

## **FLIGHT LIEUTENANT REGINALD “CRASH” HARRISON, RCAF, 431 SQUADRON**

**Reginald Harrison, from Saskatchewan, survived four crashes while serving with 431 Squadron RCAF at Croft in England. There were some other near misses on his sorties. With skill and some luck, he survived and flew 19 missions before returning to Canada. Reg celebrated his 102<sup>nd</sup> birthday on 16 August, 2024.**

Reginald ‘Reg’ Wilfred Harrison was born in Pheasant Forks, SK, on 16 August, 1922. to William Harrison and Nellie (nee) Hardy. Reg grew up on several farms near Lorile, SK. He had four siblings; Elsie, John, Bill and Sylvia. He went to a one room school in Lorie up to grade 8 and did grades 9 and 10 by correspondence. He had his first flight when he was 14. He had a challenging life growing up in rural Saskatchewan. He worked on the family farm and neighbouring farms after his schooling was completed.

In October 1941, he went to the RCAF Pre-Enlistment School in Regina, SK, to upgrade



his education to grade 12 which the RCAF required for pilots. Upon graduation, he enlisted in the RCAF (J25826) on 13 April, 1942 and was sent to the RCAF Manning Depot in Brandon, MB, for basic military training. This was followed by a 10-week Ground School course in Regina. On 26 October, 1942, he went to the Elementary Flying Training School in Virden, MB. On 13 January, 1943, he arrived at the Service Flying Training School in Yorkton, SK, where he trained on multi-engine aircraft to become a bomber pilot. He received his pilot wings and a commission as a P/O in April 1943.

P/O Harrison 1943

After some pre-embarkation leave at home in May, Reg travelled by train to Halifax, NS, with his friend Donaldson Rendal “Buddy” Holloway whom he met in training. They waited in Halifax several weeks for passage to be arranged on a ship going overseas. They were among several other thousand airmen who traveled on the French ocean liner, the SS Louis Pasteur, to Liverpool England arriving 1 July, 1943.

Reg went to the RAF Advanced Flying Training School at Church Lawford in England. From November 1943 to January 1944, he was at the Operational Training Unit at Gamston where he selected his crew to train together on Wellington bombers. The

crew consisted of Arthur Harold "Hal" Phillips, Navigator, from Vancouver, Gordon Dumville, Bomb Aimer, from Rocanville, SK, Robert "Bob" Hooker, Wireless Operator, born in Rolla, North Dakota, and home in Erin ferry, SK, Kenny Taylor, Gunner from Mayerthorpe, AB. In February 1944, Reg and crew went on a Conversion Training Course at Dishforth to learn to fly the Halifax. As the Halifax had a crew of seven, Flight Engineer Sgt F.H. Samson and Mid-Upper Gunner Sgt R.L. Lockhead were added to the crew. The 431 Squadron Daily Diary entry for March 14, 1944 notes F/O Harrison and his crew were posted to 431 Squadron RCAF at Croft.



Halifax crew (standing) Content, Harrison, Dumville  
(sitting): Hooker, Phillips, Samson, Taylor

The list of sorties below was obtained from the Operations Record Books of 431 Squadron RCAF.

- 15 March 1944 - Amiens, France (2.24) (Second pilot. Blew up while turning off runway when landing at Croft)
- 24/25 May 1944 - Trouville (4.0) (Second pilot)
- 27/28 May 1944 - Le Clipon (3.59) (Second pilot)
- 31 May 1944 - Leubringhen (1.41)(returned early due to engine failure enroute to target)
- 4/5 June 1944 - Calais (4.00)
- 5/6 June 1944 - Merville Franceville (5.34)
- 7/8 June 1944 -Versailles-Matelots (5.21)
- 10/11 June 1944 -Versailles-Matelot (5.29)
- 12/13 June 1944 - Arras (4.50)
- 16/17 June 1944 - Sterkrade (4.30)
- 27/28 June 1944 - Wizerces (4.04)
- 1 July 1944 - Biennais (3.56 Day)
- 5/6 July 1944 - Biennais (Crashed on take-off)
- 10/11 August 1944 - La Pallice (6.15)
- 12/13 August 1944 - Le Neuville (4.32)
- 14 August 1944 - Falaise (4.09)
- 15 August 1944 - Soesterberg (3.40)
- 25 August 1944 - Brest (5.46) (Bailed out on return due to fuel shortage)
- 27 November 1944 - Neuss (5.36)
- 29 November 1944 - Duisburg (7.25)(Crashed on landing)

On 15 March, 1944, 140 aircraft from Bomber Command took off for a raid on the railway yards at Amiens, France. F/O G.B. Philbin as first pilot and Reg as second pilot were airborne at 1537 hours in Halifax LL152 and successfully bombed their target. Unnoticed by the crew, one bomb failed to drop out of the Halifax while over the target. The plane landed successfully at Croft at 2347 hours. As the Halifax was turning off the runway, the bomb exploded and blew the tail and rear fuselage off the aircraft and threw the remainder of the Halifax over on its nose. The aircraft immediately caught fire. Two gunners, WO2 I.G. Klein and Sgt L.R. Barker were killed. This was Reg's first crash.

Reg had serious burns and spent over 10 weeks at the burn hospital at East Grinstead. The hospital had developed a new treatment for burns which made them heal quicker. A plastic surgeon, Sir Archibald McIndoe from New Zealand started the Guinea Pig Club which had about 700 members which included 75 Canadians. The club had reunions every two years which Reg attended until the year 2000.

Reg returned to 431 Squadron to rejoin his original crew on 14 May, 1944, and was successfully checked out for pilot duties by F/L Bull.

On 5/6 July, 1944, Bomber Command sent 388 bombers to attack four flying bomb sites. 431 Squadron's 16 Halifaxes started to take off shortly after 0100 hours 6 July to bomb the V-1 site at Biennais. This was to be Reg's thirteenth mission. Before the takeoff, Kenny Taylor, the rear gunner was apprehensive about the 13<sup>th</sup> sortie so Reg said he would log it as 12A. Taylor's premonition seems to have been accurate. While taking off from Croft at 0124 hrs, one engine quit on the Halifax as Reg was starting to get airborne. He crashed into a stone wall on a farm just beyond the Croft airport. The aircraft also caught fire which caused the bombs to detonate.



Reg at the controls of a Halifax

Reg recalls the takeoff. (Source - Canadian War Museum, In Their Own Voices Oral History Project, Interview Transcript)

“14 aircraft waiting behind to take off just on the perimeter track, and I wasn't exactly sure how far away they were. You couldn't see. It was pitch black. And I didn't know whether—I had about 85 miles an hour and I wasn't even airborne.

As soon as the engine—it quit. Then, of course, I swerved off the runway. Now I'm in pitch blackness. I don't know how far away I am from these planes that are all loaded up with bombs, whether I can get stopped in time, so I shoved the throttles through the gate to get extra power. And when I did that, the port wing, of course, with two engines

was through the gate with low 10 power, and I only had one engine on the starboard side. The aircraft started to tilt, and then I knew we were going to crash, so I yelled at the crew to brace for impact, and then I straightened it out before I lost control of it because it was stalling.

I straightened it out. And then I don't remember anything else, but I staggered over—I did stagger over those aircraft. Just beyond the perimeter of the aerodrome, there was a farm and a big stone fence around the house. The plane crashed into that stone wall. I don't know how I ended up, but they found me out on the wing. I was unconscious. And my bomb aimer—I didn't have the presence of mind to tell him to get down on the floor, but he smacked into the—it's like a shot out of a catapult. He went into the instrument panel and got a severe brain injury.”

WO1 Robert 'Bob' J. Hooker, WAG, recalls as he was leaving the crash site, he noticed movement in the front of the aircraft. He went forward and found the flight engineer wounded and unconscious. He dragged him from the already burning aircraft and left him some distance away. Returning to the burning wreck, he found the bomb aimer, also wounded and unconscious. Taking him from the aircraft and calling for help, he proceeded to drag both bodies away from the aircraft. He then returned a third time, to determine if all members of the crew got out. When he was only a short distance from the aircraft, the first bomb exploded, which threw him to the ground. He soon recovered and ran from the danger area, and was picked up by the crash crew. He was awarded the George Cross for his actions after the crash.

F/O Gordon Dumville, RCAF, the bomber aimer was severely injured and died later in the hospital. Reg and the rest of the crew were admitted to Friarage Hospital. Reg stayed for 10 days and returned to the squadron another 10 days later.

The cause of the engine failure was determined to be an airlock in the fuel line which prevented fuel from going to the engine.

As this was Reg's second accident in two months, another pilot started calling him "Crash". This help distinguish him from the two other Harrisons on the squadron.



431 Squadron with a Halifax. Reg is in the front row, second from right

On 14 August, 1944, Reg's crew was part of the Allied attack on the Falaise Gap to trap the German army. This attack involved 805 aircraft attacking seven German troop positions at Falaise. Medium bombers had bombed the quarry in the morning and the Canadian and Polish army then moved into the quarry. Unfortunately, the next wave of bombers did not know that. In addition, the Allied army was using yellow signals to indicate they were friendly while Bomber Command was using yellow smoke to mark the targets. While Reg was two minutes away from his target, he noticed a Halifax above him with its bomb bay door open and ready to drop them. As the Halifax was almost on top of them, he moved out of the way being careful not to hit other Allied planes near him. Reg continued to his target but remembered a lot of bombs were dropped short that day resulting in many Allied casualties on the ground. Reg noted "they should never send inexperienced crews on a complicated mission like that".

Crash number three occurred on 25 August, 1944. Bomber Command sent 334 aircraft to attack eight coastal battery positions near Brest. The crew left Croft at 2309 hours in Halifax MZ658 to target Brest along with 17 other squadron bombers. Reg dropped his bombs on target at 0210 hours on 26 August. Due to poor weather, the airfield at Croft notified the returning bombers to divert to Membury. Reg was not aware of the diversion. Various sources have different reasons. One was the radio was not working. Another reason is the crash on 6 July 1944 may have affected hearing of the WAG, WO Hooker, and a "wonky" receiver may have resulted in his missing the recall signals on 26 August 1944. Arriving at Croft and unable to land with the bad weather, the crew was diverted to Silloth but did not have enough fuel to reach it. When the first engine started to sputter, Reg ordered the crew to bail out. As Reg was about to leave the aircraft, his parachute harness caught on a lever near the opening. Fortunately, the lever broke and Reg fell out of the plane and parachuted to safety. The aircraft soon crashed near Allendale, Northumberland. The crew had bailed out at about 5 am in the hills of Cumberland. By evening, they found a farmhouse and the residents contacted to police. An RAF van picked up the crew about midnight and took them to Penrith. A Lancaster later came to the nearby airport to take them back to Croft. Hal Phillips, the navigator fractured some of his vertebrae when he landed. F/O Little, the flight engineer, sprained his ankle. Reg had a compounded vertebrae in his back which was eventually operated on in 1974. The others escaped serious injury.

After several days at Croft, the squadron commander sent the crew to a hospital in London to recover from their injuries and to be examined by a Medical Review Board of psychologists and psychiatrists to determine if they were still fit to fly. The crew, except for Reg and Kenny Taylor, the rear gunner, were deemed unfit and sent back to Canada. Reg and Kenny were offered the opportunity to be sent back to Canada or to stay with the squadron. Not wanting to be considered cowards or let their squadron down, they decided continue to fly.

The October Daily Diary entry for 31 October, 1944 noted F/O (A/F/L) R.W. Harrison posted from 64 Base back to 431 Squadron effective 21 September, 1944.

In October 1944, Reg and Kenny returned to Croft and were offered the opportunity to fly the Lancaster bomber. New members were added to complete the crew.

On 27 November, 1944, F/L Harrison had his first mission since bailing out on 25 August, 1944. The squadron's November Daily Diary had the following entry for 27 November, 1944:

This raid marked the return to Operations of J.25826 F/L R.W. Harrison (Pilot) (CAN). F/L Harrison had previously been involved in two crashes and an abandoning. However, gathering about him a new crew, this intrepid pilot once more embarked upon the primary mission of raining blows of destruction on the enemy.

This was Reg's first sortie with the Lancaster. The squadron was part of an attack on Neus by 290 aircraft. Reg had departed Croft at 1647 hours and was returning from a 5.36 hour sortie to Neuss when they were diverted from Croft due to weather. They went to Tuddenham, an American base, which had FIDO (Fog Investigation and Dispersal Operation). FIDO used fuel burning in pipe along the edge of the runway to disperse the fog. Tuddenham also had a beam approach system to help the pilots land. After a few anxious moments, Reg remembered the beam approach training he took a year previous and landed successfully. He recalls:

"I made two or three circuits around the 'dome while I tried to remember Morse code. They kept calling me from the control tower wondering where I was but I didn't know where I was! I crossed that radio beam twice and finally remembered where the signals were. I got lined up with the runway and I remember staring at the altimeter – 1,200 feet, 1,100 feet, 900 feet – I was still in fog... Then, all of sudden, there was no more fog and there were these two great big walls of fire. I saw a Halifax blazing away down the port side and I thought I'd best keep this plane between these walls of fire. I made it down safely and then I enjoyed the best breakfast I'd had in a long time! It was an American 'drome and I remember being impressed. After breakfast, we took off and went back to our own base"

On 30 November/1 December, 1944, Bomber Command sent 576 bombers to attack Duisburg. At 1367 hours on 30 November, Reg and crew took off on Lancaster KB788 from Croft. Just before 2009 hours, the crew was on their bombing run to their target at Duisburg when the aircraft got hit by flak setting the port engine on fire. The flight engineer put out the fire using the fire extinguishers. After the fire was out, Reg recalled the conversation with his new mid-upper gunner.

"Skipper," he said, "there's a Halifax shooting at us. What'll I do?" "Well," I said, "it can't be." "Yes," he says, "it's a Halifax, I can see it." I said, "Well, shoot back at him."

The Halifax then stopped shooting. Reg later found out the Halifax's guns had jammed. The Halifax crew was on their first trip and thought they had shot at an unidentified four-

engine German night fighter. Unfortunately, the Halifax had shot out some of the hydraulics and damaged both turrets on Reg's Lancaster. In addition, the bomb bays would not close so they flew back with the doors open. When returning to land at Croft, one landing gear would not come down and the other would not retract. They were diverted to Carnaby, a crash aerodrome which had a longer runway and crash landed at 0002 hrs on 1 December. The wheel that was down broke off and the aircraft spun around several times and ended up on the grass. The crew was successfully evacuated from the bomber. The Lancaster was considered too severely damaged to be repaired and was written off.



Lancaster KB788 after crash landing at Carnaby airport

Some time after the fourth crash, Reg recalls a meeting with Wing Commander Mitchell, the squadron Commanding Officer, who said

“Well, Crash, you’ve cheated the Grim Reaper four times. I have a feeling you’re not going to be lucky the fifth time, so I’m going to screen you and send you back home. Or maybe we can find some work for you’re here if you’d like to do some flying. If you want to stay around, they’re forming a new special duty squadron at Middleton Saint George, which is our parent station. They’re just in the process of forming it and if you want to join that. I’m not sure what all they’ll be doing, but the Germans are practically all out

of France now and Holland, so they'll be making lots of trips there. You can think about it."

Reg decided to discuss this offer with Kenny, his rear gunner, who said "Ah. Skipper, maybe we'd better pack it in and go home". Reg liked flying the Lancasters but thought with his luck, maybe something else would happen. He accepted Wing Commander Mitchell's offer to go back to Canada. After 19 missions and four crashes, Reg was sent back to Canada in January 1945.

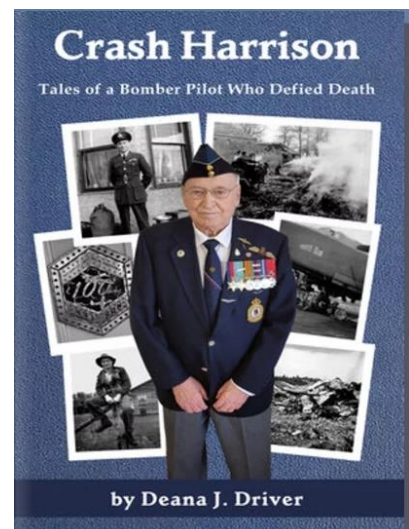
For his service he was awarded the following medals: the 1939-1945 Star Medal, the Aircrew Europe Star and Clasp, the Defence Medal 1939-1945, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp, the Bomber Command Bar. He also has a Caterpillar Club pin for parachuting out of his Halifax and a Guinea Pig Wing pin. In 2016, he received the French National Order of the Legion of Honour. In 2022, he received the Queen Elizabeth the Second's Platinum Jubilee Medal. Reg did not get the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). He was Deputy Flight Commander working in the squadron office when the recommendations for the DFC came in for him and F/O Phillips. Reg thinks G/C R.S. Turnbull, Commanding Officer, RCAF Station Croft, considered him partly responsible for his crashes and did not approve his DFC. His navigator, A.H. Phillips, who was on most of Reg's sorties received a DFC.



When he got back to Canada, Reg called Jean Woods who had been engaged to Reg's close friend Buddy Holloway who died during a Halifax training flight at #1664 HCU on 15 April, 1944. Buddy had Reg sign a postscript to each of his letters to Jean even though they had never met. Buddy used to comment that "you never know, you might meet her one day". Reg married Jean Woods of Ottawa, ON on 23 December, 1946. They had three daughters; Laurie, Marion and Susan. Jean passed away on 6 February, 1990.

Reg worked for the Veterans Land Administration Office in Regina, SK and later in Saskatoon, SK. He retired in December 1984. He enjoyed golf and curling until he was 90.

In 2022, Deana J. Driver published a book titled 'Crash Harrison' about Reg's very fascinating life. There are numerous details of his early life before joining the RCAF. Life was challenging growing up in rural Saskatchewan especially during the depression in the 30's. His training with the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan units is very well portrayed. There are excellent descriptions of the various accidents he was in as well details of his various sorties and activities between missions. His life after leaving the RCAF is also quite interesting.



The Crestwood High School in Toronto did a wonderful project on Reginald Harrison with a short summary of his career in the RCAF, numerous photos and seven video/audio interviews with Reg. Their project is available at <https://www.crestwood.on.ca/ohp/harrison-reginald/>.



In October 2018, 431 Squadron, the Snowbirds, made Reg an Honorary Snowbird.

Reg on his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday with a plaque from 431 Sqn made from a piece of a Snowbirds Tudor jet.



To recognize his service, Lancaster KB726 from the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum in Hamilton, Ontario stopped in Saskatoon, SK, on July 18, 2024 while on its tour to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the RCAF. Shortly after, Reg celebrated his 102<sup>nd</sup> birthday on August 16, 2024.



Reg with others who flew on Lancasters at the Saskatoon airport

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