

Consolidated Liberator VI “46-27”,
as flown by its Bombardier, F/O Pete Sianchuk



159 Squadron operated Liberators out of RAF Digri (India) from 1942 to 1945

Flying Officer Pete Sianchuk's Tour in Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) 159 Squadron – Royal Air Force January - July 1945

Pete Sianchuk – eventually my Dad - was a farmer in Saskatchewan when he decided to join up in the spring of 1943. His choice of service was the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). His training in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan took him to various bases in Canada, including Regina (enlistment) and Dafoe, Saskatchewan (# 5 Air Gunnery & Bombing School), Winnipeg, Manitoba (Air Navigation) and, finally, Boundary Bay, British Columbia, for training on the B-24 Liberator at 5 Operational Training Unit. He graduated as a qualified B-24 Air Bomber, aka Bombardier, in August, 1944.

Off to India

A posting to SEAC followed and, in January, 1945, after a brief stop at 6 RAF Familiarization Unit in Kolar, India, he joined 159 Squadron (RAF) at Digri, just west of Calcutta. He flew his first operational sortie in February, 1945.

The primary mission of 159 Squadron was bombing Japanese-held targets in Burma, now Myanmar. While Dad comments in his photo album that it was considered to be something of a cold war by this time, losses of aircraft and crews on operations still happened. The air threat was now minimal, and the Sperry ventral ball turret was removed in the field in order to save weight and drag. However, the Japanese anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) units still shot back. On one occasion, Dad remembered a post-flight inspection finding an 88 mm shell hole in a wing of his aircraft; fortunately, it hadn't hit anything solid enough to set off the fuse... or maybe the fuse malfunctioned. In any event, it was a graphic reminder that bombing in Burma could be hazardous to one's health!

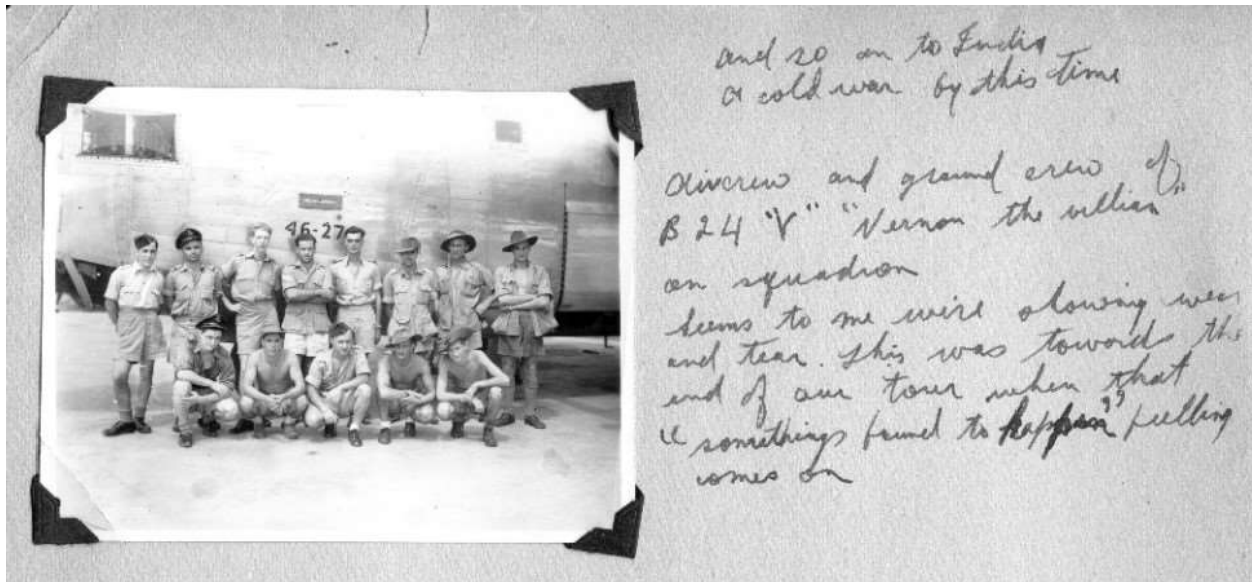
The usual 159 mission set out across the Bay of Bengal, a journey of several hours, depending on one's target; mission times run anywhere between eight and fifteen hours in Dad's Log Book. The most common targets were railroad bridges on the lines running north out of Rangoon - as it was known in those days. In such cases, the attack altitude was 800 feet, hence, the fairly common experience of coming back with anti-aircraft artillery damage to one's aircraft. One such target

was, in fact, the infamous bridge on the River Kwai. Apparently, the movie was set in a period just after a 'visit' by 159 Squadron!

Other targets and missions included airfields, shipping, mine laying and supply drops. One of the photos in Dad's album features a ship, apparently an oil tanker, with a towering column of black smoke...a direct hit from 6000'! For missions ranging farther into southeast Asia, the squadron would deploy to Akjap, a forward operating base on the west coast of Burma. Such missions would include targets as far afield as Siam (Thailand), Laos, Vietnam and the South China Sea.

Of course, much of war is just waiting, even while airborne. On a fourteen-hour mission, for example, a crew would spend mere minutes on the target run. Occasionally, if there wasn't any AAA, they would do some photography for post-strike assessment but, otherwise, most of the mission was spent in transit. Sometimes, aircraft were simply never heard from again. Dad got to see how this could happen in pretty innocuous circumstances one night.

They had hit the target and were on the return leg of the mission; it was now the middle of the night as the B-24 droned west across the Bay of Bengal. In his role as Bombardier, Dad happened to be passing some of the time making adjustments to his Mark XVI bomb sight, a fairly hi-tech piece of gear. While looking through the sights at the waves below, he noticed that the wave pattern, which had been perpendicular to their westward direction, had now become parallel to their course. There having been no notice of changes in the forecast winds in the mission brief, he decided to just check "upstairs" with the flight crew - two pilots, a flight engineer and a navigator. When he got up to the cockpit, he found everyone fast asleep and the aircraft compass pointing north - towards the Himalayas!? The aircraft was on autopilot but with a slight right wing down attitude and so was turning very slowly to the right. They might not have hit the mountains but the Liberator did not have an infinite range and thus could easily have ended up running out of gas either over some remote jungle or else far out at sea!



"Aircrew and ground crew of B24 "V" "Vernon the Villain" on squadron. Seems to me we're showing wear and tear. This was towards the end of our tour when that 'something's bound to happen' feeling comes on." ... Flying Officer Pete Sianchuk, standing, second from the left.

... and back home

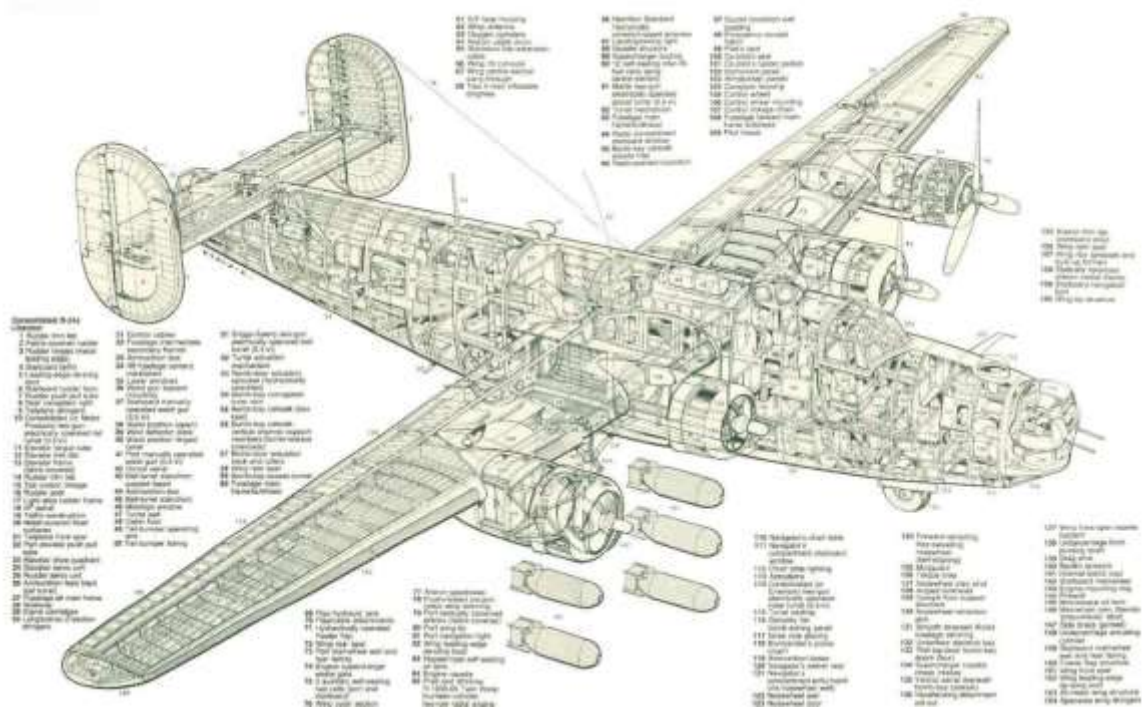
While battle fatigue was even then becoming known, as in Dad's caption to the photo above, he and his crew did survive the war. In December, 1945, after transiting by ocean liner from India to England, and awaiting repatriation in England, he met my mother, Sheila; they married in January, 1946 and she followed him out to Saskatchewan in August of that year. They spent the rest of their lives on the old family homestead, Dad passing in 1982 and Mom in 1995. As Mom had also experienced some of the Nazi bombing of England, I'm guessing they both decided they had seen enough of the world and so were completely committed to that old farm, which made it an oasis of calm for my siblings and myself,

**Laurence Sianchuk
Major (Retired), RCAF**

Consolidated Liberator VI



A Consolidated Liberator Mk.VI, RAF Digri, circa 1944; note the absence of the ventral turret





F/O Pete Sianchuk is standing, second from the left



"Vernon the Villain"



The Consolidated Liberator VI was the RAF designation for the B-24H and early B-24Js, the first production versions of the aircraft to be built with a nose turret. As with the earlier Liberator III, the British replaced the tail turret with a Boulton Paul four-gun turret but retained the American nose and dorsal turrets. This was the most numerous RAF version of the Liberator, with over 1,100 being delivered from late in 1943.

The majority of these aircraft served as B.VI bombers. Five Coastal Command squadrons used the type from bases in Britain, operating the Liberator GR. *(Gilles' note: GR is an acronym for "Great Range")* Mk VI, carrying centimetric radar in place of the ball turret, or neither, as in the case of units in India:



Liberator B.Mk VI(EW267) "Wandering Witch". 355 Bomber Squadron, RAF. Baza Salbani, India, 1945 r.

My note: the 159 Squadron Liberator VI did not have the Sperry ventral ball turret, as fear from fighter attack was at a minimum by late 1943 until the end of WWII.

In all, the Liberator VI equipped 36 squadrons of the RAF, SAAF and RCAF, performing a wide range of duties from bases in Britain, India, and Italy.

Gallery











Model: 1:48 Monogram B-24J Liberator 5608; initial issue: 1976; a true pleasure to build. This venerable kit includes the tow tractor.

SEAC decals: Aviaeology Decals Canadian Overseas Catalinas at Ceylon, 48013

Model dimensions: 27.5" x 16.75" x 4.5"; **display case footprint:** 26.75" x 26.75"

