



PALEN, John & Margaret



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& Margaret

I am sad to advise that **John Palen** passed away on Feb. 3, 2019 at age 96 in Langley BC. **John** Franklin **Palen** was born December 1, 1922.

For those who remember him he was an humble gentleman; always interested in others.

A Distinguished Flying Cross recipient he seldom spoke of his own accomplishments. Some of his military background is contained in an interesting remembrance day article from the Langley newspaper in 2013; a copy of which is attached.

Internment at St. Paul's Cemetery in Innisfil is to be followed by a service/reception at Steckley's Funeral Home on April 20<sup>th</sup> from 2 to 4.

**John** was a former member of the Kiwanis Club of Barrie, Trinity Church Barrie and the Canadian Legion.

### **John's Exploits During World War II**

#### **D-Day anniversary: A tail-gunner over Normandy**

A Langley man recounted his years in a bomber crew before and after D-Day during the Second World War – Written by Matthew Claxton / Langley Advance

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John Palen can still pick out the faces of friends and comrades from the 77th Squadron of RAF Bomber Command. Palen left his home in Ontario in 1942 to become a tail

gunner, flying a total of 58 missions over Europe before and after D-Day. Photograph by: Matthew Claxton

John Palen, 90, has felt lucky to be alive for almost seven full decades.

"I count every day as a bonus day," said the Murrayville resident.

As a 19-year-old from Toronto, Palen and three friends joined the RCAF. He would spend most of his military career in RAF Bomber Command, as a tail gunner, flying 58 missions over Nazi-occupied Europe.

This June 6 marks the 69th anniversary of D-Day, the day on which Allied forces invaded Normandy and began pushing the German army back out of occupied France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

Palen was one of hundreds of thousands of people who were a part of that effort.

"A lot of Canadian boys paid the supreme sacrifice," he said.

Palen grew up in Halliburton, Ont., moving to Toronto as a boy when his father was transferred by the railroad.

His hobby was making balsa wood model planes.

"We were fascinated with the flyers of the First World War," Palen said.

In 1942, at the age of 19, he graduated from Grade 12 and with three classmates joined the Royal Canadian Air Force.

He was assigned to be an air gunner, and learned to fire machine guns from a bomber in Mont Jolie, Que., and then in 1943 in Scotland at a training unit, first working on Whitley bombers.

He lost a member of his crew even before training was complete.

His plane's navigator came down with appendicitis just days before they finished their training. The rest of the crew did their final flights, then waited for the navigator to head up with another group to qualify.

The training bomber was intercepted and shot down by a German night fighter over northern England, with all on board killed.

The new navigator was one of their former instructors, Jimmy Hogg, who already had combat experience flying in the Middle East, said Palen. The crew was glad to have him on board.

"You had to have a top notch navigator that would get you there at the exact time that you were assigned," said Palen. A good navigator would help keep you with your bomber group, get you home, and thus keep you alive.

Flying Halifax bombers, the crew finished training and was assigned to RAF 77 Squadron, just south of the city of York.

"They used to say it's your first five trips that'll either make or break you," said Palen.

On their very first mission, they were sent on a night bombing run to Berlin, the most heavily guarded city in Germany.

Their second flight was almost Palen's last.

As a tail gunner, Palen was crammed down into a small Perspex bubble in the tail.

"It was fairly cramped," said Palen.

"If you were 6'4", I don't think you would have been a tail gunner." Palen was 5'11", and had to wear a flying suit, harness, a bulky life preserver dubbed a Mae West, and flying boots.

"There wasn't much room, eh?" he said.

To improve visibility, most crews, including Palen's, cut an extra window in the bubble, so the gunner's view wouldn't be obstructed by scratches on the Perspex.

This also let in a blast of freezing air.

Armed with four Browning machine guns, Palen defended one of the most vulnerable areas of the plane. It was on his crew's second operation, over the German city of Magdeburg,

"We were attacked over the target by a JU-88," Palen said.

"I just saw this fighter coming towards us, and I swung my guns around and started firing," he said.

The JU-88, a twin-engined fighter bomber, fired a shell that blew up directly underneath Palen's turret.

It shattered all the Perspex, jammed the doors, and destroyed the controls that allowed him to aim and fire his Brownings.

"I was stranded there," said Palen.

This also meant that he was separated from his parachute, which was hanging on the other side of the hatch inside the plane's fuselage. It turned out not to matter much, as the same shell started a fire in the rear of the bomber.

"My parachute, that was hanging inside, burned up," said Palen.

The rest of the crew got the fire out, and they headed back for England. Palen manually cranked his turret around so it was facing dead behind the plane, but couldn't do much else but shiver.

"With all the Perspex out, God, I was freezing," he said.

Low on gas, the pilot called in the need for an emergency landing, and the bomber was directed to a fighter squadron base on the Yorkshire coast.

The plane's damage included its brakes.

"It took us three attempts to finally land before we made it," said Palen.

They had to try to stop. With the short runway, designed for the fighter planes, that proved a challenge.

"We just kept going right across the fields," said Palen.

The plane finally came to a halt when it hit a ditch, with its nose down and its tail way up in the air.

"I had a heck of a job getting out of this turret," Palen said.

As the emergency crews rushed towards them, they seemed to think they'd be pulling a dead man out of the rear turret, based on the damage to the plane, Palen said.

He wasn't even seriously hurt, but he came close. He pulled sharp fragments of shrapnel out of his flight suit after he got out of the plane.

"That was one of my worst trips," he said.

It wasn't the first time he would lose a parachute, though. He saw a second burn up on another operation.

Later the turret crews were given seat-tight parachutes like those used by fighter pilots.

"I felt a lot better when I had my parachute with me," he said.

From November 1943 to April 1944, Palen and his crew served with 77 Squadron.

"We did 18 operations on 77 Squadron, and then we were asked if we would like to volunteer for the Pathfinders, which we agreed to do," Palen said.

They went to a special school for a month, then joined 635 Squadron at Downham Market. He would serve with that unit through D-Day.

"We completed our 40th operation there," said Palen.

In total, he flew 58 missions.

Pathfinders had the responsibility of dropping coloured flares that would guide in the other bombers in a formation and show them where to attack. Then they had to drop their own bombs.

All but four to six of Palen's operations took place at night, and while he fired at enemy planes, he doesn't think he ever shot one down. Even if he did hit one, he has no way of knowing. The only way to see in the darkness would be if it burst into flames, he said.

With the Pathfinders, Palen's crew, flying mostly in the newer Lancaster bombers now, bombed railways, oil depots, and factory areas.

He knows that Allied bombs also hit homes and killed civilians, but that was the reality of war.

Around May of 1944, the number of missions increased. A number of railway depots and oil refineries were being hit in France, in an attempt to prevent Nazi troop movements.

On the night of June 5, Palen and his crew found out why.

"We were told there was a large armada crossing the Channel," he said.

D-Day was June 6, when the American, British, and Canadian forces stormed five beaches in Normandy.

Palen's plane had engine trouble that morning and didn't fly during the first day, but it was in the air on June 7, and for several days after that, hitting targets on the French coast.

One of his memorable operations was an attack on a buzz bomb storage depot in the French town of Trossy St. Maximin. Bomber Command had tried to hit the area twice with night raids, but the pilots couldn't even find the location. Finally, they pulled together more than 60 Pathfinders for a single mission and sent them up on Aug. 4, 1944.

The bombing was successful, but the lead aircraft, commanded by Canadian Ian Bazalgette, was heavily damaged by anti-aircraft fire. Bazalgette, a Calgarian, ordered his four uninjured crew members to bail out, then tried to land the burning plane with two injured men still aboard. He successfully set down in a field, but the plane exploded, killing all three men. Bazalgette was awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery.

Just a few weeks ago, Palen visited Nanton, Alberta, to see a restored Lancaster painted with the colours of Bazalgette's aircraft in memory of the pilot.

After his 58 operations, Palen was told he had done his bit and was discharged.

Despite flying through much of 1944, Palen never found going up on an operation became easy.

"You're always scared," he said. "Anyone who says they're not scared, I don't think they're telling the truth."

Amazingly, he and the rest of his crew were never seriously injured on a mission. During the Second World War, 55,573 members of Bomber Command became casualties, more than 44 per cent of the unit.

He left the RCAF with a Distinguished Flying Cross on his chest, which he wears at Remembrance Day parades, including last year's Langley City event.

Palen graduated from the University of Toronto, and spent his career managing civic facilities, including seniors homes.

He moved to Langley last year to be closer to his family. He has three children in B.C., nine grandchildren, and 10 great-grandchildren.