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Canada's War Heroes Search for lost airmen

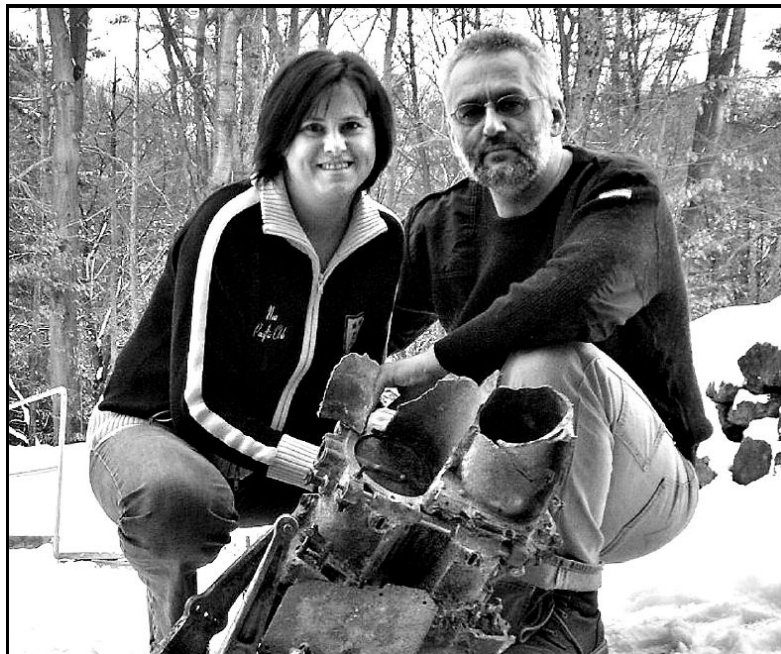
By Steven Edwards • CanWest News Service

The heroism of Canadian and other Second World War airmen is being rediscovered through excavations of Allied and German warplanes shot down over Germany.

Spearheading the drive is a father of four whose newest project targets a Lancaster bomber that carried two Royal Canadian Air Force members from Toronto.

The extraordinary work of Uwe Benkel, 43, began in 1989 with the excavation of an RCAF Wellington bomber of 431 Squadron — today the number of Canada's Snowbirds. While 1940s "scrap hunters" removed bigger surface wreckage, huge quantities remain buried, and Benkel's excavations are yielding new clues to the airmen's last terrifying moments. "It's so emotional to imagine what our airmen went through, but the more you can find out the better," said Ron Costen, a Grimsby, Ont., resident and relative of one of five Canadians aboard an RAF Halifax heavy bomber Benkel also plans to unearth.

A shortage of RCAF squadrons meant thousands of Canadians flew with the Royal Air Force. They included navigator Stephen Simm and rear gunner Edward Kisilowsky aboard the Lancaster — the most successful bomber used by both air forces during the war — that Benkel seeks for his 83rd recovery.



Uwe Benkel and his wife, Martina, hold an engine part of an RCAF Wellington bomber — his first recovery project in 1989. He has located 1,300 of the 15,000 to 20,000 Allied and German planes shot down during the war.

Digging was set to start last September, but the landowner suddenly denied access to Benkel and a partner for this project, U.S. army Sgt. Danny Keay.

"The farmer said it has been buried for 60 years so it can stay there," Benkel said from his home in Heltersberg, Germany, near the French border.



April 1943 clipping from the New York Times, left, describes an RCAF Wellington bomber that was lost during a 600-plane raid on Mannheim. Above: Five Canadians were aboard a Halifax bomber shot down in 1945 that Uwe Benkel hopes to unearth. Ron Costen, cousin of Hamilton, Ont.-born Pilot Officer Wilfred Phillips (top left) is keenly following the excavation. plans. Four more of the crew members were Canadian, including pilot Harold Ball (front centre) and navigator William Mallen (top, second from left).

"He's also asked us for 5,000 euros (\$6,800 Cdn), saying they're poor." A German Messerschmitt night fighter probably brought down the massive bomber on Aug. 26, 1944, about 15 kilometres from its target, Darmstadt. Some accounts say it tried to crash land. RAF records say the airmen's remains were exhumed after the war from a "communal grave without coffins" near the wreckage, and are now in Bad Tolz British Military Cemetery in Durnbach, Germany.

But Benkel says a different scenario emerged after fellow plane hunter Kurat Langer rediscovered the wreck three years ago. "He heard from a wartime witness the farmers and police retrieved only parts of bodies from around the plane, and nothing from inside," Benkel said. "He also visited the field when the farmer was planting, and found aluminum pieces, fragments of the bomb load, and bone he thinks are from the crewmen.

Remains of three crewmen could still be in the field. Records show Kisilowsky's identity tag enabled identification of his body, but there had been no identification of Simm's remains by 1948, when officials told his next-of-kin graves for unidentified crew members would be "registered collectively." "We just want to give these guys a proper burial," said Benkel, who has recovered the remains of 28 airmen. Relatives of the British crew are tracking Benkel's efforts, but he's failed to locate family of the Canadians. Navigator Simm, 29, who was married and had a son, David, born in 1942, was a mining engineering student at the University of Toronto, RCAF records show.

The widow of the plane's pilot, 27-year-old RAF Flight Lieutenant Maurice Harding, said her husband befriended the Canadian after spending two years in Saskatchewan and Alberta training pilots.

"He was a very nice young man, I do remember that," said Audrey Ewing, 84, who met him when he accompanied her then-fiance on a short leave. Simm says on a health form he smoked "15 cigs per day" and was an "occasional" drinker, but only on "pay night." Gunner Kisilowsky, a baker's assistant before joining up, died single at age 20. The families of both men received a standard RAF letter saying each was "exceedingly popular

with all the boys on the squadron." What's left of the Lancaster is far below the surface, where wreckage and even human remains are often surprisingly well preserved. Spilled fuel sometimes gives added protection.

An example of what could emerge is provided by Benkel's 1999 excavation of a Messerschmitt fighter.

He and helpers extracted the battered but near-intact body of its pilot, Georg Frohlich, along with his unused silk parachute, cigarettes and blood-stained wallet containing Reichsmark bills. That project turned out to be one of the most emotional for Benkel, but also one of the most ominous because a group of apparent neo-Nazis turned up. "We'd contacted the pilot's family who were there amid other onlookers," he said.

"We placed the body in a coffin, and when we brought it up, two skinheads in military boots came out of the crowd. They asked me to open the lid, saying they wanted to take a picture of the dead pilot." Benkel refused, turned to Frohlich's daughter Astrid, and handed over her father's identity tag.

"She hugged me and cried. She had been one year old at her father's death, and this was the first thing she'd ever had that belonged to him personally." Benkel said he was so touched he and his wife, Martina, 36 — a journalist he met as she covered an earlier excavation — named their next child after the pilot. Georgina is now five.

From Ontario, Costen has kept track of Benkel's preliminary metal-detector search where the Halifax went down in February 1945, killing his cousin, Pilot Officer Wilfred Phillips, 27, of Hamilton. It produced an oxygen bottle and cockpit parts, but Benkel says much more remains at the Hohen-Sulzen site in southwestern Germany, which Costen, 76, visited in 2004. Benkel has located 1,300 of the 15,000 to 20,000 Allied and German planes shot down over the country, marking locations in red on a map.

At first when we reach family, there is clear shock that — after so many years — we're telling them we've found something that tells them more about their loved one," Benkel said. "Then you see relief on their faces — it's like a chapter is being closed. They all deserve that before they pass on."