

Remembering Timothy Alphonse Pertus

Born D'Escouse, Nova Scotia, Canada on 6 August 1920

Died, Leuchars, Fife, Scotland on 5 February 1943

by Graham Connelly



Image credit: The Pertus family.

I

The weather in eastern Scotland in February 1943 was mostly mild, and even sunny, for the time of year but early in the month a depression tracked north-east across the country and on the Friday 5th this matured into heavy rain and localised gales.

The adverse weather caused severe difficulties for the crew of Lockheed Hudson T9414 'V' of 279 Squadron RAF, but that was not the only challenge they faced. Soon after taking off from Leuchars air base in Fife at 16.41 to carry out an air-sea rescue search in the North Sea, the aircraft's automatic pilot became inoperable causing the captain, Flying Officer A. A. Henderson, to give his full attention to the controls during the bumpy five-hour mission.



Lockheed Hudson over the North Sea, 1940. Image credit: Imperial War Museum.

Things got much worse. Returning to Leuchars, Henderson was unable to make out the runway landing flares because of heavy rain obscuring the aircraft's windshield. He made two attempts to land but aborted on both occasions when the plane's lateral controls proved difficult to handle. The pilot now decided that landing would be impossible and told the crew to prepare to bale out when they were safely over land.

After climbing to 3,000 feet, the aircraft went into a spin. At 1,500 feet, it lurched into the opposite spin. This undoubtedly terrifying experience became too much for one of the

crew's three wireless operator-air gunners, Sergeant Timothy Pertus of the Royal Canadian Air Force. According to the testimony his crewmates later gave in debriefing, and recorded in the formerly top-secret Operations Record Book, "Sgt. Pertus shouted incoherently and rushed to the exit." Despite his crewmates' attempts to restrain him, Pertus jumped. His body was later recovered and taken by launch to Tayport.

What makes the story even more tragic, is that Henderson managed to regain control of the aircraft and again gave the order to bale out. All the crew, including the two other wireless operator-air gunners, Sergeants J. P. Burness and G. H. Lumley, and the navigator, Flight Sergeant J. A. Birkett, baled out and landed safely at around 21.30 with only minor injuries.

II

My interest in Timothy Pertus came about because of three distinct triggers. The first happened on 17 September 2002, the day my father died. His youngest sister, Helen, came to sit with us and talked of her earliest memories of her brother, Albert, who would appear periodically in RAF uniform during WWII. On one of those occasions, she told me, he had collected her and their two sisters from primary school during an air raid. His aircraft had been diverted to RAF Leuchars because of bad weather, he said, and that meant an unexpected overnight pass to visit his home in nearby Dundee. Accompanying him was a crewmate who so captivated my aunt that she had remembered his name and the attention he gave her all her life. He was Timothy, or Tim, Pertus. Next time Dad came home on leave, my aunt asked why he had not brought Tim too. The shocking answer was that Tim had been killed, apparently close to Leuchars.

Now a childhood memory of my own was triggered. In September 1966, Dad took me to the annual Leuchars Air Show that ran until 2013. I remembered that on our way home he stopped at a cemetery and told me to stay in the car. When he returned after about 15 minutes, I asked what he had been doing. "A friend is buried here" was all he said, and I sensed he didn't want to say any more. "Could it have been Tim?" I asked my aunt.



Image credit: Graham Connelly

A few weeks later, I got an excited call from Helen. She had decided to visit Leuchars and searched the village without finding a cemetery, but then a call on the base guardhouse had her redirected to Leuchars Cemetery. This is reached by crossing the railway from the A919, about half-way between the villages of Leuchars and St Michael's, and the car park is shared with St Michael's Golf Course. The location is about 15 minutes' drive from St Andrew's. As soon as she parked her car, my aunt told me, she knew this was not her first visit, and she seemed instinctively to find her way to Tim's grave.

Buried in her unconscious memory was a visit as a child, with my father and their mother, which could not have been earlier than late 1946 when Dad returned from service in the Pacific. I paid my own first visit shortly after. The third trigger came in 2017 when I heard a report on BBC Radio Scotland about the Commonwealth Graves Commission. An official interviewed explained that the immediate families of the war dead from WWII were either no longer living or were prevented from visiting because of age or infirmity. Also, many families were not in the UK. He suggested that local people could 'adopt' graves and remember the fallen as proxies for their families. "I can do that for Tim's family," I said to the radio, and my wife and I have visited to place flowers on his grave every year since, though our visits were delayed during Glasgow's extended pandemic lockdowns.

III

On my 2017 visit to Leuchars Cemetery, as I looked at the simple yet elegant Portland stone memorial, three questions occurred to me: Why are there no other memorials for the same day, indicating an entire crew lost, as there are in neighbouring stones? Is Tim's body really buried here, or is this simply a commemoration? What was Timothy's life before volunteering for war service so far from home? The people who could have told me the answers – my father and his mother – were dead, and my aunt didn't know, so I would need to conduct my own research, now made easier by online search facilities, genealogy and war-related websites, and the declassification of WWII RAF records.

I began simply by searching for references to 'Timothy Pertus' in Google. These searches produced several 'hits,' including those from the Commonwealth Graves Commission, Canadian veterans' websites, 'findagrave,' and uncovered a lovely portrait of Tim in uniform. His forage cap bears the white stripe worn by aircrew in training. I also found a directory of the New Cemetery at St Hyacinth's Church in D'Escouse, Nova Scotia, in which I found several Pertus names listed, including a reference to Timothy "resting in Fife, Scotland." But the key find was an obituary of Susan Clemence Murphy (nee Pertus), which listed Timothy as a sibling. Susan, clearly a prominent member of the community, including serving as postmaster for 25 years, had died a year before my search, on 29 February 2016.

Susan's obituary included reference to her funeral mass being celebrated "by her good friend, Father John DeCoste." Further online searches allowed me to trace Father DeCoste to Saint Ignatious' Church, Bedford, Nova Scotia, and I sent a speculative email explaining my interest in the family to the parish administrator. I received a prompt response reassuring me that my email would be passed on, but that Fr DeCoste was currently very busy. The priest replied some weeks' later, confirming that he knew the family well, was aware that a brother had died in WWII, and that another sister, Jeanetta, was living in Fall River, near Halifax; he would contact the family for me.

Next, I received an email from Terry Doucet who introduced himself as the husband of Jeanetta's cousin Claudette. He told me that Aunt 'Jeanette' lived independently, kept well, and that they lived nearby and saw her daily. They had read to her my email forwarded by Fr DeCoste, and she had been pleased to learn of the direct connection to her late brother. The family was particularly pleased to receive the recent photographs I had taken at Leuchars Cemetery.

In September 2018, Terry emailed to say that Jeanette would like to speak to me by phone. A date and time were arranged. During the call, I reprised my own connection, and my Aunt Helen's childhood memories of meeting Tim. Jeanette told me that she had visited Scotland twice, in 1999, together with her sister Susan, and again in 2004, and on both occasions had visited Tim's grave. (In a subsequent email I received from Susan's nephew, David Keith, I learned that his aunt had been overcome with emotion and had been unable to enter the cemetery.) Following my call with Jeanette, I received an email from Terry attaching a folder containing photographs of Tim's funeral which had taken place with full military honours, and copies of letters she had received from her brother. My second question now had an answer: Tim's body was interred at Leuchars.



Jeanette caught me off-guard by asking if I knew how Tim had died. By this time, I already knew the answer to my first question, having accessed the 279 Squadron 'Operations Record Book, AIR27/1609,' now available online from The National Archives. But I hadn't realised that the family didn't know, having only received a wartime communication of death on active service.

Timothy's interment, Leuchars Cemetery. Image credit: The Pertus family

I told Jeanette I did know, but that she might find the account distressing. She said she'd had a long time to process her brother's death and she wanted to know the details. She also said she was comforted to know that there was someone in Scotland who also cared for her much-loved brother.

IV

My Aunt Helen died in January 2020. She had Alzheimer's disease, and by the time I contacted Tim's family, her dementia was too advanced for her to understand. I received an email from Terry to say that Jeanette died on 11 June 2021, aged 99. She had continued to live independently, other than a brief period of hospitalisation earlier in the year, and although she was increasingly frail and her eyesight was poor, she preferred the security of familiar surroundings.

My father's flying logbook showed that he landed at Leuchars on 13 January 1943, and my assumption is that it was that day, or the next, that he and Tim collected Helen from school and had an overnight at my Granny's home in Dundee. Dad himself had to bale out of an aircraft that had developed engine trouble shortly after, on 22 January, over Bodmin Moor

in Cornwall, landing safely, and he did not return to operational flying until 18 February, by which time Tim had died.

Timothy Alphonse PERTUS, RCAF, Service Number R/88231, was posthumously promoted to Warrant Officer Class II. He is commemorated by the Commonwealth Graves Commission at Leuchars Cemetery, in the family plot at St Hyacinth's Church in D'Escousse, and in lists of Canadian fallen, such as the Canadian Virtual War Memorial. The tragedy is also recorded in a database of WWII RAF aircrew and aircraft losses maintained by volunteers found at www.rafcommands.com.



Jeanette with Fr. John DeCoste.
Image credit: The Pertus family.

Timothy was the son of Albert Leonard PERTUS (1889-1979) and Florence Catherine DOYLE (1893-1963), and brother of Lorette Mathilda PERTUS (Keith) (1917-1997), Marie Susan PERTUS (Murphy) (1918-2016), Marie Jeanetta PERTUS (Hilchie) (1922-2021), and John Wilfrid PERTUS (1924-2002). I know very little of Tim's life before volunteering for war service and training as a wireless operator in Canada, though his nephew David Keith told me his aunt said he enjoyed hunting deer with his father and younger brother John. John's oldest son is named Tim.

About the author

Dr Graham Connelly is a retired academic, currently holding the position of honorary senior research fellow in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Strathclyde. In retirement he is following interests in family history and the history of experience of the care system.

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