



WOLFGANG AUER

Wilfred "Foxy" DeMarco, the pilot of a Second World War Lancaster bomber, crashed on April 25, 1945, near the town of Adnet, Austria, where a memorial is now planned.

## 69 years after their Lancaster crashed, crew to be memorialized in Austria

# HAP'S LAMENT



JOE O'CONNOR

Hap DeMarco is 87 years old and feeling it, physically, and facing another surgery in the not so far off future to get his bum ankle fused while worrying about his kid brother, Mickey, his only surviving sibling, whose heart is acting up.

There is a lot on his mind, a lot of stuff pressing down, in the present. So answering the phone and finding a reporter on the line hoping to talk about the past, about April 25, 1945, the day his eldest brother, Wilfred — though everybody called him Foxy because he was so smart and handsome — was blasted out of the skies over Austria, sends an old man's memories reeling back to a moment he made peace with a long time ago because making peace was the only way to go on without being swallowed by grief.

"You can't ever truly put that one to bed, Joe," Mr. DeMarco tells me, from his home in Niagara Falls, Ont. "If you were to come into my bedroom I have a picture of my mother and father, with my older brother sitting in my mother's lap. Maybe he is 10 months old.

"Next to that I have a picture of my brother in his air force uniform with a smile on his face that could melt your heart. He was so handsome. His picture looks at me every day. I think about him all the time. I shake my head.

"He was fantastic, one of the smartest around in Timmins. An all-around athlete and good looking and, boy, that helps. He played hockey. And he was killed right on the button, right at the end of the war.

"My parents were devastated. We all were. It was indescribable, and I hate to have to think about losing him, all over again, because I already put it to bed, years ago. It is difficult to relive the thing. Even talking about it with you, 69 years later, gives my heart a twinge."

Wilfred Tarquinas DeMarco, Lancaster bomber pilot, Northern Ontario boy, Italian-Canadian, gold miner, hockey star, prankster, big brother, has been dead for almost 70 years. But his ghost is stirring, now, thanks to the mayor of an Austrian mountain village where the handsome Canadian pilot's stricken bomber crashed with three other men aboard.

Burgomaster Wolfgang Auer begins our conversation by apologizing for his "bad" English, which isn't too bad at all, and by telling me that the day the bomber went down in Adnet was *The Event* of the Second World War in the village.

"My father was only six years old and he remembers it," Mr. Auer says. "The older people always talked about the plane when I was growing up."

Adnet is about 15 kilometres from Berchtesgaden, Austria, home to Hitler's Eagle's Nest, a stone chalet with spectacular views and a warren of tunnels beneath it.

It was the scene of opulent Nazi weddings, an architectural feat protected by the SS, a powerful Nazi symbol perched on a ridge 1,800 metres above sea level. Near the end days of the war, Allied commanders feared that it could prove a formidable last redoubt for Nazi true believers.

So they sent over 300 aircraft to bomb it on April 25, 1945, two weeks before Germany surrendered.

Two aircraft were lost, the final casualties of the air war over Europe. One crash-landed safely. Flight Officer DeMarco crashed into a mountain.

"There are parts of the plane all over our mountain," Mr. Auer says.

By 1945, the villagers were desperately poor, lacking in basic materials. People scavenged the plane wreckage, peeling off bits of aluminum to patch leaky roofs, fashion makeshift sinks and other assorted gizmos.

"People made all sorts of crazy stuff with it," the mayor says. "The plane was totally recycled."

Mr. Auer began collecting parts about 25 years ago. He has engine

covers, a door, the landing gear and an ambitious plan to erect a memorial on the crash site honouring the four men — Wilfred T. DeMarco, Timmins, Ont.; Norman H. Johnston, Calgary, Alta.; Edward W. Norman, Boston, Lincolnshire, U.K.; Gordon V. Walker, King City, Ont. — who died on the mountain plus the three that parachuted to safety and were captured — Freddy Cole and Art Sherman, both Brits, and Jack Speers from Barrie, Ont.

The memorial will incorporate plane wreckage with the marble the village has been famous for since Austria was part of the Roman Empire. A local trades school is working on the project. The dedication date is April 25, 2015, the 70th anniversary of the crash. All seven airmen are gone now, and so the mayor's final wish is to extend an invitation to their living relatives to attend the unveiling.

"I want to give the men a proper ending," he says.

It is a desire that has revived the memory of Foxy DeMarco. David Young is a retired lorry builder in Stoke-on-Trent, U.K., and a volunteer researcher for 619 Squadron, a Facebook page where history buffs and descendants of Second World War flyers share old family photos and war stories.

Mr. Auer contacted Mr. Young through a third party seeking help in his hunt for the bomber crew's relatives. Most were easy to find, except for the pilot from Timmins and Gordon Walker, the rear gunner from King City. (The search for Mr. Walker's descendants is ongoing).

"All I had on DeMarco was that he was from Timmins," Mr. Young says.

The researcher sent out several

emails, including one to the *Timmins Press* requesting "information or addresses" connected to the DeMarco family. The note appeared on the paper's "Letters and feedback" webpage on Jan. 11, which is where I saw it.

When I found Hap DeMarco in Niagara Falls he told me his family left Timmins 50 years ago. He said in 1939, when the war first broke out, his hometown wasn't the greatest place to be Italian no matter how Canadian you were.

Italy's Mussolini sided with Hitler. Timmins' Italian population, which worked in the mines, were targeted with racial slurs and labelled as "traitors." There were fist fights. And job firings. Prominent community members were sent to internment camps while a generation of Italian-Canadian sons, men like Foxy DeMarco and his brother, Blackie, enlisted, partly to prove their patriotism but mostly to get out of Timmins to see the world. (Hap DeMarco spent six months in the army in 1945, but never left Toronto).

Mr. DeMarco remembers meeting a man at a house on Davenport Avenue in Toronto after the war. The man said he had some information about his brother and the attack on Berchtesgaden.

"He told me they weren't even supposed to go out — that there was another crew already on board that Lancaster," he says. "But they were ordered to stand down and my brother's crew was ordered to take the plane.

"This guy told me the anti-aircraft fire was ferocious. They got hit. My brother ordered everyone to bail out, saying he was going to try and get the

plane back to England. And as they parachuted down, looking up, they saw the plane being blown to pieces."

*Flying into Hell*, a book by Mel Rolfe published in 2001, provides an eyewitness account of Flight Officer DeMarco's final mission. The writer interviewed the three survivors. Freddy Cole, the flight engineer, describes "Wilf" DeMarco as "a brilliant pilot ... with a terrific sense of humour."

He was an outsized personality, a sucker for a good gag, who would hand the controls over to Mr. Cole and walk to the rear of the bomber pretending to the rest of the crew that no one was flying the plane. On his leaves he headed to Liverpool to coach and play hockey.

To prove his strength he would scoop up a crewmen beneath each arm and heave them around like laundry sacks.

Jack Speers, the wireless operator, recalled tapping the pilot's knee on April 25, 1945 — standard procedure to alert him that the rest of the crew were bailing out — and getting no response.

Maybe Foxy DeMarco was already dead. Maybe he was unconscious. Maybe he just wanted to get that plane home to England. There was a withering crossfire. Explosions everywhere. A crash.

"I shall never forget the loss of those boys whom I look back on as brothers," Mr. Speers said in the Rolfe book.

For Hap DeMarco, Foxy really was a brother, his big brother, the best looking, the best of them all. He shares a headstone in Timmins Memorial Cemetery with his father, Rocco.

"All we had to bury was a memory," Mr. DeMarco says.

It is getting late. We've been talking for close to an hour. Mr. DeMarco has to go. But not before saying that his brother loved to fly. Truly loved it, and he would have come home from that war and probably been a pilot for Air Canada, married a pretty girl and had a mess of kids.

It is burying that image — the imagined life of a brother who never had a chance to live it — that could break a man apart, if a man let it, so better just to let it be.

"My brother died in another war to end all wars," Mr. DeMarco says. "Now you tell me how many wars there have been since then?"

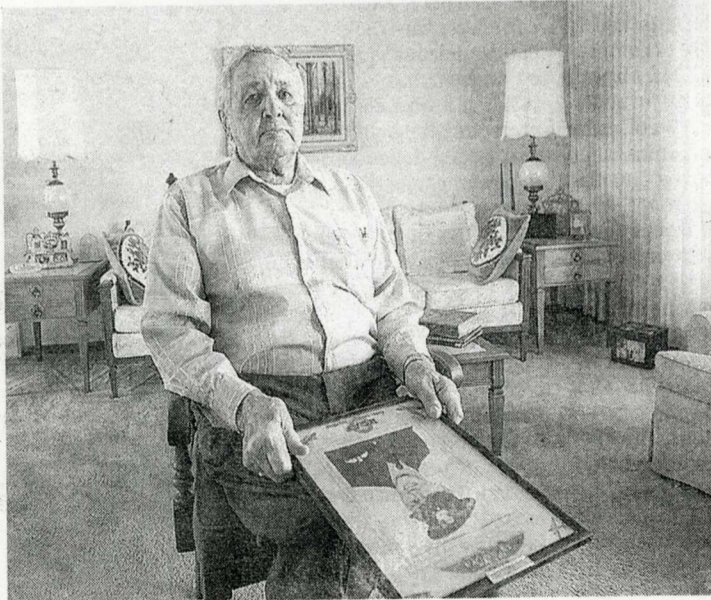
"I look at my brother's picture; he is so alive, so beautiful. Why would I want to stir up the ashes? No, I won't be going to Austria.

"But you can tell that mayor he can send me a picture."

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Hap DeMarco, 87, sits in his Niagara Falls home holding a portrait of his older brother Wilfred DeMarco, right, a Second World War RCAF bomber pilot who was shot down in one of the war's last raids.



GLENN LOWSON FOR NATIONAL POST