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75th Anniversary



OPERATION MANNA

Food Raining From the Skies

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Photographs courtesy of H.A. Buchan's family

Lancasters approaching over Terbregge windmills



In April 1945, food drops over the occupied Netherlands were performed under the code name Operation Manna. One Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) squadron, namely 405 Squadron, participated in Operation Manna. That said, other RCAF personnel also participated along with personnel of Royal Air Force (RAF) and Royal New Zealand Air Force RNZAF squadrons.

While parts of the Netherlands had already been liberated by September 1944, the failure of Operation Market Garden brought the allied advance to a near standstill. People in the occupied western part of the Netherlands faced harsh conditions as the winter of 1945 was extremely cold. This winter was referred to as 'de Hongerwinter' (the hunger winter). Food and fuel were rationed by the Germans as a retaliation measure for

civil strikes and underground resistance. The population suffered from malnutrition and hunger edema; some 30,000 people died from starvation. To end this humanitarian disaster, a truce was negotiated with German occupation forces, allowing food containers to be dropped from Allied aircraft. Operation Manna was set up as an airborne food delivery operation executed by the RAF. The USAAF did the same under the code name Operation Chowhound.

An RCAF crew participated in the first Operation Manna mission. It was the crew of 'Bad Penny', the lead aircraft of two sent by 101 Squadron to verify whether the Germans would indeed allow the food drops. The crew consisted of five RCAF and two RAF members. They took off on the morning of Sunday, 29 April, and were followed by an Australian-led crew.

Both aircraft dropped their food bundles on the racetrack at The Hague, with the crew of 'Bad Penny' dropping their load first. The lone RCAF squadron involved in Operation Manna, 405 Squadron, flew missions between 30 April and 5 May using the Duindigt horse racetrack in The Hague as a drop zone, and on 7 May dropping in the Terbregge polder in Rotterdam, completing thirty sorties in total.

The squadron's aircraft would drop two red smoke target indicators to show following aircraft where the drop zone was. The marker aircraft would fly over the drop zone in 10-minute intervals, thereby refreshing the smoke. The target indicators they used had their explosive candles removed, making them safer to use around civilians.

As for the distribution of sorties, all of the squadrons' crews were able to fly an Operation Manna sortie at least once. One of the more famous pilots to participate in the operation was Squadron Leader C.H. Mussels, who would go on to lead 426 Squadron during the Korean War airlift.

With the armistice signed by the Germans and the threat reduced, the crews were reduced in size, with two of the three air gunners on each aircraft remaining at the base. In total, 145 RCAF and 36 RAF personnel flew with 405 Squadron during these missions.

However, they were not the only RCAF members to fly on Operation Manna. An estimated 300 RCAF personnel flew missions while serving in RAF and even RNZAF squadrons. Two hundred of them have been confirmed by name in 21 of the squadrons that flew or were highly likely to have flown missions. One example is RCAF pilot H.A. Buchan, a warrant officer who took part in no less than six missions. Buchan was assigned to RAF I Group Bomber Command, 166 Squadron, A Flight, and flew a Lancaster III from RAF Kirmington. The family of Buchan planned to visit the Netherlands to remember, commemorate and celebrate the 75th anniversary of this humanitarian mission. Unfortunately, the event and travel plans were cancelled due to COVID-19.

Daughter Edna Buchan recalled, "My father spoke vividly about flying a Lancaster at low level over occupied Holland in daylight. The expectation of anti-aircraft batteries was fundamental to pilot training and the Manna missions were therefore contrary to mission conditioning. He said they flew so low that some planes were below the cheering people standing on the top of windmills! Although we have no specific reference, this elevation was likely less than a hundred feet.



A Lancaster being loaded with food parcels

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Buchan with his crew



a pilot of Bomber Command, as shown in the following anecdote he loved to retell. After the drop on a Manna run, with his Lancaster at near-stall speed and windmill height, he spotted a German soldier in a muddy field running for his life at the approach of the echelon of Lancasters, the four mighty Rolls-Royce Merlins groaning with power to keep the plane aloft, flaps and gear extended. My father made no attempt to alter his course.

“The soldier must not have been aware, or distrusted, the no-fire agreement and appeared to expect a stitching line of bullets to bring his war-troubled life to its end. As my father swept over the soldier and banked into the sky, he saw him flailing face down in the cold mud of a deserted Holland field.

“As children we were certain that the smile on my father’s face as he told the story was the same smile worn by a 25-year old RCAF pilot who had flown a daylight mission over enemy-occupied territory and had survived, and found a reason to laugh with his crew on the journey home to England.”

The Operation Manna missions greatly influenced the ability of Buchan to return to civilian life and work past the emotional stress of war in a way many less fortunate armed forces members could not.

Buchan’s first mission was in a Lancaster III with registration ND405/AS-C. That day, the squadron commander stated in the Operation Record Book, “28 aircraft took off in good weather

for another supply dropping operation on April 30. Apart from showers all the way to Holland, the conditions remained good. The dropping zone was clearly seen and identified by the white cross and red TIs. The loads were being deposited accurately in the area marked, though it was reported that some bags burst on stakes placed on the airfield and on contact with the ground. A small number of sacks failed to release. No snags were encountered and no opposition met. As a squadron, we dropped enough to feed 77,872 people for one day, the total effort being sufficient to provide for over 1,000,000 persons for a day”.

A system was devised whereby food could be air-dropped by bombers, using panniers (called ‘blocks’), four of which could be fitted to a standard Lancaster bomb bay. Each block held 71 sacks (giving an average weight of 1,254 lbs / 567 kg per block) variously containing sugar, dried egg powder, margarine, salt, cheese, tinned meat, flour, dried milk, coffee, cereals, tea, high vitamin chocolate, potatoes, etc. - all supplied from the Ministry of Food’s reserve stockpiles.



After the droppings, the food was collected and brought to distribution locations under heavy security.

The grand total 11,000 tons of food were dropped at multiple locations in 11 days.

Not only did this unique operation save many civilian lives, for many of the flight crews it was their last mission during the war and their most rewarding mission as well.

Edna said, “My father was extremely proud of his service to his country, and especially proud to have participated in the great humanitarian missions to save many thousands of people from starvation in the Netherlands.”

The code name ‘Manna’ refers to the biblical verse Ex 16:15. As one of the Dutch newspaper headlines described it, “It rained food!”