



# VIMM Newsletter

Fall 2024

Vancouver Island Military Museum



## Canada's Flying Boat Men

By Angus Scully

On December 30, 1941, a Stranraer flying boat of No. 4 Bomber Reconnaissance Squadron, RCAF, took off from Ucluelet on the west coast of Vancouver Island on a patrol searching for Japanese submarines. It crashed and four of the eight-man crew were killed – Flying Officer Robert Jamieson Gray from Ottawa, Sgt. Pilot Martin Neill McKay of Selkirk Manitoba, Pilot Officer Albert Cecil Scruton of Ottawa, and Corporal Willard John Zenkie of Vancouver. They were just four of thirty-six young men killed on the west coast flying Stranraer flying boats in defence of Canada. In active anti-submarine patrols, or in training accidents, many others died flying Canso flying boats and other RCAF aircraft.



FO Robert Gray, age 30, had been married for five months to Elizabeth Ormer, whose brother had been killed in action with the RCAF just four months earlier.

Flying boats have almost disappeared from the skies. This summer, the arrival of the huge Martin Mars flying boat for permanent display at the B.C. Aviation Museum made

headline news because of its history in fire fighting for fifty years in British Columbia, and because of its novelty. Two much smaller, and older, Grumman Goose amphibian flying boats are still in daily service with *Wilderness Seaplanes* in Port Hardy. During the Second World War, six squadrons of flying boats in RCAF service were the first line of defence here on the west coast.



Corporal Willard John Zenkie, age 20, was the son of Charles J. Zenkie and Flossie Hall Zenkie of Vancouver. He is buried in Vancouver.



An RCAF Stranraer flying boat flying over Ucluelet in 1942. Designed by Supermarine in England, RCAF aircraft were built in Montreal by Canadian Vickers Ltd.

Why flying boats? In the early twentieth century it was not clear what form of flying machines would dominate. Would it be airships, larger than most of us today realize? Could the frail land planes of the time, all canvas and wires, fly safely across oceans? For decades, the flying boat seemed to be the answer to the questions posed by long distance travel over water. They were more robust than float planes and were not reliant on grass fields or cleared aerodromes. The first successful trans-oceanic airlines flew flying boats. The geography of Coastal British Columbia, with rugged forested mountains limiting landing strips, made flying boats and float planes especially useful, and still does today.

*Continues page 4.*





# President's Report



The Vancouver Island Military Museum overlooking Nanaimo Harbour.

We are now moving well into 2024 and experiencing an uptick in visitation, with guests from all over the world - Australia, Europe, Asia, South America, New Zealand, US, India, Canada and of course, local visitors. So far this year we have had 2894 visitors, with three more months to go in 2024. We anticipate that we will surpass last year's total of 3736.

We have also experienced a larger volume of medal mounting and framing requests. Thanks to my wife, Heather Neil, for her assistance in the workshop doing medal work to help keep up.

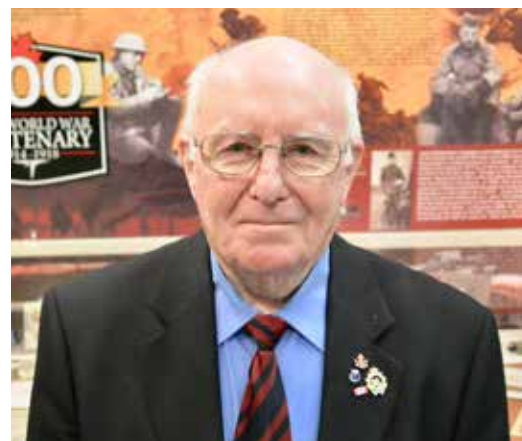
We said good bye to a long-time volunteer Allan Surgin who moved to Leduc, AB to be close to his family.

Our BBQ Luncheon at the RCL #257 in August was well attended and enjoyed by all. Again, this year we will have our Christmas Dinner at the Grand Hotel scheduled for Thursday 28th November. The museum has ongoing meetings with the City Parks, Recreation and Culture Department to plan for a co-management agreement. We have also had two City Council meetings on this subject which is the necessary part of the way forward with the planning.

Again, I thank all the directing staff and volunteers for their consistent hard work in making our museum a popular place to visit in Nanaimo.

Bravo Zulu to you all.

*Roger Bird*



Farewell Alan Surgin.

## Medal Mounting

The VIMM will gladly mount your medals in court mounting or in a frame. Contact us for further information and prices.



# Margaret Brooke

## M.B.E. B.H.Sc. C.D., Ph.D., Lt.Cdr. (ret'd)

by Heather Neil

Margaret Martha Brooke was born in Ardath, Saskatchewan, and at the age of eighteen enrolled at the University of Saskatchewan where she earned a B.H.Sc. Degree in household science in 1935. She enlisted in the RCN in March 1942 as a Nursing Sister Dietitian and was given the rank of sub-lieutenant. Brooke was subsequently assigned to *HMCS Unicorn*, *HMCS Avalon*, *HMCS St. Hyacinth*, and *HMCS Naden*.

On 14 October 1942 (while serving at *HMCS Avalon* in St. John's), Sub-Lieut. Brooke was returning from leave on the passenger ferry *SS Caribou* sailing the Cabot Strait, when it was torpedoed by the German submarine *U-69*. The ferry sank in minutes. While fighting for her own survival, Brooke attempted to save the life of her friend, Nursing Sister Sub-Lieut. Agnes Wilkie, both of them clinging to the ropes attached to a capsized lifeboat. Despite Brooke's efforts, Wilkie succumbed to the elements. Wilkie was the only RCN nursing sister to die from enemy action during the war.

In 1943, for her selfless act of bravery, Sub-Lieut. Brooke was appointed a *Member of the Military Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire*. She ultimately attained the rank of Lieutenant Commander on 1 April 1957 and served in the RCN until her retirement in September of 1962.

After her service in the Royal Canadian Navy, Brooke returned to Saskatchewan and earned a bachelor's degree and a PhD in biostratigraphy and micro-palaeontology. Retirement in 1986 found her in Victoria B.C.

On Brooke's 100th birthday she received the news that one of six new *Harry deWolf Class Arctic Patrol Ships* would carry her name.

Not only was Brooke the first woman – among a total of 40 other women who served during the Second World War – to be awarded the MBE, but she was also the first living Canadian person to have a Royal Canadian Navy vessel named in her honour.

Margaret Martha Brooke died on 10 January 2016, three years before the launch of *HMCS Margaret Brooke* on the 10 November 2019.

Agnes Wilkie was born in Oak Bluff, Manitoba in 1904. A keen swimmer and skater, she was described as 'pleasant, very quiet, kind and mild' when she began nursing school at Misericordia General Hospital, Winnipeg. Agnes was buried with full naval honours in St. John's. Ships in the busy harbour flew their flags at half-mast and flowers were piled high on her grave, which can still be visited today in Mount Pleasant Cemetery, St. John's, Newfoundland.



HMCS Margaret Brooke



Margaret Brooke



# First World War Zeppelins and the Spider Web

Canadians played an important role in the early days of flying boats. Douglas McCurdy of Silver Dart fame, a



Artist Henk Uitslag of the Netherlands recreated Leckie's successful attack on the German airship L22.

partner of American aviation inventor and entrepreneur Glenn Curtiss, started Canadian Aeroplanes Ltd. in Toronto in 1915 and was active in building flying boats and instructing boat pilots in Toronto in 1915 and 1916. Canadian pilots played an outstanding role in the Royal Naval Air Service. Douglas Hallam of Toronto learned to fly at the Curtiss Flying School in New York and joined the Canadian Army in 1914 but switched to the RNAS. By 1918 he was the commander of the RNAS War Flight at Felixstowe England, flying patrols hunting for German submarines in the North Sea. The War Flight made 1073 patrols flying Curtiss "Large America" and Felixstowe F2 flying boats.

His excellent book, *The Spider Web*, is available free at

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/50339/50339-h/50339-h.htm>

Robert Leckie took flying lessons at the Curtiss Flying School in Toronto in 1915 and joined the Royal Naval Air Service in 1916. He was the pilot of a Curtiss H12 "Large America" flying boat that shot down the German airship, Zeppelin L22, in 1917. He shot down a second German airship in 1918. He had a distinguished career in the RAF and the RCAF, establishing the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. Air Marshall Leckie was Chief of Staff of the RCAF from 1944 to 1947.

Between the wars, float planes and flying boats were important aircraft in the RCAF, perhaps most notably the Vickers Vancouver which was stationed at Jericho Beach Vancouver, and Patricia Bay on Vancouver Island.

Flying boats in RCAF service were used on both coasts and overseas during the second world war. The Stranraers were replaced by the Canso, a Canadian version of the American designed PBV or Catalina that also saw extensive service with the RAF and the Royal Australian Air Force. Boeing Canada built 362 Cansos in Vancouver and Canadian Vickers Ltd. built 369 in Quebec. In British Columbia, RCAF Canso squadrons were based at Tofino, Ucluelet, Alliford Bay, Prince Rupert, Bella Bella, Coal Harbour, Sea Island, and Patricia Bay.

The RCAF also operated Canso and Catalina flying boats overseas. 413 Squadron and its four Catalina flying boats were based in Koggala on Ceylon's (now Sri Lanka) south coast. In April 1942, a Catalina flying boat piloted by Squadron Leader Leonard Birchall, on patrol south of Ceylon, spotted a Japanese invasion fleet heading to Ceylon and radioed a warning, before being shot down. The crew were taken prisoner by the Japanese. Birchall was called the "Saviour of Ceylon," and awarded an OBE. After the war, Birchall served on diplomatic posts and was commandant of the Royal Military College of Canada.



Air Vice-Marshal Robert Leckie, January 1944, a flying boat pilot who commanded the RCAF.

# Second World War Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Ocean Operations

In June 1944, Toronto native David Hornell of 162 Squadron RCAF was captain and first pilot of a Canso on patrol near the Faroe Islands in the North Atlantic. Flight Sergeant Israel Joseph Bodnoff described what happened when the Canso headed home after a twelve-hour patrol. *I sighted the submarine on the port side four or five miles from the aircraft. The light was good and the submarine was fully surfaced. The submarine had seen us and opened fire. We took evasive action but ...could feel the flak strike. Before we reached the target the starboard engine was shot off and fell into the sea. The attack was carried out about 50 feet over the submarine and four 50 lb. depth charges were dropped. All the gunners opened fire. The U-boat was destroyed.*



Artist Graham Wragg's depiction of Hornell's attack.

Kenneth, was in the RCAF as well and killed in Burma only 6 months after Donald was lost at sea.

Flight Lieutenant David Hornell, age 34, was married and is buried in Lerwick, Shetland Islands. He was awarded the Victoria Cross, posthumously. That was the first VC awarded to a member of the RCAF in the Second World War.

Canso Flying boats of RCAF 162 Squadron sank five other U-boats. After the war, Cansos continued in RCAF service for search and rescue and photographic surveys. The last retired in 1962.



The Grumman Albatross was another flying boat in RCAF service. This one is seen on the water off Gabriola Island, near Nanaimo, in 1964. Designed to take off in waves up to 1.2 m, with jet assisted take off (JATO) the Albatross could take off in 3 m waves. Entered service in the 1960s, retired in the 1970s.



This portrait of Flight Lieutenant David Hornell hangs in the school named after him in Toronto.

Hornell landed the flying boat, but it sank in four-meter waves. One of two inflatable dinghies capsized. Flight Sergeant Donald Stewart Scott of Pakenham ON, and Sergeant Fernand St. Laurent of Point au Pere, QC, both died of exposure and their bodies were lost at sea. Both sergeants were later Mentioned in Dispatches. After 21 hours in the water, the remainder of the crew was rescued, but Hornell died soon after rescue. Bodnoff was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal as was Flight Sergeant Sidney Reginald Cole. Flying Officer Bernard Charles Denomy was awarded the Distinguished Service Order, and Flying Officer Sidney Edward Matheson the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Sergeants St. Laurent and Scott are listed on the Runnymede Memorial. Donald Scott's 19-year-old younger brother,



The RCAF had 36 Grumman Goose flying boats. This is one at Patricia Bay, Vancouver Island, in 1943. They first entered service in 1939, and they were used throughout the war for training and transport. Two similar flying boats are still in private airline use on Vancouver Island. See <https://www.wildernessseaplanes.com/fleet-grummangoose.php>

**On Display at VIMM:**

*War at the West Coast – British Columbia  
Canadian Victoria Cross Recipients*



# Sir Charles Wright Explorer, Scientist, and Soldier

by Greg Devenish

On 12 November, 1912, a young Canadian looked over the vast expanse of snow in Antarctica. He squinted against the sun's glare and noticed a dark spec off in the distance. As he got closer, he realized he saw the top of a tent. Opening the tent he found three frozen bodies, including that of Robert Falcon Scott, the famous explorer and scientist. The young man was Charles Wright.

Charles Seymour Wright was born in Toronto in 1887. As a young man he was a very good athlete, academic and outdoorsman. He attended the University of Toronto (1904 -1908) studying physics and mathematics. While attending U of T, he joined a militia unit, the *Queen's Own Rifles of Canada*. In 1908 he won a scholarship to the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge University in England.



This photograph of Charles Wright was taken on 29 January 1912. Charles had just returned frostbitten from the Great Ice Barrier as part of the first support party aiding Scott's push to the Pole.

ice sheets. He was not paid but was provided with food and lodging. Wright found Scott to be reserved and aloof but did recognize his keen interest in scientific exploration. Scott described Wright as, *a charmingly simple straightforward young man with intelligence of the highest order.*

The expedition arrived at Cape Evans, Antarctica on Dec. 29, 1910.

Wright was personally involved with depot laying across the Ross Shelf, and discovered a new glacier which he named "Canada," and a mountain peak which he named after his U of T professor, A.P. Coleman. Wright was proud of his Canadian nationality and although he took a lot of ribbing from the other members about being Canadian, he carried two silk flags - one emblem was the beaver, the other a maple leaf.

In 1909, Captain Robert Scott, RN, organized the Terra Nova Expedition to do scientific research in Antarctica and complete a 1287.5 km (800 miles) trek to the South Pole. Ernest Shackleton and Roald Amundsen were also trying to get to the South Pole, and there seemed to be a race to be the first.

Over 8000 men applied for the Terra Nova Expedition and just 65 were selected. Charles Wright applied but was initially turned down. Wright persisted, travelling from Cambridge to London to speak directly to Scott. He wrote later:

*I was so sure of myself in those days that I went down to London to explain what a frightful mistake Scott had made and walked off with a job. I must have had a lot of gall.*

As part of the select crew, Wright was able to research magnetism and study the Antarctic



A young Charles Wright at the Antarctic. One can only imagine the strength to man - haul a loaded sledge in one of the most inhospitable places on earth.

Scott grew to like this young Canadian. He wrote,

*... one of the great successes is Wright. He is very thorough and absolutely ready for anything. Like Bowers he has taken to sledging like a duck to water...nothing ever seems to worry him, and I can't imagine he ever complained of anything in his life.*

Wright was over the moon to be selected as one of the sixteen members to complete the trip to the pole using ponies, dogs and two motor sledges. The sledges broke down quickly and the ponies proved impractical. Then he was “man-hauling” supplies and conditions worsened. The temperature dropped, hunger was constant, and the men suffered from snow blindness. On 20 December, Scott announced the names who would make the final 480 km dash to the Pole. Wright was ordered back with three others to Cape Evans. Scott wrote in his diary, *All are disappointed –poor Wright rather bitterly, I fear.* Scott did reach the South Pole only to find that Roald Amundsen had arrived 33 days earlier. Scott and his party failed to return. Months later, Wright and the relief party found Scott.

Charles Wright returned to England. When war broke out, he joined the Royal Engineers. In Flanders, he was wireless officer of the 5 Corps and awarded the Military Cross. As Officer Commanding Wireless, 2 Army, he was awarded the French Legion of Honour, and while serving with the General Staff was awarded the Order of the British Empire. After the war, he joined the Admiralty Department of Scientific Research, becoming Superintendent of the Admiralty Research Laboratory in 1929 and Admiralty Director of Scientific Research in 1934, a post he held through the Second World War, working on radar, and anti-torpedo and anti-mine research. He became Chief of the Royal Naval Scientific Service in 1946.



Wright was made Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath in 1946. Sir Charles retired from the RN and served in several official capacities in the UK and Canada before becoming Director of the Marine Physical Laboratory at the Scripps Institute in California. In 1955, he joined the RCN's Pacific Naval Laboratory in Esquimalt and then the Institute of Earth Science at the University of British Columbia. In 1969, he and his wife retired to Salt Spring Island, British Columbia. J.A. Jacobs interviewed Wright and wrote,

*He always spoke affectionately of “his boys” - those people who worked under him particularly those of his Admiralty days. He was one of the most unassuming men that I ever met, yet beneath that exterior was a strength of character and purpose that none could deny. He gave freely of his time and friendship and scientific knowledge.*

Sir Charles Write lived an extraordinary life. He was an explorer, soldier and a scientist. His contributions were recognized when he was buried at sea on Nov. 13, 1975, from destroyer HMCS Restigouche. In fitting tribute, at the moment of committal, HMCS Terra Nova steamed past.

Sir Charles Seymour Wright, KCB, OBE, MC, MID (2), Legion of Honour (France), Medal of Freedom (USA).



Scott Polar Research Institute <http://www.spri.cam.ac.uk/>



# DISPATCHES

from VIMM



## Remembrance Day - Monday November 11.

VIMM will be open following the Ceremony of Remembrance at the Cenotaph in Nanaimo. No entrance fee.

## Christmas Volunteer Lunch

Thursday November 28 at the Grand Hotel. 11:30 AM.

## Unanimous Approval

In September, President Roger Bird and Vice-president Brian McFadden attended the meeting of the City of Nanaimo Financial Committee which unanimously approved the plan for VIMM to join with the Port Theatre, the Nanaimo Art Gallery, and the Nanaimo Museum in co-management. These cultural facilities occupy City-owned properties but are managed by community-based non-profit organizations. Counsellor Ian Thorpe stated that the VIMM was one of the city's main tourist attractions. Formal approval by the full Council was given two weeks later. The future looks bright.

## Hawaii Martin Mars

The red and white Martin Mars' final flight was on 11 August the RCAF Snowbirds flying alongside the plane. It took off from Sproat Lake near Port Alberni, flew to Campbell River, Powell River, and then south along the east coast of Vancouver Island from Comox to Saanich. It landed on the ocean in Patricia Bay, north of Victoria, beside the Institute of Ocean Sciences (IOS) and Coast Guard base, before being moved to the BC Aviation Museum, its "forever home."

The final flight can be seen at <https://youtu.be/js8uQOMQiaI>



The wingspan of the Martin Mars is 60.9 m.

### Interesting Sites:

Canadian Serials Personnel Information Resource  
<https://caspir.warplane.com/>

West Coast Defence  
<https://www.onthisspot.ca/cities/ucluelet/seaplane>

BC Aviation Museum.net  
<https://bcam.net/>

## Museum Directors

**Roger Bird**, President  
**Brian McFadden**, Vice President  
**Greg Devenish**, Secretary, Treasurer, Library

**Bruce Davison**, Volunteer Coordinator  
**Bill Brayshaw**, Acquisitions  
**Angus Scully**, Newsletter Editor

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