

Christmas in a Lighthouse

Born in Saskatchewan in 1924, Nicholas Donald (Don) Franko enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force in late 1942 at the age of eighteen. Following training at 2 Initial Training School in Regina and 6 Elementary Flying Training School in Prince Albert, Don completed advanced pilot training flying twin-engine Cessna Crane aircraft and received his Pilot Wings at 11 SFTS in Yorkton in September 1943. After a two-week embarkation leave, Franko sailed from Halifax to England.

BCATP pilots had been trained to fly and navigate in relatively good weather conditions over an area of hundreds of square miles of flat land in Western Canada. Further training was required in the UK, with several weeks experience flying and navigating in challenging and changing weather conditions over the UK. So F/S Franko was posted to 14 Advanced Flying Unit at RAF Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire in mid November of 1943, flying Airspeed 'Oxford', twin-engine aircraft.

Near the end of that three week course, on December 16th, F/S Franko was assigned a solo, Night Navigation Exercise over the sea to the north of RAF Fraserburgh. The aircraft that he flew on that assignment was Oxford' V3631. During his flight, weather conditions began to deteriorate rapidly, and F/S Franko realized that he would be unable to return to the Fraserburgh base. Due to the extensive cloud and fog coverage over the entire north coast of Scotland, he had become disoriented and lost. As well, and unknown to F/S Franko, strong southerly winds had blown his aircraft well to the north of the Scottish mainland. After nearly two hours in the air, the aircraft fuel supply had become critically low, and an emergency landing in the North Sea seemed inevitable.

Descending slowly over the North Sea, with the wing landing light turned on, Don had a quick glimpse of waves breaking white at the bottom of cliffs, and what he thought might be a small area of flat, unobstructed land. Franko quickly reversed course, and descended to almost sea level. When he saw the land appear again he dropped full flaps, pulled off power on both engines, and made a very rough wheels-up landing on a small area of hard turf.

Fortunately, and probably due the fact that there was almost no fuel remaining in his tanks, there was no fire. The aircraft remained essentially intact. Nineteen year old F/S Donald Franko had acted with a great deal of skilful airmanship in his first reaction to the sight of the white sea-breakers, and the quick 180 degree turn to make a rather hard, but successful wheels-up landing. He had one chance of survival, and he succeeded.



Orkney Islands



Auskerry Island and its lighthouse, built in 1866

Don Franko had force-landed on Auskerry Island -the smallest island in the Orkney group. Auskerry Island is less than one mile long, and about one-half mile wide. It's located about eighteen miles east-northeast of the town of Kirkwall in the Orkney Islands Group.

Although he had landed safely on an island in the middle of the night, he had no idea of where he was. Don decided that he would not try to explore his new surroundings until daylight -believing that there were steep cliffs to the sea close by. He popped open the fastenings of his parachute, and wrapped himself



*Airspeed 'Oxford' –V3631 – after emergency landing on Auskerry Island
Pilot F/S Donald Franko RCAF. Little damage to the aircraft; wooden propellers broken.
(photo by Lighthouse Keeper, George Mainland - Dec. 17, 1943)*

in the voluminous folds of cloth; and fell asleep sitting in the cockpit of the aircraft, vastly relieved, after hours of considerable distress while in the air.

At daylight, F/S Franko was awakened by a knocking on the cockpit window. The Auskerry Lighthouse Keeper, George Mainland, had heard the sounds of the aircraft during the night, and the noisy wheels-up landing, but thought that the aircraft must have gone into the sea. George was very surprised to find the aircraft sitting on the middle of the island, and the pilot alive and uninjured. Don was delighted to find that he was not alone on a barren island. Because of war-time conditions, and the absence of regular Allied sea shipping activity in that area of the North Sea, the lighthouse was not operating on the night of December 16/17, 1943. George invited F/S Franko to his residence at the Lighthouse on the southern tip of the island and news of the incredible arrival of the aircraft on Auskerry Island was soon transmitted to RAF Fraserburgh.



However, weather and sea conditions prevented the rescue of F/S Franko from the island for a further ten days. Don Franko was pleased to discover that the lighthouse residence had an extensive library that he very much enjoyed during his extended stay on the Island. He remembered invigorating walks around the island, in the brisk, salt filled air and winter breezes of the North Sea and the unique experience of Christmas Day at the remote North Sea Island Lighthouse. The young RCAF pilot from Saskatchewan was treated royally by the lighthouse keeper, and they became friends.

The RAF decided that Oxford' V3631 could not be salvaged from the Island, although they did recover both engines and the instrument panel. They then burned the remainder of the mostly wooden Oxford to prevent it being a distraction to other aircraft flying in the vicinity in the future.

F/S Franko completed his course at 14 AFU, further training at 20 OTU at Lossiemouth, Scotland on Wellingtons, and eventually flew a tour of thirty-four operations with 432 Squadron RCAF at East Moor flying Halifax Bombers.

During 1999, Don visited Auskerry Island again, this time with his family. They were given a very warm reception by the people of the Orkneys, and visited the site of Don's miraculous landing and his 1943 Christmas in a Lighthouse.

Information about Donald Franko's RCAF career, and the landing on Auskerry Island in 1943 is from personal interviews with Don Franko by the author, in 1992 and 1993.