



# 904 (Lake Chapala-Mexico) Wing Air Force Association of Canada

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Newsletter

November 2004

## Editor's Comments

The format of this issue of the bulletin is slightly different, but I think you will find the contents of interest. The major story this month is a tribute to **Air Commodore Leonard Birchall**, who died this year in Kingston, Ontario at age 89. Peter DeTracey who attended the reunion of 436 Squadron at 1 Wing in Trenton this past August provided the story, as well as an excellent presentation on the Burma Star 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary at the regular 904 Wing meeting at Nueva Posada on 8 October.

Our hard working President (who perhaps spends too much time on the Internet!) has written a new column titled **Willy's Web Favourites** that I hope will become a regular feature of the bulletin. We will keep the major focus on aviation sites

Finally, as a service to our members Dick Strobl prepared an excellent set of guidelines to assist you if you have a spouse die here in Mexico. It is typical of this "classy" friend that he took the time and effort to write out these guidelines to help others while he is still grieving the recent loss of his wife Dorothy. We will send a copy of these guidelines to you separate from the Wing Bulletin

For future editions, please pass any comments or suggestions to Bob Rowlett or Mario Okunsky. The deadline for submissions for the next issue is 3 January 2005.

### 904 (Lake Chapala-Mexico) Wing Executive Council

President	Bill Watt
1st Vice-President	Pete De Tracey
2 <sup>nd</sup> Vice-President	Ron Hudson
Secretary	Jack Girard
Treasurer	Tombo Thomlinson

United hired gentlemen with the expectation of training them to become pilots,  
Northwest hired pilots hoping to train them to become gentlemen. To date, despite their  
best efforts, neither carrier can be considered successful.

— Ed Thompson

## Willy's Web Favourites

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### Aviation Web Site

[www.flight-history.com](http://www.flight-history.com)

Flight-History.com is the site operated by Calgary based Ghosts of Aviation Inc. This site is shaping up into an important reference for the aviation history buff. It has dozens of military aviation stories, spec sheets on many pre-1950's aircraft and a list of aviation interest groups from over 20 nations. However, there are two features that are particularly well done: the photo archive and the museum directory.

The Photo Gallery covers 80 different topics. What makes this gallery different is that it allows the viewer to comment on each photo and to read the comments made by other site visitors. You will be surprised by the 'who, what, where, and when' details provided by some of the comments.

For the traveler, the Museum Directory provides lists of aviation museums in 31 countries, including many in Canada and an extensive list of museums in the USA and the UK. When you click on the name of a museum that interests you, the site takes you to a page that provides the museum description, location details and a hot-link to the museum's web site. A real travel-planning tool!

### General Interest - Appliance Repair

[www.repairclinic.com](http://www.repairclinic.com)

An appliance parts on-line retailer located in Michigan sponsors this site. It has an excellent appliance trouble shooting section written for the 'do-it-yourself' crowd.

To reach the repair guide, click on "Repair Help" on the Home Page. This takes you to a generic list of appliance types. Select the appliance type that interests you and go from there.

Even if you are not a DIY kind of person, you could learn whether or not your appliance is repairable and what questions to ask of the 'black arts' practitioner who does that sort of thing.

<b>Meetings</b>			
<b>Date</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Speaker</b>	<b>Venue</b>
Ø 19 Nov	Welcome Back Snowbirds	Mixed TGIF	Lake Chapala Society
Ø 10 Dec	Aviation Art	Aviation Artists	Nueva Posada, 4 P.M.
Ø 14 Jan	Nostalgia Night	Members	Nueva Posada, 4 P.M.

If black boxes survive air crashes -- why don't they make the whole plane out of that stuff?

— *George Carlin*

## **Official report from the BRITISH NEWS TELEGRAPH on "Air Commodore Birchall" Jim Lynch**

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Air Commodore Leonard Birchall, who has died at Kingston, Ontario, aged 89, was known as "the Saviour of Ceylon" because he spotted the Japanese Fleet approaching the island, which was the base for the Royal Navy's Eastern Fleet in 1942; as he radioed the position of the enemy force, his flying boat was shot down in flames.

Admiral Sir James Somerville had taken up command as C-in-C, East Indies Fleet, two days before being alerted by intelligence sources to the probability of a Japanese attack on Ceylon on April 1 1942. Fearful of the Pearl Harbor fiasco being repeated, Somerville dispersed some of his forces, and ordered air patrols to search for the enemy fleet.

Birchall and his crew, who were part of No 413 (RCAF) Squadron, had only arrived in Ceylon from the United Kingdom 48 hours earlier, when they were immediately pressed into action. After two days of fruitless searching, their Catalina took off early on April 4 and, eight hours later, sighted the Japanese force 350 miles south-east of Ceylon, steaming towards the island.

Realizing that he had found the Japanese strike force, Birchall closed to observe that the fleet included five aircraft carriers. Almost immediately his lumbering flying boat was attacked by 18 fighters. A sighting message was hastily coded and transmitted to base before cannon fire destroyed the Catalina's radio. The aircraft was then set on fire and, as Birchall landed on the sea, the tail broke off.

Two of the crew were seriously injured and went down with the aircraft. As the survivors swam away from the burning fuel, the radio operator was killed by machine-gun fire in the water. All six of the survivors were wounded, three of them seriously, when they were picked up by the destroyer Isokaza.

Birchall's signal was garbled on arrival in Ceylon, and requests for amplification went unanswered. However, it gave the clear impression that invasion was imminent. The defences were alerted and 48 ships, including the aircraft carrier Hermes, sailed from Colombo and Trincomalee. As the first Japanese air attack was mounted the following morning the defences were fully alerted. The British suffered considerable losses, but the Japanese fleet retreated; Ceylon suffered no further attacks.

Although The Daily Telegraph reported at the time that there was talk about erecting a memorial to Birchall, it was not until the end of the war that he learnt of his award of a DFC for his unique mission. At a formal dinner in Washington in 1947, Winston Churchill declared that Birchall's courage in helping to foil the Japanese invasion was "one of the most important single contributions to Allied victory".

Leonard Joseph Birchall was born on July 6 1915 at St Catharine's, Ontario. After serving in the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals, he joined the RCAF to train as a pilot in 1937 before specializing in maritime reconnaissance. Following the outbreak of war, he flew convoy and anti-submarine patrols from Nova Scotia. Early in 1942 he joined No 413 Squadron in the Shetland Islands, flying patrols over the North Sea. Following the Japanese advances in South-East Asia, No 413 was ordered to Ceylon to provide a reconnaissance force.

Once on board Isokaza, Birchall was singled out as the senior officer, and beaten by his captors in an effort to find out if a radio message had been sent. He steadfastly denied that any such report had been sent, and resisted all attempts to extract information.

The badly injured crew was put in a damp lock-up with room for only the three most badly wounded to lie down. After three days they were transferred to the carrier Akagi, flagship of the Japanese commander Admiral Nagumo, before being landed at Yokohama, where the injured were given good treatment.

Birchall and his three other crewmembers were taken to the town prison, where they were poorly fed before all the crew was eventually reunited. After five months they were the first inmates at a new camp in the mountains near Yokohama, where 250 Commonwealth prisoners from Hong Kong and 75 Americans from the Philippines soon joined them.

These had been so badly let down by their officers in previous camps that they proved extremely troublesome; but Birchall quickly instituted a strict code of discipline. He endeared himself to the POWs when he struck a Japanese guard, who was insisting that a badly wounded American should join a working party. Birchall was severely beaten and placed in solitary confinement where he suffered great privation.

For most of his time in captivity, Birchall kept detailed diaries of camp life, recording deaths and maltreatment by Japanese guards. He completed 22 diaries, which were kept hidden. "If they are found," he told a friend at the time, "I am for the chop."

In early 1944, he and others were moved to another camp, where ailing men were forced to work in the docks until they collapsed. In protest, Birchall ordered the men to stop working and sit down. Although guards flayed him with clubs and rifle butts, the POWs did as Birchall commanded until the sick were excused from work. He was then taken to a "discipline camp", beaten senseless and left without food and water for days.

In June 1945, Birchall and 200 prisoners were sent to a camp near Mount Fuji. When three men died of malnutrition, he organized "stealing teams" to raid local farms for fresh vegetables to provide the essential vitamins; no more deaths were recorded. Finally, on August 27, American troops arrived to take over the camp. After his release, Birchall stopped off in Manila, where he left eight of his diaries with instructions on how to find the remaining 14, which were wrapped in oilcloth and buried at one of the camps.

On his return to Canada, Birchall was appointed QBE in 1946, when the citation recorded that "he continually displayed the utmost concern for the welfare of fellow prisoners with complete disregard for his own safety. His consistent gallantry and glowing devotion to his men were in keeping with the finest traditions of the service". His own flight engineer, Brian Catlin, who spent much of the time with him as a POW, echoed the feelings of many when he said: "There are many alive today who would not have survived without Birchall."

In 1950, President Harry Truman appointed Birchall an officer of the Legion of Merit, saying: "His exploits became legendary throughout Japan and brought renewed faith and strength to many hundreds of ill and disheartened prisoners."

Birchall was a member of the American prosecuting team at the war crime trials held in Japan, where his diaries were used in evidence by the prosecution. As a group captain he served on the Canadian attaché staff in Washington before joining the Canadian NATO delegation in Paris. After commanding a fighter base he was promoted air commodore. He was commandant of the Royal Military College at Kingston, Ontario, and finally retired in 1967 rather than be associated with the unification of the Armed Forces.

Even when honorary colonel of No 413 Squadron in the Air Reserve, Birchall exasperated some progressive spirits by insisting on wearing the light blue mess kit of the RCAF.

While acting as a Canadian observer during Sri Lanka's general election of 1994, he was struck by the poverty of its hospitals. At his own expense, he arranged for eight tons of medical supplies to be sent to the country. He also organized visits to the war cemeteries in Sri Lanka and a memorial at No 413's wartime Ceylon base. One veteran commented: "Birch is still looking after his men."

Birchall was appointed a Member of the Order of Canada in 1999. He was one of only two recipients of a fifth clasp to the Canadian Decoration; the other was Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother.

Twice a widower, Leonard Birchall, who died on September 11, is survived by his third wife Kay and two daughters and a son from his first marriage.

Per Ardua Ad Astra