

A typical flight crew

A crew was always referred to by the name of the pilot. In this case we will look at the Star's crew.

This crew was posted into 429 Squadron on 14 May 1943 from 23 OTU.

The crew consisted of (L to R in the photo):

R131714 Sgt Ernest Star – Pilot – from Picture Butte, Alberta, age 26

R132169 Sgt John Kopchuk – Observer/Navigator – from Melville, Sask, Age 24

R143318 Sgt Casimir Orlinski – Wireless operator/Air Gunner – Winnipeg, Man, Age 19

R154098 Sgt James O'Reilly – Observer/Bomb Aimer – Westmount, Quebec, Age 23

R205126 Sgt William Parkinson – Air Gunner – Toronto, Ont, Age 20



Each one no doubt joined up wanting to be a pilot. All joined for different reasons. Many joined up because everyone was doing it, not for any patriotic reasons or to volunteer and go overseas and join the fight in Europe.

Ernest Star was working at factory in Lethbridge, Alberta when he signed up. Ernest had a love of flying and was very active in baseball. The factory where he worked had recruited him to come work there so he could play on the company baseball team and help them win

championships. Apparently, he was a pretty good pitcher.

Casimir was from Winnipeg, Manitoba. His father had died when he was young. Because of this he had left Holy Cross High School at 16 to earn money to support the family. He was working at a gas station garage when he signed up. His interests were in flying and radios, which is probably why he ended up as a wireless operator.

James had been very active in school sports (Lacrosse, Football and Track) along with his brother. James was on the Junior Lacrosse Championship teams for 4 years and 2 years on the senior team. He was also on the Junior Quebec Rugby Football Championship team in 1941. He was working in the engineering department of Eatons in Montreal as a office clerk and shipper from 1938 to 1942. At the same time he was working for Gazette Printing Co as a carrier from 1937 to 1941. He stated his reasons for leaving as a carrier was the hours were too strenuous when working in the day time. On his application form it asked what special qualifications, hobbies that were useful to the RCAF and James wrote that the experience of looking after one's self and the mental alertness derived from sport should, I think, be of some help to the RCAF. He

requested being a pilot on his enrollment form. On his enrollment form he was recommended for pilot or observer and may be suitable for an officer's commission.

He had 1 brother and 3 sisters at the time. His brother John was a 2nd/Lt in the army at the time. Sadly his brother, Lt. John James O'Reilly, who served with the Lincoln and Wellington Regiment was killed in action on April 23, 1945. He was 26 when he was killed. James was enrolled in the RCAF on 13 Feb 42 in Montreal. His ITS (8 Jun 42 – 1 Aug 42) report it states he is fairly neat, not very alert, lacks drive, works hard but takes long explanations, mixes well and enters school activities. Was a bit over confident. He placed 118 of a class of 166 with a final mark of 60%. It was here that he was recommended for Air Bomber training, which was probably a disappointment that he wasn't going to pilot training.

He attended No 1 B & GS School, course No. 60 from 3 Aug 42 to 25 Sep 42. His course notes state his bombing was average and gunnery was average. The general remarks state he was an average student, irresponsible, not a leader type, does only what is required of him. He placed 29th out of 36 students with a final pass mark of 70%. It also states he is unsuitable for commissioned rank.

He went to No.9 Air Observers School, Course no.60 in St. Johns from 28 Sep 42 to 6 Nov 42. His report states he was above average and had a good knowledge of ground theory. He was average as an air gunner and not recommended for commission. The remarks also state he made a poor showing and should make a good operational air bomber. He left Canada on 11 Dec 42 arriving in UK on 18 Dec 42.

William also left school and was working in a butcher shop when he signed up. He also had an interest in flying.

John Kopchuk joined up because he was serving his 2nd stint in the draft. John had already done this compulsory service once before and it was not a great experience. Michael Kopchuk, John's younger brother, remembers John telling his father that he was going to volunteer. His father called him a fool, because that's what they want you to do. John replied that at least he gets to choose the branch he goes in. The last time he served in the draft the Sergeant treaded everyone worse than a dog and he didn't want to go through that again.

John got on the train in Regina for Manning Depot training in Edmonton. This was the basic training for everyone going into the air force. Here they get their basic training and it lasted XX weeks. They learned how to march, do drill, learn military law, handle a rifle, get their uniforms and barracks ready for inspection, etc. It was the recruit's introduction to military life in the RCAF and getting them whipped into shape for what was ahead. Once the basic training was done they then went on to aircrew selection training. This is where they went through a training and selection process to determine which position they would be selected for aircrew: pilot; navigator; air bomber; wireless operator; air gunner. Interesting, the trade that was written on the application form by the recruiting officer at the recruiting centre was the trade that each member of Star's crew ended up being trained in. So the question is, was the aircrew selection process just a formality to confirm what the recruiting officer said or did everyone have an equal shot at being a pilot. In the case of these 5 crew members what the recruiting officer said, is what

happened. On John's application from the recruiting centre, the recruiting officer had written that John should be a navigator. This was because John was very strong in math. Oddly enough, at aircrew select they told John he was selected to be a navigator. At this point there was a change in John. During his Air Observer training as a navigator he was charged three times under military law and found guilty. On 26 Jun 42 He was charged with Appearing on parade in a state not becoming an airman and found guilty and confined to barracks for 2 days. On 13 Jul 42 He was Absent from PT parade and confined to barracks for 2 days. On 14 Aug 42 it was Leaving camp without proper leave pass and confined to barracks for 3 days.

In discussing this with my father Michael Kopchuk. I believe what happened is John was upset that he wasn't selected to be a pilot and decided he wanted out. Since they wouldn't let him voluntarily leave, he was going to get himself kicked out. Unfortunately it didn't work and in his final course report the course officer wrote he was obsturate and individualistic.

I, having been in the military and the course officer for numerous courses was shocked to read this in his course report. The main reason being, for the course officer to write this on the course report there must have been something very wrong or very extreme with John's attitude and behavior for the course officer to write this. Because, once it's on paper its there forever for everyone to see and read. This course report along with his personal file would follow him everyone he was posted in the military and everyone reading the course report would quickly form an opinion of the type of person John was, whether he continued to act that way or had changed his behavior.



John Kopchuk's Air Observer Course (AOS) at the start in June 1942. These are the 27 students who began the course. John is in the back row on the end at the left.

The graduating class of AOS on 25 Sep 42. Front row L to R: DH McLeod, WH Maxwell, John Kopchuk, GM Walls, Course Instructor F/O Rod Digney, P Randalow, DH Simpson, IJ Toppings and VF Ridepers.

Back Row L to R: JC McNeill, GS Palin, JE Stewart, RC Sutherland, A McTavish, GD Thompson and WN McNaughton.



What happened after AOS tells the grim reality of war. Seven McLeod, Kopchuk, Randalow, Toppings, Ridepers, Palin and Stewart were killed in action; three Maxwell, McNeill and McTavish died in subsequent training accidents; the course instructor, Digney, eventually went overseas and was killed in action.

Thompson was shot down and became a POW; Only three did a tour and survived the war: Walls, Simpson and McNaughton. Four out of 16 survived the war.

Another surprising fact is that for John and all those who went to Manning Depot in Edmonton (where Northlands currently is located). They stayed in Edmonton for all 3 phases of training. Manning Depot, Initial Training Selection (at the University of Alberta) and Air Observer Training (Air Observer School, which was located at the Edmonton Municipal Airport). Usually a person did the three phases of training in different locations across Canada.

Once a crew member graduated from their specialty aircrew training usually the top one third of the class was also commissioned as officers (Pilot Officer rank) and the remaining two thirds were promoted to the rank of Sargent. At the graduation ceremony, each one had the wing or wings of their specialty trade pinned on their chest above the left breast pocket: Pilot, Observer (later broken out into Navigator and Air Bomber), Flight Engineer, Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, Air Gunner. A few, usually the top few students were also offered the option to stay behind and become instructors in their trade.

When they graduated they were then given 10 days leave before going overseas. Many reflected later that is was the opportunity to get their affairs in order and say their good byes because they may not be returned. When leave was up, each one boarded the training for Halifax, Nova Scotia to take a troop ship to England. In John's case he arrived in Halifax on Oct 9th, 1942 and departed aboard the troop ship, Princess Elizabeth on Oct 30th after waiting on board the ship tied to the dock for 2 days! From Oct 8th 1942 to Jan 1943 John kept a diary, which he wrote in Ukrainian. Their ship arrived in Scotland on Nov 4th, 1942 and went by train to Bournemouth, in the south of England. Bournemouth was where all air force personnel (Britain and Commonwealth Countries) went before going to AFU (Advanced Flying Unit) and OTU (Operational Training Unit).

AFU was set up to get each member of the aircrew familiar with flying in England. It is interesting that John noted in his diary on Dec 12 that many of the navigators that included him were going to AFU in Scotland and the group were the worst navigators. He asked the question in his diary "Do they think I am one of them?" His course report was following him. Everyone went to AFU anyway.



John Kopchuk's class at AFU. John is in the front row 2nd from the right. 3rd from the right is F/O Jim DeRosenroll who was also posted to 429 Sqn and survived the war.

After AFU John then went to 23 OTU located in Pershore, England. The biggest thing that happened at OTU is where you crewed up. While at OTU they crewed up on 31 Mar 43. Many

of the aircrew members said this part of the process was extremely awkward and they wished the airforce had just assigned them to a crew. What they did after a few days is they put everyone together in one of the hangers and said 'Crew up!' This meant everyone wandered around and paired up as a crew. So everyone mingled around or awkwardly waited until approached to join a crew. In the end you ended up with a pilot, navigator, air bomber, wireless operator/airgunner and air gunner. The question was how it started. According to letters home written by James O'Reilly, he and John had become good friends. If it happened at AFU, OTU or once they were on the squadron is unclear. So perhaps it happened at OTU and when they were ordered to crew up John and James grabbed each other and when searching. I am guessing that John found Casimir Orlinski because he was of polish descent, then they probably went looking for a pilot and found Ernest Star and then found their air gunner, William Parkinson. All were sergeants so they may have also run into each other in the sergeants mess and may have gotten to know each other a little more there before crewing up. Or during the training they would have been paired up with different crews and gotten to know each other that way. It's hard to say. Either way the 5 of them ended up together as a crew. From this point on in OTU they would all train together. Normally on OTU all crews would fly a Nickel raid. This where they would fly to North France and drop propaganda leaflets then return to base. For some reason, Star's crew didn't fly a Nickel raid while at OTU. When they graduated from OTU they received their squadron assignments. Now highly trained and ready to go, Star's crew reported in to 429 squadron on 14 May 1943. During OTU John did report to the base hospital complaining of stomach pains that had been going on for 2 weeks. The pain became worse when he was flying. He did tell the medical officer that he smoked about 10 cigarettes and day and drank 10 pints of beer a week. The doctor decided the pain was temporary and should go away. One thing that is a Kopchuk family trait is excess stomach acid. Which is usually caused in times of extreme stress. No doubt the stress of nearly being operational is getting to John while at OTU.

The crew reported to 429 squadron on 14 May 1943. The first step was to get them ready to fly an operation. This involved doing several bullseye exercises. The bullseye is designed to simulate an operational flight. Star's crew did 2 of these, one on 19 May and the other on 27 May. There are some notes on John's navigation logs in his file. This is surprising again. The note on the one log saying he had poor chart work and more continuity is needed in the log. I had Bill Morrison, who did a tour on 429 squadron and then became the Navigation Leader on the squadron, review these logs in 1999. He stated that John was a maverick, individualistic and did things his way rather than following the air force standard. The fact John got this far and no one corrected the way he was recording his navigation or the way he was doing his navigation was a definite issue. By the time they flew their 1st op to Wuppertal on 29 May, John's navigation log was perfect. So there was a drastic change in a very short period of time.

Star's crew participated in an air search on 23 May 43 looking for downed air crews in the Channel/North Sea. The search was a total of 4 hours and they like the other 2 crews had nothing to report.

The first step in getting the crew ready for ops was to have the pilot go on, ideally, 2 second dickie operations with another crew before he flew with his crew. The second dickie op is where

the pilot goes with another crew to get a feel for doing an op and hopefully get some pointers from the pilot he is with on the op. In many cases the crew getting a 2nd dickie pilot didn't even know it until they were on the flight line in their 'kite' and the 2nd dickie pilot comes in and says I was assigned to you for tonight's op. Sometimes the crew was introduced to the 2nd dickie at the briefing.

Sgt Star was a 2nd dickie for only one trip, as was the case quite often during this period of the squadron's history. Simply because they needed crews cleared for ops quickly because of the attrition rate and the demands for this or any squadron to put up as many serviceable planes and crews. The Battle of the Ruhr was going full bore and the demand was high!

Star was 2nd dickie with Ellison's crew on the op to Dusseldorf on 25/26 May 43. This was Ellison's crew, 12th trip. Given the number of crews who failed to return (FTR) during this time period, it made them veterans of the squadron. Their intelligence debrief says:

“Cloud in layers. Identified. Own routes not observed. Many incendiaries round flares but had not taken hold properly.”

After Star did his 1st second dickie op he and his crew were cleared for ops and they flew their first op to Wuppertal on 29/30 May 1943. They got their first op jitters out of the way and were ready to go. Their intelligence report states:

“Attacked primary at 01.16 hrs from 17,000 ft. No cloud, smoke and ground haze. Own results not observed. Numerous fires fairly concentrated. PFF good.”

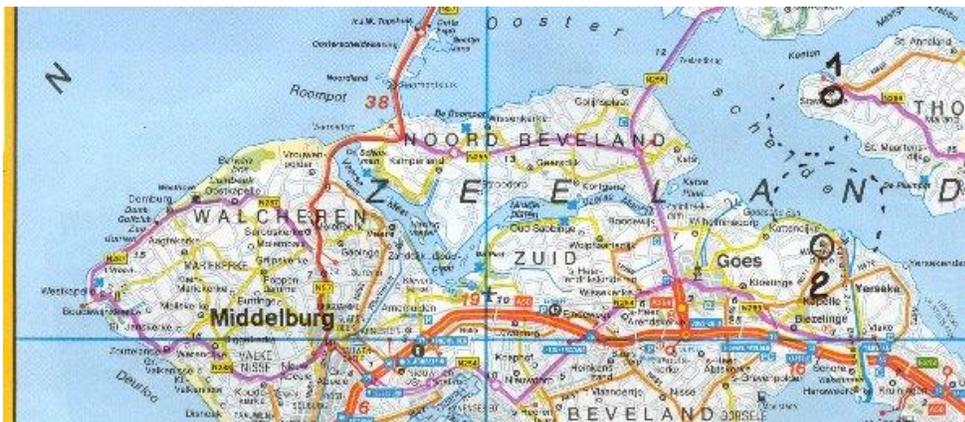
Star and his crew were briefed for an Op on 30 May 43 however the squadron was scrubbed from the Op. Star's crew and the whole squadron was scheduled for an Op on 7 Jun 1943 and again on 9 June and they were both scrubbed. This would be tough for any crew to be briefed, get hyped to fly an Op then have it scrubbed. Your nerves would take a rollercoaster ride. Then on 11 Jun 43 they were briefed for an Op, did an air test of their kite (Wellington bomber) and they were scrubbed from the Op along with There were 4 other ops in between so they must have gone on leave to have not been on ops for a whole month. I received a note from Jim Rollinson that said Star's crew had been selected for transfer to 425 squadron which was going to North Africa. The crew didn't go because one of the members tested negative for tropical service. The replacement crew, of Sgt Wilton, were posted out on June 14th, 1943, went to North Africa and survived the war. The member who may have not passed the test was John Kopchuk because of his stomach problems.

The op on 21/22 June 1943 was going to be into the Ruhr. A tough op, many experienced crews referred to the Ruhr as Happy Valley. This was the most heavily defended area of Germany because it was the industrial heart of Germany. Essen was the worst in the Ruhr, still the Ruhr overall was no picnic. This would be a short trip as well. Total time there and back would be about 4 and half hours. Zero hour, the time that the bombing attacking would begin on Krefeld, was set for 0130 hours. All Wellington bombers, including 429, would attack the target from 0141 hours to 0149 hours. 429 squadron was ordered to put up 16 aircraft for this op with 4 of the Wellingtons carrying 1 x 4000 LM HG Bomb and the remaining 12 aircraft to be loaded with

9 SBC Incendiaries. The crews that ended up with the 4,000 lb cookies in their bomb loads were DeBussac, Eames and Star. When I was chatting with Jack Kerr in 2000 he did say that crews dreaded having the 4,000 lb cookie because it made the kite slower to climb, slower in speed and less maneuverable, therefore making them more vulnerable to night fighters. Three of the four aircraft from 429 which failed to return were carrying the 4,000 lb cookie!

The Wellington bombers were instructed to take the route from their bases to Cottwemore then Southwold at 6,000 ft. Cross the enemy coast above 16,000 ft proceed to the target and bomb above 16,000 ft where they would meet up with the bomber stream at 0350E (After bombing the target reduce height and gain speed by descending in steps of approximately 1,500 ft so as to cross the enemy coast not below 8,000 ft.

The German night fighters were all prepped and ready. They were put on alert once the radio listeners in Germany heard all the radio checks the wireless operators were doing in their bombers before takeoff.



When the bomber stream was arriving and grouping up over the Netherlands this is when they were first hit by the German night fighters. The first claim by a night fighter that night

was a No. 7 Sqn Stirling bomber at 01:14 hrs shot down by Hptm Walter Millus. Star's aircraft was the 2nd one shot down. The German crew reported shooting it down at 0118 hours local time in the area of 1 marked on the map. The German crew was shot down later that night around 0141 hours. It was then that the radar operator of the ME110 heard the pilot, Major Kurt Holler, order him to bail out. The plane then went into a dive. As the radar operator, Robert Gotha, removed himself from the plane his parachute was caught on the tail assembly for a while. He eventually struggled free before the plane crashed. Holler didn't survive and Gotha was injured. Gotha eventually recovered from his injuries and survived the war. Holler is buried in a German war grave cemetery in Ysselsteyn, Holland.

What happens next is purely my speculation based on conversations with other crew members who ditched their aircraft.

Once Star's Wellington (serial number HZ519) hit the water, the impact would have released the dingy which is stored on the top of the starboard wing. Each aircrew would have been warned they were ditching if the pilot, Star was conscious. Once in the water each member has to escape and get to the dingy. They would have practiced these drills during training.

There are few things that are known for sure about Star's crew once they took off from East Moor when they were 13th in line, taking off at 2337 hours: they were shot down at 0118 hrs by Maj Holler and his crew, on the morning of 22 Jun 1943 their dingy was found near label 2, Wemeldinge on the map with 3 aircrew. It is unclear if the dingy was floating in the water or washed ashore, several of the documents indicate both. The only one positively identified that day was James O'Reilly because he had his dog tags on. The other 2 crew members weren't positively identified until 1946. Casimir Orlinski washed ashore close to Wemeldinge on 26 June 1943. The body of the 5th crew member was never recovered. Orlinski was positively identified at the time, because he also had his dog tags. John was positively identified in 1946 was his body was exhumed and they used his dental records to confirm his identity. The 3rd body was never identified because when it was exhumed they couldn't locate the head. So the question is, did he lose his head in the crash or was it just somehow not found when they dug up the body. The notes from the exhumation said the body was approximately 5 ft 10 inches in height, it was badly decomposed, there were bits of Air Force battledress (the uniform) and the hair on the body was dark brown. Unfortunately that doesn't help to narrow down if the body is Star's or Parkinson's. Since the battledress was in pieces they couldn't see if there was pilot's wings or an airgunner wing on the tunic. Star was 5 ft 11.5 inches with dark brown hair and Parkinson was 5 ft 11 inches with brown hair. The likelihood is the 3rd body is Parkinson. In order for him to exit the aircraft he would have just had to turn his rear turrent 90 degrees, open the door and fall out backwards into the water. He could not have done this if his head were missing.



Kurt Holler was born on 10 May 1911 at Tannenbergsthal in Vogtland in the Auerbach region. On 1 May 1942, Hauptmann Holler was appointed Gruppenkommandeur of III./NJG 4. He was promoted to the rank of Major on 4 June 1943. On 22 June 1943, Holler was shot down and killed by return fire from the bomber he was attacking, his Bf 110 E-2 (WNR 4488) "3C + AD" crashing near Zierikzee. His Bordfunker, Feldwebel Robert Gotha baled out slightly wounded.

Maj Holler had 18 confirmed kills, Star's crew was number 19. Maj Holler was 32, married and had a daughter when he died.



Greg Kopchuk visiting Maj Holler's grave, in 2010 at the German War Graves Cemetery in Ysselsteyn, Limburg, Netherlands.

During that time, it was known that when a Wellington ditched in the water the pilot and rear gunner had the same chance of surviving, 14.6%. The navigator had a 21% chance, and the wireless operator and bomb aimer had a 18.5% chance of surviving. Orlinski didn't make it into the dingy, why? He was obviously late getting out of the aircraft. The reason he may have been late was he may have been helping Star to get out of the plane. When they hit the water, Star probably flew forward into the flying column and was either dazed or knocked unconscious. As you can see from the crew photo Casimir is the smallest and Star is quite large. No doubt Casimir struggled to try and get Star out and couldn't. Plus the plane was filling with water and if he didn't get out he would be taken down with the aircraft as it sank. As part of the ditching drill Casimir would have to grab the emergency bag. In the emergency bag would have been short paddles or glove paddles for rowing in the dingy. The current in the Zieder Zee is quite strong. So Casimir would have gotten out late and the current would have started to have been swept him out to sea. Being dark with blackout conditions it would have been difficult for him to see where the dingy was and by this time the plane would have sunk and the dingy floated away as well.

Each member of the aircrew has a whistle, so he would have started to blow his whistle so the crew in the dingy could find him. They probably tried to row towards the sound of his whistle using their bare hands and found they weren't getting very far. Eventually the sound of Casimir's whistle faded in the distance and there was nothing they could do. They were all wearing their heavy wool flight suits that absorbed a lot of water. During June that body of water is about 68 degrees F (20 C). The body starts going into hypothermic shock after 2 minutes in that temperature of water if you are just sitting there. By this point that was no doubt happening to the crew in the dingy. Keep in mind it is pitch black and there are no lights visible anywhere. I have been to this location in Holland where their plane ditched. Even if their dingy were right in the middle of the water there is basically land in almost any direction less than 1 kilometer away.

They were probably wondering what to do since they didn't have any paddles and they couldn't fight the current paddling with their bare hands. Plus their hands would have gotten cold very quickly from the water and they wouldn't have been able to paddle with their hands. My uncle, being the navigator and knowing basically where they were because he was looking at the map, would have said they were surrounded by water. He probably suggested that they drift with the tide and they will eventually get to shore. The only problem was, it wasn't until late 1943 that the airforce understood what hypothermia was and what it did. So the crew didn't know either. They made the decision to drift with the tide and one by one they fell asleep from hypothermia and washed ashore on the morning of 22 June, all looking peacefully asleep and quite dead.

What is left of these airmen now? Fading memories of family members and their names etched on monuments across Canada and the world. After WWII ended each province was going to name land features (lakes, rivers, hills, mountains) after those who had fallen in battle. The only province who has come close to completing the project is Saskatchewan.

John Kopchuk has a lake named after him in Saskatchewan, Lake Kopchuk. It is located at 57 degrees N and 107 degrees and 50 minutes W.



Photographed by Doug Chisholm of La Ronge, SK who is working to photograph and document every land feature named after a veteran.