

Bringing a Tiger Home

Sometimes you are aware of things without realizing how you ever gained this knowledge, things like riding a bicycle or how to play cribbage. So, when I think of my father serving in the RCAF with the Tiger Squadron (the 424) during World War II, I cannot remember ever being sat down and hearing about it.

I do remember around Remembrance Day, November 11th, I would sometimes casually say “my dad was in the Army.” He would very quickly and firmly say, “the Air Force”. Maybe feeling a bit foolish about not knowing that detail, I hesitated to ask more questions because I worried that would have shown more of my ignorance to other obvious details. I now regret not asking Dad directly for more information, but fortunately over the years I have been able to glean some details about this meaningful time in his life.

Cribbage was an important pastime in our family, and my father never refused to play. Most games led to an opportunity for him to share a detail about how and where he learned to play – overseas, with the Tigers, adding the name of one of his squadron members who had provided a particularly good match. It may well have been over a cribbage game that I eventually learned about the Tigers.

Another clue to Dad’s time in the Air Force was a mystery newspaper clipping with a group of men in uniform. They were standing around a table of toys. The article explained how these men, stationed in England, were making toys for local children in their spare time. I had no trouble pointing out up Dad in the picture – his smile easily identifiable. This may have been the piece that clicked in my young mind that my father was involved in World War II. I did ask him about the photo, but other than acknowledging he was in the picture, he never really elaborated on it. There was no indication of when or where the clipping came from. In Dad’s final years at the veteran’s hospital, we had a copy of the picture on his memory board. When we brought home his belongings after his passing, the extra copy of the clipping came to me.

The years go on. Dad passed away in 2009. There are many occasions when I think of him. I think he would be pleased to know that I never, ever make the mistake of saying he served in anything but the Air Force. All my children have been taught and are excellent cribbage players. And I continue to admire the newspaper clipping with the photo of the men and the toys.



As a research librarian, very capable of finding and referencing most any item, it dawned on me that I should at least find out where the article was published. Sparing details, I came to discover that the R.C.A.F. had an 'official publication' called, "*Wings Abroad*," which was published weekly in London between April 22, 1942 and June 28, 1945. I tried to find copies of the newspaper and realized that the Canadian War Museum library in Ottawa seemed to have the most complete cache of the issues published. I decided to take time off work to visit the library and hoped my trip would be successful.

While waiting for the day to come, I decided to look around and lo and behold an issue of "*Wings Abroad*" happened to be up for sale on one of the secondary markets. I opted to buy it, thinking it would be a nice souvenir to have.

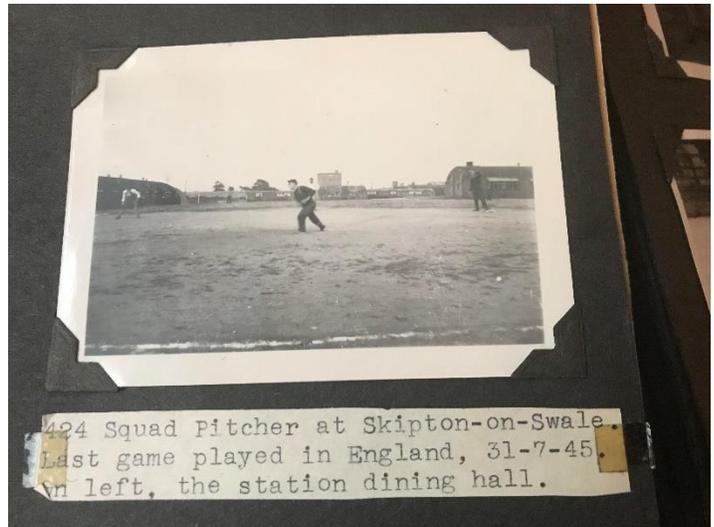
When I finally made it to Ottawa, the staff in the library was helpful and set me up with the box of newspapers. The pile consisted of large, oversized, and slightly discolored paper. To my absolute delight, I turned to the issue dated December 21, 1944, and there on page 8, was the same familiar photo and my father's smile looking right at me. I had finally found out where and when the picture had been published. I reread the details and was proud to read about my father's involvement and his title as 'instigator' of the project. This certainly was a characteristic of his I knew well.

Having travelled two hours for this adventure and having found the photo in less than an hour, I decided to spend some time looking through the pages. It was a worthwhile exercise in curiosity that was rewarded with a new detail about my Dad I had never known before. Here amongst the "*Wings Abroad*" pages were columns devoted to the happenings of the different squadrons – "Moose Squadron", "Black Bull Boys", "Beaver Base" "Lynx Squadron" and "Iroquois Squadron." The Tigers were easily spotted in a column branded, "Tiger Howls."

Throughout his life, even as a young man in high school, Dad valued newspapers for their ability to inform. He also followed editorials closely. He regularly read aloud to us bits of information he would find and always encouraging memorializing some events by submitting it to the newspaper. I knew immediately these squadron columns would have been sections Dad would have read religiously.

I decided to photocopy "*Tiger Howls*" as well. The first few had no byline, but soon they were signed off with the familiar, *L.A. Roberts*. My dad, Lyman Anderson Roberts, had been the regular contributor to these columns. He cleverly worked in the names (and nicknames) of the guys in his Squadron. He also took time to write in small details of interest, including updates on their A & B Squadron softball games. Suddenly I made the connection with Dad's love of pitching a softball to his four daughters, obviously another activity he enjoyed overseas.

I remember looking through his R.C.A.F. scrapbook recently and seeing a photo of Dad on the pitcher's mound, throwing a pitch. He had written "Last game played in England, 31-7-45'. I finally understood the unstated emotion of that simple label. My father's life changed quite a bit while overseas. He was a young, callow man who left his small farm in rural Quebec, saying goodbye to his recently widowed father. His father had died while he was away. His older siblings had begun to establish their own lives. The family farm had been sold. Through the perils of war, Dad learned much from his squadron mates and established deep bonds of friendship with them. "The last pitch" would surely have been bittersweet for him, leaving the new family he had made, to return to a country where he no longer had a place to call home.



I continued through the newspapers, copying all the articles, presuming someday to carefully read through them and look for more clues about my father's WW2 experience. When I returned from my day in the library, I felt very satisfied. Nothing could have made it more fulfilling, other than of course having my father waiting at home so I could fill him in on my find and ask him all those questions I had never asked.

To my surprise, that very day's mail included a package with the random issue of "Wings Abroad" that I had recently purchased and, quite frankly, had forgotten about. When I opened the parcel to look at the old newspaper my jaw dropped. There, in my hands, was an original issue – December 21, 1944 – the very one I had just discovered contained the article with the photo of my father in it. Out of the possible 167 issues published, I happened to unknowingly purchase the exact one that I was looking for. I could not help but think that, even though Dad has passed away years before, in some real way he had very much been with me that day. I have continued to look for issues of "Wings Abroad" but have never found another copy available for sale anywhere.



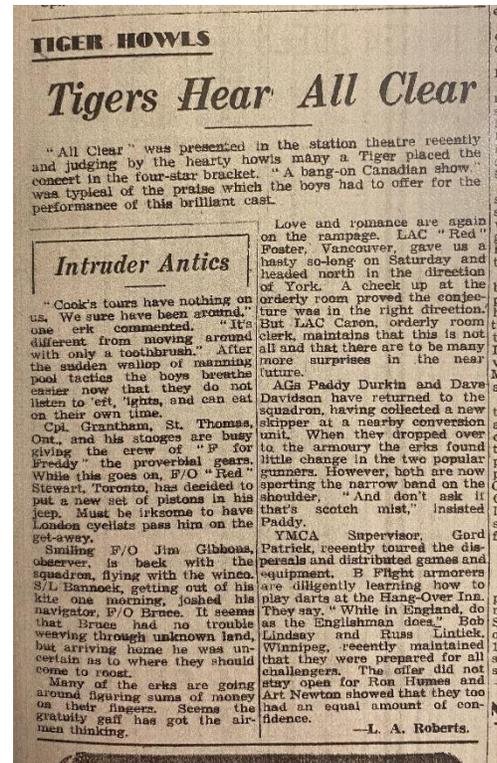
Several years have passed, and I now have the good fortune of following a Facebook group dedicated to the 424's. Vince Munro, the moderator of the group, encourages participants to post photos and share details of the Tigers. He recently contacted me about any photos I may have that might be clear enough to include in a commemorative calendar he is planning for 2022, the 80th anniversary of the squadron. I showed him Dad's photos, and he was drawn to my favorite, the one of the group of men, my father, and the toys. I was delighted to be able to tell him about the article and where it was published. I am thrilled at the thought of the photo being used, and so am telling my family about the story and the excitement of me finding where it was first published.

The consequences of my search did not end there. I pulled out my folio to look through the original issue again and reminisce with the other pages I had copied. There, in one of the columns in the September 14, 1944 issue, my father wrote about some former Tigers who had moved to another squadron but were now returning. He wrote, "AG Paddy Durkin and Dave Davidson have returned to the squadron, having collected a new skipper at a nearby conversion unit. When they dropped over in the armory the erks¹ found little change in the two popular gunners. However, both are now sporting the narrow band on the shoulder, "And don't ask if that' scotch mist," insisted Paddy." Then something clicked for me. The name Paddy Durkin. There was one more photo and memory from my father that came to me.

Many years ago, we happened upon my dad looking through his R.C.A.F. album. I stood and watched. He was studying a photo of a young man, geared up, and standing by a plane, holding its turrets. It was perhaps one of the few times Dad gave recognition to the horrors and dangers they had endured. He said, "Poor Paddy. Shortly after I snapped this photo, his plane went down, and he was missing in action. Poor ol' Paddy." I sensed a real sadness and could tell it was something I did not want him to have to endure again.

I decided to check his album. Sure enough, the details on the photo in the album of this young man who died read, "Paddy Durkin with his turret. Missing 4-11-44. Tiger Squad. RCAF ". He was the same man so affectionately welcomed back into the group in September 1944, and who would be M.I.A. November 4, 1944.

Because I was communicating with Vince about the calendar and the Facebook group, I mentioned the photo to him and said that I often wondered if anyone in Paddy's family would ever find the group, or if they would like to have a copy of this picture my dad had. Vince sent me the details of the crew that went down:



Paddy Durkin with his turret. Missing 4-11-44. Tiger Squad. RCAF.

¹Erk – an air craftsman of the lowest rank in the Royal Air Force

A.1478: Loving, L.R., Chapman, A.D., Running, G.A., Flatt, A.L., McGarrity, B., Davidson, W.G. (also mentioned in the “*Wings Abroad*”, *Tiger Howls* column as “Dave Davidson” – so Dave must have been his nickname) and of course J.P. Durkin. Listed in the Canadian Virtual War Memorial: Pilot Officer James Patrick Durkin, born 22 March 1923, Humber Bay, Ontario – died 5 November 1944, I finally knew more about Paddy.

'E' on track rest of way home. Crew brought A/C safely down at base.			
This A/C failed to return from this operation. It is presumed that the bomb load was dropped over the target. The crew and particulars are, as follows:			A.1478
		<u>Trips</u>	<u>Pts.</u>
P.	CAN.J.16130 P/O LOVING, L.R. DPO	+ 15	40 78
N.	CAN.J.24548 P/O CHAPMAN, A.D.	26	90 142
R/A	CAN.J.67797 P/O RUNNING, G.A.	27	93 149
W/G	CAN.J.09863 P/O FLATT, A.L.	24	82 123
P/R	RAP.158902 SGT MCGARRITY, B.	23	82 111
M/G	RAP.179853 P/O DAVIDSON, W.G.	29	104 156
A/G	CAN.J.68076 P/O DURKIN, J.P.	30	104 169
2300	This A/C bombed target at 1933 hrs. from 16,500 ft. heading 015, I.A.S. 155. No cloud but haze, with visibility good. Bombed on concentration of all T.I.'s, which were well grouped. At 1932 hrs. saw large explosion in target with blossom of flame followed by billowing black smoke. Very good attack. concentration of stream fair both before		A.1479

By this point in my life, I have become quite passionate about ancestor searching. Genealogy provides fulfillment in my life, and the *Ancestry* websites are my greatest tools. It dawned on me, perhaps I could rebuild a family tree for Paddy and see if he happened to have surviving descendants. Using his birth and death date, his full name, and finding his parent’s information from his military records, I plugged them into a tree.

A clue, which initially delighted me, quickly dampened my hopes. There in a Toronto cemetery, I found a tombstone that commemorated Paddy alongside his parents. His mother Catherine Gainley, died December 23, 1946, just over two years after her son’s death. I imagine the heartache she had felt, but the records seemed to indicate she died of cancer. Her added grief at the loss of her son surely made her pain unbearable. I was then stunned to see that her husband, also called Patrick – died the very next day, December 24, 1946.



I felt overwhelming sadness. I could not imagine the timeline in this family’s life. Though there was also a brother, John, listed below them on the stone, it appeared he died in 1984. There was no indication of further family. I began to prepare myself for the real possibility that there may not be any family to be found. I went back to the tree I was building and continued the hunt.

A glimmer of hope came up as I found just one tree that may contain a match to the names of Paddy’s parents. I sent a message to the family tree owner, asking if they had a relative in the Durkin family named Patrick who died in World War II. The very next day I had a reply. Indeed, there was such a person in their family, although they knew little about him. He would have been their great uncle, or brother of their grandfather. I explained the photo in my father’s books (although, in fact there were 3 photos of Paddy in the book) and offered to share them. I sent a copy of the article I had also found that mentioned him in “*Wings Abroad.*” They in turn sent me a small article they had about the family. Here are the details of that article:

The Durkin Family, by W.J. Moher

"P.O. James Patrick Durkin, missing over Germany, presumed to have died Nov. 4th, 1944, in his 21st year."

And that is the last official news ever received of the eldest boy of the family. One of his officers wrote later to tell of Jimmie openly expressing to his superior officers his disgust with the language used by them on a few occasions. And, as is generally the case, his criticism raised him greatly in their esteem, and they apologized. That is just one instance to show you the type of boy Jimmie was. But we, his acquaintances, were aware of this long before he enlisted. Jimmie was, like every member of his family, a real Christian. He thought clean; he talked clean. He believed in the Four Freedoms; and UNLIKE an aggregation of hate-peddling disturbers that refused to have anything to do directly or indirectly with the fight for those Freedoms and are now crying to high heaven to participate in the same, he didn't hide behind anyone else, but did his own fighting, and gave his life.

As I said, no further news was ever received; and the boy's good Mother failed little by little every day until the Monday before Christmas she passed away. As though this were not sufficient disaster at any time but especially at Christmas, the father, an active man in apparent good health, dropped dead the next day, leaving a boy of twenty, a girl fifteen, and another boy fourteen. For two years Paddy Durkin had tried to carry the load; had hidden his own suffering, had taken upon himself the suffering of his visibly failing wife, till at last his big heart burst with grief, and he went with her.

But they leave their two children in care of a MAN – twenty-year-old John Durkin. I worked with him for two years, alone with him on thirteen-hour night shifts, so I know him. There never was, couldn't be a cleaner spoken, cleaner thinking, squarer dealing, good-hearted, refined boy than Johnny. Humorous, witty, full of music, a fine hockey player, and every inch of him game to the core, just like his brother Jimmie. He was brought up to fear nothing but evil, to live up fearlessly to his own religious beliefs, to mind his own business and to respect his neighbour's nationality, racial origin, color, religious and political rights. And Johnny, Good Bless him, has enough of the Old Country to his veins to make sure that nobody infringes on his rights.

The concluding sentence will tell you more than if I were to write fifteen columns. I stood with Johnny beside the two coffins and remarked about the tragic Christmas for the three left alone. "Yes," said he, "It's a sad Christmas for us; but I know Dad and Mom are having the happiest Christmas ever."

I immediately understood why Dad would have liked Paddy so much. They would have had similar values and integrity. They certainly would have been friends.

My heart warmed when his family responded to the photos I had sent saying, "You have made our entire year with this message! Thank you so much for reaching out." I was delighted when I heard that they were planning to take the photos and information I sent them to surprise and share with Paddy's namesake and nephew. Their response to me, equally made my entire year too!

All the details that lead to this moment could have at any point been overlooked, possible derailing the outcome. Now that it has come to fruition, I think back to that day when I saw the sadness in my Dad's eyes as he looked at Paddy's photo. He surely could never have imagined how his efforts in taking, preserving, and recording the information about Paddy would have one day turn out this way. I think of the weight on Paddy's young brother's shoulders, at age 20, now responsible for his two younger siblings, finding consolation at the thought of his parents and brother reunited, happy together at Christmas.

I had to share my story with you. I feel like Dad carried this message for a reason. Today he has a bit more peace, finally bringing Paddy home to his family.

- R.C. Roberts for L.A. Roberts, February 19, 2021



Above, two more photos from Lyman's scrapbook – Paddy with Wilfrid, the Squadron do;, and Lyman, often referring to himself as 'Yours truly' on his way back to England from North Africa.