

My Uncle Jack RCAF, Lost and Found in WW II Bahamas

The pilots, John (Jack) Wood and Maurice (Morris) Francis O'Neill of the 113th Unit, RCAF, took off at Windsor Field at Oakes Airforce base outside Nassau, Bahamas for their 5th practice circuit that morning in a B26 Marauder, on 17 October 1944. Morris, 27 single from Halifax, was the co-pilot. Uncle Jack was 28 year old new father to a 9 month old son who I met briefly 50 years ago but sadly was not able to share this story with him in person but I have reached out to his family.



In the Covid fall of 2021, Eric returned to his family home in the Bahamas and dived every chance he could – weather permitting – to find the location he remembered long ago and there he found more encrusted aircraft pieces over the weeks. He retrieved, photographed and documented the artifacts submerged for 77 years.

On Remembrance Day 2021, Eric reached out to me on Ancestry, while doing his research and sent me the photo below with a poppy and an artifact from the plane that he placed on Uncle Jack's memorial at the airbase. This summer, when we finally met up in person, I was given that poppy and I put it on the page in the book with the picture, documented for my family's history.

Eric donated 45 of the recovered artifacts to (AMMC) the National Antiquities, Monuments & Museum Corporation of Bahamas where an exhibit will follow.



Jack Wood and Maurice O'Neill's aircraft was found in November, so the first piece of their aircraft fuselage and memorial poppy for Remembrance Day were brought to the RAF Cemetery nearby to commemorate them.

Eyewitness Dr. H.A. Quackenbush in his

report, noticed the craft appeared to be in difficulty as it disappeared from the control tower's detection only the black smoke from the starboard engine keeping up a steady trail to indicate where the craft ditched tail-first into a heavy swell 400 yards from shore at 10.25 am. Rescue was swift, but futile for the officers.

In the early 1980s, a young man, Eric Wiberg, living in the Bahamas, found some interesting pieces embedded in the sand while snorkeling near his family home. It piqued his interest again 40 years later— now as a historian, and author of 20-plus books on local history and things military and navy. He made note of the location of the crash against the military records and found it was near his family home and continued his research.

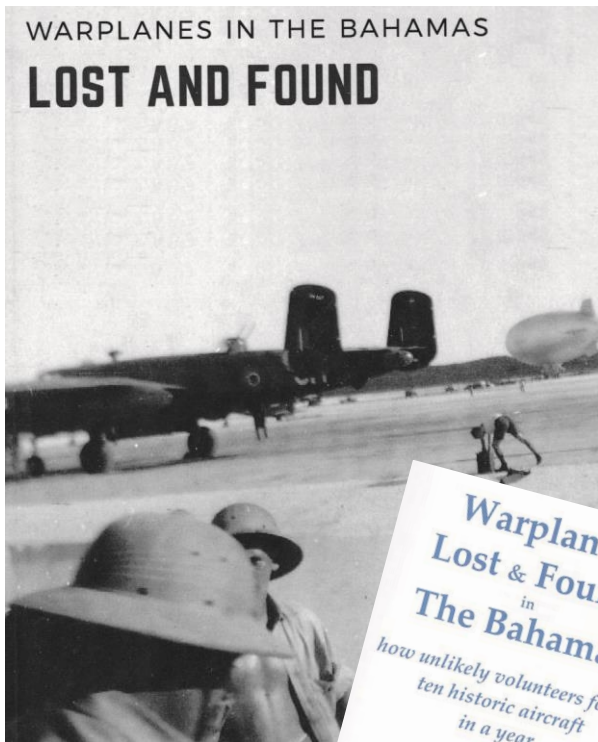
Eric at Cable Beach with his trusty inflatable *Clementine* and artifacts recovered that dive.

As a maritime man who has sailed and skippered every type of ship and tanker around the world, and who has written numerous books and articles about the Bahama's nautical role in WW II, Eric turned his research to aircraft with this information and that was the beginning of a year-long quest to find more and write about it!!

With the aid of over 100 volunteers, and the support of grateful descendents like myself, Eric continued his sensitive blend of family history and nautical research, uncovering story after story of the military personnel and their families. Like me, they had little or no knowledge of the events or the aftermath of these events, and by reaching out to the families, it has provided a whole new understanding to the lives of our families, and for myself and family, closure.

During the following months, Eric pursued nine more aircraft. He researched,

located and verified items with the help of those knowledgeable in identifying aircraft remains, reading military records and maps and he listened to local folk, many who had their stories to add. I loved the one about the silk parachutes recovered which were turned into wedding dresses and baptism clothes sewn for babies.



Eric documented the events, the generosity of those who lent boats, equipment and their time in the quest. I was happy to assist in looking up military files, finding family to contact, and to support this effort which enhanced my own skills. Usually a historian who collects the information in a scholarly report, Eric's involvement adds another level with his own "boots on the ground" having the passion to find the information and pass it on to the families of the servicemen and women.

And too it expands! I had read about Sir Harry Oakes, the Canadian millionaire who mined gold in Kirkland Lake and lived in the Bahamas. He offered some of his land to expand the airport for the war effort on the island.

This was also the time of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor in Nassau as the governor during the war years, and hollywood movie stars who discovered the beauty and solitude of the island.

Charlotte Gray, in her book *Murdered Midas: A Milionaire, His Gold Mine and A Strange Death on an Island Paradise* wrote about the still unsolved murder of Sir Harry Oakes, and I realized that Dr. Quackenbush who was at the crime scene then was the same man who had witnessed my uncle's B26 crash in the ocean the next year and gave his testimony in the RCAF accident report. I love our family history connections! 2, it seems – is the new "6 degrees of separation"!

Joanne Green, Wellington Branch, 19 November 2023
Ontario Ancestors GreenHistorySearch@gmail.com