

The Putnam Lake Schoonover Cousins Brigade



July 21, 2012, I led my Putnam cousins to the lake named after their Uncle Max, a gunner killed during his first bomber night mission over France in 1943. There's 3,800 lakes, rivers, bays etc among northern Saskatchewan's 100,000 pristine lakes honouring armed forces personnel who had their lives taken. A year ago, curious, I had sought out the lake on a topographic map - and was startled to see that it was accessible by canoe! Thus was the trip born.



It's a gorgeous lake and we spent the first full day there absorbing the pure, clean atmosphere, shedding civilization, and honouring his memory. I drank right out of the lake.



Max was a handsome lad (note the extra jaunty tilt of his beret) of only 21 when he augged in and his last moments must have been a terrifying blur. It's not known if ack-ack or a night fighter shot them down. He was late ejecting. I've said it before: we're so damned lucky to be born when we did, a generation that didn't face death at its most pathetic and stupid in a muddy WW-I trench, or pioneer hardship, the Depression or a major war - rather we inherited the greatest Golden Age in history. And it's thanks, in turn, to the generation which included Max Sr. which had to face challenges we can't imagine.



It was an emotional time as the family shared what they knew about him and tears were shed. As they surely were on the family farm (which third generation Greg today operates) on a frozen, depressing February day on the Canadian prairies in 1943 when the dreaded telegram arrived, the predecessor (now lost) of this one. There was no rural electricity in those days and it was probably read and re-read, painfully and through searing anxiety, to a coal oil lamp. You can imagine the impact it had....



CANADIAN PACIFIC TELEGRAPHS

World Wide Communications

C.D. 1 X

W.D. NEIL, GENERAL MANAGER OF COMMUNICATIONS, MONTREAL

KN..A.....40/39-2exa GB report dely
RCAF Ottawa Ont July 14th 7.12 am

Ben Putnam
Watson Sask.

M 9870, Deeply regret to advise that your son Sergeant
Max Ernest Putnam reported missing believed killed overseas
is for official purposes presumed to have died January
twenty sixth nineteen forty three stop please accept my
profound sympathy

RCAF Casualties Office.

915a



OUR FILE 1022-P-3444 (R.O.4)

REF. YOUR.....

DATED.....

ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE

OTTAWA, Canada, 2nd February, 1943.

A I R M A I L

Mr. Ben Putman,
Watson,
Saskatchewan.

Dear Mr. Putman:

It is my painful duty to confirm the telegram recently received by you which informed you that your son, Sergeant Max Ernest Putman, is reported missing on Active Service.

Advice has been received from the Royal Canadian Air Force Casualties Officer, Overseas, that your son was a member of the crew of an aircraft which failed to return to its base after a bombing raid over enemy territory on the night of January 26th and the early morning of January 27th, 1943. There were five other members of the Royal Canadian Air Force in the crew and they also have been reported missing. Since you may wish to know their names and next-of-kin we are listing them below:

Sergeant K.G. Vallis,
Next-of-kin, Mr. E. Vallis (father)
2053 Queen Street, Regina, Saskatchewan.

Sergeant V.F. McHarg,
Next-of-kin, Mr. J.M. McHarg (father)
St. Gregor, Saskatchewan.

Sergeant A.G. Ingram,
Next-of-kin, Mr. A.J. Ingram (father)
Wrentham, Alberta.

Sergeant W.A.L. Masterman,
Next-of-kin, Mr. J.B. Masterman (father)
7341 Granville Street, Vancouver, B.C.

... 2 ...

Sergeant A.C. Riach,
Next-of-kin, Mr. C.C. Riach (father)
2721 Retallack Street, Regina, Saskatchewan.

I desire to point out that this does not necessarily mean that your son has been killed or wounded. It might be that he is a prisoner of war and inquiries have been made through the International Red Cross Society and all other appropriate sources. Official announcement that your son has been reported missing will not be made through the Press for at least five weeks and, until then, you are requested not to give any information to the Press or Radio. It is possible that he has landed in enemy territory and in that event publicity at this time might imperil his chance to escape.

You may be assured that any further information received will be communicated to you immediately.

May I join with you and Mrs. Putman in the hope that better news will be forthcoming in the near future.

Yours sincerely,

W.R. Gunn
W.R. Gunn
Flight Lieutenant,
R.C.A.F. Casualties Officer,
for Chief of the Air Staff.

A I R M I N I S T R Y

.73-77 Oxford St. London W.1

11th February, 1943.

CAN/R107016/P4/CAS


Dear Mrs. Putnam:

It is with deep regret that I must confirm the information which you have already received from Air Force Headquarters, Ottawa, which stated that your son, Sergeant Max Ernest Putnam, was reported missing as the result of air operations on the night of 26th/27th January, 1943.

Your son was the Wireless Operator Air Gunner of a Wellington aircraft which took off on an operational flight over enemy territory on the above mentioned date and failed to return. Information received from the International Red Cross Committee quoting German information stated that three members of the crew, Sergeant Vallis, Sergeant Riach and Sergeant Ingram, were prisoners of war in Germany but no mention was made of your son or the other two members of the crew. If any information is received concerning your son it will be forwarded to you immediately.

Please accept my deepest sympathy with you in your great anxiety.

Sincerely,


(Milton A. Foss) Flight Lieutenant,
R.C.A.F. Casualties Officer,
for Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief,
Royal Canadian Air Force, Overseas.

Mrs. B. Putnam,
Watson,
Saskatchewan,
C A N A D A.



The French farmers who found him reported he didn't have a bruise and looked peaceful. The Wellington had created a nearby crater. The Gestapo nixed an honour guard but the Weirmacht sent a delegation to the funeral. Leanna and her late dad Joe visited the grave in 1996, and about eight years ago the surviving and ex-POW member of the flight crew visited the family farm in Watson, a small town about 100 miles east of Saskatoon.



The family installed a bronze plaque. L-R Jason "Capt. Magnus Twat" Schoonover, Tanner "Red Cooler" Kellett, Greg "Dumper" Putnam, Chris "Scoop" Putnam, Max Putnam, Leanna "Hooker" Putnam and Lynn Putnam Robertson. The above Max is named after his uncle. Perhaps not coincidentally, January 26 is Max Jr's birthday. It's being registered as a geocache site. This same photo the family kindly blew up and framed for me.



This is the second time I've had the honour of leading a family onto a lake named after a family member sacrificed in WW-II. In 2005 I guided the Pennycook clan, childhood friends from Carrot River. Their uncle was a provost on the Italian front killed in a motorcycle accident. It, too, was an emotional time for the family, and a plaque was also attached. Doug Chisholm, whose magnificent passion is honouring these fallen warriors, flew in to help attach the plaque and head a service, including the sounding of taps. That family has since been back to the lake.



Putnam Lake is a two day's paddle north of Black Bear Island Lake, part of the fabulous Churchill River chain, and it was a challenge getting out. The portages, dating back to the fur trade and beyond, were badly overgrown and had to be reopened, and in one case it was so bad that lining the canoes down a long stretch of wild water was preferable. It was hard work and a hot day - well over 90F/30C - and I set a record for water consumption: an entire gallon!



But it got easier as we approached the Churchill and there were some fun little rapids to shoot.



Once on Black Bear Island Lake, we had favourable winds and popped up the sail to the delight of all. "How often do you sail?" Hooker asked (Leanna's last two relationships

were with Johns, tagging her obviously as a streetwalker). "Every chance we get," I laughed.



We had the added pleasure of having a descendent of famed Hudson Bay Company explorer and mapmaker Peter Fidler along in the form of 17-year-old Tanner "Red Cooler" Ens. (Unable to paddle due to a shoulder operation, thus rendering him a passenger, he replaced our red cooler.) I pointed out to Red that his illustrious ancestor trod and mapped this very portage on the Churchill, and brought a copy of one of the many hand drawn maps he had done along the Churchill. M.G. MacGregor's *Peter Fidler - The Forgotten Explorer 1769-1822* is the best book.



Talking about river names, Greg - Dumper - got his when he dumped not once, but twice. The first time it was in Lower Birch Rapids, an easy #1+...if you're paying more attention to shooting a picture and go in at a 45-degree angle. That's 17-year-old Trystan aka "Try Stan" executing a skillful canoe T-rescue. I haven't seen a young person with so much bush and canoe craft since, well, I was a kid when the wonderful Stan Perkins, our Boy Scout Akayla in the late '50s, taught me so much about the outdoors, from knots and first aid, to how to trim trees safely with an axe and pass a knife properly, to finding dry firewood when it's raining (it's dead and standing, or under pine and spruce trees, including birch bark which burns even when wet). That Try Stan was a strapping 6'6" also came in handy setting up the tarp on a day threatening rain.



The second time Dumper dumped was just three hours later when pulling up to shore after fishing. Dumper was, like me, a skinny kid. "I grew 11 inches one year," he said. I replied, "I remember one year I grew six inches. I think I was 12." The boys loved my disgusting sense of humour. Actually, I love my disgusting sense of humour too. I never know what's going to pop out and enjoy it too.



07/29/2012 06:35AM

After 37 miles we reached our last campsite at the bottom of Trout Lake (part of the Churchill chain) where we had some Yank good ol' boys from Billings, Montana, on a fly in fishing trip join us for dinner. We served up walleye chowder and bannock; they cold, cold, cold Bud light. Ice cold.



07/27/2012 01:45AM

We had three days of the week long adventure off to relax and enjoy and I naturally set up my trusty hammock. Wade's book is highly recommended to anyone interested in Mallory and Mt. Everest, a tour-de-force.



Then Osprey Wings' Turbo Otter and Beaver flew in to fly the brigade out.



But I stayed to solo the last 45 miles to Missinipe along a favorite stretch of the Churchill. I treasure those days a year when I get to carry on a dialogue only with myself, laugh at my own inane thoughts, and breath in the solitude through every pore of my being. I never feel alone because Nature is alive everywhere. It's a time to recharge the batteries for another year, to rebalance. And I thank Nature for that.



I travelled light, able to portage in two moves. I just love our 14'6" Bell Yellowstone Solo. It's like a sports car, highly manoeuvrable, fast, sexy and weights only 43 pounds. I can't imagine a better solo canoe, just a pleasure to paddle, but they've sadly gone gunwales up, outta biz. . I once pitched a menage-a-trois to The Dragon Lady, but she just sighed and went back to her book. I just don't understand women....



I lucked out on weather the first few days, with a following breeze to help me up the long reach of Trout Lake. Among the islands at the top, I found this fabulous 5-star campsite.



I've never passed a willow tree since I was 10-years-old, the age at which I'm happily developmentally arrested, without looking for the perfect slingshot. My two most treasured possessions back in 1956 were the slingshot (which I still have) in a back pocket of my jeans, and a jackknife (still have too). Well, along with my bike and the ball glove (that too) swinging from the handle bars. In half a century of looking, this is the best slingshot I've found, a real beauty!



5-star campsites line the Churchill. That's Rock Trout Portage and campsite across the river, taken from the island splitting the river. Here, I had the most dangerous encounter of my life - and I've been charged by a bull elephant in a Thai jungle and crashed through the windshield of a truck. At 2am I awoke to the rustle of mice in my tent vestibule. I slapped the tent side, sending them scurrying. A bit hungry, I unzipped the door and reached out for my trail mix, in a plastic bag. Reaching inside, I pulled out a small handful of gorp and popped it into my mouth. But before I swallowed, I recalled that last year mice had chewed through the plastic of my map case. I shone my headlamp on the bag. A hole the size of a fingernail had been chewed through. But worse - through a clear plastic window in the bag, there was a frightened mouse trapped inside! The top had been left open! Worse still - it was a *deer mouse*! Worse worse still - I could see a mouse turd! *Deer mice carry deadly Hantavirus!* I spat out the gorp and rinsed out my mouth several times. Gestation period is 1-6 weeks, it's fatal at least of 30% of the time, and they've been reported as far north as Fort MacMurray, Alberta - which was north of me. That's all I need. To be felled by a bloody mouse.... (Stay tuned. If this is the last blah blah, it's because I'm a croaker. I'm seeing my doc to see if I should have a blood test for antibodies.)



This is the fourth time I've stopped at this other, and tiny, island I call Squirrel Island after a tame squirrel we encountered on our first run with Ted Skibinsky and the Welsh boys in '97. It's a favorite of mine.

I was planning to take a day off but the weather changed dramatically. It started with a thunderstorm, a common, often daily event here with all these lakes, rolling and rumbling through, and then sky cleared. I didn't know that was just the lull.



There's a nearby fishing hole where I never fail to land all the walleye I want and after discarding a 4 pound jack and a smaller pickerel, I landed this one just as the deep, loud, ominous rumble of thunder fired up again. I looked up. The sky was black towards the entire and dreaded northeast. The east is where all dirty weather comes from. It was enormous, black as Hades and the continuous rumbles were already all but vibrating the waters. I hurried back to camp, quickly filleted and fried the fish and - incredibly - just as I finished washing dishes and dived into my tent, the Storm from Hell exploded.



In minutes it was raging like a Thai typhoon. Lightning and Hiroshima-class thunder were simultaneous and continuous, lightning striding over me, a Banshee wind scalloped the waters, and rain so thick blasted that visibility was cut to 30 feet. Fortunately we have a great tent (MEC Wanderer II) and I was warm and dry throughout the assault.



It raged for over an hour, making me fearful of both lightning strikes and blow downs, the latter an even greater danger, before settling back to just a pounding rain. In two hours, it left a foot of water in my bow. Unfortunately, it had introduced a major, black, weather system change. I've been coming up here long enough to know that when a heavy system like this blasts in from the east, it's going to lock in for three days, so, reluctantly, I paddled out over the next two (though I did have some good weather moments).



Back in Missinipi and at Osprey Wings to settle the flight bill, I visited Mister, clearly a descendant of my beloved 54-Heinz Stokely that I brought from Vancouver in 1970 when I moved to Saskatoon. Being a slut, she had a litter a year later and they all looked like her. I had to find her a home because the dry prairie climate fired up my allergies, but I loved that dog. She was so intelligent I could teach her anything in 20 minutes, sensitive, gentle, polite, intuitive and kind. And Mister even has her shy mannerisms. She belongs to Garry Jr., son of Osprey Wings' owner, Garry Sr. Mister's seven now, a chip off the ol' block.... And thanks to Garry Sr. for the kind gift of two of his wonderful outdoor prints which he signed for me.



It was a great, great trip - rounding up the Schoonover side cousins for a significant excursion - and one doesn't get too many chances in a lifetime to do that. For us, this probably will be it. But it well may launch a tradition of new generations flying into the special family lake - Putnam Lake. Many thanks to Lynn No River Name Robertson for the bottle of Bruichladdich Islay she brought me before the trip, and to the whole brigade for the bottle of Lagavulin-16 Islay which Hooker delivered after I returned to civilization, along with the framed photo which will find a place in my garret. I'm a little dumb for not wondering why everyone kept asking, "What was the name of that favorite Scotch of yours again...?" But then, I'm just a 10-year-old kid. All is very much appreciated. As was the trip. A Cousins Adventure I'll always treasure.