

A TWO-TIME SURVIVOR REMINISCES

by Raffaella Cortese de Bosis

It is late at night when a man walks toward the house of the Nierenkerkens in Landenberg, Germany. Here, out in the country, a loud explosion, followed by bright flares had the couple come out to see what was happening. An aircraft had crashed on the Bardell furniture factory, not far from their house. They welcome the man in. He looks thrashed, his uniform is ripped, he has mud all over and is wearing only one boot. Mrs. Nierenkerken does not speak English and he speaks only English but by way of gestures they understand each other perfectly. With a motherly attitude, Mrs. Nierenkerken brings out a pair of clogs for him and hangs his socks to dry on the wood stove.

The flames are still burning on the crash site. The man stares at the scene, petrified, then he walks back to the stove and plops down on the straw chair.

The plane that is burning is his.

The man is William Studnik, a pilot of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

His parachute saved him. But the large, light-colored outline of his parachute did not go unnoticed, despite the darkness. And soon William is arrested by the Luftwaffe. March 22, 1944.

He does not know what happened to his crew: B H Murdock, D A Laird, L W Denning , D H Bailey, D J O'Brien and Ciro Bertoia.



Young Ciro, so handsome he could be an actor, has roots in the in the northern Italian Friuli region. His father, Leno was born in Arzene, now in the Pordenone province and his mother is Isidora Marcocchio. Leno emigrated to Canada on February 19, 1904, sailing from Genoa onboard the Vincenzo Florio. Isidora left much later, on April 18, 1923, on the America. She settled in Belleville, Canada where she married Leno, soon after. Ciro was born in Corbyville, Ontario, on March 13, 1924. He has two brothers, Leno and Leo. He attends high school for three years, then he finds a job with the Canadian Auto Trim in Windsor.

He is a quiet introvert but when he gets together with his friends he is very sociable. He likes but does not have a passion for sports. He plays baseball and hockey.

Ciro enlists in 1942. All three Bertioia brothers go to the frontline. Ciro joins the Royal Canadian Air Force and is sent to East Moor bombers airfield, in England, some 200 miles north of London.

Here, he meets Billie Murdock, a lanky man who has a passion for model planes. David Albert Laird, the astronomer, always reading his book that talks of stars. Dennis Harold Bailey, who finds a way to play tennis and golf. And also Daniel O'Brien and Leslie Watson Denning.

The young pilots train at the East Moor airfield, a strategic base throughout the war. They know that they could be called at any moment for missions in enemy territory.

For Ciro that moment came on March 22, 1944. The order is to fly over Frankfurt and release bombs from the Halifax 111, 432° Squadron. A night flight. The pilot is William Studnik; the crew includes Murdock, Laird, Denning, Bailey, O'Brien. They should be flying back by midnight.

But they never returned. The six young crewmembers die on March 22, 1944. Ciro had just turned 20, and was not the elder!

William Studnik, who does not know he is the only survivor, is taken prisoner and sent to the Stalag Luft I in Barth, on the Baltic sea. A barren and frigid location, full of desperate souls. He is prisoner N. 3854. Their conditions are terrifying. They sleep on sawdust cots, food is scarce and horrible, they undergo interrogatories, physical and psychological abuse. This hardship lasts one year and William struggles to stay alive. The camp was liberated by the Russians on May 1st, 1945. William made it! He goes back to England.

He is a two-time survivor. William digs into his memory and provides all the details of the disaster.

Ciro and his comrades were buried in the Rheinburg British Cemetery. His gravestone reads: "To one who gave all".

"We Flew, we Fell, we Lived" by Philip LaGrandeur has been a precious source of information.