

The Last Flight of "W" Willie

Bob Shank

On the night of January 5, 1944, a routine Training flight over England by ten bombers of 431 Squadron of the RCAF ended in tragedy for the crew of 'W; Willie when the plane crashed while attempting to land. This is the story of what happened on that foggy, windy night over the Yorkshire moors.

Training flights were an ongoing necessity for operational squadrons, especially for the newer crews. Since most of their flying was to be night time raids on targets in Europe, training was done at night. On January 4, nine aircraft had participated in night cross country training and bombing flights without incident. Since no operational activities were scheduled for January 5, ten aircraft were sent out on cross-country exercises that night.

Practice bombing at the Strensall bombing range was part of the exercise. The weather at Croft, home base of 431 Squadron at 18:00 hours was described as "10/10ths cloud at 1100'. Continuous slight drizzle. Visibility 7 miles". The Squadron Commander was informed that "at time of return there will be large amounts of cloud at 1000-1500'. Visibility unlikely to be worse than 4-5 miles. Cloud probably about 6000'. Another forecast called for winds of 40 m.p.h. from the west at 2000".

The crew consisted of :

Pilot	Flight Sergeant H. P. Morrison (25)
Navigator	Flying Officer G. A. W. Shank (29)
Bomb Aimer	Flight Sergeant A. L. Schoenthaler (21)
Wireless Operator	Sergeant E. S. Barlow (20)
Mid-upper Gunner	Sergeant G. A. Lamontagne (29)
Flight Engineer	Sergeant K. H. Greenwood.
Rear Gunner	Sergeant J. R. Bothwell did not go on the trip

Albert Shank was born in Markham, on June 11, 1915, eldest child of Eli Byer Shank and Berna May Williamson. He attended Markham Public and High Schools. After graduation, there being no work to be had around Markham because of the 'Depression', Albert headed north. He found work underground at Sudbury with the International Nickel Co. of Canada in their Creighton Mine. Later he moved to the Sylvanite Gold Mine at Kirkland Lake and left there when the miner's union went on strike in 1941. He joined the RCAF at North Bay on November 14, 1941 and was sent to Manning Depot in Toronto. After training as a Navigator, he was awarded an Observer's Wing and commissioned as a Pilot Officer on October 23, 1942. Embarkation leave was followed by sailing to England and appointment to a training pool.

He was promoted to Flying Officer on April 23, 1943 and continued training until October 5, 1943 when he went to 1659 Conversion Unit at Topcliffe, Yorkshire for pre-operational training on heavy Bombers. Posting to 431 Squadron at Croft, near Leeming in Yorkshire, followed on November 29, 1943.



As 'W' Willie returned for landing the wind picked up and the plane was buffeted unmercilessly. Morrison, the pilot, was having difficulty locating identifiable ground location marks; he was in and out of the low-lying clouds. He changed the pitch setting on the propellers when he needed power to keep from falling too quickly. He might have heard the pilot ahead of him in the landing mode report strong turbulence, but by now 'W' Willie was caught in such strong turbulence that it would probably be called wind shear today. Morrison flew north by Middleton St. George, then turned to his left and headed south in the direction of his home base at Croft. He turned on

his navigation lights, all the while fighting the controls.

Suddenly the plane lurched, rolled over on its back and plunged into the ground. There was a flash that lit up the sky. The burning wreckage was strewn over a radius of 400 yards on Rutter's Farm, one quarter mile north of Long Newton and one mile north of Middleton St. George Aerodrome. Immediately after the crash a tender from Middleton St. George Aerodrome rushed to the site and proceeded to fight the fires. A witness reported that he saw one body about 100 feet from the main part of the wreckage and it was burning.

The funeral for the crew members was held at 10:30 a.m. on January 11, 1944 at the Royal Air Force Cemetery called Stonefall Cemetery, Harrogate, Yorkshire. Flight Lieutenant Father McMann officiated. Albert's brother, Oscar Shank, who was Station Signals Officer for the Snowy Owl and Allouette Squadrons stationed at Tholthorpe, Yorkshire, attended the funeral. On January 9 he wrote to his mother back in Markham and told what he could about the accident and about the plane rolling over on its back before crashing. He did not tell her that Albert had confided to him once when they were on leave together that he knew he would not survive the war.

A few years after the war, when I was a teenager playing baseball in Markham, I had a coach named Doug James who had been a mechanic on the same base with 431 squadron in No. 6 Bomber Group. When I asked him what had caused the crash, he said that a wing had fallen off 'W' Willie when it hit turbulence causing it to roll on its back.

According to the 'History of the RCAF', the Halifax V was not a stable aircraft. Reports stated that when a pilot took strong evasive action to avoid anti-aircraft fire, search

lights, or enemy night fighters, parts tended to fall off. The Mark V did not have a good reputation.

Some information is contained in the website <http://www.accessweb.com/users/mconstab/halifax.htm>

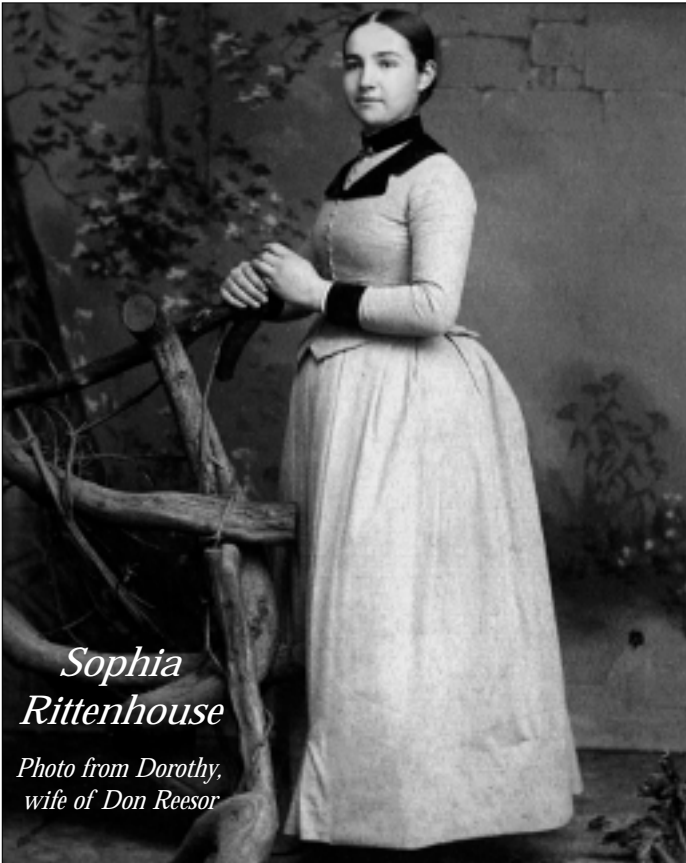
It might be of interest to note that Albert was killed about 55 miles from the farm where his great grandparents, John and Hannah Williamson lived up to 1837 and is buried only 30 miles from the same farm. Even the name of the aircraft 'W' Willie, has some meaning to the Williamson name.

Sophia Rittenhouse

Born July 16, 1867, died May 18, 1924

Sophia was born at Jordan, Ontario, one of four sisters and two brothers who married into Markham area Reesor families. Sophia married David N. Reesor, grandfather of Don Reesor in 1893. D. N. Reesor and his brother Alvin built and operated Reesor's Marmill by the train station (ceased operation in 1995 and now Olde Markham Village community). D.N. in later years lived at 354 Main Street, Mount Joy. This photo was taken in St. Catharines about 1890 before Sophia was married. This is a fine example of a conservative but stylish dress of the era.

Just to show the connections to the Historical Society, sister Emma married Isaac Reesor and is Murray Reesor's grandmother. Sister Naomi married Jacob Reesor and is Ivan Reesor's grandmother. Sister Lizzie married Albert Reesor. Brother Aaron married Ada Reesor (Carol Smith's grandparents). Brother Abraham married Esther Diller. Esther is a great aunt of Dorothy (Murray) Reesor.



*Sophia
Rittenhouse*

*Photo from Dorothy,
wife of Don Reesor*

Sundial Mystery

Does anyone know the story of Markham's other Sundial at Milne Pond or when this photo was taken?



Host family needed

The Town has had a request for assistance in locating a host family for a young couple from Nordlingen who wish to spend some time learning English and becoming familiar with Canadian ways beginning this fall. The male will be working for the Town and the female has experience working with seniors. The location must be within walking distance of Markham transit. A reasonable independent living setting would be best. The time period may be from three to 12 months. An ideal arrangement might be living in a senior's home with a reduced rent for services rendered.

This couple know some English and are anxious to improve. They do not want to live with a German family. Anyone knowing of a possible host situation is asked to contact Lorne Smith at 905-640-3906.

Memorial Stone Mystery

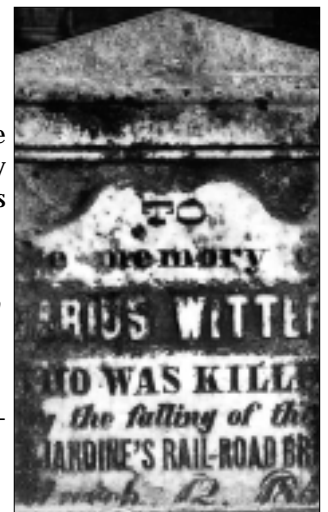
When the stones were raised in Quantztown Cemetery an interesting mystery was unearthed. This stone reads:

*To the Memory of Darius Witter
who was killed by the falling of the
Desjardine's Rail-Road Bridge,*

March 12, 1857

Where is Desjardine's Rail-Road Bridge?

Anyone have any clues?



2001 MEMBERSHIPS NOW DUE

If you have not already paid your 2001 membership you are encouraged to fill out the enclosed renewal form and send it in with your cheque

Markham Museum News

Family Weekends

Back for another season of family fun, the Museum is offering programmes on selected weekends throughout the winter.

On **February 10 and 11**, you're invited to come out and make your sweetheart a **Victorian Valentine**.

Throughout **March and April**, visitors on weekends will be treated to **Egyptian activities and crafts**. These are offered in conjunction with our temporary exhibit, *Egypt, Gift of the Nile*.

These activities are free with Museum admission and run Saturdays from 11 to 4 and Sundays from 1 to 4. A reminder that children must be accompanied by an adult to participate.

Heritage Day Sunday, February 18th

July 2001 marks our 30th anniversary. To kick off the celebration, we invite you to join us February 18th from 1 to 4 p.m. for our annual Heritage Day Open House. Find out what we've been up to for the past 30 years and get a behind the scenes look at how Markham's past is being preserved.

Stroll through the village, check out the blacksmith shop, sample historic recipes in the Maxwell Log Cabin, and try your hand at 19th century crafts, activities and more. We'll even have some birthday cake! Parking and admission are FREE!

March Break Madness

March 12 to 16

March Break is just around the corner and we're busy planning a number of activities guaranteed to be fun, and educational, for one and all!

This year's theme is EGYPT! We'll have crafts, activities and more that will have you walking like an Egyptian when you leave!

Special give-aways and other bonuses are also planned!

Admission to March Break Madness is \$4 per person, per day, ages 3 and older and children must be accompanied by an adult. Museum members are free. Pre-registration is not required. Parking is free.

Egypt, Gift of the Nile

We've planned a number of activities to support our temporary exhibit, *Egypt, Gift of the Nile*.

For our younger audience, we have March Break Madness and Family weekends in March and April. For the adults, how about a Saturday afternoon lecture series at Markham Museum? Starting February 24th, we'll be offering a series of 5 lectures to complement the exhibit.

February 24th, Amy Barron will lead us on an **Introduction to Egyptian archaeology**.

Deirdre Keleher will present **Family Life** on March 10th.

Caroline Rocheleau, just back from a dig in the Sudan, presents **The Art of Ancient Egypt** on March 24th.

Alwyn Burrige brings **Death and Funerary Rites** to life on March 31st.

Our series concludes on April 21st with Amy Barron's return and **The Pyramids**.

Each lecture is \$8 (\$6 for Museum members) and the series of 5 can be purchased for \$35 (\$25 for Museum members). The price includes admission to the lecture and refreshments only. Start time is 1 p.m. in the Ninth Line Baptist Church, pre-registration is recommended. To register, call Tracy: (905) 294-4576.

Curator Seeks Assistance

As part of the exhibit "Faces & Places from Markham's History" the Museum is recreating a corner of a kitchen at two different time periods: the early 1950s and the mid 1970s. The Museum's collection does not have many "artifacts" of such recent vintage. If you have any small kitchen appliances, accessories or food packaging dating to these periods, which you would be willing to loan to the Museum for 5 years, please contact Elizabeth Hunter at (905) 294-4576.

Coming Soon . . .

Thursday, May 10th: Our annual **York Region Heritage Fair**.

Sunday, May 13th: 1:30 p.m.: **Mother's Day Tea**
Pre-registration is required.

Sunday, June 24th: 12 to 4: **2nd Annual Ice Cream Social**.

July 9th to 13th and August 21st to 25th: **Village Dayz** a week of activities for children 7 to 12 years old. Pre-registration is required.