

Ode to an Englishman

by Lorraine Denise Vickerman

432 Squadron - LW582, QO-M

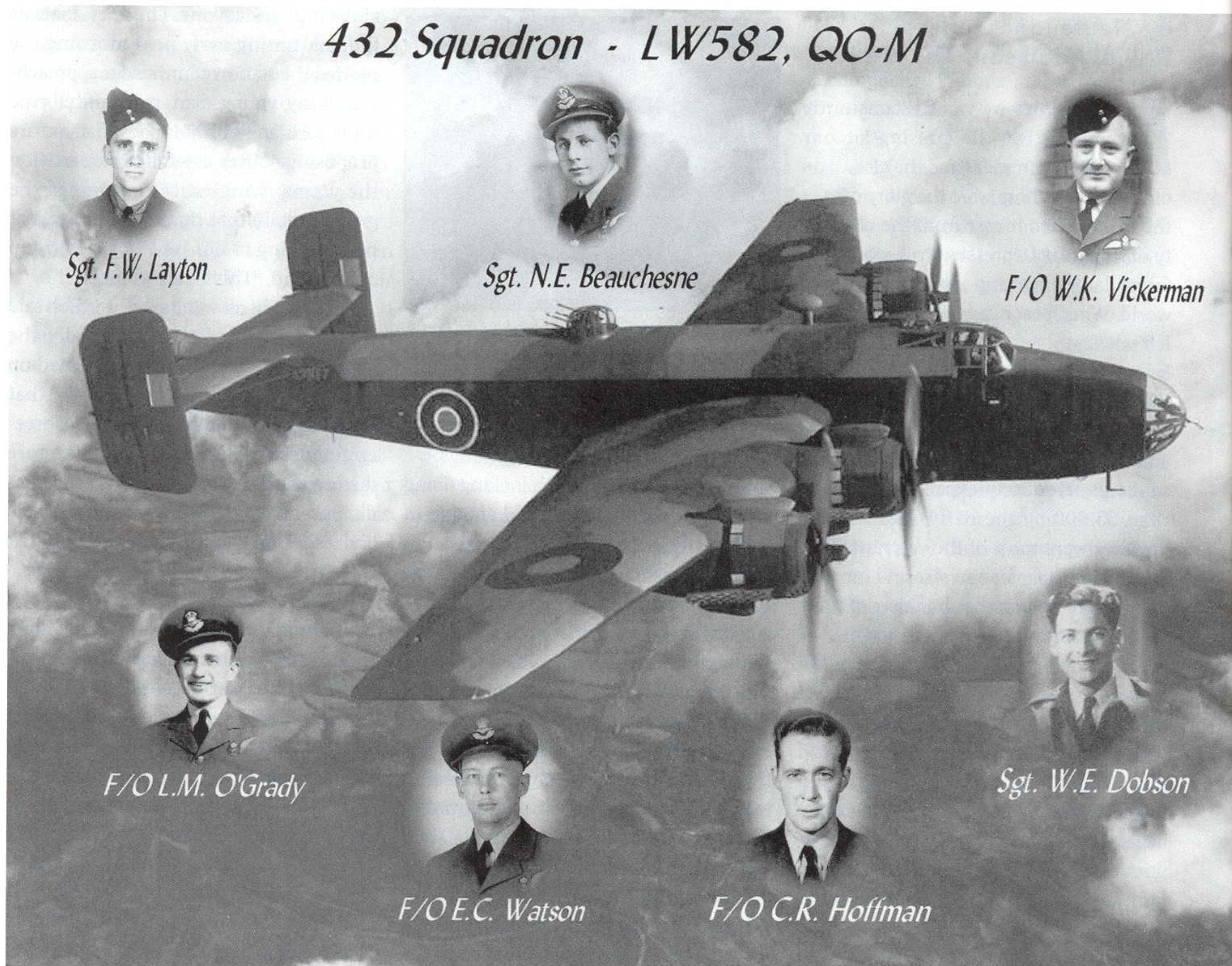


Photo montage of F/O Bill Vickerman's Halifax bomber crew in 1944. Sergeant Fred Layton of Winnipeg, the tail gunner, would die on June 7th 1944 when LW 582 "Pistol Packin' Mama" was shot down near Bauvais, France. The rest of the crew escaped.

Life is like a baseball game; lots of curve balls, change-ups, double plays, triple plays and strike-outs. If we are lucky perhaps it's a base hit or a walk. And for the rare few, if we are really lucky or exceptionally skilled, we manage a home run. This past year I managed a home run and it had little to do with skill!

It started with a phone call that Saturday in Jan 2004. I just happened to be nearest the phone, so answered it and immediately had to sit down. I knew instantly who the man with the English accent was on the other end. He was my Dad's flight engineer. Dad had been a bomber pilot back

in 1944 and his career in the Halifax IIIs had ended abruptly in the early morning darkness of June 8th 1944. The bomber he was flying, dubbed "Pistol Packin' Mama" had been hit by a German Ju-88 and crashed in Normandy. The rear gunner was killed and the remaining six crew members survived the war (please see *Airforce*, summer 2004).

Dad (F/O Bill Vickerman) died when he was 54 and missed what so many surviving veterans did following retirement. He never had the opportunity to search out his crew. I had taken on the task and so far none of his crew were still alive – except perhaps one. With a lot of digging, I realized Dad's

flight engineer was in all likelihood an Englishman. Apparently it was common practice to match up RAF flight engineers with Canadian crews, as training for flight engineers was done in England, not Canada. And in 1944 they couldn't get bomber crews trained and into the air fast enough.

National Archives information mostly listed Dad's RCAF crew members but one page mentioned the Englishman. And a 1993 article in *Airforce* magazine had mentioned Dad's crew in relation to the bomber they had been flying when shot down. Again, the Englishman was listed but information indicated he had perished that night along with the rear gunner. The mysterious man's name was RAF Sgt Walter E. Dobson.

The first time it hit me that Sgt Dobson was still alive was after doing an internet name search. I happened upon a technical school website in England where teenagers put up their stories. Each year a local RAF veteran by the last name of Dobson visited the school and told the class about his wartime experiences. From the kids stories I gleaned this Dobson had been with an all-Canadian crew as the flight engineer and his Halifax was shot down in the wee hours of June 8th 1944. He and the wireless air gunner (WAG) hid with the French for three months. Everything matched!

The school's website did not respond to my many requests, and with no more luck, my search ground to a halt. Finally, it was Jack O'Grady, the nephew of Dad's WAG, who confirmed there was indeed a crew member by the name of Walter Dobson and he believed the man was still alive in England. Jack wrote Walter with my phone number... the rest is history.

That first phone call last year, Walter and I talked for two hours. So many phone calls and letters followed. We were both just over the moon! He thought the Canadians had forgotten him. At first we planned for Walter and his wife Joan to come to Canada. Walter desperately wanted to see our country again. He had trained in Calgary under the RAF for two years back in 1942. He described it as two miserable years; nothing to do with the Canadians but the RAF had treated its own men poorly. All he really saw was the training base and Calgary. Even the Rocky Mountains, always on the distant horizon, had eluded him.

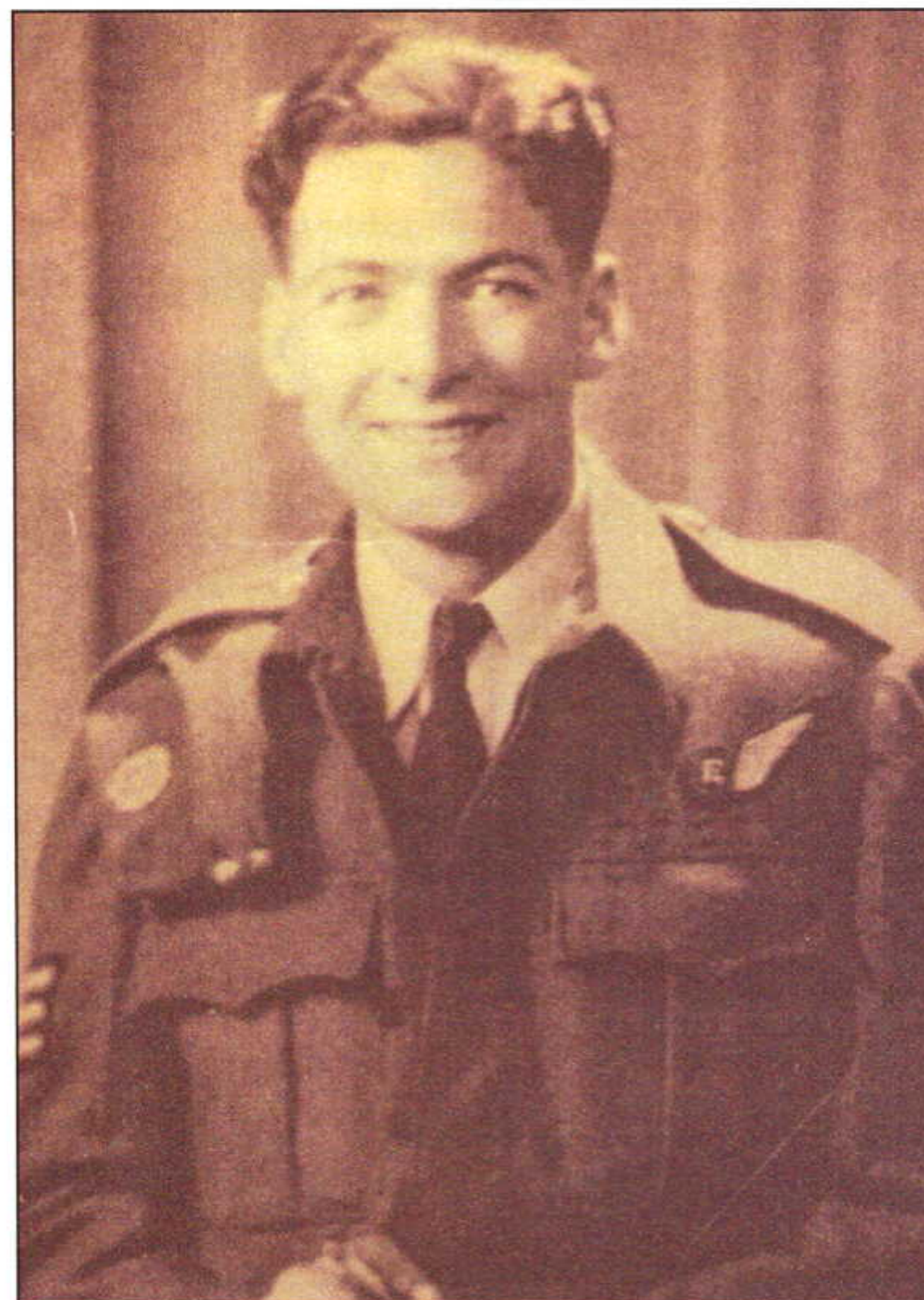
But Walter was not well enough to make the trip, so I packed my bags and on a cold day in late Oct 2004, headed for England for the second time in two years. In all honesty, I had reservations about how

things would go. What if we didn't get along? It was one thing to talk and write to each other, but I would be staying with these people for the better part of three weeks. This time I didn't have my daughter or husband to buffer my often too basic, loquacious persona. Please God, no high teas!

We had a blast! From the moment the burly 83-year-old, with the mass of grey hair, and his English bride met me at the Ramsgate Station, until the day three weeks later, when I watched their images fade into the distance as the train pulled away for London, we celebrated. We cherished every moment! Walter's health didn't allow him any serious "touristing," so most of our days were spent in the sunroom and living room of the Dobson bungalow.

By the way, to those who knew him best, he was "Peter." The French called him Edward (which was on his false ID when he hid with the Underground). To Dad he was always "Dobbie." But to me he was "Walter."

On my second evening with the Dobsons, we went to an RAF Regiment dinner. I was introduced as 'The Skipper's Daughter' and that name seems to have stuck. It quickly became routine at the Dobson household for me to wake up and find a cup of tea on the bedside table in the guest room. Then that voice would boom from the main bedroom and orders were to come round and visit.



Sergeant Walter Dobson in RAF flight engineer's uniform, 1944.



Walter Dobson in
Oct 2004

Walter and Joan would sip their tea in bed and I would sit with mine in the chair of honour.

I made Walter tell me over and over again every little tidbit he could recall of the time he and Dad flew. They had some close calls in training at the Heavy Conversion Unit at Wombledon, Yorkshire. One day on take-off, the Halifax in front of them crashed and they witnessed the death of that rear gunner. Another day they were up in a well-used Halifax and could not get the bomber up over 400 feet. He talked about each crew member and their unique personalities. It still boggles my mind to think of how young these airmen were.

I learned the facts about England during its darkest hours. Walter talked matter-of-factly about the

Lorraine Vickerman,
centre, is flanked by
Walter and Joan
Dobson at their home
in Ramsgate.



terrible losses the English people incurred. Some 60,000 English men and women died when *Luftwaffe* bombs fell on England. Walter said the roof of his house had been blown off when a bomb dropped nearby, killing seven people. His mother and two younger brothers were evacuated to the country. And so many of his school chums were killed or injured in the fighting.

He talked about the time he and Mike O'Grady had spent with the French Valois family, in hiding, after the Halifax crashed. O'Grady was a bit of a character and built a catapult in his boredom (to try and nail pigeons!). On their last day in hiding they spent nine hours up a tree watching the Germans retreat. Walter laughed as he remembered whispering to Mike, "I have to pee." And Mike saying, "Don't pee... the steam will give us away!"

When he finally made it back to England, Walter was so weak he needed hospitalization. But 23-year-old men have incredible rebound capacity and soon he was on his feet again. His career was briefly on hold for a month when the powers-that-be tossed him in the brig for partying too hard! Then he was back on-track, this time flying in Lancasters as the flight engineer. His 6½ years of voluntary service with the RAF ended in May 1946. He returned to his job as a plumber, finally retiring at age 69.

I was with Walter and Joan on Remembrance Day 2004. He wasn't well enough to attend the ceremonies so we toasted each of the members of the crew at home and watched services on TV. The English honour their warriors, alive and dead, from Remembrance Day through to the following Sunday, which is referred to as Remembrance Sunday.

The evening of Remembrance Sunday, I was back in London for the flight out of Heathrow the next day. I will always remember the London Remembrance ceremony conducted in Whitehall, attended by the Queen. During the respectful silence for the dead, thousands of poppy petals fell from the ceiling, covering the ground and heads of everyone below in a sea of red.

Since coming home last November seldom a week went by that Walter and I didn't talk. We became such dear friends and had so many laughs. Plumbers and nurses have a lot more in common than people might think! This spring Walter and Joan enjoyed the daffodils and crocuses I planted in their garden last fall. We all quietly knew my precious Englishman would not be with us long. We said our goodbyes Friday, July 29th, 2005. Walter went home to God July 31st, 2005.



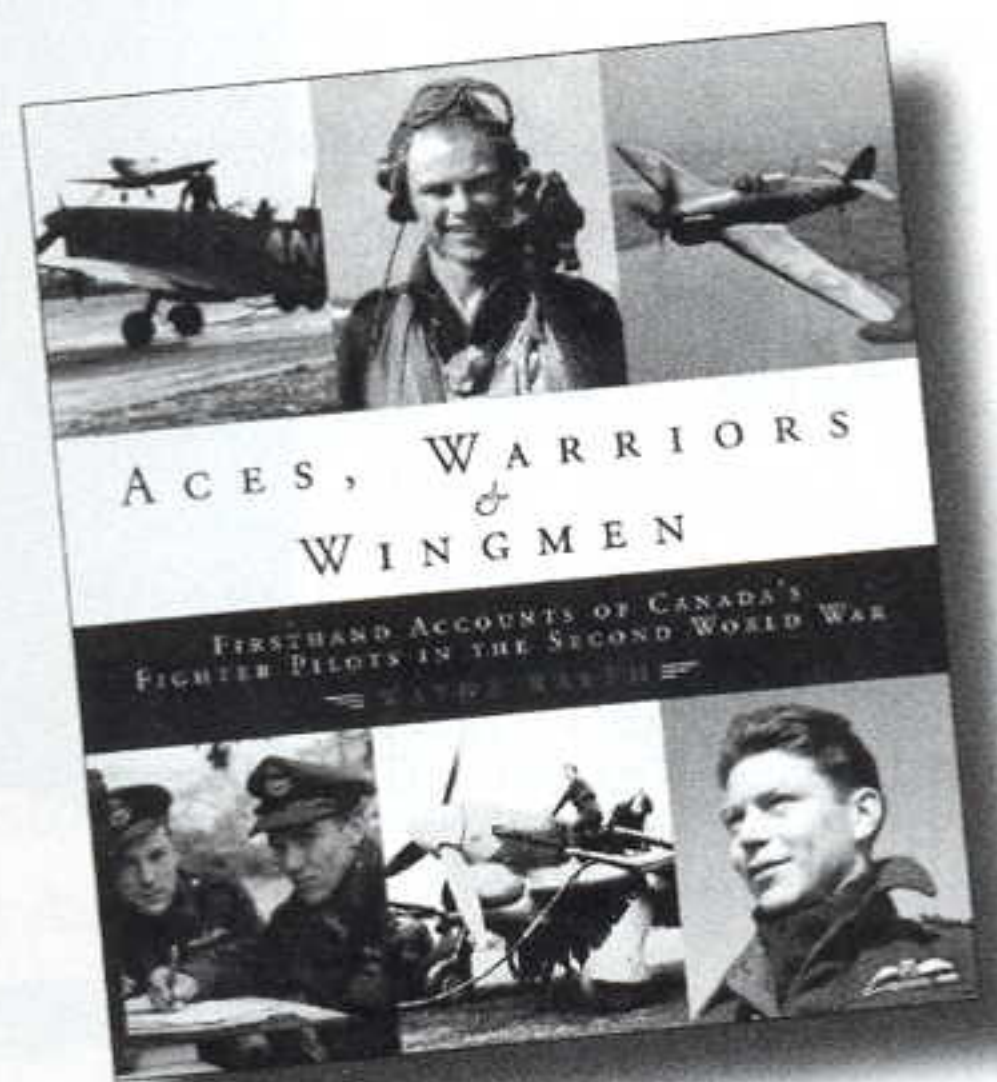
Walter Dobson drives a miniature steam train built from scratch by his eldest son Joe at his home in Peterborough, England.

He never got the chance to see our Rockies. He so badly wanted to come back to Canada and meet all the family members of Dad's crew I had told him about. But mostly Walter wanted to raise a glass with the Canadian RCAFers still alive from that time; to say his thanks and to honour them. He was overwhelmed that we had not forgotten him.

So, from the skipper's daughter, to all of the RCAF airmen of WW II still with us, I am to thank you on behalf of the late Peter Walter Edward "Dobbie" Dobson. Thank you for leaving the safety of Canada and your families as innocent young men to cross the Atlantic and climb into those war planes. Thank you for fighting and dying for England and for freedom. As Winston Churchill so clearly defined it "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." ☺

(Ed note: Lorraine Vickerman of Richmond, BC is a freelance writer. She is a member of the Air Force Association of Canada.)

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