

Recognition for Unsung Heroes



A Salute to Americans in the RCAF

BY JACQUELINE CHARTIER

Dignitaries, veterans and government officials converged on the picturesque town of Nanton, Alta, on Aug 25th 2007. They came from throughout Canada and the United States for a weekend of ceremonies honouring the Americans who served in the RCAF during WW II.

The event organized by the Nanton Lancaster Society was a rare and moving tribute to those airmen and brought public attention to a little known chapter of military history. While Canada and Britain declared war against Nazi Germany in Sept 1939, the USA remained officially neutral. Young Americans wishing to become pilots or wanting to participate in the war effort looked north of the border and thousands joined the RCAF. Prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entry into the war in Dec 1941, approximately 9,000 Americans had signed up with the RCAF. Of these, some 800 were killed in RCAF service – 379 while serving with Bomber Command.

Explicitly targeting Americans as potential recruits for Canada's air force was prohibited; recruiting American citizens on American soil to fight in a foreign war was a violation of the United States Neutrality Act. Despite this obstacle, many Americans began making their way to Canada, appearing at RCAF recruiting centres near border crossings. From a Canadian perspective, our government could not afford to ignore promising



In 2005 the Nanton Lancaster Air Museum dedicated Canada's Bomber Command Memorial, a massive granite wall on the museum's front lawn that is inscribed with 10,643 names. The monument includes all the Canadians who were killed serving with Bomber Command as well as those of other nationalities who died while serving with the RCAF in Bomber Command.

For the Salute to Americans ceremony, tiny stars and stripes flags were placed beside the 379 American names, including that of Charles Lesesne whose heroic actions saved the lives of five Canadian aircrew members.

Photos: Nanton Lancaster Air Museum and Jacqueline Chartier

recruits from the U.S., as many men as possible were needed for the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. It was an ambitious undertaking, which sought to train 130,000 aircrew, of which 50,000 would be pilots.

Canada's WW I ace, Billy Bishop, recognized the need for organized recruitment even though initially such activities would have to occur illegally. Bishop contacted Clayton Knight, an American friend who had flown with a British fighter squadron during WW I. Knight had established himself as one of the United States' foremost aviation artists and Bishop knew he would have lots of

connections. "American boys will want to help Canada as they did in the First War. But this time they must have direction and be screened," Bishop told his friend. Knight agreed to collaborate by developing an organization to locate American pilots and assist them in coming to Canada. This organization became known as the Clayton Knight Committee.

Gordon Symons, a Canadian WW II pilot, is an authority on the Clayton Knight Committee and American service in the RCAF. The author and historian was in Nanton to launch his autobiography, *The Boys of Spring*. Symons served with many Americans and they are prominently

featured throughout his book. Commenting on the event and the hundreds who had gathered in the small town 75 km south of Calgary, Symons was emotional. "This is the first time Canada has stepped up and said, 'We're going to honour the Americans who came to Canada,'" he remarked. "I think it should have been recognized a long time ago."

Actually, in 2005 the Nanton Lancaster Air Museum erected Canada's Bomber Command Memorial, a massive granite wall on the museum's front lawn that is inscribed with 10,643 names. The monument includes all the Canadians who were killed serving with Bomber Command as well as those of other nationalities who died while serving with the RCAF in Bomber Command. In Nanton, the names of 379 Americans are found on the memorial. When the memorial wall was initially unveiled, museum volunteers were amazed by how many of the flyers that died were from the United States. "It's not what you would expect of a Canadian war memorial, to have so many American names," said Nanton Lancaster Society director Dave Birrell. "It's time to bring it to people's attention."

A crowd of several hundred stood before the Bomber Command Memorial for a special benediction service. As part of the proceedings they witnessed miniature stars and stripes flags placed next to the names of those Americans who lost their lives alongside their Canadian comrades. One name that appears on the memorial is that of F/L



Air Marshal W.A. "Billy" Bishop, VC, one of the greatest aces of WW I, pins wings on LAC R. N. Harrison of Montclair, NJ, upon his graduation from No. 2 Service Flying Training School at Uplands, Ont on Jul 31st 1942. This huge photograph was hung in the Nanton Lancaster Air Museum during the ceremony to salute Americans in the RCAF. Photo: Jacqueline Chartier

Charles "Chuck" Lesesne who was from South Carolina. His exact inspiration isn't clear, but Lesesne joined the RCAF in Feb 1941. He had been working for the *Sumter Daily Item* newspaper in Sumter, SC, and was already 30-years-old when he began training as a pilot.

Perceived as an "old man" by WW II standards, Lesesne probably had to work hard to arrange an overseas posting and to convince his superiors to assign him to wartime operations. Flight Lieutenant Lesesne was serving with 425 (Alouette) Sqn on Mar 31st 1945, flying his 22nd operation when he tragically lost his life near Hamburg. The Halifax bomber he was piloting was attacked by one of the Nazi's new Me-262 fighter jets. All six crew members, including five Canadians, escaped the crippled Halifax and were taken prisoner. It is almost certain that Lesesne stayed at the controls. He would have kept what was obviously a severely damaged aircraft under some measure of restraint, thus allowing his mostly Canadian crew to bailout. When the controls were released, the American would have been trapped in the aircraft and unable to get free.

According to Birrell, when the Nanton Lancaster Society and numerous volunteers started planning the museum's salute to Americans, including remarkable individuals such as Lesesne, they decided

that art should play a considerable role. The museum houses dozens of examples of aircraft nose art and several large aviation themed murals. Much of their collection is the work of Clarence Simonsen, an Alberta-based artist with an international reputation. Simonsen is a contemporary artist born in 1944, meaning that none of the museum's Simonsen pieces is vintage wartime work on the original aircraft skin. Rather it is "replica" nose art, painted quite recently, but in many cases on actual aluminum skin from a wartime aircraft.

Several new paintings by Clarence Simonsen were commissioned commemorating prominent Americans who served in the RCAF. Arguably the most illustrious of the Americans in the RCAF was W/C Joe McCarthy, DSO, DFC and Bar, CD of Long Island, New York. An impressive artwork panel was unveiled honouring McCarthy's leading role in the famous Dambusters raid. Inventive genius Barnes Wallis conceived the perilous mission, during which McCarthy and his crew distinguished themselves. Wallis had designed the highly successful Wellington bomber and, in his spare time, he searched for weaknesses in the enemy's industrial infrastructure. The hydroelectric dams of the Ruhr Valley became his focus.

Wallis devised for use by McCarthy



Artist Clarence Simonsen (left) and Joe McCarthy Jr unveil a painting to be put on permanent display at the Nanton Lancaster Air Museum. The work is now part of an exhibit honouring the approximately 9,000 Americans who served in the RCAF during WW II. Photo: Jacqueline Chartier

and others a cylindrical, 9,500-pound weapon that could be dropped at low-level while rotating backwards at 500 rpm. Released from a height of 60 feet, about 450 yards from the dam, and at a speed of 230 miles per hour, the weapon would skip along the water until it struck the dam wall. The spinning would maintain the weapon's stability while gradually slowing it. Finally the backward rotation would cause the cylinder to roll down the dam wall where it would explode at a predetermined depth. The wall would be weakened and the great weight or water pressure would cause the dam to collapse. McCarthy survived his hazardous wartime missions and continued to serve proudly in the RCAF until his retirement in 1968.

On hand at the dedication was Joe McCarthy Jr who travelled to Western Canada from his home in Virginia Beach, VA. McCarthy helped to unveil the permanent museum panel in recognition of his father's outstanding career with the RCAF. He was also presented with a smaller Clarence Simonsen painting as a keepsake from the Nanton Lancaster Society. "The Americans in the RCAF, and in Britain's Royal Air Force were unsung heroes," the younger McCarthy told reporters who had gathered. "The U.S. Air Force had its own American heroes, and the RAF its own British heroes, so the Americans in the RCAF and RAF were forgotten."

Another American who chose to join the RCAF was John Gillespie Magee.

The son of an American father and a British mother, Magee was an extremely intelligent and somewhat brash young man. He craved adventure and longed to defend Britain and her allies against Nazi Germany. Magee is the author of *High Flight*, arguably the greatest aviation poem ever written – it stands with *In Flanders Fields* as a paradigm of wartime literature. On Sept 3rd 1941 Magee was flying a high-altitude test flight in a new Spitfire Mk V when he suddenly had the inspiration for a poem. In a letter to his parents he wrote, "I am enclosing a verse I wrote the other day. It stared at 30,000 feet and was finished soon after I landed." On the back of the correspondence he had written the sonnet, *High Flight*.

Sadly, Magee was killed just three months later at the age of 19. At an altitude of about 400 feet and with visibility obscured by clouds, his Spitfire collided with an Oxford trainer. During a subsequent inquiry a British farmer testified that he saw the Spitfire pilot struggling to push back the canopy. The pilot stood up to jump from the plane but was too close to the ground; his parachute didn't have sufficient time to open and he died instantly. The Oxford pilot, a young man by the name of Ernest Aubrey Griffin, was killed in the accident as well.

John Gillespie Magee's biographer, Linda Granfield, was in attendance in Nanton. At the request of the Magee family, the author gave a slide presentation and spoke of her research into the life of



What is believed to be the largest RCAF Ensign ever made flies over the town of Nanton, Alta. The flag measuring 40 by 20 feet was raised on Aug 25th 2007 and flies atop a 103 ft flagpole.

The flag was a result of the tireless efforts of Karl Kjarsgaard, an internationally renowned aviation archeologist and current project manager of Halifax 57 Rescue (Canada) whose current quest is to recover a Halifax bomber ditched off the coast of Ireland in 1945.

The \$1,200 cost of the ensign, specially manufactured by SignCraft Digital Inc of Calgary, was split between Halifax 57 Rescue (Canada) and local Nanton merchants Tony and Joan Scheiwiler, the owners of Ultimate Trains on whose property the flag pole is located. Calgary Herald photo by Lorraine Hjalte

the teenage RCAF officer. Although he died over 65 years ago, his poetry endures as an anthem for today's generation of pilots and astronauts. From Granfield's perspective, *High Flight* is testimony that a few words, even those written in youth, can have great influence. She reminded those assembled that John Gillespie Magee was not a fighting hero of WW II and did not die in battle. He was merely a talented young man who, like many other youths who continue to die in war, showed boundless promise. ✈

(Ed note: Jacqueline Chartier is a Calgary-based freelance writer.)