

HOWARD & MARY WITHERS

Mentions in [The Daily Herald-Tribune](#), Grande Prairie, Alberta, Canada

Pe♥ple

Keith **Withers** has been elected president of the 31-member Grande Prairie 4-H beef club. Other executive members include vice-president **Bill Doll**, secretary **Trudy Diederich**, treasurer **Janet Bulford**, and reporter **Danny Lange**. Leader is again **Neil Moon** and committee chairmen include **Joan McNally** for entertainment, **Mary Withers** for the canteen, **Mrs. Marcy**, **Mrs. Friesen**, **James and Charles Doll**. Junior leaders include **Everett McDonald**, **Bill Doll**, **Trudy Diederich**, **Janet Bulford**, **Ernie Lange**, **Keith Withers**, **Dana Marcy**, **Dianne Marcy**.

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Subdivision ruling overturned

By BRUCE MASTERMAN
of our staff

The Provincial Planning Board has reversed a decision by the Peace River Regional Planning Commission and allowed subdivision of five acres of farmland near Grande Prairie for use as a home site.

The PRRPC had said application for subdivision of the land parcel by Howard Withers was to establish a country residence and therefore was not suitable on land which had prime soil characteristics.

The land parcel is located on a quarter-section about 11 miles north-east of Grande Prairie.

Mr. Withers had asked the PRRPC to approve the subdivision because he wanted to build a house on the five-acre parcel to assist in his farming operation.

He said he intended to attain the balance of the quarter-section and later consolidate it with the five-acre parcel to facilitate the establishment of his own independent farming operation.

However, the board said,

Mr. Withers would require mortgage funds to establish himself on the land and to secure this loan he would require title to the five-acre parcel.

In reversing the PRRPC's decision, the Provincial Planning Board said Mr. Withers must meet all conditions set down by the County of Grande Prairie.

These include the construction of internal roads, approaches, and accesses with gravel and the installation of culverts at no cost to the county.

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'No heroes - just numbers'

Bezanson's Howard Withers recounts his luck, his duty and his comrades on the 60th anniversary of VE Day

Story and photos by Kevin Crush

Old photos courtesy of Howard Withers



Howard Withers flew a full tour of 33 missions with Bomber Command during the Second World War.

Over 60 years ago, Howard Withers found himself at the end of a gun turret.

Staring down into near darkness, in the blackouts only the rivers were lit up by the moonlight, he waited for the German fighters to attack. Sometimes his plane would land pocked full of holes, sometimes his turret was shelled mercilessly, yet he never got touched.

Thirty-three missions in Bomber Command, a unit notorious for people lasting just a few missions, and after 60 years Withers doesn't believe he did anything special. It was, after all, just his duty.

"No, you're no damn hero, you're just another number," said Withers from his Bezanson-area farm.

All he feels is lucky to have made it through the Second World War, which celebrates the 60th anniversary of VE Day on Saturday.

Luck must have had something to do with his getting through it. Despite sometimes being riddled by German bullets, all anyone on the seven-member crew of his Lancaster bomber experienced were close calls.

"The pilot just about got shot. The flak came up between his legs, cut his tie off here, cut his face, and went out through the roof," said Withers, pointing to a pair of spots along his chest.

"The navigator had to have a curtain around him so no light would come out. The flak came up and hit the curtain and slapped him in the face once. I had lots of holes in my turret but I never got touched."

Part of their luck may actually have been Withers' doing. With a high mortality rate in Bomber Command, everyone was forced to write a will. At 20 years old and coming to the war to find a decent wage, there's nothing to will to anyone. He and navigator Dave Sower hatched a plan.

"They wanted you to make out a will. So I wrote mine to the navigator, and he willed his to me. If he went missing, I got his motorcycle. And if I went missing, he got mine."

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Withers' Lancaster crew. Back row (from left): bombardier J.H. Wright, wireless operator J. Riddell, flight engineer H.W. Cooke, navigator Dave Sower. Front row: mid-upper gunner W. Alan Galsburgh, pilot Ken Fraser, tail gunner Howard Withers.



A Lancaster bomber

Howard Withers remembers

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There were some missions where after they landed, the pair would actually check to see if they had just gained some new property.

Born and raised in the Grande Prairie area, Withers wasn't even 18 when he enlisted for service in 1941, lying about his age to get in. Going to war wasn't about looking for adventure, or even about wanting to beat the enemy. For Withers, it was about where his next paycheck would come from.

"We were young and there was no jobs here. What were the wages at the time? In the wintertime I worked for a tin of tobacco a month and board."

The military, at least, paid him \$1 a day. Not much, but it was something.

Making the decision to join the Royal Air Force was practically a given for Withers.

"I didn't want to walk and I sure didn't want to be in a submarine," he said with a laugh.

Withers finally left Halifax bound for England on March 29, 1944. His crossing was made on the Andes, a ship made for Caribbean cruises and carrying 6,000 troops. It was an old ship, and sometimes its a wonder that it made the journey.

"The ships went that way and this way to fool the U-boats, well we had to cut across because we couldn't keep up, but she got us there anyways."

Joining 100 Squadron 1 Group of Bomber Command as a tail gunner, Withers first operation was on Oct. 22, 1944, on a bombing run to Stuttgart. Over the next few months he was sent on 33 operations across Europe, once even laying high-tech mines from the air

in the ocean near Kiel, and finally ending his tour on April 14, 1945, with a mission on Berlin.

Faced in such situations, the mentality of duty just takes over.

"We weren't scared, especially after the first couple of ops. You started to get used to it," he said.

"You've got to realize this whole crew was only 20 years old. We were just kids."

"They used to say the life of a tail gunner was 2-3 minutes, but that was after the plane was attacked. Either you got them or they got you."

The Germans were tough, and Withers gives them their due respect.

"The Germans put up a lot of resistance, they were a good enemy. And they still build good machinery."

Operations were long, lonely times. Sometimes they would be in the air for upwards of 10 hours, zigzagging across the continent so as not to give away their target. Flying at night, the cities below were always blacked out, leaving nothing for Withers to look at while watching for fighters except some moonlit rivers.

"It was quite a thing to get up, take off, and not see a thing for 10 hours until you get back to your own aerodrome."

There were rough times in the air, but Withers gets a gleam in his eye when he remembers what he got up to while off-duty. Pub crawl, he said. That and riding their motorbikes.

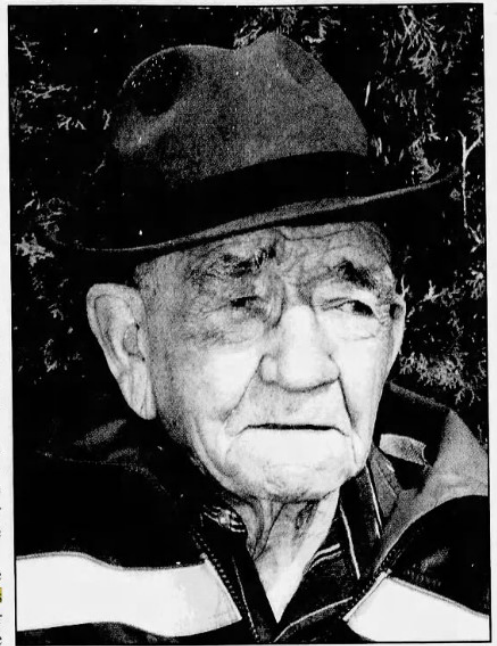
In the 1940s, a motorcycle would set you back \$30. Not bad, but the problem was gas was rationed, so fuel was scarce – unless you

were like Withers and knew how to improvise.

"Under the plane of the Lanky (Lancaster), there's a vent tube there. You give a pull on that and it will puke out another few gallons. So I got a sidecar so you could pack more gas in beer bottles. And I always carried a siphon hose with me. I was underneath the CO's car with a siphon hose in there and he came out, crawled in, I pulled the siphon out and he drove away."

After the guns fell silent in Europe, Withers volunteered for duty in the South Pacific, but the war was over there before he could arrive.

Now 60 years since the end of that war, Withers still sees himself as never having been a hero. He was, after all, just doing his duty.



Howard Withers

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