

What's in a Name?
The Story of the Crew of Ventura 2159,
No. 145(BR) Squadron (Bomber Reconnaissance)

By Gerry Madigan

Disclaimer

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author cultivated in the freedom of expression and of an academic environment.

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Part 1 – What was lost, now is found

“Keith!”

“Sir”

“Do you or do you not have an e-mail address?”

“Of course I do, sir. I’ve always had one.”

“Well you better come over here and show me because I’ve spent the better part of an hour searching for your name!”

This was the gist of a conversation that I had with a colleague during one of my final years in the military. I was in the midst of setting up a new team and trying to organize some files to be passed around to the staff for their work. Keith Stuart was my point man for one of my key sub-sections.

Keith was flummoxed by my persistent question and frustration as much as I was confounded by his “missing name”. He pointed out “Major Madigan my last name is spelled “S-T-U-A-R-T not S-T-E-W-A-R-T!” Little did I know that appellation would come around once again to confound and foil my attempts in resolving the story of the “*Mystery on the Lake*”! But this little incident was invaluable. I learned that people make mistakes, there are barriers of miscommunication, and that records are imperfect!

For those who have not followed the serialized story “*Mystery on the Lake*”, a Ventura Bomber had a forced landing on Archibald Big Lake on 4 March 1944. Much of the story came from news accounts both before and after the event.

I was recently working on another project pertaining to the Ventura bomber in the follow up to this story. I needed some information on Operational Unit 34 at Pennnfield New Brunswick to finish it off. Major Mathias Joost, Operational Records Team, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Canadian Armed Forces generously assisted me. But he had another surprise in store for me. He inquired if I was interested in a crash record that he had on a “Stuart” Lake, NS.

Major Joost knew from prior correspondence that I was on the lookout for anything related to the crash on Big Archibald Lake. He had a crash record for an incident on 4 March 1944 but at Stuart Lake, NS. It was just too much of a coincidence.

It turns out that this record is the lost record for the crash on Archibald Big Lake! They are one and the same the crash. What may have caused some obfuscation was the spelling of Stuart Lake on the official crash record.¹

The place of the record was spelt as Stuart Lake whereas the spelling of the name in Country Harbour Mine was “Stewart” Lake. We know from the story to now that there was also some confusion given on the crash site. Three possible locations were cited in “*Mystery on the Lake*”. It would seem that the different spelling in the official record only added to the mystery.

But was it the same Stewart Lake? In fact there are at least three Stewart or Stuart Lakes that can be found in the Nova Scotia Atlas. Surprisingly a second Stewart Lake is located near the borders of the Antigonish, Pictou, Guysborough County Lines at Cross Roads Ohio, Antigonish County. A Stuarts Lake, similar to the name on the crash card, does exist and is found near Port Mouton and Kejimikujik National Park.

There may be some doubt from the confusion in the records that this air crash record is for the one and the same event! Remember that there were over 300 air crashes in Nova Scotia alone during the Second World War. The record could have easily been related to another event!

The spelling of the name of the lake and the information contained in the air crash record was ephemeral. It did not readily lend to narrowing down the crash to Archibald Big Lake. But the additional information from the operational records provided by Major Joost and eye witness accounts on the ground do corroborate this record as the account of the events of 4 March 1944!

The air crash records identifies Ventura GRV Serial 2159 from No. 145(BR) Squadron returning from an operational patrol forced landed on Stuart Lake on 4 March 1944 at 1750hrs GMT or 1:50 PM Atlantic Standard time. Ventura 2159 suffered a Category B crash that signified considerable damage had been sustained. Category B meant that the aircraft would have been transported – not flown under its own power – to a contractor or depot facility for repair. This would have been hard to do in the case of Archibald Big Lake. The contractor had to come to them!

The purpose of the flight was an operational patrol. A court of Inquiry determined “With fuel running low, or *used entirely*, (the) aircraft attempted to land on ice and snow covered lake and ground looped.” This is consistent with the account given in “*Mystery on the Lake*”.

The Court added “the crew was lost and no gas”. It also identified secondary and contributing factor as “Wheels up landing” but that was subsequently stricken from the record for that wasn’t the case at all.

The Ventura 2159’s wheels were observed to be down by those on the ground well before its approach to Archibald Big Lake. The gear must have collapsed at some point after the landing either by damage in contact with the trees as observed by eye witness account or by ground looping at the far end of the lake.

The crash record identified four personnel aboard the aircraft, again consistent with the story told so far. The personnel on board were Warrant Officer (WO2) J.C. Tanner – Pilot, Warrant Officer (WO1) A.W.G. Edgley – Navigator, and two wireless air gunners Pilot Officer (P/O) W.A. Harris and Warrant Officer (WO2) A. McMichael. All were reported as uninjured. What was inconsistent was the fact that there was no Frank Newman, the assumed aircraft captain, on board!

Dartmouth was listed as the unit of origin and that is consistent as well. It seems odd then that “Frank Newman” was named in the news accounts. He was not listed on the crash record nor was he listed on the operational staff list for No. 145(BR) Squadron at Dartmouth in March 1944.

The “Newman” name again places some doubt about the veracity of the found record. But there was a Flying Officer (F/O) Nelson who also was an aircraft captain in search of Tanner and Ventura 2159. It is possible that Nelson may have been the liaison between the RCAF and the newspapers. It is also possible then that the newspapers simply got the name wrong. But other evidence from the official records serve to remove all doubt concerning the Ventura 2159 record.

What we do know now was that WO2 Tanner was an experienced pilot in command of Ventura 2159. He had some 563 total flying hours broken down as 300 solo and 263 dual, with 38 hours solo and 36 hours dual or 74 hours in total on the Ventura airframe. His training included instrument and night flying which he amounted to 28 and 50 hours respectively. His profile was the norm for the day. Tanner was both a proficient and an experienced pilot.

Tanner’s Lockheed Ventura was a Mark V with Canadian Serial Number 2159. It was assigned to No. 145(BR) Squadron, Dartmouth Nova Scotia. It was taken on strength 30 April 1943 from ex-US Naval stocks whose original serial was USN 33148 again confirming Dartmouth as the unit of origin in the case of the forced landing of Ventura 2159.ⁱⁱ

The USN relationship too is consistent with the evidence found by Robert Walsh and his team in 2000. The aircraft was most likely painted in Canadian colours. The wing was on the surface of the frozen Archibald Big Lake in March 1944, sunk in its waters that spring, and rested there for over 56 years. The lightly painted Canadian colours simply wore off over time and the more durable enameled USN markings came to show and was found instead. This explains the USN marking found so many years later by Robert Walsh and his team.

ACCIDENT CLASSIFICATION													
UNIT 145 Sqn		COM. E		PLACE Stuart Lake				DATE 4-3-44		TIME 1750 GMT			
A/C TYPE VENTURA GRV		No. 2159		CRASH CAT. "B"		H.Q. FILE 1100-21-59		S.E.		M.E. x		DAY NIGHT x	
PERSONNEL		RANK	NUMBER	DUTY	INJURIES			SIGNAL		NO.		DATE	
TANNER, J.C.		WO 2	R71261	P	Uninj.			A.744		4-3-			
EDGLEY, A.W.G.		WO1	R55664	NAV	Uninj.			D 14 (REVISED)					
HARRIS, W.A.		P/O	J38953	WOAG	Uninj.			NO. 1		CHECKED			
MCMICHAEL, A.		WO2	F82948	WOAG	Uninj.			#1					
ENGINE		ENGINE NUMBER(S)		HOURS FLOWN BY PILOTS									
Pratt & Whitney		5538/7005		INST.	NIGHT	ON TYPE		TOTAL					
Double Wasp		5537/7050				SOLO	DUAL	SOLO	DUAL				
R2800-31				28	50	38	36	300	263				
ACCIDENT CLASSIFICATION													

From Files of "Operational Records Team, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Canadian Armed Forces". GMT – Greenwich Mean Time is 4 hours ahead of AST – Atlantic Standard Time.

No. 145 (BR) Squadron and the Evidence of the Operational Records

We now know the history associated with Ventura 2159. In the winter and spring of 1944 No. 145(BR) Squadron was located at Dartmouth, NS. The crew state for No. 145(BR) Squadron states that it was staffed with 21 Pilots, 21 Navigators, and 40 Wireless Air Gunners (WAG). Also listed were one spare pilot, 2 spare navigators and 3 spare wireless air gunners. There was no Frank Newman found anywhere on the operational staff list.ⁱⁱⁱ

No. 145(BR) Squadron's Operations Records were available for the period 1 to 7 March 1944. There were no flying operations on 1 March 1944 due to poor weather conditions. We see the first actions commencing 2 March. Ventura 2159 was assigned to WO2 Tanner who is listed as its "Aircraft Captain".

Tanner had an early morning start that day, taking off at 1025 GMT GMT (6:25AM AST) only to return some hours later at 1700 hrs GMT (1PM AST). His mission was a regular anti-submarine sweep lasting approximately 6-1/2 hrs duration. The unit remarks that he completed the usual patrol and that nothing was sighted.

Tanner rested on 3 March 1944. He was then assigned a convoy coverage patrol on 4 March 1944. Tanner took off around 0910 hrs GMT (5:10 AM AST) hours. His return time was listed as 1750 hrs GMT (1:50 PM AST). Ventura 2159 was 8 hours and 40 minutes in duration. This time Tanner's trip was not so uneventful. The Operations Log

listed him as crashed and missing. This time places Ventura 2159 in the area of Obie Fenton's farm roughly at the right time of day recalled by Obie's daughters.

We have no clear indication if Tanner in Ventura 2159 had encountered any difficulties at any point while over his convoy coverage patrol. We know from prior sources that he was in radio communication with his **headquarters**. Tanner reported that he had engine problems at some point after leaving his convoy patrol.

Tanner's radio transmission probably occurred at the end of his mission, long after he departed the coverage zone, and once he was over the Nova Scotia coast line. Tanner would not have jeopardized or endangered the convoy by radioing his dispositions while in position over the convoy. He would have waited until the convoy was safely out of his way and when he was able to do so.

Dartmouth knew that Ventura 2159 was experiencing difficulty. Ventura 2171 was diverted to investigate. F/O Nelson's in Ventura 2171 was ordered and diverted from his own mission to search for Tanner and the crew of Ventura 2159. Nelson was already on station somewhere over the Atlantic and most likely closest at hand to the distressed aircraft.

Nelson departed Dartmouth 0850hrs GMT (4:50 AM) some minutes prior to Tanner's own take off. They were most likely tasked to the same convoy coverage duty. F/O Nelson duty listed in the unit operation log 4 March 1944 was typed "carried out search for missing aircraft." The operational report was most likely typed up after the fact to reflect the change in mission. There was very little space for detail in the log. F/O Nelson returned to Dartmouth at 1520 GMT (11:20 AM) without encountering Tanner in Ventura 2159.

But Tanner was able to roughly fix his position and radioed that information to Dartmouth. Dartmouth subsequently tasked two other Ventura crews to go out and find him. **Flight Lieutenant** (F/L) E.T. Merriot in Ventura 2165 was first dispatched at 1800 hours GMT (2 PM). His rescue flight was specifically a mission to locate Tanner and the crew of Ventura 2159. He was followed by Flying Officer (F/O) I.D. Stephens in Ventura 2171, fifty five minutes later at 1855 (2:55 PM).

Merriot in Ventura 2165 was only an hour and fifteen minutes in the air. He returned to Dartmouth at 1915 GMT (3:15 PM). Given the very short duration of this flight, Ventura 2165 was probably the first to locate the downed aircraft and probably was the initial aircraft to fly over the Fenton farm scaring the older Fenton sisters. His was also most likely the first to indicate the way to the crash site and who corrected the initial crash site location to Tom Mann Lake.

But it was most likely F/O Stephen in Ventura 2171, who put the fear of God into the younger Fenton sisters, who dropped the kit bag, and whose voice boomed on high from above, that lead the way to Archibald Big Lake to the rescuers on the ground. His rescue mission began at 1855 hrs GMT (2:30 PM). Stephen's flight was long and lasted until

2330 Hrs GMT (7:30 PM). He was the one that most likely cycled over the crash site, guiding Obie Fenton, his nephew Lloyd, Wilmer Hodgson and the others there. F/O Stephen left only when that last ray of sunlight and the onset of darkness forced him to do so.

A fourth flight was carried out on 5 March 1944 by a personage no less than the Squadron Commander! Squadron Leader (S/L) J.F. Greer flew to the crash site in Ventura 2165. His mission began at 1310 GMT (9:10AM) and ended a short while later at 1450 GMT (10:50 AM).

S/L Greer's duty was listed as a "Carry Flight", which was likely two fold; to see and assess the situation for himself and to drop supplies to the beleaguered crew. So it was no surprise that Obie Fenton's rescue team came home with tins of bully beef for his family confirming Mickey (Fenton) Harpell's account of what happened in March 1944. The crew was indeed grateful to be found after a very harrowing day!

These records and the eye witness accounts match and corroborate what happened both on the ground and in the air. The only logical conclusion then is that this must be the one and the same crash record relating to Archibald Big Lake!

So what's in a name? Plenty! In this account it was the spelling of names that hid and confused the information that took us over many paths. In the end the facts were found and doubt removed in the telling of the big picture that sets the history.

Names are important on the smaller and personal level too. It is names within the tale that bring life that defines the history. The names of the people involved beyond the events and what they did are very important too!

Part 2 – A hellish hard day!

The story of Ventura 2159 is interesting on the human level. It is a story of distinguished service and one of great courage and determination.

WO2 Tanner on Ventura 2159, on an operational convoy coverage patrol, orbited over a convoy providing cover and protection for over eight and a half hours on 4 March 1944. He must have been on station for a considerable length of time. He stretched the mission envelope of Ventura 2159 to the limit and almost lost it. He was caught short of fuel on the return flight. We now know from the official records that "With fuel running low, or *used entirely*, (the) aircraft attempted to land on ice and snow covered lake and ground looped" on Archibald Big Lake.

Why would WO Tanner and the crew of Ventura 2159 choose to do so? The operational records do not provide very many clues here. However, these young men were trained to conduct a mission with maximum effort, regardless of cost. Tanner would have remained on station as long as needed given the certain and present dangers of lurking U-Boats in Canadian waters. Ventura 2159's job was not only to seek and destroy the U-Boat but

also to keep them down and underwater, where U-boats lost an advantage of speed and became much slower than a passing convoy. This gave a passing convoy a fighting chance of escape. Ventura 2159's patrol ensured that **time, space**, and distance were placed between a passing convoy and any hunting U-Boat.

What happened to WO2 Tanner in Ventura 2159 was actually a very common occurrence. Russell McKay, a veteran of the Second World War recounts a similar tale but this one, a ditching off the coast of Nova Scotia, in 1941. Russell McKay too was on an extended antisubmarine patrol out over the Atlantic.

Mr. Mackay and his crew spent a long time on station, became lost, and were very low on fuel. Land was spotted but their plane lacked sufficient fuel to make it back. Mackay's plane was forced to ditch in St Margaret's Bay. His crew was lucky. They were quickly rescued by local fishermen.^{iv}

The plane at Country Harbour suffered similar circumstances. It was short of fuel and had to force land on Archibald Big Lake. The fact that it was first spotted over Isaacs Harbour and Goldboro gives an indication of where Tanner's patrol line may have been on the day.

At the time it passed over Isaacs Harbour, Ventura 2159 was some hundred miles away from its Base at Dartmouth. It was short on fuel looking for a safe place to put down at the end of its patrol. The usual patrol is not defined in the unit operations log. But by mental calculation and knowing the limits of the Ventura aircraft we can roughly locate the area of his patrol.

Tanner's patrol line would have been bounded in an area somewhere bounded by Halifax and Cape Breton and off shore toward the edge of the continental shelf where he shadowed a convoy at length from where he made landfall at Isaacs Harbour and based on his reported difficulties and fuel shortage.

On making landfall, Tanner first proceeded westward in-land as he determined that the ice at Isaacs Harbour appeared to be unsafe. The aircraft was next observed along the way and by two young Fenton girls at Country Harbour. Tanner's engines were then observed to be running rough and may have been backfiring. The plane was subsequently observed at Howlett Brook but proceeding in a northerly direction.

Tanner's way up Country Harbour was not conducted in solitary fashion. He was not alone. He had his crew to assist him. His two wireless air gunners Harris and McMichael would be observing along the way and calling out details, hazards or landmarks. Edgley his navigator, would have been responsible for charting and navigating Ventura 2159's course and path. He would have been the one responsible for plotting points for radio transmission.

The record says that they were lost. That was not necessarily the case. They may have been lost coming in from the Atlantic but Edgley most likely quickly fixed their positions

at Isaacs Harbour and on up the Country Harbour River. It is clear that this was so as Stewart Lake was fixed as landmark along the way. Its location was radio backed to Dartmouth probably as a waypoint in the first instance. So the crew knew roughly where they were in relation to these known points.

Tom Mann and Stewart Lake are also clearly evident on any good charts or maps of the river. They would have been evident from the air on the way to the Fenton farm where Ventura 2159 turned back easterly. Edgley did not radio his position from these two known **landmarks that** is suggestive in the events that followed and the urgency of their situation. Navigation would not have been easy, there was no GPS in the day. It was all a matter of headwork, calculation, slide-rules, rulers, charts, plotting and paperwork. That took time, and time was running out in the heat of events. But Edgley's navigation and the report of Ventura 2159's rough location were key to their rapid rescue!

Ventura 2159 was indeed in some difficulty. It had both wheels extended when it passed over the Fenton Farm, indicating that it was landing somewhere. There were indications of fuel starvation by the backfiring of the engines. It was at this point that Tanner had no choice. He needed an immediate and a suitable area for landing as Ventura 2159 was in extreme danger of crashing. There was little time for Edgley to fix or transmit another new location.

Ventura 2159 continued in a northerly- easterly direction away from the Fenton farm on parallel course with Archibald Big Lake where it disappeared from the Fenton girls' view. But time had run out for Ventura 2159. It was going down, not on Stewart Lake but on Archibald Big Lake, more than likely because they had simply run out of fuel!

We have an indication of Tanner's intent. He was probably heading back to Stewart Lake given the reciprocal change in direction away from the Fenton Farm and then back towards it. The eye witnesses on the ground say that he was lost from view. This suggest that Ventura 2159 was very low.

The area in and around Cross Roads Country Harbour and Country Harbour mines is very hilly. The height of land is between 150 and 200 meters. Ventura 2159 was very low as it flew out of their view very quickly. Why would Ventura 2159 be so low?

The basic rule of thumb for flying is maintaining height! Height cannot be maintained without power. Once power is lost either from fuel deprivation or engine loss, height diminishes and an airplane suddenly becomes a glider. Ventura 2159 was out of fuel, WO Tanner was out of options, and he forced landed quickly were it was safest to do so.

Tanner was about halfway down on a parallel vector when he made a turn **into and toward** Archibald Big Lake and where he finally forced landed Ventura 2159. He had only fumes remaining in his tanks. Archibald Big Lake is approximately 3km long on its east west access with lots of room for an emergency landing. It is an irregularly shaped lake, long, and bounded by bays and points along its shores. There was a point though,

approximately midway down the lake, which from the evidence on the ground at the time, suggested that Ventura 2159 turned there and **onto** the final approach.

Ventura 2159 apparently made contact with the tree line. The aircraft must have been too low, probably because it was losing power. A wing, presumably the starboard wing, clipped the trees and tore off the tip and may have weakened the oleo. The tree tops in location indicated such contact that was observed by Wilmer Hogdson and the others.

The aircraft proceeded on past the treeline, then landed on the lake, sliding to the far end. Ventura 2159 finally ground looped and came to rest within 300 feet of the distant shore.



Source: <https://www.google.ca/maps/@45.2937062,-61.7970012,3122m/data=!3m1!1e3>
Accessed: 9 Jun 2015

Ventura 2159 subsequently required 45 gallons of aviation fuel that was **needed** for the takeoff from Archibald Big Lake some weeks later. Ventura 2159 eventually lifted off and was salvaged from Archibald Big Lake. The 4th of March 1944 was the end of a hellishly hard day for WO Tanner, WO Edgley, P/O Harris and WO McMichael, the crew of Ventura 2159. They were stranded on the frozen surface of Archibald Big Lake!

Part 3

The Crew - Duty Bound and Courageous too

WO Tanner, WO Edgley, P/O Harris and WO McMichael, the four crew of Ventura 2159 forced landed on Archibald Big Lake aboard Ventura 2159 on 4 March 1944. All survived. They were very lucky too, all were uninjured.

These young men often cast as Canada's own, intrepid young airmen, attracted to the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and the romance of flying, came from all parts of Canada to join in the air war in common purpose to defeat the enemy.

WO2 John Charles Tanner hailed from Winnipeg. He was born 17 February 1914. He joined the RCAF 25 September 1940. He was 26 years old. He would be a relatively an old man in the air force at 30 years old by the time of the crash in March 1944.^v

Tanner began training as a pilot and received his wings upon completion of initial flight training on 28 May 1941 only nine months later. He was promoted to Sergeant. He continued his flight training and proceeded along the training path was promoted along the way, Temporary WO/2 on 1 June 1942, Temporary WO/1 1 December 1942, and Pilot Officer (RAF) 9 December 1943.

WO Tanner accumulated some 563 total flying hours and was an experienced pilot by March 1944. WO Tanner was posted to Eastern Air Command on 31 December 1943. He was subsequently re-posted to No. 145(BR) Squadron some five days later on 5 January 1944.

WO1 A.W.C. Edgley – Navigator, hailed from Quebec. He was born 5 January 1921 and joined the RCAF 30 November 1940.^{vi} He was only 19 years old at the time. His initially trained as a Pilot Observer. He began that training on 4 January 1941 and successfully graduated some five months later on 28 May 1941. He was promoted to Temporary Sergeant effective 7 November 1941.

WO Edgley continued his training and eventually became an Air Observer on 7 November 1941. He had several postings and was eventually posted to Eastern Air Command on 9 November 1943. He was subsequently posted to No. 145(BR) Squadron 11 January 1944 just one week after WO Tanner.

P/O W.A. Harris's personnel record does not easily identify his province or town of origin. Harris's card states that he was from N. Falls, and was a Canadian Citizen.^{vii} Presumably N. Falls was short for Niagara Falls.

P/O Harris was born 5 November 1919. He joined the RCAF 13 May 1940 and was only 21 years old at the time. He trained as a Wireless Air Gunner. Harris began his initial training 21 June 1940 and qualified on 15 December that same year. He was promoted Temporary Sergeant on successful completion of that training.

Pilot Officer Harris had several postings from December 1940 to May 1943. He was posted to Eastern Air Command 12 May 1943 and was subsequently re-posted to 162 Sqn 16 May 1943. He was promoted to Pilot Officer 19 Sep 1943. He was then posted once again back to No. 145(BR) Squadron on 11 January 1944. He was promoted to Temporary Flying Officer 19 March 1944.

WO2 A. McMichael hailed from Ottawa and was born 20 Feb 1920. He was 21 years old when he joined the RCAF on 18 February 1941. He too was trained as a wireless air gunner. He qualified in his trade 6 July 1942 and was promoted to Temporary Sergeant.

WO2 McMichael's personnel record is sparse on details but it would seem that he was first posted to No. 145(BR) Squadron 7 Dec 1942. He was subsequently re-posted to No. 145(BR) Squadron once again on 26 Oct 1943. Along the way McMichael was promoted first as Temporary WO2, 1 September 1943, then as Pilot Officer, 18 Apr 1944, and finally as Temporary Flying Officer, 18 October 1944. Of the three crew members, WO2 Albert McMichael was *the* old hand at No. 145(BR) Squadron as he was on Squadron strength for the better part of two years.

The crew were typical of the men and women who joined Canada's Armed Forces in the day. Their collective training and devotion to duty came to define who they were and what made them truly extraordinary and special. WO2 J.C. Tanner – Pilot, WO1 A.W.C. Edgley – Navigator, the two wireless air gunners P/O W.A. Harris and WO2 McMichael, the four crew members aboard Ventura 2159 truly represented the finest of Canada during the Second World War.

Their patrol on Ventura 2159 is an example of extraordinary devotion to duty and courage in the face of grave danger. War is often said to be 99% boredom followed by one per cent sheer terror. The terror arises when things can and do go quickly off the rails. It was the unexpected that was terrifying!

On 4 March 1944 **Tanner and his crewmates** in Ventura 2159 were on a convoy patrol tasked with its protection. The mean temperature in Halifax was -11.1 **degrees** C. It was bitterly cold. It was also a relatively clear day with no noticeable precipitation. Tanner's odyssey started at 0520 hours (local) and ended almost seven hours later at 1320 hours (local). This patrol can be described as routine, **hour upon hours** of orbiting and cycling in a circuit...pure boredom.

That patrol quickly turned from pure boredom to sheer terror. Ventura 2159 forced landed and ended up on Archibald Big Lake at 1320 hours meant that Tanner ensured his Ventura was on station on convoy protection to the very limits of its range and endurance. He and the crew of Ventura 2159 provided maximum coverage to what was a very attractive target to an enemy U-Boat. They performed this duty at great risk to the aircraft and the crew, at a time when the convoy was very vulnerable.

Tanner fuel difficulties suggested that he was on the limits of his aircraft's fuel envelope. Any shift in wind direction, which impeded his progress, would have likely reduced his

ability to make safe landfall at Dartmouth. And that was the case! He was forced to land some 100 miles away at Country Harbour. He was indeed on the edge of mission profile. He and his crew could have easily have perished off the Atlantic coast had he not made landfall...sheer terror!

We do not know if Tanner encountered any difficulties over the convoy. The records suggest not. To us, Tanner was simply on the way home. It was only once he crossed the Nova Scotia coast that he encountered a problem, raised the alarm and expressed concern about his situation. This was important! Tanner and the crew of Ventura 2159 first duty was to the protection and safety of the convoy.

That is the point to be remembered. Any break in radio silence over the convoy would have exposed that convoy to detection and have brought the wrath of any present U-Boat down on it. If he had encountered any difficulty, Tanner chose not to break his radio silence until the convoy was out of his range and once he was safely over the coast, far and away putting distance from this desirable enemy target!

Tanner's actions taken in Ventura 2159 on 4 March 1944 were the ordinary actions of the day. But their actions were indeed extraordinary, and both remarkable and courageous too! Such deeds occurred daily and regularly by all who served in this role. They attest to the quality of the men and women of the day and their deference to danger and the ultimate sacrifice that was required in the performance of their duties. It is mark of true courage and expectations that, even in the performance of the mundane, the day to day, the routine, an ultimate sacrifice was expected of them.

Given the conditions of the aircraft, its fuel state, and the need to put down in such a hurry, attests to the skill and training of its pilot, WO2 Tanner. But there was more to it than simply putting an aircraft down, a lot more to it. This was bravery and devotion to duty in the highest regard!

WO2 Tanner persevered under some extremely difficult conditions, no fuel – engines likely failing. He was able to put his aircraft down safely and the crew was able to walk away relatively unscathed. Moreover Tanner saved a valuable asset that was repaired and that was returned to service! Ventura 2159 was able to fly again and was struck off RCAF strength 7 December 1946. Still it was truly amazing that Ventura 2159 didn't crack up and that no one was killed!

In the greater scheme of things the safety of the convoy was more important to them than the lives of the crew and safe return of Ventura 2159 to Dartmouth. It was just the way it was. Tanner, Edgley, Harris, and McMichael knew that well, and accepted it as the risk of service in the RCAF during the Second World War.

Part 4 – An incident at Goose Bay

People get posted and units get transferred or detached. The ways and means for doing so vary but they are often based on needs and service requirements. No. 145(BR) Squadron

not only operated out of Dartmouth, but it also had detachments at Torbay and Goose Bay Newfoundland.

Scott MacKeen of Aspen was once posted to Goose Bay during the Second World War. We have his photographic record that documents the time and conditions of service. Newfoundland then was not a part of Canada and was indeed considered as an “overseas” posting.

Goose Bay was not the lap of luxury. It was primitive by today’s standards. The base was quickly built with Quonset and H-Huts. The walls looked thin and the accommodations cold in winter.



Files: Scott MacKeen, Goose Bay during the Second World War
H-Huts in winter

The men and women at Goose Bay were kept busy both on and off-duty. They had ball diamonds, theatres, messes and other local entertainments that assuaged the pains of being away from home.



Files: Scott MacKeen, Goose Bay during the Second World War
H-Huts in summer – a little fall hunting

Goose Bay was an active air station with a wide variety of units and aircraft. It had its fair share of accidents too. **One on 6th July one incident in particular** would have very tragic consequences.



Files: Scott MacKeen, Photo 1: Air crash at Goose Bay, no loss of life on this one but Scott's comment was "The pilot who went down with his ship – only mental injuries"
Photo 2: B24 Liberator eventually used in the anti-submarine role mid-Atlantic gap

Goose Bay was far away from home for servicemen and women. It was very different from what they were used to. It was cut off from civilization, isolated, out in the middle of nowhere, and on the Labrador Shield. Notwithstanding the pleasures of the mess, local entertainments, and the diversions of hunting, fishing and sports in the off-duty hours, many would have been homesick, looking forward to a good leave, and longing for the coveted distraction of the bright lights of a big city sometime, if they could only get here.

Many longed for diversion from the structured military life and the isolation at Goose Bay. It was an adjustment that may have been stifling to the one time civilians now serving under the King's Rules and Regulations!

The one good thing about Goose Bay though was that it was on a well-connected airway. There would have been opportunities to relieve the staff and dispatch some well-deserved personnel on leave or posting on any administrative flight that passed through "Goose".



Files: Scott MacKeen, Goose Bay during the Second World War
RCAF B-17 Mail plane on stop over weekly run from Ottawa to UK

One such flight originated from Dartmouth. Ventura 2171 was dispatched from Dartmouth to Goose Bay on a cross country training mission. Ventura 2171 tasked to pick up six passengers to fly with its crew of five on the return leg from Goose Bay to Dartmouth.

Ventura 2171 headed down the runway when it encountered engine difficulties. Its starboard engine faltered at a critical juncture in its takeoff at about 1737 GMT (roughly 2: 07 PM local). It was suspected that the engine had a spark plug failure.

What happened, happened relatively quickly, for the aircraft started to swing. Given the load on board, the engine failure and weight imbalance, Ventura 2171 swung out of control. Ventura 2171 failed to clear the runway, crashed, killing all on board.

There were 11 fatalities that day. Amongst the dead, Pilot Officer J.C. Tanner, Pilot, and Pilot Officer W.A. Harris, Crew -Wireless Air Gunner, survivors of the forced landing on Archibald Big Lake of only a few short months **earlier on 4 March 1944**. Pilot Officer Tanner had 752 total hours on his log book at the time of the crash, 189 hours more than he had on 4 March.

Pilot Officer Tanner was a busy pilot and fully engaged in the war about him. His flying hours between March and July 1944 attest to that fact. This flight was supposed to be a swan, a simple training and administrative run. It was anything but simple. It turned deadly, moreover, it happened quickly.

Sadly this happy occasion turned sour and cost the lives of PO Tanner and PO Harris with those on board Ventura 2171 who would not live to see the fruit of their labours – final victory.

Part 5 – A Distinguished Unit

What's in name? The names of Tanner, Edgley, Harris, and McMichael revealed a lot. We now come to the point of the story where we sum up. We can place their contribution and the history of Ventura 2159 in the context of Canada's great contribution to the Second World War in the history of No. 145(BR) Squadron.

No. 145(BR) Squadron was a very distinguished unit, first formed at Torbay Newfoundland 30 May 1942. It was originally armed with Hudson and then Ventura aircraft for anti-submarine work on Canada's East Coast. No. 145(BR) Squadron flew 3085 sorties amounting to 16851 operational hours. It sunk one U-boat from 7 attacks on 9 sightings. It was busy in other ways too as it accumulated 8443 hours in non-operational flying.^{viii}

On the balance sheet No. 145(BR) Squadron earned seven distinguished Flying Crosses and 12 Mentioned-in-Despatches at a cost of 4 aircraft lost on operations with 12 crew, and 8 aircraft lost on non-operational duty. No. 145(BR) Squadron suffered 27 personnel killed or injured; 8 killed - on operations, 17 killed – non-operations (9 passengers). Two crew were injured.^{ix} PO Tanner and PO Harris from the forced landing at Archibald Big Lake on 4 March 1944 are amongst the dead listed in aircraft lost on non-operational duty status.

Looking at the balance sheet, it may not appear to have been much. No. 145(BR) Squadron flew roughly some 25000 flying hours for one U-boat sunk on 7 attacks and 9 sightings. But these 25000 hours were very important. The ultimate aim may have been to destroy the enemy but the secondary aim was also to keep the enemy at bay! Their patrols did that. They forced the enemy to remain submerged and provided opportunity to the convoy system for escape or evasion.

Germany lost 772 U-boats during the war at a cost of 28,000 lives. Land based aircraft accounted for 48% of total U-boat losses in relation to all aerial attacks on U-Boats. Air attacks accounted for 349 of 772 or 45% losses of all U-Boat losses between 1939 and 1945 that included attacks by land and carrier based aircraft or attacks in combination with naval assets. It was quite an achievement. Eastern Air Command (EAC) reported 84 attacks on U-Boats between 1941 and 1945 with confirmation of 6 U-Boat kills.^x

Still many merchant men were sunk despite naval and air action. The situation might have been far worse without air cover, we will never know what those long hours actually achieved. The effect of air power was an intangible and was difficult to measure in the balance sheets of the war.

So was it true, nothing really happen here in Canada during the war? The EAC record proves otherwise. Canada was on the front line. The air force and navy played a vital role in ensuring that the supply lines were kept open to Britain on the sea lanes. The army protected its shores. We should never forget that. What Tanner, Harris, and the other young men and women of their generation achieved was vital to the final victory. It was paid for **in their blood with our treasure!**

“Nothing ever happened in Canada. It was a safe haven. The ravages of war only happened over there.” Those assertions are certainly far from the truth. Much did happen here. Lives were lost in the service of our country and sacrifices were made by all our armed services on our very shores.

Robert Wilson’s desire for the recovered Ventura 2159 wing to be used as a monument in Country Harbour was well-placed and would have been very fitting memorial for the loss of Tanner and Harris.

We should never forget their sacrifice. We should never forget that Canada was a theatre of war too – it just wasn’t apparent and hidden from us in secrecy under the veil of wartime censorship.

So “what’s in a name?” Everything! Names are the fabric and mosaic of our collective history. Names define places, persons, events, or things. Names place everything in context and tell a great story of what happened. Names describe moments of valour. This is especially true too for the small community of Country Harbour.

This story is simply at an end. But “Mystery on the Lake” during the Second World War, tells us that there are other stories yet to be told. There is much more out there to learn and discover. There is a lot of hidden history resting in family scrapbooks and albums. It may simply be the beginning of the larger history of Gusyborough County during the Second World War. Time will tell!

ⁱ Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, Air Crash Card Record Ventura GRC 2159 4-3-44, file #1100-21-59, email DHH, Major Mathias Joost 6 Aug 2015

ⁱⁱ Canadian Wings, web page: [Home](#) > [Squadrons](#) > SquadronDetail, No. 145 Squadron, Copyright 2012 © AEROWAREdesigns
Accessed: 5 August 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, No. 145 Squadron – Crew State, email DHH, Major Mathias Joost 6 Aug 2015

^{iv} Tom Spears, **Remembrance: Russell McKay's adventures in flying — and landings**, Ottawa Citizen, 8 November 2014

Source: <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/remembrance-russell-mckays-adventures-in-flying-and-landings>

Accessed: 8 November 2014

^v Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, **John Charles Tanner, R71261 – J43174, Personnel record**, email DHH, Major Mathias Joost 6 Aug 2015

^{vi} Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, **Alexander William George Edgley, R55664, Personnel record**, email DHH, Major Mathias Joost 6 Aug 2015

^{vii} Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, **William Arthur Harris, J3B593,1130-H-238, Personnel record**, email DHH, Major Mathias Joost 6 Aug 2015

^{viii} Ibid Canadian Wings, 2012

^{ix} ibid Canadian Wings, 2012

^x Major (Ret'd) G.D. Madigan, **Canada's Unknown Success Employment Of Land Based Aircraft – The Antisubmarine Role Gulf Of St Lawrence.**, unpublished paper submitted RCAF Journal, 18 October 2011 (to have been published 2012 – deferred)