



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

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**November 2009**

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### **Remembrance Day**

Members of 904 Wing are encouraged to attend the Remembrance Day service at the Chapala Cemetery, Veterans' Section. We are also invited to attend the Pig Roast at the Chapala American Legion at 2:30 pm. Please get in touch with Susannah Kelly for tickets.

The following article on the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan was reprinted from Veterans Affairs Canada "Canada Remembers."

### ***Flying for Freedom***

#### **British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP)**

To win the Second World War, the Allies needed to control the skies. Canada was selected as a major site of Allied aircrew training in 1939. It had the geographical space for a large training program, was out of range of enemy bombing and close to North American factories producing planes and needed equipment.

The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) saw construction of more than 100 airfields across Canada. More than 130,000 pilots, navigators, wireless operators, bombers, air gunners and flight engineers were trained by 1945. They came from the Commonwealth countries of Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. Men from Poland, Norway, Belgium, Holland, Czechoslovakia and France were trained as well. It was dangerous work: more than 850 died, many buried in the communities where they had trained.



Canadian women contributed to the success of the BCATP as well, sometimes working as ground crew to keep the planes flying.

Photo: CFPU, PMR-75-361

The BCATP was one of Canada's most important and successful contributions to the war effort. It was a huge financial commitment for our young country. The new air bases created jobs and an economic boost in many towns. After the war, these airports would be key elements in the growth of civilian air service across the country. More than 3,700 of the airmen who came here to train married local women, many returning to live in Canada after the war.

## **Meet the Members - Geoffrey C. Marlow**

I was born on 28<sup>th</sup> January 1922 in Duncan, B.C., Canada, where my father was the manager of the Canadian Bank of Commerce at the time. In 1929 he was posted to the bank's branch in Trinidad, British West Indies.

After two years in Trinidad my parents sent me to boarding schools in England, including four years at Marlborough College, after which I went to the Camborne School of Metalliferous Mining in Cornwall. At this time, World War 2 was being waged but my father insisted that I complete the mining engineering course before joining the forces. However, as a student, I served in the Home Guard as a corporal, patrolling the hills overlooking the town one night a week, looking for enemy paratroopers. Thank goodness they never landed in England as we would have been blown away in minutes!

One week after graduation in June 1942 I volunteered to train as a pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force, having passed the strict medical and aptitude tests six months earlier. I was entitled to join the RCAF due to my Canadian birth and was initially put in the same platoon with 29 other Canadians, mostly transferees from the Canadian army. With them I spent several months in basic training prior to moving to a 12 hour flying training course near Coventry. Here most of us completed our first solo in a Tiger Moth. Those that did not solo were trained as navigators or bomb-aimers.

I was then assigned to a troop ship bound for Canada for further flying. At that time the enemy was sinking an average of 32 ships a week. When we were in mid-Atlantic, out of range of our air surveillance, I was on deck at dusk peering out at the cold dark green ocean, pitying the poor merchant seamen who had to travel back and forth to supply the beleaguered British Isles with essential supplies. Suddenly the periscope of a submarine appeared only about 400 yards off our beam. We waited for the torpedo but our helmsman quickly altered course 90 degrees, almost heeling the ship over. With only our stern visible to the sub we were able to escape by weaving our way south all night long, finally

landing a few days later in the brightly lit New York harbour, a glorious sight after three years of austerity and blackouts.

In Canada I completed a total of 227 hours of flying Tiger Moths at Virden, Manitoba and twin-engined Ansons at Vulcan, Alberta, after which I was awarded my coveted wings and an officer's commission. On my return to England I did many more hours in a twin-engined Oxford in order to familiarize myself with navigating over a highly developed countryside as well as learning more about blind flying. When this was completed I was posted to a station near Stratford-on-Avon where I crewed up with a navigator, bomb-aimer, two gunners, and a wireless operator, all of whom were Canadians, flying the twin-engined Wellington. Later we added an English flight engineer and flew the four-engined Halifax bomber at a Conversion Unit. We then reported to 434 squadron based at Croft, Yorkshire which was part of the Canadian 6 group. By then I had completed 455 hours of flying and, as a crew, we had become compatible friends and respected each other's contribution to the team.

In all, we went on to complete 30 bombing trips over Germany to finish a tour of operations. In those days flying was not as safe as it is today and many of our losses were due to bad weather, mechanical failures, navigational errors, collisions and crashes, apart from the hazards of enemy flak and fighters. As an example of this, 6 Group suffered its worst loss on a night raid in March 1945 to Chemnitz. On leaving the target our plane was attacked by a fighter, but by a combination of smart timing by the rear gunner in giving me the corkscrew command and the proximity of clouds just below us, we escaped. However, a few moments later, I heard a loud drumming on the fuselage right beside me which for a moment I thought were bullets. I then realized it was ice flying off the propellers so decided to climb to a colder altitude thinking that it was less dangerous than letting down over the mountainous country below us. We were then faced with a different problem. My rear gunner reported that the electric had gone on the "fritz" and he was freezing to death without power to his electric suit. We immediately descended to a lower height which was not as cold and headed back to base. When we landed after flying almost ten hours in awful weather, mostly on instruments and with no second pilot, you could see the strained looks on the faces of the aircrews. During debriefing we found out that no fewer than seven of our 6 group bombers had crashed shortly after take-off due to icing and another four had suffered the same fate as they descended through cloud over England on their return. Over Germany several more of our planes were shot down and one of my friends escaped death after having a collision over the target and managing to bring his plane back to an emergency field for a crash landing, making the group's losses that night 10% of the 180 planes that went on the mission. As was the custom, only the planes shot down over Germany were reported missing.

As another example of how things were, one night we lost the port outer engine of our Lancaster just after take-off towards the south on another bombing raid. A chill of fear settled in my bowels as this situation often results in a crash. My immediate action was to feather the prop and pull a red lever on the dashboard that allowed the super-chargers to give emergency full power in spite of being at a low altitude. When I did this, the port inner engine failed under the strain, thereby putting us in a very serious predicament since I had full power on the starboard side and no power on the port side. The plane was gradually swinging to port and tending to go into a spiral dive in spite of supreme efforts to

control it. Maintaining altitude with our full bomb load and gas load was also a challenge. We could not jettison our bombs as we were too low but, as fate would have it, we were gradually being forced to go east towards the North Sea . After passing over the coast we dropped our bombs and returned to base. We were still faced with a difficult landing due to the imbalance of the engines. The Gods were kind to us that day because if we had been taking off to the north we would certainly have crashed into the Pennine Mountains to the north-east. In this case we were not given credit for an operational trip although it was one of our most terrifying experiences.

Bomber Command suffered heavy casualties, amounting on average to two deaths out of three who flew. I was fortunate to have survived and in the end I felt that I had matured considerably and had developed some experience in leadership. Because I was still on the station at war's end I was chosen to fly my Lancaster plane back to Dartmouth , Canada in June by way of the Azores , thereby completing 802 hours as a pilot. I was discharged in September 1945 in Vancouver with the rank of Flight Lieutenant and a DFC. This was presented to me four years later by the Canadian ambassador in Mexico City because in the interim I was moving around too much. I have never flown again as a first pilot although I have put in about 500 hours as a passenger in twin-engined company planes on my frequent visits to remote mining camps.

In October 1945 I began my mining career as an underground miner at Britannia Mines in BC after which I went to Noranda, Quebec to work as a junior engineer for two winters. In 1948 I went to Mexico, working for a large American mining company called Asarco. I spent the first 19 years at a mine in Parral, Chihuahua which is located in the western foothills of the Sierra Madre about 400 miles south of the US border. Over the years I climbed the organizational ladder from engineer to mine manager in Parral and was then moved to Mexico City to take over the management of some 5000 miners employed by the company at nine operating mines throughout Mexico at a time when the underground mines were either being built, expanded or modernized. Although this was an extremely interesting and rewarding experience, during which I was given a pretty free hand, I had gone as high as I could go as a foreigner in the company that had become mexicanized and I decided to resign. I had been with the company for 25 years.

Three years after my arrival in Mexico I married my first wife, Margaret, who gave me two boys and one girl. Regretfully my wife died of cancer after 21 years of marriage. A year later my youngest son died of a ruptured appendix at the age of 13. This was the low point of my life, but in 1974 I was fortunate in marrying my present wife, Beatriz. A month later we were in the Philippines where we began a new life. I had been hired as Vice President Operations by Placer Development, a Canadian company that had a large open pit copper mining operation on the island of Marinduque. I arrived just as the mine was being expanded by 50% to 30,000 tons of ore a day. This was also a very challenging time as I had a lot to learn, not only about open pit mining technology in which I had no previous operating experience, but also about the country's laws, tax structure and politics. After the expansion was completed we discovered an equally large ore body adjacent to the original mine. However, this was covered with 40 million tons of tailings produced from the processing of the ore from the original mine. All of this mixture of sand and slime had first to be removed by a novel system of dredging which we pioneered. The dredged

material had to be disposed of by building a gravity flume and pipeline system over mountainous country, a distance of some 18 kilometres to the sea. During our ten years living in Manila where we had a house in a very upscale suburb and were members of the most exclusive clubs, we enjoyed a full social life and met many interesting people.

While in the Far East we took advantage during our five week annual holidays of visiting many different countries in that part of the world including China, Malaysia, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, New Guinea, Australia, New Zealand, Tahiti and Hawaii. We also visited Kenya, South Africa and Morocco.

The last three years of my career were spent back in Mexico searching for a mining property and a suitable Mexican company with whom Placer could associate as a minority shareholder in its development and operation. However, before this was achieved, a change in Placer management decided against further work in Mexico.

My wife and I retired in West Vancouver where we were lucky enough to find a nice home overlooking the harbour entrance, with the city and Lion's Gate Bridge in full view. We spend most of the year there living a good life with many friends and participating in a variety of different activities. In my case they include golf, tennis, bridge and gardening whereas Beatriz enjoys bridge, painting, mysteries and socializing. She is an excellent hostess. On thirteen occasions we have successfully exchanged our home with other retired people from several different countries. All of these exchanges have been fun as we not only have a comfortable home to live in while away but we can read their books, meet their friends and drive their car without really suffering any extra expense beyond the travel cost of getting there. We have also been on several cruises including one waterway cruise from St. Petersburg to Moscow which was most enlightening. Other trips to Egypt, Turkey, Greece, the British Isles, Scandinavia and almost all the rest of Europe, Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, Chile, Argentina, the Caribbean, Bermuda, the Maritimes, Florida and the Eastern Seaboard, Arizona, Oregon, Colorado, California, New England, Washington DC, Alaska and most of Canada and Mexico. Travel to distant lands was always one of my ambitions and I can say that we have been fortunate enough to see most of the world.

To add icing to the cake we now spend the three winter months in Ajijic in our Las Palmas home enjoying the beautiful sunny weather, the abundance of birds, the colourful trees and gardens and the busy social life. The moment we arrive in Ajijic in January we immediately unite with our friends from previous years as if we had hardly been away. We participate in most of our favourite pastimes and occasionally take small trips by car to other places not too far away. We truly live the best of both worlds.

## **Welcome Back Snowbirds BBQ**

Don't miss the Welcome Back Snowbirds BBQ at 4 pm, on 20 Nov at the Lake Chapala Society. It is sure to be a good event with Hector from Manix providing the food and Ron and Babette doing the drinks. The cost is \$150 pesos per person, alcoholic drinks 20 pesos each, pop free. We had over a hundred members and guests for this event last year and it was a great one.

## 904 Wing Golf Tournament

Sign-up now for the "Fourth ANNUAL BEST BALL GOLF TOURNAMENT" to be held at the Chapala Country Club at Vista Del Lago on Tuesday, 26 Jan 2010. Speak to Mike Briscoe or Bob Rowlatt to sign-up.

## Program 2009/2010

The full program of activities is available on the Web Site at [www.904wing.org](http://www.904wing.org).

Date	Day	Theme	Venue
11 Nov 09	Wed	Remembrance Day	Chapala Cemetery
20 Nov 09	Fri	Welcome Back Snowbirds BBQ	LCS Gazebo
11 Dec 09	Fri	Guest Speaker	La Nueva Posada
01 Jan 10	Fri	New Year's Day Cocktail Party	Birds of Paradise
15 Jan 10	Fri	Beer Call	Las Miche
26 Jan 10	Tue	Golf Tournament (Best Ball)	Chapala Country Club
12 Feb 10	Fri	Regular Meeting	La Nueva Posada
26 Feb 10	Fri	Beer Call	Las Miche
12 Mar 10	Fri	Annual Dinner Dance	La Nueva Posada
26 Mar 10	Fri	Beer Call	TBA Las Miche
02 Apr 10	Fri	Annual General Meeting	La Nueva Posada

### Notes

1. Notice of events organized by outside organizations, including the AEMA and the American Legion, will be announced separately to our members.

### **904 Wing Executive Council 2009-2010**

Don Slimman	President	765-4141
Ken Reppen	First Vice President	766-4316
Martin Inwood	Second Vice President	766-1900
Tombo Thomlinson	Treasurer	766-4684
John Prichard	Secretary	766-1876
Ed Healey	Snowbird Rep	766-1930
Ron Hudson	Past President	766-2142