

FZ 692

And The Hidden Messages That She Revealed



Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum's Dakota – FZ 692

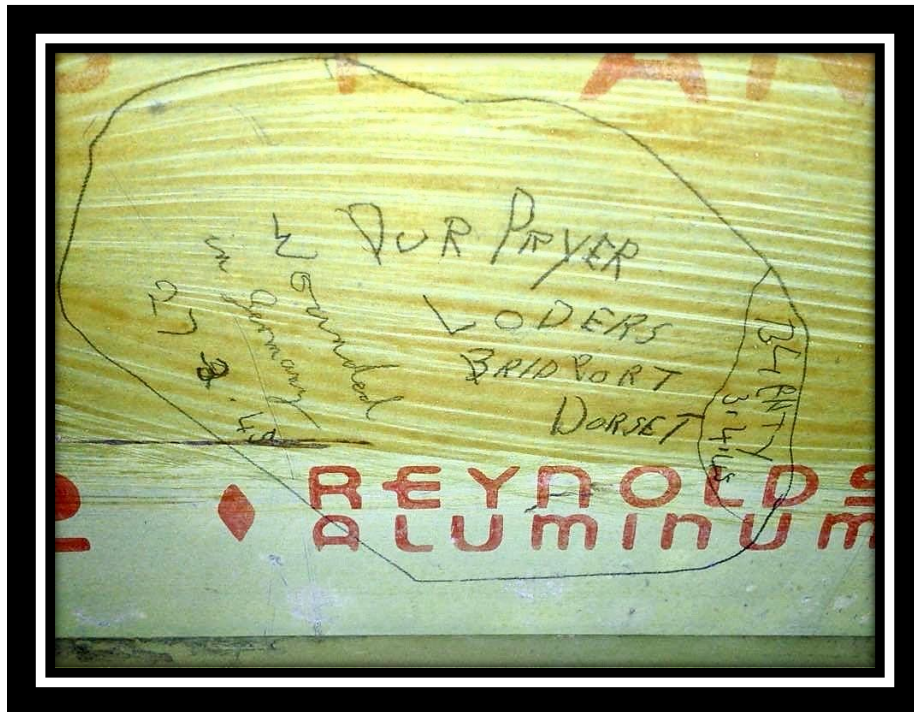
It was February 14, 2019 when I first laid eyes on this iconic piece of World War Two history. On a day that is forever synonymous with falling in love, I knew Cupid's arrow hit its mark with me as I stood beside "her" for the very first time.

It was my first day as a tour guide at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum and for reasons I didn't yet realize, this C-47 Dakota, know as FZ692 would become my conduit to making a connection on the other side of the Atlantic with a family, who at that specific moment in time, I had no reason to know even existed. And to think, all of this would originate due to a faint name, scribbled in pencil found on the interior skin of this airplane yielding only vague information about the wounded soldier who wrote it.

After doing some investigating about FZ 692, I discovered that during a maintenance procedure in 2015, the interior cladding was removed. In doing so, graffiti was discovered on the interior skin written by soldiers who were either flying to the front lines to engage the enemy or perhaps being flown back as casualties, back to RAF Blakehill where this Dakota was stationed or another airbase somewhere in the United Kingdom. Up to eight separate "messages" have been found inside the aircraft, but, it would be just one that would capture my curiosity and send me on an investigation craving knowledge and hopefully, giving me an opportunity to trace back surviving family members associated to this fading message.

FZ692 has a storied history of service during the second World War. This aircraft flew 224 missions and participated in two major air operations, Normandy and the Rhine crossing. It also is credited with carrying close to three-hundred casualties to medical aid, soldiers who after being wounded in battle, longed to get back to their homeland and the love of their families. On June 6, 1944 more commonly known as D-Day, paratroopers jumped from FZ692 into enemy occupied France along the Normandy coast. Serving with 233 Squadron Royal Air Force, it was one of thirty aircraft from 233 that flew the mission that night piloted by Canadian Warrant Officer J.S.R. McRae from Agassiz, British Columbia. The next day, it flew across the channel again to drop ammunition to replenish their supplies. In Sept. 1944, FZ692 was assigned to 437 Squadron Royal Canadian Air Force where it operated in Europe eventually returning to Canada in May 1946.

That impressive history, coupled with names of real soldiers - sons, fathers, brothers or perhaps friends, scribbled on the interior wall breathed LIFE into this airplane. Suddenly, in real-time, present day became tied directly to the past. What stories did these names and written messages have to tell? Were any of these brave soldiers still alive? Did they have surviving family members that would love to know about these hidden messages? I was intrigued and decided to make it my mission to find out anything I could, associated to even just one of the names. I chose the name PRYER and my mission was launched.



This photo was taken inside FZ692 revealing Driver Pryer's message.

DVR. (Driver) Pryer Loders, Bridport, Dorset

Wounded in Germany 27th Feb. 1945 - * Blighty Apr. 4, 1945

**an informal and typically affectionate term for Britain or England, chiefly as used by soldiers of World War I and World War II.*

So, this is what I had to work with. Where would I even begin? Somehow, I had to find a way to get my message out if I wanted even a remote chance at a successful outcome. One thing was very obvious. I had to do some research and the internet would be a great place to start.

I began by searching information on the town of Loders as I had no idea of its location or population. I was surprised to discover that it was a very small village and it had a population of only 518 people based on its most recent census taken in 2011. This finding could be interpreted two ways. First, it's small so everyone must know each other, which could be advantageous as the name Pryer is likely recognizable in the village. Second, being such a small village, what's the likelihood of people staying there when they got older and began seeking employment? I couldn't imagine prosperous job opportunities in Loders for the children of the war generation when they became adults. This likely would force them to move away from the quaint village they called home up to that point in their lives. That concerned me because if Mr. Pryer did have children, they likely have moved away which will make it much more difficult to make a connection. Worse yet, if they were daughters and were married, the chances of connecting would be deeply reduced not knowing their new married name. I dismissed the obvious challenges that I faced and decided to concentrate on finding a place in the village that had a website with the intent of sending someone, anyone in Loders an email.

I started by entering "Loders City Hall" in the search engine only to yield zero results. I guess villages that small don't have a dedicated city hall so I had to get more creative. My wife, who was born in England, suggested I try a "Loders Primary School" search, suspecting that every village or town likely had a primary school.

Success! She was correct.

My search took me to an establishment called Loders C.E. Primary Academy located in **Loders, Bridport, Dorset**. When I read those three names on the webpage, they resonated with me because they were the exact three names Mr. Pryer recorded in his own handwriting on the interior skin of FZ692 some seventy-five years earlier. My eyes scanned the page for a "Contact" link which fortunately was supplied. I opened that link and a page appeared that allowed me to reach out to someone in the village in the form of a letter.

On December 16, 2019 I composed and sent this letter:

Hello!

My name is Mike Tabone and I am in Hamilton, Ontario CANADA. I'm hoping you can assist me in tracking down a person or people who were related to this person who, sometime around 1945 lived in Loders, Bridport, Dorset.

Now, for some history that may help put this request into some perspective. I volunteer twice per week at a museum called The Canadian Warplane Heritage in Hamilton Ontario Canada. Recently, we restored an aircraft called a C-47 Dakota which was used for paratroopers to jump into Normandy on June 6 1944 during the D-Day invasion, as well as other key missions including medical airlifts. During the restoration, we stripped the aircraft down to the bare interior (skin) and in doing so, we found 8 different "messages" written on the actual surface of the interior wall in pencil.

One of the names was from a man called PRYER. Mr. PRYER wrote that he was wounded in Germany on Feb. 27, 1945. He was flown back to the U.K. on this actual aircraft. This aircraft now shifts over from being a piece of

history to a LIVING piece of history as these pencil scrawled names and words brought the aircraft to life. I am taking it upon myself to see if I can connect with, in this case either Mr. PRYER (if he is still alive) or any of his surviving extended family members. I am really hoping with the limited information that I provided you, perhaps you can trace something down and get back to me. I know that there are potential privacy issues regarding you passing contact information to me but, you can absolutely give my email to anybody related to this search so as to let them contact me if they are comfortable in doing so.

My email address and personal phone numbers are included in the form I filled out previous to composing this letter.

If you follow the link below, you can learn a little more about our aircraft called FZ692 and see a photo of Driver Pryer's hand written message from some 75 years ago. Our aircraft is still a flying aircraft and, if he is still with us, I would love to arrange to bring him here to once again fly in this iconic piece of history. As I close, I just want to thank you for at least taking the time to read this letter.

I realize that this is a school but it was the first place in Loders I could find with an email link!

Perhaps with your local knowledge you can forward this to someone who can help me out. May you have a fabulous Christmas and a Happy and Healthy New Year.

With much gratitude and respect Mike Tabone - CANADA

<https://www.rafblakehillfarm.co.uk/blakehill-fz692-kwicherbichen>

Upon completion, I submitted the request knowing that the next move, if there was indeed to be one, would have to come via Loders Primary School. At this point, it was out of my hands. I knew that Christmas was approaching so a response would likely not materialize until 2020, or at least that's what I thought.

Surprisingly, a woman named Kate at the Loders C.E Primary Academy received my email and forwarded it to a gentleman named Chuck Willmott on December 16, 2019 which read:

From: Loders Office <lodersoffice@acornacademy.org>
Sent: 16 December 2019 09:00
To: Chuck Willmott <bogle.2@outlook.com>
Subject: Fwd: Workflow Notification - Contact Us Form

Hi Chuck

I thought you might be better placed to think about this one!

Many thanks, Kate

----- Forwarded message -----
From: Loders CE Primary Academy <noreply@schoolzineplus.com>
Date: Sat, Dec 14, 2019 at 8:43 PM
Subject: Workflow Notification - Contact Us Form
To: <lodersoffice@acornacademy.org>

On December 20, the following correspondence was received from Mr. Chuck Willmott.

On Friday, December 20, 2019, 11:25 AM, Chuck Willmott wrote:

Hi Mike

Your request for information has got to me. I am trying to get more information for you. There was indeed a family of Pryers in Loders. I will get back to you as soon as I know more.

Have a very Happy Christmas

Kind regards

Chuck Willmott (Loders Local History Group)

When I awoke to the email response from Chuck, I was overjoyed. In my wildest dreams, I never expected to see such progress made in such little time. It was only four days earlier that I sent an email to a person who I never knew in an English village that I'd never heard of requesting help in finding relatives of an injured service man who scribbled his name on the interior wall of a C-47 Dakota, likely while laying on a stretcher on route to England – April 4, 1945. It quickly reminded me of how small the world had become. What I managed to accomplish with the help of our twenty-first century technology in four short days would have taken months to do twenty-five years ago. After reading that there indeed was a family of Pryers in Loders, I at least had some verification that I was on the right track. Driver Pryer was coming back to life and it was very exciting!

The very next day, the email below arrived, again from Chuck Willmott:

On Saturday, December 21, 2019, 6:59 AM, Chuck Willmott wrote:

Hi Mike

I think the Mr Pryer you are looking for is: I did not read his service record but found details, probably because he was injured.

Charles Stanley Pryer

Possible DOB 1908

T232160 driver 1945 Royal Army Service Corps

Lived at Myrtle Cottage, Uploders, Bridport. Dorset. They had 3 children at Loders School

Doreen and Keith left Loders 23 December 1942

Patricia returned home 26 July 1945, 365 Battersea Park Road, London SW11 (incorrect)

We would be interested to hear of your research.

We had a Dakota pilot in the village. Bill Budden. There is an interesting website which details his D Day landings exploits, and another with the Fallen of Loders.

I immediately replied to Chuck Willmott, my hands trembling as I took aim at hitting the correct keys on the keyboard. I couldn't believe things were moving as quickly as they were. It was like it was meant to be. Some "Greater Being" was doing everything possible to help me make a connection with someone who called this soldier, Driver Pryer, either dad, husband, brother or friend.

I was really excited because even if nothing came from this project, I felt that I gave this serviceman some new notoriety that was fitting and well worth my effort. I couldn't help but think how emotional I would be if it was me that was on the receiving end of a find like this. To lose a loved one is a terrible thing. When it's a parent, it is even more difficult. "Time heals" they all say, and that is true. You learn to move on with the loss and you grow into the idea of accepting it. You never forget nor should you ever want to. I can't imagine what it would feel like to have my father resurrected through a message he left behind, written with his own hand, and discovered by accident seventy-five years later. I know I would be overwhelmed and overjoyed seeing such a treasured find.

Chuck Willmott was a tremendous help in this search so far. His dedication and urgency in his replies helped me to stay focused and more importantly, optimistic. I shared my gratitude with him as it was deserved. We corresponded one more time before Christmas. He requested my permission to post my letter that I originally sent to the Loders Primary School. He felt that if he posted it to the *Loders Parish Local History Group* website we may be lucky and get a "hit" from someone exploring the local history of the region. I was obviously in agreement and excited as this was exactly what I was hoping for. A forum where many people could see my letter with the hope that they too would like to put on their Sherlock Holmes cap and help me, this amateur Canadian Mountie find his man.

The year of 2019 came to an end with one of the best week being the final one. It was a fitting way to end the year, the year incidentally that my own mother passed away. Perhaps it was her recent death that inspired me to be diligent in this search. It was the elixir I needed to help me understand better that death doesn't necessary represent finality. Although our loved ones are gone in body, they never leave us in spirit. In fact, sometimes, like in the case of Driver Pryer, a message left behind can rejuvenate our memory in a very loving and positive way.

At midnight on December 31, we said "good-bye" to the old decade and we ushered in a new one. We had successfully competed the first twenty years of the twenty-first century. Life was moving quickly and like all Januarys I made resolutions I would break before the end of the first week. One I promised myself to keep until it was physically impossible not to do so was reuniting Driver Pryer with someone whom he loved and who loved him back just as much.

The entire month of January saw absolutely no correspondence between Chuck Willmott and myself. It was a little concerning, likely because of the immediate successes I was experiencing at the end of December. I didn't let it discourage me and I maintained hope that eventually, I would hear from somebody who knew of Driver Pryer. By now, I'd be happy just knowing this man's first name.

In February my focus was still on England but this time for a different reason. On the twenty-sixth of the month, my wife and I were travelling there, spending just over two weeks, dividing our time between exploring London and taking a train to Andover, Hampshire to visit my wife's relatives. Andover is a small town located WSW of London about one-hundred kilometers away, a mere seventy-minute train ride. It has a population of about thirty-eight thousand people which by most standards would qualify it to wear the badge of being labelled "small". I thought to myself if Andover is small, Loders is miniscule. With a population seventy-five times smaller than that Andover, Loders entire population of 518 people could blend in on the Andover High Street barley being noticeable. I reflected on what living here would have been like during the second world war. I envisioned young sons embracing their parents and siblings as they exited their small row houses on their narrow street and headed off to fight for the freedoms that we are privileged to be enjoying today. It made me think of Mr. Pryer and also, it made me imagine a family living in a similar house today (albeit in a different town), overjoyed because they just received news that someone in Canada found some written words that came from the hand of a loved one who went to fight for those same freedoms.

We returned from England and it was now the tenth of March. The world was changing rapidly as a new Coronavirus was unleashing itself everywhere on the planet. Three days after we arrived home, travel bans were being imposed to try to contain this deadly virus in its tracks. That later led to stay at home orders and before we knew it, the world was literally shutting down. No school, no work in enclosed spaces, not entertainment, no restaurants, movies or even haircuts. Only businesses deemed essential were allowed to open. We started using phrases like "social distancing" and "masking" in everyday conversation. As a result, everybody's lives changed. If there was ever an example of derailing a project, this Covid-19 was it. It was difficult to get motivated in my ongoing search for driver Pryer when a common death toll was exceeding thousands of people each day worldwide. I lost all immediate hope of any new information regarding my search. I couldn't help but think that my main source of support in England, Chuck Willmott, was likely also following stay at home orders as well since the U.K. was struggling controlling the virus that was spreading like a wildfire there as well. Covid-19 officially put everything in pause mode including my search for Mr. Pryer.

By the end of May, I needed something to lift my spirits and hope came at the right time. On the twenty ninth, I received an email from a woman introducing herself as Sue Curtis. As it turns out, Sue Curtis is the eldest grand daughter of the man I have up to now been referring to as Driver Pryer. Sue introduced me to Charles Stanley Pryer, known commonly as Stan Pryer or, to the people of Bridport, "Whistling Stan, the man who rode his bike around town always whistling a happy tune" to quote Sue's email. She went on to tell me that "grandad and granny Pryer had six living children...Doreen who was about to turn eight-seven, Pat, Keith (her dad), Eileen, Nevil and Jenny. She had made contact with her aunt Jenny believing she likely had the most information and freshest memories as she was the youngest child.

Aunt Jenny would become instrumental in learning more details about Charles Stanley Pryer going forward. Sue closed her email by letting me know that she would “chase things along a bit” with Auntie Jenny over the next few days to see what new information she could uncover.

I was thrilled to have made a connection with the eldest granddaughter of driver Pryer who I now knew was named Stan. If FZ692 came to life when the written secrets were revealed, today, one of those names gave me a glimmer of a personality.

Over the next few weeks, Sue and I continued to email each other information, her about her granddad and me about what she was now referring to as “Granddad’s Plane”. As we got to know each other better, Sue became more and more excited about the find. I sent her a photo of what her granddad wrote on the interior skin of the Dakota and she said that after seeing it, it’s importance both on a personal level and a historical one, resonated within her. I was very happy to read her words describing those feeling in her follow-up email.

On May 30, I received the un-edited e-mail below from Sue which shared more information about Charles Stanley Pryer and his family:

Hi Mike ..auntie Jenny went to Dorchester but due to lock down they were not open so no military records as yet ..but ..she tells me grandads date of birth (if her memory is right) is 27/02/1908

She has found a photo of her dad in uniform..she has a taken a photo of it on her phone but sent it to my step mum instead of me ..so i will retrieve it tomorrow as she doesn’t no how to send it on to me ..bless her!

It seams it shows Stan with granny Pryer..with Keith, Doreen, Pat and Eileen..

She goes on to tell me the photo was taken in Scotland, Stan obviously flown from Germany in the Dakota, where he was convalescing.

Mum (Stan’s wife Helen, nee French) went by train hence the photo,

She had previously received two cards, 1st one saying missing presume killed, the 2nd saying wounded..

It doesn’t look like auntie Jenny is likely to email you and seems happy for me to pass on things .. any way I’ve no idea how good quality this photo may be when i see it tomorrow but I will send it to you.

Best wishes

Sue

The image Sue was painting of her granddad Stan was starting to really take shape. I could feel my excitement build with each new e-mail that landed in my inbox and couldn’t wait for the next one.

Photo of the Pryer Family as described by Sue Curtis, eldest granddaughter of Charles Stanley Pryer



It became evident that Sue was well invested in this story as much as I was and the very next day, another email arrived. This time, the new information hit closer to home. Sue has a second cousin who also lives in Canada! Her Canadian second cousin's grandmother is the sister of Sue's grandmother Helen, Stan's wife. Upon seeing this new puzzle piece, I immediately responded to Sue asking her to forward my email to this Canadian cousin asking him to reply to me so I could pinpoint where in Canada he lived. She followed up my request and suddenly, another person related to Charles Stanley Pryer surfaced.

In early June, I received an email from a gentleman named Graham Crabb. He introduced himself as the second cousin to Sue Curtis. As I continued reading, I was pleasantly surprised at how close to home this trail was leading. Graham Crabb is living in Listowel Ontario a mere ninety- minute car ride away! I replied to Graham and we agreed to meet up at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum some time in the near future so I could tour him around the facility culminating with a visit of his Great uncle Stan's message inside FZ692. We agreed to wait until the Covid-19 restrictions were much more relaxed before we'd meet. Wow! This was getting better and better by the day. I was excited to know I would actually be meeting a descendant of Charles Stanley Pryer before the year ends. Finally, something to look forward to in a year filled with nothing but doom and gloom as it seemed.

Just when I thought things couldn't get any better, they did. On June 12, the following e-mail appeared in my mailbox:

Jenny Harrington

Hi Mike, my name is Jenny Harrington (nee Pryer) I am the youngest Daughter of Stan and Helen Pryer born 1946. I live in Dorchester Dorset with my husband Dave. How amazing coming across the scribblings of my father from all that time ago. I had goose bumps, and a few tears. Up until now my niece Sue has been doing an awesome job of gathering as much info as possible for you. I expect she mentioned that my sister Doreen lives in Blandford in Dorset, there's just the two of us now, she's a treasure.

I am looking at the cost of a flight and accommodation to visit if Covid -19 eases up. When a date is set for the resumption of travel, I can get the ball rolling. Thank you so much, it's like my dad is back for a while. x Jenny

It couldn't get any better than this. I was now connected to youngest daughter of Charles Stanley Pryer, born shortly after the second world war had finally ended. And to think, only a year earlier, her dad was wounded in Germany thankfully surviving his injuries and coming home to resume or perhaps, re-start his post war life. This is the closest blood relative I could have found and, with the help of both, "Kate" at the Loders Primary School and Chuck Willmott from the Local History Group in Loders, I was now acquainted with Jenny Harrington, one of two surviving children of Helen and Charles Stanley Pryer. I replied to my new friend that same day and I committed to her that if she did indeed make the journey "across the pond" I would be honoured to be her tour guide, not just in our museum but also, around Southern Ontario. Niagara Falls, Niagara on the Lake, downtown Toronto and, anywhere else she would like to see. I told her that both my wife and I would find it a pleasure to escort her and her husband Dave during their stay.

Over the next few weeks, Jenny and I reached out to each other regularly. We were becoming intertwined in each others lives, learning about each others families and interests. Although the connection was very enjoyable, it was more information about her dad that I truly yearned to uncover. Eventually, I respectfully asked her if she could either scan or photograph a picture of Charles Stanley

Pryer for me to have. I insisted to her that if she felt uncomfortable about sending something as personal as a family photo, I would truly respect her decision. I already had the family photo that her niece Sue sent me but I longed for a photo of “Stan” in his uniform. Jenny replied, addressing my request. She was very pleased to send a photo of her dad arriving a few days later.



Charles Stanley Pryer – “Whistlin” Stan

The photo is exactly what I had hoped for. My connection with this British Army veteran was now very real. I examined it over and over again, imagining what thoughts were running through his head as his image was being captured in this stained and grainy photograph. I now know that when he left his family to join his fellow soldiers in battle, he was leaving a wife and four children behind, never knowing whether they would ever be reunited. In fact, his granddaughter Sue tells us earlier that Stan’s wife Helen received two cards from the British Army after her husband was wounded. The first one announced that he was missing and presumed “killed” while bravely defending his country. Then, after an undermined period of time passed, Helen was relieved to receive a second card informing her that her once deemed “killed” husband was now deemed “wounded”. There was hope. We also learn from Sue’s previous email that when her grandpa Stan was flying in FZ692, the museum’s Dakota, where he would eventually end up in Scotland producing the family photo she sent. Thinking of the relevance of the second card informing Mrs. Helen Pryer that her husband was wounded in Germany instead of being presumed dead, there would have never been a Jenny Harrington had the first card been accurate.

At this point in time, I only yearned for one more thing from my Jenny. At first, I struggled with this final request I was considering making of this very warm and generous person who I was proud to call my friend. I slept on it for a few nights before I decided to make the request. When I felt comfortable in doing so, I sent Jenny an email defining my curiosity and desire to know as much about Charles Stanley Pryer as I possibly could.

On June twenty-second, I composed an email to Jenny outlining my requests. In the email I asked Jenny, to write me a one-page biography describing in her own words things like: Who was Stan Pryer? What did he do for a living before he was called to serve? How did he meet your mother Helen? What were some of his interests? Was he a happy man?

My desire was to learn as much as I could about Charles Stanley Pryer to help me fulfil my goal of eventually having an information pedestal located under FZ692 displaying a photo of his pencil scrawled words found inside the airplane as well as a photo of Stan himself and lastly, the bio that would be composed by his daughter describing "personal" things about the man she called "Dad", who seventy-six years earlier wanted to leave his mark inside an airplane. I chose my words very carefully, reviewing and re-reviewing them over and over again before I had enough confidence to press the "send" button, which I eventually did later that afternoon.

As the page on my screen informed me that my message was sent, I had second thoughts about this last request. Throughout this project, I realized that because I was so excited to learn more about Charles Stanley Pryer, I may have been insensitive towards how the memories I was conjuring up in both Sue's and Jenny's minds. Perhaps these past couple of months have brought heartache rather than pleasant times. Some people don't do well reliving memories of a lost family member. Nothing up to this point has indicated that either one of my new friends was ever saddened by how things had transpired so I convinced myself that all was good in theirs.

Three short days after I made my most personal request of Jenny Harrington, she replied with the email below:

On Thursday, June 25, 2020, 1:24 PM, Jenny Harrington wrote:

Hi, Mike, Is this the sort of thing you are looking for. ?

Our Dad - Stan Pryer

Dad was born 18/02/1908 in a small village on the edge of Bridport in the County of Dorset. He had a harsh start to life as his Mother died suddenly when he was just six years of age. It's thanks to kind neighbours that he survived at all. His Father, though working spent any money he earnt in the local pub. (public house),

Once he was of age he was not shy of work. Having quite a few jobs before starting work as a delivery boy peddling all over Bridport "up hill and down dale" said Dad. It was whilst delivering to a large house he met our Mum, she was working in the kitchen helping the Cook and would often give Dad a cake or a pie out of the window. Dad said "she always said that's why I married her". When Mum told the Lady of the house she was soon to be married, the Lady said " oh Helen !!! you are not marrying that fool who rides his bicycle with his feet up on the handlebars" she did of course.

Sometime after, Dad started working for Bridport Gundry a large Net & Rope manufacturer who have been making them since the days of King John (1167 -1216) also suppling The Fishing Industry, The Royal Navy, Wimbledon tennis courts, and the infamous Judge Jeffery's Bloody Assizes which followed The Monmouth

Rebellion in 1885, the hangman's noose etcetera being made in Bridport hence the saying hung by The Bridport Dagger.

Dad's years with Bridport Gundry were postponed when he was called up to do his duty in the second world war with the Royal Army Service Corps, their roll was mainly Supply and Transport. At some point he was working as a Driver / *Batman to a Captain Farley, which he said he thoroughly enjoyed. Like a lot of ex-servicemen, he didn't say much else about that time. I do remember as I sat on his lap he would sometimes yelp, " mind my bad leg " (his wounded leg) he showed it to me just once, it was not nice, the shrapnel tore his leg open from his knee to the top of his leg. Other than that he never complained.

*** a soldier assigned to a commissioned officer.**

Our memories of Dad are too many to mention, but to name a few, he was a very keen gardener, we always had vegetables of some sort on the dinner plate, he was very proud of that, he liked a pint or two with a game of darts at the local Pub, he also followed the local Football Team, and finally, Dad whistled where ever he went, oh we must not forget he loved telling anyone who would listen the latest jokes doing the rounds. We miss him very much, but, can honestly say he was very happy with his lot.

bnf for now jenny

When I first read the well crafted and descriptive letter Jenny sent me, I was overwhelmed. The flow of how she wrote it made it seem she was orating the written words. The emotions I could feel that she put into her composition helped solidify my earlier fears of upsetting her were unfounded. She was enjoying sharing the stories of her dad with me likely as much as I was enjoying reading them. Her descriptive words of the man she called "DAD" painted a picture of a very happy man who knew the value of both family and life overall. He demonstrated his loyalty to country, family and self very clearly. Saying I was thrilled with the informative letter Jenny furnished me with would be an understatement and, I knew then there was no more to ask of this lovely English woman who I never knew existed a few months earlier. I conveyed that message to Jenny in my response email and committed to her that I would do everything I possibly could to share with our guests at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum, the memory of a World War Two veteran named Charles Stanley Pryer.

Jenny and I still connect very regularly and she is still committed to come to Canada hopefully in May of 2021 to see what she still refers to as "Dad's Plane". She explains that her husband Dave doesn't travel well any longer so she has a dear friend who has committed to make the trans-Atlantic crossing with her. I hope Jenny fulfills her desire to see her Dad's plane and would be honoured to be with her when she first lays eyes on his hand-written message inside FZ692.

As I close and reflect on this personable story, I am incredibly amazed at how the connection of all of the dots actually happened.

Seventy-six years ago, a soldier wounded in Germany on (27/2/45) scribbled some words on the interior skin of an airplane he was flying back to the U.K. in while likely laying on a stretcher. In his pencil scribed words he gives us his surname, that being "Pryer". He includes the most three important words in his message, those being, Loders, Bridport, Dorset. As a result, in 2015, while the aircraft was being maintained by its previous owners, someone finds these same words. Years later, the airplane changes hands and a volunteer at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum in a place called Mount Hope

Ontario learns about this previous find and is intrigued by it as it begs the question “Has any effort to locate this man or his family members ever been attempted”? He takes it on as a challenge and sends an email to the only place he could locate with a website in the village called Loders in the county of Dorset, England.

A receptionist at a primary school receives this email requesting help in locating this mystery soldier named Pryer or, any of his living descendants. Fortunately, she has the wherewithal to forward it to someone in a much better position to help.

A gentleman who runs the historical society reaches out to this volunteer, asking permission to post the original letter and his contact information on a website.

Five months later, the unimaginable happens. A connection is made and the wounded soldier is resurrected in the heart and mind of a loving daughter who called this great man “DAD”.

All of this originating from the tip of a pencil.

When Driver Pryer left his mark that day, not even he could have expected it would create an emotional journey that would eventually connect his daughter and a Canadian man who she now calls her friend. Thanks for taking me on such a great ride Stan, I’ll never forget you. May you rest in peace for eternity.

A footnote for the reader;

September sixth, 2020 gave us a bright sunny morning. I couldn’t wait for this day to arrive and so much of its outcome depended on the weather. On this day, at ten-thirty a.m., I would be flying in FZ692 an airplane I started to refer to as Jenny’s dad’s plane just as his daughter in Dorchester, England now does. Our restored D-Day Veteran Dakota would be taking eight passengers for a one-hour flight culminating with two right handed rotations around the world famous Niagara Falls and I was fortunate to be one of them.

It became obvious that the only thing left for me to do to help me tie up the last loose-end in my love affair with this iconic aircraft was to actually take a flight in her but, I wouldn’t be doing it alone. This flight would have a ninth passenger that only I and the flight crew would know about.

Before I left home, I printed a hard copy of the photo of Charles Stanley Pryer. Careful not to bend or crease it, I tucked it into an envelope. The ninth passenger would be a stow-away boarding the aircraft hidden from view, in the pocket of my pants. I was the first on-board the aircraft and made my way to the seat that I preferred. From it, I had a great view of the right side Pratt and Whitney R-1830 engine that would eventually deliver twelve-hundred horsepower on command. To the left and slightly upwards,

I had a clear view of DVR Pryer's hand written message on the interior skin. Lastly, I had an unobstructed view of the cockpit and the two experienced and highly professional pilots that would be flying us on this perfect morning.

As the other passengers settled into their seats, I made my way to cockpit. I recognized one of the pilots named Bill Craig. Bill already knew about my connection with the daughter of Driver Pryer. Seated beside Bill was Steve MacIntosh whom I'd never met prior to that morning. I reached into my pocket and carefully pulled out the photo of Stan. I introduced them to Charles Stanley Pryer and asked them to honour his memory by allowing him to ride in the cockpit with them. They obliged my request and before I left to take my seat, I asked them to pose for a photo with Stan so I could send it to his daughter Jenny as a keepsake from this special flight.



Bill Craig (left) and Steve MacIntosh inside the cockpit of FZ692 with Charles Stanley Pryer's photo Sept. 6, 2020

I buckled myself into my seat as the door was being closed. I could hear Bill and Steve going through the pre-start checklist. Moments later, I heard the words "right engine start" and with that, I watched the propeller start to rotate from my window. Immediately, the Pratt and Whitney R-1830 engine roared to life. Seconds later, the left engine joined it and shortly, we would officially be on our way.

As I sat in my seat, listening the purr of the engines, I looked around the cabin of the aircraft. With my imagination, I re-created what I believed the cabin looked like during that medical flight back to the U.K. those many, many years ago. It brought a smile to my face and it warmed my heart because all of the passengers aboard that day had survived being wounded in battle and were heading out of harm's way, some to reunite with people who loved them very much.

Lastly, as I looked forward I could see into the cockpit where Stan was riding along in the very capable hands of Bill and Steve. A glance to the left and a little upward, my eyes connected with Stan's written message, in plain view above the head of the woman passenger sitting across from me. Reminiscing in my seat, I thought about the first time I laid eyes on this beautiful bird on that Valentine's Day in 2019. My task was completed. For the first time in my sixty-three years of life, I fulfilled my New Years resolution resulting in a very rewarding experience.

I made new friends that I long to meet one day and, I made a connection with a man who I will never have the honour of meeting in this lifetime. He was the catalyst that connected me with these new friends and for that, I will always remember him. Charles Stanley Pryer, I hope you enjoyed your ride in FZ692 and I thank you for taking me along with you,... my friend.



Mike Tabone September 6, 2020