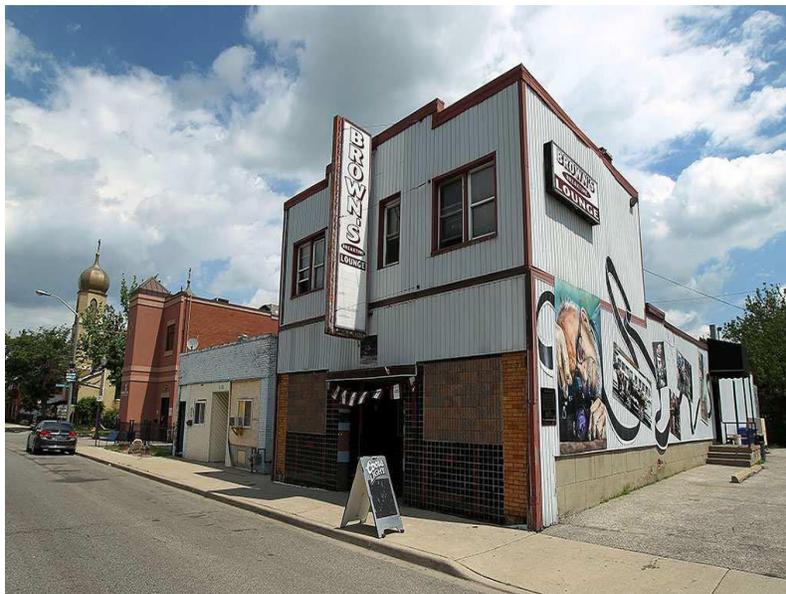
All five crew in Sature's aircraft, including fellow Canadian Eric Warburton, were killed.

Pastoral Texel Island lay on a common flight path for bombers heading for targets in northern Germany, and it's home to the graves of 167 Allied airmen whose missions ended prematurely. Fisherman Bram van Dyck, who witnessed one of those fatal crashes as a child, made it his life's work to try and track down the families of the airmen buried there. Konkel heard of van Dyck's efforts at "reconciliation" — honouring the dead by reaching out to their families — and he started helping out using "old-fashioned, follow-the-lead police work."

There have been some successes, and grateful families have made pilgrimages to Texel to reconnect with ancestors, most of whom died as young men in their 20s. Konkel hopes his work "brings closure to their lives."

Despite four years of searches covering four countries, Vincent Sature remains a cold case, and the mystery starts with his name.

Konkel's research uncovered the fact that Sature, who was 37 and a flight sergeant when he was killed, was likely born Vincenty Sheurmin Korzydlowski in Poland on Feb. 11, 1904, reportedly near the Jewish ghetto in Krakow. His parents were Wladyslaw Jen Korsydowski and Felicja Maria Kobylanska.



Brown's Breaktime Lounge is seen on Drouillard Road in Windsor on Wednesday, May 27, 2015. The upstairs apartment of the building is where Sgt. Vincent Sature listed as his address when he enlisted in the RCAF. Sature was killed during the war. (TYLER BROWNBRIDGE/The Windsor Star)

Wartime records show Vincent Sature enlisting in Windsor on April 2, 1940, and giving his family's address as 1118 Drouillard Rd. (RAF records at the War Museum show the name 'Korzydowski' pencilled in next to Sature).

Konkel believes a possible reason for the name change could have been to disguise his Jewish heritage, particularly in the knowledge he'd be flying over Nazi-occupied Europe.

"It's a mystery I'd love to solve. His family doesn't seem to exist anymore," said Konkel.

The Windsor address on Drouillard Road is now a pub, Brown's Breaktime Lounge, but from 1929 to 1982 it was called the Rex Hotel, with upstairs residential units. The current owner said the neighbourhood has strong Polish and Jewish roots.

In the original notice (published in The Windsor Daily Star on Dec. 2, 1941) declaring Sature missing — it was only later the crew of the twin-engined bomber was officially declared dead — the only named next of kin was a Y. Kobylanski, his uncle in Gary, Ind. Chicago Post-Tribune readers were recently enlisted to help in the search for Sature's American descendants.

Konkel has searched museum, military and public library archives, sought assistance from veterans' and government agencies, consulted with police services and been in contact with Polish communities in Windsor and elsewhere. Most resulted in dead ends.

Sature's last resting spot may not have seen next-of-kin visitors, but his name is etched into a stone grave marker at Texel (den Burg) Cemetery. He's also one of hundreds of Windsor airmen who lost their lives in the Second World War whose names are included in a Royal Canadian Air Force memorial at the city's waterfront Dieppe Gardens.

Konkel said anyone with any information on Vincent Sature's family ties can email him at

chuck.konkel@torontopolice.on.ca

DOUG SCHMIDT, WINDSOR STAR