

COMMEMORATING ELDON KEARL

Imperial honours Second World War Canadian pilot –
namesake of its new oil sands development By Margo Pfeiff

The first threads connecting Flight Lieutenant Eldon Eastham Kearl of 408 Squadron with the largest single undertaking in Imperial Oil's history appeared in 1950. It was then that Canada's post-war government renamed a northern Alberta lake in honour of a decorated serviceman who was killed in action.

Eldon Kearl was a 24-year-old Second World War Canadian air force pilot when he and his crew crashed near Berlin aboard a Lancaster bomber in 1944. When Muskeg Lake north of Fort McMurray, Alberta, became Kearl Lake in honour of the Distinguished Flying Cross recipient, it lay in the heart of wilderness. Today it is on the site of the Kearl oil sands project, which will operate for more than 40 years, recovering an estimated total of 4.6 billion barrels of bitumen.

And for a 132-year-old company that was part of wartime efforts and continues to commemorate Imperial employees who fought and died in wars, the connection holds a special significance.

In 2005, Imperial learned that there were still Kearls living in Alberta. A company representative invited Eldon's brother, Harold Kearl, to a Fort McMurray meeting about the proposed development. "They wanted to honour the man who is the project's namesake," says Harold, now 90 and living in Calgary, "and they thought it fitting that

a Kearl be there." It was the start of a long relationship between Harold Kearl and the oil company.

By mid-2013, when the project will begin producing roughly 110,000 barrels daily, all access roads within the facility will be named after Eldon Kearl and his crew members. A memorial will also be unveiled. "It's appropriate

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that those who will enjoy future benefits are reminded of the sacrifices made for our freedom by the men and women of the Canadian armed forces," says Gary Silgard, operations manager. "It's an honour for us at Imperial to

be associated with the Kearl name."

The tribute is also an honour for Harold, a Second World War pilot himself, who followed in his older brother's footsteps. Three years apart, the two boys grew up in southern Alberta and when they weren't doing chores on the family farm they hiked, fished and camped between Chief Mountain in Montana and their hometown of Cardston. Harold remembers his brother as a calm and thoughtful fellow, a good dancer popular with girls. During high school, Eldon worked part-time as an assistant to the town tailor.

Eldon had attended a military summer camp in 1940, but news of the Battle of Britain inspired him to join the air force. It was 1941, he was 21, and like many young fellows at the time he was excited about becoming a pilot. He earned his wings in Fort Macleod and returned home to visit his family before shipping out to Europe. On his final day in Cardston, Eldon stopped in to say goodbye to one last person, the tailor he had worked for. "Bill," he said, shaking the man's hand, "I probably won't see you again."

Those words ring eerily in the ears of his brother. "He was so young," says Harold, "yet it seemed he knew he would never come back. And as we now know, 25 percent of the 40,000 Canadians in Bomber Command did not return."

Promoted to a flight lieutenant, Eldon especially welcomed the responsibility and

One of the signs to be placed at the Kearl Oil Sands site.



challenge of flying over Berlin on dangerous missions in his lumbering Lancaster, heavily laden with explosives. “If I have to go missing,” he often told a friend, “I hope it’s over Berlin.” January 26, 1944, marked his 18th operation. It was also Eldon’s 24th birthday. After bombing a series of targets, the plane was hit by shots from a German fighter and the bomber plummeted into a forest southeast of the city.

Harold too had joined the RCAF at age 20 and was home on leave from training when the station agent knocked on the door and delivered the telegram that proclaimed Eldon missing in action. His parents devastated, Harold vowed to find his brother.

Two weeks later he received his pilot wings and the family said goodbye to their second son. After he’d flown 17 missions the war was over. Harold could have returned home, but he was still focused on his promise to find his brother and took a year-long posting with Transport Command, flying passengers and freight across northwest Europe. He knew he had to find a way to get to the countryside 50 kilometres outside of Berlin where, his parents had learned from the Red Cross, his brother’s plane had crashed inside what was now hostile Russian-occupied Germany.

On February 25, 1946, he was able to land just outside Berlin. He knew it would be risky heading into the Soviet zone. After days of seeking help, he at last met with the officer

overseeing Canada’s diplomatic mission in post-war Germany. With his help, Harold secured a car and driver, a Russian translator and, most important, an impressive-looking, rubber-stamped but non-official letter explaining his quest.

Harold finally set off through the battered Brandenburg Gate, the start of a nerve-racking trip. Stopped at a check-point, he had a gun shoved in the vehicle window before being led to a Russian captain for questioning. But the letter did the trick, and within an hour Harold was in the village of Bugk with a kind German farmer named Karl König, who had seen Eldon’s plane crash in a ball of flames. He had buried the men and planted flowers on the gravesites. Harold stood silently at his brother’s grave two years after his death. He said a prayer, stepped back and saluted. “I felt I had fulfilled my family’s desire and visited my brother’s grave,” Harold says now.

At the age of 23, Harold Kearl returned to Alberta, married and worked for two oil companies before moving into real estate. He looks forward to his brother’s commemoration when the Kearl facility is complete. “I see it as a meeting of two good names,” says Harold. “I respect Imperial Oil and what they are doing, and they’re respecting my brother’s name, the 408 Squadron and the veterans who served our country. They’re a good match and our family feels honoured.” ■

Kearl and his crew

Flight Lieutenant **Eldon Eastham Kearl** DFC, of 408 Squadron, was killed in action in January 1944 when the Lancaster bomber he was piloting was shot down over Berlin. He is buried in the Berlin 1939-1945 War Cemetery.

His Canadian crew members were:

Flying Officer **Elmer Reginald Proud**, Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), age 22. He is commemorated at the Runnymede Memorial, which is situated at Englefield Green, near Egham, about 30 kilometres southwest of London.

Pilot Officer **Joseph Paul David Parise**, RCAF, age 25. He is buried in the Berlin 1939-1945 War Cemetery.

Pilot Officer **Alfred Smith**, RCAF, age 23. He is buried in the Berlin 1939-1945 War Cemetery.

Pilot Officer **John Angus MacLean**, RCAF, age 31. He is commemorated at the Runnymede Memorial.

Pilot Officer **John Francis McManus**, RCAF, age unknown. He is commemorated at the Runnymede Memorial.

There were also two British crew members: Pilot Officer **John Adamson**, Royal Air Force (RAF), who died in the crash, and **Alfie Brown**, an RAF engineer, who was captured and became a prisoner of war. He survived the war. Source: Canadian Forces