

RAY McMAHON

Credit for the presence in Nanton of Lancaster FM159 is rightfully given to George White, Howard Armstrong, and Fred Garratt, the three local residents that purchased the aircraft and moved it from the former BCATP training base twenty-eight kilometres to the east, to Nanton. However the early restoration and maintenance of the bomber and its saving from the ravages of vandals, thieves, and weather must be credited largely to Ray McMahon.

When FM159 arrived in Nanton on September 28 1960, it was complete and could have flown had the engines and propellers not been removed. Six years later, it was a gutted shell. Virtually all of the instruments and interior equipment had been stolen. Vehicles would regularly stop on the highway next to the aircraft, their occupants would unload a ladder and tools, and then, quite openly, climb aboard, remove whatever caught their eye, and take it away.

There was vandalism as well. These visitors simply smashing the perspex covering the cockpit, turrets, and bomb-aimer's perspex, and tearing the fabric that covered the control surfaces to shreds. The aircraft was on the edge of town at the time and it seems that nothing could be done to prevent the theft and vandalism -the Lancaster had lost all of its interior equipment and its exterior appearance was clearly deteriorating. Rather than the memorial and tourist attraction envisioned by George, Howie, and Fred, FM159 was rapidly becoming an eyesore. It badly needed help.

Again, in its hour of need, good fortune smiled upon FM159, this time with the appearance of Ray McMahon.

Ray had served with the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II, training as a Wireless Operator at No. 2 Wireless School in Calgary. Although he saw no combat service, he acquired a love for the Lancaster and great respect for the men who flew in them.

In 1965, Ray was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and was forced to retire from the farm machinery business. He moved to Nanton with his wife Ruth, where the state of FM159 and the ongoing vandalism immediately began to disturb and upset him.

Ray decided to do something about the situation. He approached the Nanton Economic and Industrial Committee, a group of Nanton businessmen which included George White, Howie Armstrong, and Fred Garrett and requested permission to personally take over the care and refurbishment of the bomber.

The group immediately accepted Ray's proposal, preparing a letter dated July 16 1966 that gave, "Ray McMahon full authority to make any changes that he thinks proper toward improving and upgrading the Avro Lancaster Bomber." Over the next three summers, Ray led a small group of supporters that included family members and young boys in the community. Some funding was arranged by the Economic and Industrial Committee to support Ray's volunteer efforts.

As Ray was making his contribution, Lancaster FM159's ownership was transferred from George, Howie, and Fred to the Town of Nanton in June of 1967. The trio wanted to ensure that their intentions that the bomber be a permanent memorial and tourism attraction in Nanton be maintained, so their donation



A much-vandalized and sorry-looking FM159 in the fall of 1966



The McMahon's station wagon and trailer below FM159. Note that the former markings had been removed and that a portion of the wing and engine cowling have been painted black.

was with the condition that FM159 must remain on permanent display in Nanton or the Lancaster would become the property of their families.

Ray made the decision that FM159 should be given a wartime paint scheme and markings. During the summer of 1964, the Nanton group had been considering this possibility. S/L Sheard of the RCAF had been consulted and replied with photographs and drawings of the paint scheme and the suggestion that FM159 carry the markings 'NA-N', the 'NA' indicating a No. 428 Squadron RCAF aircraft and the 'N' being for Nanton.

Although Ray's efforts stretched over three years, most of the work was completed during the spring and summer of 1967. The aircraft remained unfenced during this time so Ray was unable to leave any tools, equipment, or supplies on site and had to take everything home each day using a trailer and his family's station-wagon.

During September of 1968, Ray completed his work. The Lancaster had been painted to a wartime scheme as per the drawings provided by S/L Sheard but, rather than wartime markings, FM159's fuselage again carried the 'RX-159' that it had during its 407 Squadron years together with a current Royal Canadian Air Force roundel.

Harry Dwelle had made a huge contribution, removing the broken plexiglass from the canopy, turrets, and bomb-aimer's position. He then fabricated aluminum coverings at his farm shop and placed them over the remaining frameworks. This was a major undertaking, done with great care to follow the shape of the former plexiglass. As well, it was vital that it be done in such a way that birds would be unable to get inside the Lancaster. Bird droppings are known to cause rapid corrosion of an aluminum airplane. Harry also fabricated metal coverings for the formerly fabric-covered ailerons and elevators.

Lloyd Spring painted the aircraft with the help of the MacPherson boys and others who cleaned the aircraft and gave it a 'vinegar wash' prior to the painting.

Lloyd Loree placed an RCAF squadron crest below the cockpit on the port side and painted a 'Bull Moose' nose art and bomb tally record on the starboard side. It indicated that Lancaster FM159 had flown fifty operations, shot down three enemy fighters, and sunk two ships. Then broomsticks were painted black and placed in the gun turrets. The Lancaster was named 'B for Bull Moose' and to properly finish off the project, George Shaw created signage that told of the Lancaster's role in defeating the Nazis.

And all along, helping out in a variety of ways, Ray's daughters, Pat and Susan, and their friends spent their summer holidays working on the Bomber.

Finally, and most importantly, a proper chain link fence topped with barbed wire was erected around the aircraft to prevent access. Eight years after it was towed into Nanton behind Archie Clark's truck, FM159 was finally a presentable memorial and tourist attraction. It would remain untouched for the next eighteen years as millions of vehicles drove by on Highway #2, within a few metres of its nose.

Ray McMahon and others worked to keep the Lancaster in as good a condition as was possible. Service clubs assisted as well to keep FM159 looking its best as millions of people drove by on Highway No. 2 and the 'Nanton Bomber' became a symbol for the Town.

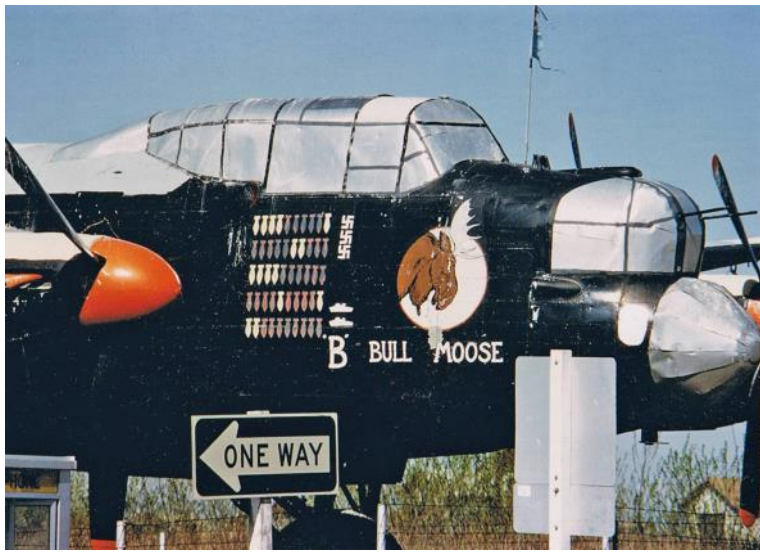
Ray continued to contribute by mowing the lawn below the aircraft for the following three summers until his medical condition forced him to be confined to a wheelchair.



Lloyd Spring with the MacPherson boys who helped out with the painting of FM159



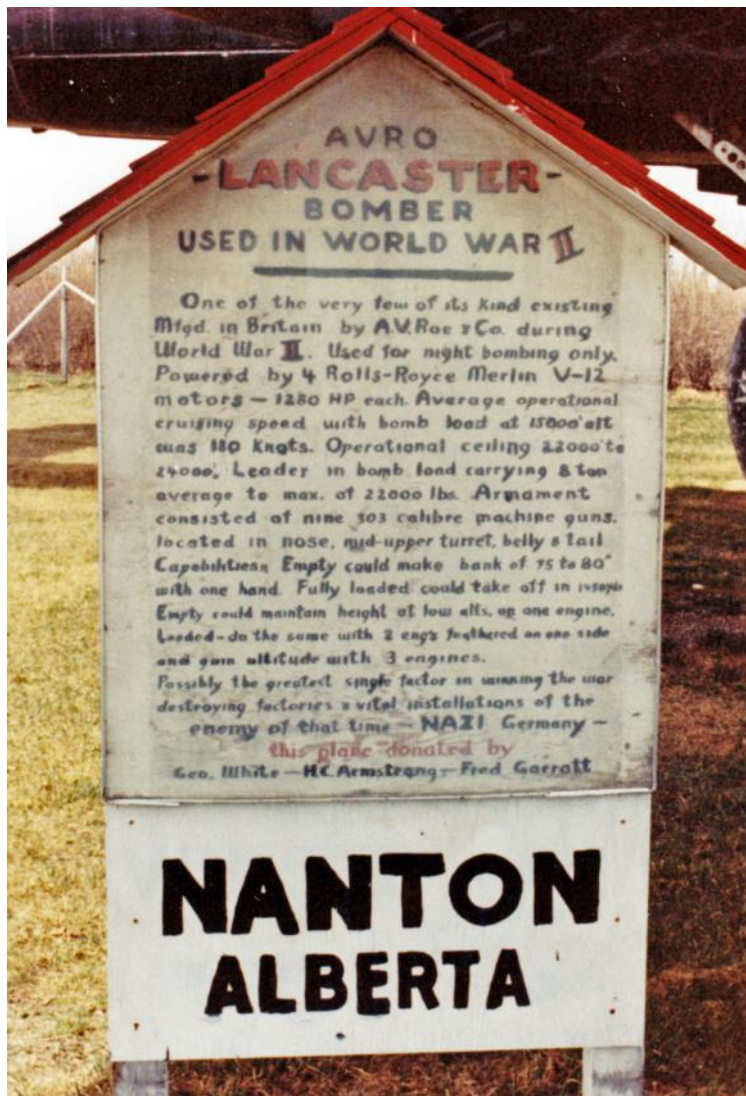
Ray McMahon and daughter Pat working on FM159



This photo of 'Bull Moose' shows Harry Dwelle's remarkable tin work. Lloyd Loree's colourful nose art and bomb tally was not based on any particular wartime Lancaster.



Ray McMahon posing for a photo that appeared in the September 28th 1968 edition of the Nanton News following the completion of his project.



George Shaw created this signage to explain the significance of the Lancaster Bomber during World War II.

