VIMM Newsletter
Fall 2020
Vancouver Island military Museum

1917–1918
Women and the Royal Flying Corps

By Angus Scully

In January 1917, the Royal Flying Corps began to train pilots, observers, and mechanics in Canada. Seriously short of trained flyers and running out of space in Britain, the RFC asked for permission to recruit and train in Canada. The Canadian government was not interested in establishing an air force, but agreed to let the RFC operate here, independent of Canadian control, with the British government paying for the whole thing.

Flying was of course new and exciting. Most Canadian had never seen an airplane, and it was only nine years since the first flight in Canada – the famous Silver Dart at Baddeck Nova Scotia in 1908. Canadians were serving in France as pilots in the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service and becoming famous aces. Indeed, by some estimates, Canadians accounted for thirty percent of the pilots in RFC.

Women riding motorcycles for the IRFC challenged the traditional view of the role of women in Canada.

The Canadian operation was called the Imperial Royal Flying Corps (IRFC), and together with the Imperial Munitions Board based in Ottawa, they built training camps and aerodromes around southern Ontario. They also bought out Canadian Aeroplanes Ltd., a small factory in Toronto, which was then greatly expanded. Soon thousands of cadets were in training and the sight of flying machines became fairly common in southern Ontario.

Overhauling engines for the Curtiss JN-4 Canuck training planes used to train pilots and observers. 600 women played a crucial role in keeping the training programme going.

Women in Aviation

While the IRFC was gaining great success in training pilots, it soon ran into problems finding enough workers in administration and maintenance. Canada was committed to an army of 500, 000, an immense number in a country of eight million, and there was a shortage of male labour. The answer, almost revolutionary at the time, was to hire women. As the war went on, and with societal values opposed to women fighting or even working outside the home once married, an adjustment in outlook became necessary, if not universally accepted. Women, of course, had always worked on farms and in the war played an even greater role in agricultural work. Women were accepted in nursing, and behind the lines soon made major contributions in new fields such as ambulance drivers. War industries in Canada employed tens of thousands of women in traditional male factory jobs.

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From the President

We have experienced some setbacks with the COVID-19 pandemic. First, we closed the museum 15 March 2020 and opened again 15 June 2020 - a three-month absence. Fortunately, the majority of our volunteers returned, and we resumed the museum operation with COVID protocols in place (wearing of masks, hand sanitizers and social distancing). Secondly, there was a noticeable decline in visitors with fewer local people and BC visitors attending. Thirdly, with the decline in visitation, there was unfortunately a decline in revenue. We had 1857 visitors to the end of September this year, 2604 visitors less than this time last year.

Unfortunately, due to Covid, the annual Christmas lunch is cancelled.

We have two new volunteers, Rob Robinson who is an RCAF veteran and is on the Tuesday AM and Saturday shifts, and Doug Hogg who is ex RCMP and is on the Friday PM shift.

The Lt. O. J. Orr DFC brass plaque is now mounted on the Nanaimo Cenotaph and will be recognized at the Remembrance Day ceremonies. The museum is constructing a small display for Lt. Orr which includes two aircraft models (Sopwith Camel and Curtiss Jenny/Canuck trainer) that he flew.

Our POW display is now complete with the addition of the “Women Beyond the Wire” poster, thanks to Brian and Pat’s hard work. We are getting the museum main tile floor refinished in cooperation with the City. The floor was last refinished in 2010 when we first moved into the building.

Next door to the Museum, the new hotel construction is well underway, and the majority of the Piper Park grounds have been fenced off and construction trailers put in that space. The roadway (Cameron Road) is restricted to one-way traffic. This situation will be with us for about another year. Stay safe.

Roger Bird

Did You Know?

John Scott Rowan is among the dead remembered on the Nanaimo Cenotaph. The son of James and Anna Rowan of Gabriola Island, he was a graduate of Nanaimo High School and became a teacher in the Powell River District. He joined the Imperial Royal Flying Corps in 1917 and was killed while in training with the IRFC in Fort Worth Texas on March 29, 1918 – one of two Canadians killed in separate accidents that day. His body was returned to Nanaimo and he is buried in the Nanaimo Public Cemetery on Bowen Road.

Medal Mounting

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

To the Definite Advantage of the Corps

The IRFC began to hire women in non-traditional roles. At the end of the war, Canadian writer Allan Sullivan described their role in his book *Aviation in Canada 1917 – 1918*.

At the [aircraft] Repair Parks alone 135 women were employed in the technical trades while at various camps nearby 600 were mechanics. Unaccustomed to aeroplane work and unacquainted with military routine they have universally performed sterling service.

Women civilian subordinates were … employed at Deseronto [a major IRFC facility east of Toronto] making their temporary homes in the town and radiating out to the two flying camps. The arrangements worked here, as elsewhere, to the definite advantage of the Corps.

No record of the [mechanical transport] section would be complete without some reference to the duties performed by the lady drivers who patriotically volunteered for this service. Their history is one of entire success...

The "lady drivers" drove cars, trucks, motorcycles, ambulances and fire trucks. This involved long hours on dirt roads in all weather around southern Ontario. Whether it was driving, overhauling aero engines, or building aircraft, this was new work for women, not just in Canada but anywhere in the world. By the end of the war, 1200 women worked for the Royal Air Force Canada, the new name for the IRFC.

In a society under stress and change, there was criticism expressed in the newspapers, with claims that the women employed by the IRFC were taking work from men. This was clearly wrong but a claim that was common to the period, and which saw women lose their jobs once the war ended and men returned from overseas. However, the example was made, and a revolution was beginning.

The public helped pay for the war through loans to the government. This parade float showed what the loans paid for.

On Display at VIMM

Home Front

The First World War

Women in War

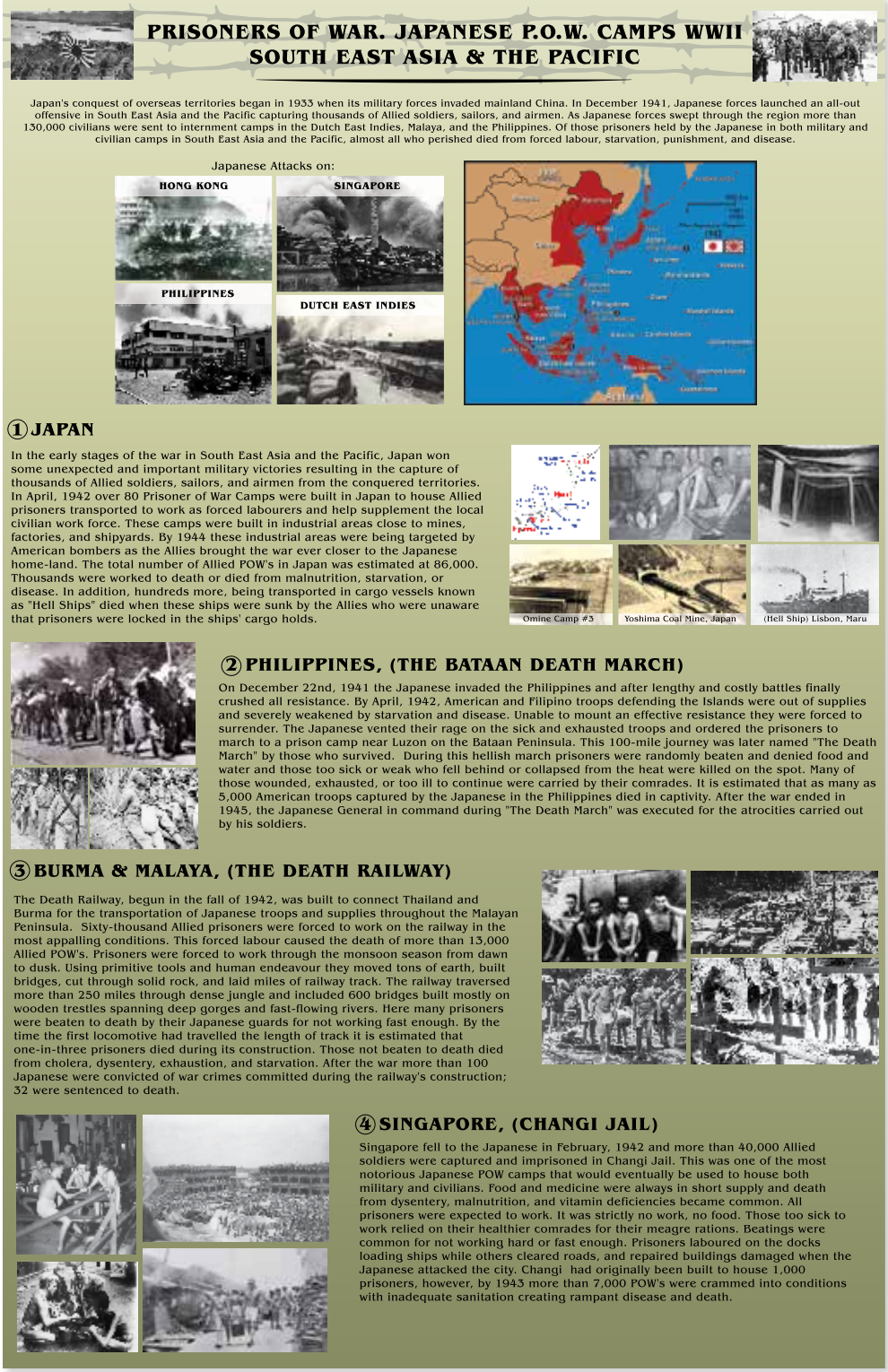
Thousands of Canadians joined the IRFC and RAF Canada and thousands got jobs in construction, in building aircraft, and in aircraft maintenance. This was such a successful and large operation that American experts came to inspect and copy what the IRFC was doing. Without a doubt, Canada got a head start in the new field of aviation because of the IRFC, and women played a crucial role in its success.

Group portrait of the Mechanical Transport unit of the IRFC in Toronto. The drivers clocked a total of 2000 km per day on roads meant for horse and buggy traffic. Women drivers were still an unusual sight and challenged existing values.

New Exhibits

By Brian McFadden, VIMM Vice President

In March of this year we began work on a major new exhibit dedicated to prisoners of war. The impetus for the exhibit was a visit from representatives of the Hong Kong Veterans Commemorative Association. Mr. Gerry Tuppert, President of the HKVCA, presented the museum with the association flag and a book dedicated to the more than 1,700 Canadian soldiers from Force "C" sent to help defend the Crown Colony of Hong Kong. The exhibit covers Europe in WWI and II, and South East Asia, in a three-panel display, which was later increased to a fourth panel. This addition was needed to document the suffering of thousands of civilian internees imprisoned by the Japanese in the Far East and Pacific, principally women and children whose internment has been largely forgotten.



Prisoners of the Japanese: World War II

Japan conquered South East Asia and the Pacific in a series of victorious campaigns over a few months beginning in December 1941. By March 1942 an estimated 140,000 Allied prisoners of war and over 130,000 civilians were interned by the Japanese. Imprisoned civilians were treated marginally better than prisoners of war; however, conditions in Japanese camps were almost universally deplorable. Twenty-seven percent of Allied POW's and eleven percent of civilian internees died at the hands of their captors.

Allied prisoners were sent to various destinations throughout South East Asia and the Pacific and to Japan itself to provide forced labour in mines and factories. Tens of thousands of POW's were packed onto vessels which came to be known as "Hell Ships"; one in five prisoners did not survive the cramped disease-ridden journey. Other prisoners laboured to build a railway line linking Burma and Thailand which earned the title, "The Death Railway". Thousands of local labourers were also forced to help with its construction, and it is estimated that one man died for every railway-tie laid along the 250 mile track. In Singapore, thousands of POW's and civilians died in the notorious "Changi Jail" from starvation and disease. After the surrender of the Philippines, American troops were ordered on a forced march of over 90 miles: many carried their sick and wounded comrades on the journey into four years of captivity. Hundreds died on this "Death March".

The massacre at Radji Beach on Bangka Island is perhaps one of the worst acts committed by the Japanese. Twenty-two Australian Army Nurses along

with 25 wounded soldiers were washed ashore on the beach from a sinking ship crammed with evacuees from Singapore. After separating the male survivors and bayoneting them to death the Japanese ordered the nurses into the sea and proceeded to machine gun the defenceless women. One nurse survived and lived to testify at the war crimes trials in Tokyo in 1946.

Civilian Internees of the Japanese

The Japanese had no consistent policy for the treatment of civilian internees and conditions varied by location. In most cases men, and boys over 15 years of age, were housed in disused army barracks, while women and children lived in fenced off areas near local towns or villages. A large proportion of civilians were Dutch from the Dutch East Indies but also included British, Australian, and Americans. Many were colonial families who had been living in the region for generations, working as civil-servants, doctors, teachers, nurses, and missionaries. With such chronic overcrowding, poor sanitation was the norm with dysentery and typhus flourishing, along with scabies, bedbugs, and lice. The Japanese banned all education for children and decreed that all females between the ages of 11 and 60 must perform "Useful Work". Many women worked in the dapur or central kitchen where they would chop firewood and scrub old oil barrels that were used as giant saucepans. Some repaired fences around their compound while others cleaned sewage from overflowing latrines. All the while the women were subjected to constant brutality by the Japanese guards. To look a soldier in the eye or fail to bow to him instantly, would incur a vicious slapping that would break a nose or loosen teeth. At Tenco (roll call) the women were required to bow deeply, eyes downcast, with fingers on the side seams of their skirts and, if this was not done properly, they were beaten. Worse even than sanctions was the fear of starvation as the ration of tapioca, gruel, and rice dwindled to half-a-cup a day. Some risked being savagely beaten if they attempted to trade their meagre possessions with local people for food.
By the time liberation came in August 1945 the degradation of women prisoners was complete and they were skeletal thin and half-blind from malnutrition. Thousands of women and children lived with hunger, disease, cruelty, and death. The suffering they endured at the hands of their captors and the story of their courage and fortitude is a testament to their indomitable spirit.

WOMEN BEYOND THE WIRE

CIVILIAN INTERNMENT CAMPS - SOUTH EAST ASIA & THE PACIFIC

Once the Japanese had conquered South East Asia, civilians who had been living there as planters, teachers, missionaries, and Civil Servants were rounded up and trucked to internment camps. Like their male counterparts in Japanese prisoner of war camps (POW) these 130,000 civilians, predominantly women and children, also endured appalling privation, cruelty, and death at the hands of their captors. For these women and children their lives, as they had known it, had come to an abrupt end and, their ordeal was to last three and a half years and claim the lives of over 13,000, due mainly to starvation, exhaustion, and disease.

Civilian male and female camps were segregated with men and boys over 15 held in disused army barracks, while women and children lived in fenced off areas of local towns and villages. With such chronic overcrowding poor sanitation was the norm with dysentery and typhus flourishing, along with scabies, bedbugs, and lice.

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In February, 1942, with the fall of Singapore imminent, sixty-five Australian Army nurses, 250 civilian men, women, children, and wounded soldiers were evacuated from the besieged city on a small coastal steamer. Near Sumatra, the Japanese bombed and sank the vessel killing many struggling in the water or in crowded lifeboats. Twenty two nurses including Sister Vivian Bullwinkel along with 25 sick and wounded washed ashore on Radji Beach, Bangka Island and surrendered to the Japanese. The men were separated and taken out of sight where they were bayoneted and shot.
On their return the Japanese ordered the nurses to walk into the sea and machine-gunned them. Vivian Bullwinkel was hit but played dead and later made her way to the town of Montock and surrendered; she was the only survivor of the massacre. By the time liberation came in August, 1945 the degradation of women prisoners was complete and they were skeletal thin and half blind from malnutrition. Like their male counterparts in Japanese POW camps, thousands of women and children also lived with hunger, disease, cruelty, and death. The suffering they endured at the hands of their captors is a testament to their indomitable spirit.

Dutch East Indies Under Japanese Occupation 1942

RCAF Fighter Pilots in Korea 1950-1953

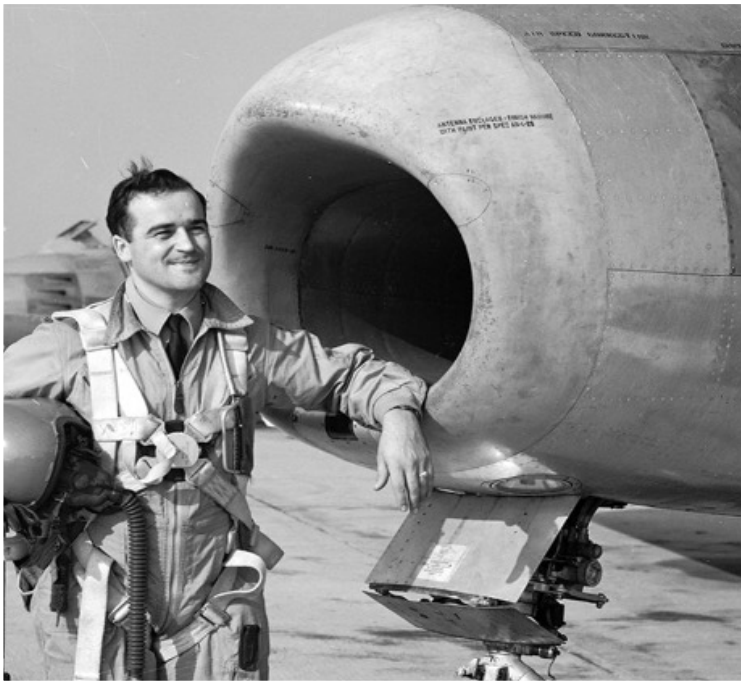
By Greg Devenish

With the outbreak of the Korean War the RCAF did not have fighters available to send. The newly introduced Sabre and CF-100 Canuck squadrons were reserved for home defense and NATO. The RCAF did send a primary transport squadron (426 Thunderbird Squadron) to fly between North America and Korea with Canadair North Star aircraft.

However, there were 22 RCAF fighter pilots on exchange with the United States Air Force in Korea, flying F-86 Sabres. Many of these pilots had served in WWII flying Spitfires and some, like Doug Lindsay, R.T.P. Davidson, and Andy Mackenzie, were in fact aces. Flight Lieutenant Larry Spurr went to Korea with prior experience in jet combat - he had shot down a German ME-262 jet in WWII. These Canadian exchange pilots served exclusively with the USAF's 4th Fighter Wing and each pilot usually completed 50 combat missions. Combat missions usually consisted of flying about 90 minutes to and from enemy territory called "MiG Alley" near the Chinese border.

F/L Glover flew a Montreal built Sabre, "RUFUS". He downed 3 MiG-15s in Korea

The USAF main fighter was the F-86 Sabre. It was a classic swept wing fighter jet and thousands were built, including almost 2000 by Canadair in Montreal. Some of these served in Korea. The F-86 was built to counter the Russian MiG 15. The F86E had a maximum speed of 1094 km/hr, a range of 682 km and was armed with six machine guns.



F/L Omer Levesque was an RCAF pilot who was attached to the 334th FIS. Levesque.

In 1950, there was only one RCAF pilot, F/L J.A. Omer Levesque, on exchange with the USAF. He had served with RCAF 401 squadron in WWII flying Spitfires and was the first pilot to shoot down a German FW-190 fighter. He was credited with four kills prior to being shot down himself and serving the remainder of the war as a prisoner in Stalag Luft III. He arrived in Korea with the 334th FIS in December 1950. On 31 March he was the first Commonwealth pilot to shoot down a MiG- 15 in air-to-air combat. He later recalled:

"I was flying wingman for Maj. Ed Fletcher … suddenly the Squadron commander called out bandits coming in from the right…Fletcher spotted two more MiGs …My MiG pulled up in the sun…that was an old trick the Germans used to do…and I kept the MiG in sight …I guess I was 1500 feet away…I hit him with along burst, and he snapped over in a violent role (and crashed straight into the ground)."

Levesque completed 71 combat missions and received the American Flying Cross and Air Medal. It took him two wars and ten years to gain the status as an "Ace".

The most experienced RCAF pilot was S/L Andy Mackenzie DFC. He had 8 ¼ kills to his credit in WWII. On 5 December 1952 Mackenzie ended up in air to air combat over the Yalu River. During the melee his Sabre was shot to pieces. He was flying as wingman for Maj. Jack Saunders and later recalled:

"As I started into a dive for the attack, I suddenly realized that I had heard no reply from Saunders. I dropped a wing ….and I could see more MiGs coming in, which Saunders apparently decided to go after… Saunders started to fire, engaging two MiGs… I noticed fire over my canopy. There were two strikes on my right elevator, followed by three more…my aircraft was out of control…in few seconds I was barreling to earth …I bailed out."

It turned out that Mackenzie was shot down by his squadron mate. Mackenzie was captured and spent two years in a Chinese POW Camp. Most of this time was spent in solitary confinement with continuous interrogation, poor food, and brainwashing. He lost 70 lbs. Under terrible duress he was forced to sign a confession that he had participated in germ warfare, which of course never took place. After release in December 1954 Mackenzie went on to serve with distinction for another 12 years in the RCAF.
The most celebrated RCAF pilot to serve in Korea was F/L Ernest Glover DFC. He had flown Typhoons during WWII. He flew 58 missions in Korea and would become the RCAF leading pilot with three MiGs destroyed and three probables. Another RCAF pilot, Squadron Leader Doug Lindsay, completed 50 missions and was credited with two MiGs.

F/L Ernie Glover talking to his crewman, SSgt. Allan Reveley from Mimico, Ontario, both on exchange with USAF in Korea.

Other Canadians served with distinction. One of the top Canadian spitfire pilots was S/L John Mackay who had downed 10 aircraft in WWII. He was the last RCAF pilot to shoot down a MiG. F/O Bob Carew, former Spitfire pilot, would be the last RCAF pilot to complete 50 missions in Korea. He was forced to eject over North Korea but fortunately was picked up by a U.S. helicopter.

RCAF pilots can be proud of their contributions in Korea. The 22 pilots completed 1036 sorties, and downed 9 MiGs, 2 probables and 10 damaged. RCAF pilots were awarded 12 U.S Air Medals and 7 Distinguished Flying Crosses. One RCN exchange pilot, Joe MacBrien, completed a sixth month tour with the USN. He was awarded a DFC. MacBrien flew 66 combat missions flying the Grumman F9F-5 Panther with Navy VF- 781 squadron.

Major General Claude LaFrance. This distinguished Canadian flyer flew 50 mission while serving with the USAF in Korea and shot down one MiG. He retired from the RCAF in 1981 having flown 5000 hours on 35 different types of aircraft. He was then an assistant deputy minister with Transport Canada, and then President of Aerospatiale Canada, a French aircraft manufacturer.

DISPATCHES
from VIMM

Remembrance Day

VIMM will be open from 11:15 am to 3:00 pm with Covid protocols in place.

Remembrance Day Ceremony and Osborne Orr

Sadly, we have had to cancel most of the ceremony of adding Orr's name to the Cenotaph in Nanaimo. The plaque is in place and a new display inside the Museum is in preparation. The Lt Osborne Orr story will be recognized during the ceremony with the MC pointing out the new plaque at the cenotaph. The ceremony this year will be very restricted with just 18 wreath presentations. All of the other normal wreaths will be placed at the cenotaph beforehand. The ceremony will be restricted to 50 people.

We look forward to brighter days when we can welcome Alan Snowie and Orr's cousin James Thayer who are currently unable to cross the border.

Pat Murphy, resident model maker, working on a model Curtiss JN-4 for the new Osborne Orr display.

Welcome New Volunteers

Rob Robinson

Doug Hogg

Museum Directors and Staff

Roger Bird, President
Brian McFadden, Vice President
Phil Harris, Treasurer
Pat Murphy, Armoury/Security
Greg Devenish, Secretary, Library
Bruce Davison, Volunteer Coordinator
Bill Brayshaw, Acquisitions
Angus Scully, Newsletter Editor