

Obituaries

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MURRAY GORDON MARSHALL, 88 » BOMBER PILOT, FARMER, 'GREAT, REGULAR GUY'


Murray Marshall, far right, is seen with the crew of a Halifax Bomber. Near the end of his tour, he won the Distinguished Flying Cross for bringing a badly damaged Halifax home.

As a potato farmer he worked the ground, but he was happiest up in the sky

During WWII he brought his plane back safely from 37 bombing missions – and gave all the credit to the crew

BY FRANK B. EDWARDS

Group Captain Murray Marshall learned to fly as a teenager in the Second World War and shared his enthusiasm with hundreds of young air force pilots over a 23-year career.

A quiet individual, he seldom spoke of his war years and referred to himself as “a dull man.”

Dull or not, he brought his aircrew safely home after every mission through the deadly summer of 1944.

Murray Marshall was born in 1921 in Ancaster, Ont., northwest of Hamilton, the 10th child of a prominent farm family that had lived in the area for almost a century.

He earned his Royal Canadian Air Force pilot's wings a year after graduating from high school and, by his 20th birthday, he was teaching teenage recruits to fly over the fields of southwestern Ontario.

In 1943, he was assigned to the RCAF's 427 Squadron in England and switched from two-seater, single-engine Harvards to huge four-engine Halifax bombers that carried seven crew and 6,000 kilograms of bombs.

The skies above Britain's airbases were crowded with beginner and veteran pilots and “conversion unit” training mishaps often added to the RCAF's high casualty lists. Bomber crews serving overseas had a 50-per-cent survival rate.

During the Halifax course, 20-year-old Nick Markin joined Mr. Marshall's crew as the mid-upper gunner. He remembers his tall flight lieutenant as “a very quiet, very calm pilot. Nothing seemed to phase him.”

When a tail control snapped during takeoff, the 21-metre-long plane swerved dangerously off the runway into a field, but Mr. Marshall's reaction was typically low key. “I wonder what caused that?” he asked casually when the plane came to rest.

“We were glad we had him,” said Mr. Markin, 87, of Port Coquitlam, B.C. “He brought us home every time.”

While pilots normally hand-picked their entire crew, Mr. Marshall was assigned a British radio operator who had experienced two fiery crashes and was suffering from bad nerves. Worried that the man would be charged with “lack of moral fibre” for what would today be recognized as post-traumatic stress, Mr. Marshall quietly talked him through the panic attacks of nausea and shaking that accompanied every takeoff and landing.

On April 26, 1944, the night before his 23rd birthday, Mr. Marshall made his first bombing flight with the RCAF 427 Squadron out of Leeming, North Yorkshire. The flights



After the war, Mr. Marshall joined Hamilton's 424 auxiliary “Tiger” squadron. By 1953 he was the squadron's commanding officer.

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Dorothy Marshall, wife

were usually eight hours long, starting and ending over the English Channel, a body of water that held no appeal for Mr. Marshall. Near the end of his tour, he won the Distinguished Flying Cross for the skill he showed in bringing his badly damaged Halifax home rather than ditching it in the sea.

“He held the plane steady while the crew members decided if they should bail out,” his daughter Susan said.

“In the end, they stayed with the plane,” she said. “But Dad had no intention of jumping. He hated cold water.”

Typically, he attributed his survival to the skill of his crew. He told his wife Dorothy that navigator “Mac” McLeod was the one who always got them home. “Even when they were flying on fumes with no oil and all shot up, Mac found their way back.”

Mrs. Marshall said her husband told her that the crew members always peed on the plane's back wheel for good luck before takeoff.

Mr. Markin credits Mr. Marshall's skill with the survival of the crew and its Halifax

through 37 missions, mostly over Germany and France. “He was very clever. When the search lights came on, he was able to take evasive action like no one else.”

During one flight, the bomber kept bumping up slightly and settling back down. “We didn't even know what was causing it until we got back home. There were 113 holes in the fuselage from ack-ack [anti-aircraft fire].”

The summer weather of 1944 made for clear flying and Mr. Marshall's crew flew so regularly that they fulfilled their quota of missions by September. One assignment was to bomb German positions prior to the Normandy invasion, during which 150,000 Allied soldiers landed in France on the first day.

That fall Mr. Marshall returned to flight instructor duties in Canada and, before his next overseas tour started, the war was over.

By Christmas 1945, he had returned to civilian life and his father's potato farm. He began courting Dorothy Gleed, a registered nurse at Hamilton's Veterans Hospital, whom he had met in high school. They married in early 1948 and bought a potato farm of their own north of Waterdown, Ont.

Mr. Marshall seldom spoke of his wartime experiences, but he was not finished with the RCAF. He joined Hamilton's 424 auxiliary “Tiger” squadron and spent the next 18 years flying a range of fighters, including Harvards, Mustangs and the T-133 Silver Star training jet.

By 1953 he was the squadron's commanding officer

LEST WE FORGET

This is the final story in our remembrance week package, which has featured veterans of the Second World War on the Obituaries page. They survived the war and rebuilt their lives, often repressing the horrors they had witnessed. They may have succumbed to illness and old age, but their courage and their valour flourish. To those who fought in that great bloodletting from 1939-1945 – and those who stand on guard at home and abroad today – we owe an enormous debt of sacrifice and remembrance.

and, in 1960, was promoted to commander of 16 Wing, which administered a number of local reserve squadrons including the 424. Administrative duties took up two nights a week and his reward was a Saturday or Sunday in the sky.

Mrs. Marshall said that her husband's reserve duties once got them better phone service after an RCAF emergency call was blocked by a local operator.

“There were 15 people on our party line and late one night the operator wouldn't put a call through for fear of waking everyone up (if all the telephones rang).” The air force had a private line installed in the Marshall home the next day.

Summer was a busy time for a potato farmer, so Mr. Marshall usually missed extended military exercises in the warm months, but he had no excuse to skip a winter survival course in 1962 near Fort St. John in northeastern British Columbia. Dropped off in dangerously cold weather with only a survival kit, the small group of pilots were contemplating a miserable night when they stumbled across an isolated homestead. The family took them in and fed them before they resumed roughing it the following day.

George Stewart, a veteran fighter pilot and fellow reservist, remembers his former commander fondly. “Everyone liked him. He wasn't a braggadocio kind. Murray was a great, regular guy. A very good pilot. A great competitor. A good leader.”

That skill and competitive nature contributed in 1953 to the success of the 424 in the air force's annual gunnery competition. Mr. Marshall and Mr. Stewart were part of the five-man team that won the MacBrien Trophy in their P51 Mustangs, beating out the country's best regular-force fighter pilots. Their green single-prop fighters carried the squadron's distinctive logo of a tiger ready to pounce out of Mount Hope, the 424's hilltop base.

Susan Marshall grew up used to seeing her farmer fa-

ther in uniform as he moved back and forth between his fields and the air base. “I remember going to change-of-command ceremonies and taking the salute at the cenotaph on Remembrance Day. He had his air force, but I was more interested in my horse shows.”

Those special-occasion duties continued long after he retired from the RCAF in 1964 when 424 Squadron was disbanded.

“The family joke was that when dad had to take the salute, mom had to put him on a diet so that his uniform would fit,” Susan said.

After his air force retirement, he bought a share in a private plane and continued to fly until age 66.

One of his proudest duties was a four-year appointment as an honorary aide-de-camp to Governor-General Georges Vanier whenever royal duties brought the GG or royal visitors to the Hamilton area. He attended the Queen during her 1959 visit.

Despite his senior rank and personal success, Mr. Marshall never forgot the needs of other veterans. For 30 years he worked with the Ontario chapter of the RCAF Benevolent Fund, a volunteer organization that provided financial assistance and counselling to airmen and women who had fallen on hard times. Fifteen of those years were as provincial chair.

As quiet a veteran as he was, he liked the camaraderie of other servicemen. He was a regular at the Royal Hamilton Military Institute, a donor to the Warplane Heritage Museum and a keen member of the Halifax Bomber Association that recovered a crashed Halifax bomber in 1995. After 350,000 hours of volunteer time, the Halifax, shot down in Norway in 1945, went on display at Trenton's National Air Force Museum.

Suffering from Parkinson's disease, cancer and a broken hip in recent years, Mr. Marshall talked of taking one last look at his beloved Halifax but he never got the opportunity. So he watched the sky instead.

To Mrs. Marshall, her husband's affection for flying was clear. “He loved the clouds, loved to do aerobatics through them. Even when he was sick, he would look at them and say he wished he was barrelling through them.”

MURRAY MARSHALL

Murray Gordon Marshall was born April 27, 1921, in Ancaster, Ont. He died Sept. 27, 2009, at Hamilton's McMaster University Medical Centre. He was 88. He leaves his wife Dorothy, and daughters Susan Marshall and Gwyn Spak. He was predeceased by his son Craig Marshall.

» Special to The Globe and Mail

I REMEMBER » JOHN WEIR

Blake Heathcote remembers John Weir, who died on Sept. 20.

I was delighted to read Sandra Martin's Nov. 11 obituary on John (Scruffy) Weir. I met John in the spring of 2001 while interviewing veterans for my Testaments of Honour archive.

He'd been a man that several people had mentioned as having had a very “interesting” war experience. When he and I met for the first time at The Royal Canadian Military Institute, John was very pleasant, although somewhat formal in his manner. We talked about everything except the war – the rotation of crops on his farm, why a restaurant's treatment of sole determined how good its chef was, why he drove a Prius.

As we were leaving the RCMI after lunch, he said, “Okay, I'll talk to you.” Which he began to do a week later. This trim, reserved man slowly began to share his story with me. Over many months and years of friendship, we continued talking and his reserve evaporated to reveal one of the most remarkable people I've ever known. What had started out as a few war anecdotes from an interesting guy became a portrait of an astonishing life well lived.

He'd been raised to trust only what he knew, and not just what he thought. This pragmatic approach to life served him well, particularly given the extraordinary circumstances he came to encounter throughout the war.

Shortly after John's death, his son Ian shared with me a photograph of Scruffy. Taken in 1941 at his squadron's base in Lincolnshire, the young RCAF pilot is doing a handstand on the forward edge of his Hurricane's wing. Perfectly balanced, elegant and vital, the picture resonates with the spirit of this extraordinary soul. It captures something of what made him so unique.

Without false humility or regret, John used to say he doubted anyone would be particularly interested in his story. He couldn't have been more wrong, as I never failed to tell him. I miss him terribly.



John Weir. WEIR FAMILY PHOTOS

I REMEMBER » CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

Cyril Belshaw of Vancouver remembers Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose obituary appeared on Nov. 4.

Your recent obituary of Claude Lévi-Strauss, being republished from a U.S. source, omitted his Canadian connections. The culture of the Canadian Northwest Coast peoples provided central data for many of his theses. Despite his aversion to travel, he visited the University of British Columbia and its Museum of Anthropology in 1972 and there met Bill Reid and his wife Martine.

Bill was one of the greatest of Canadian sculptors and thoroughly immersed in Haida images. Dr. Lévi-Strauss and his family hired a motor caravan and travelled widely in the Province, including of course the Queen Charlotte Islands. That was but the beginning of an interesting relationship.

Dr. Lévi-Strauss commissioned Mr. Reid to create his mace, which he used during the ceremonies of the Académie Française. At the time Mr. Reid was working on probably the first Haida seagoing canoe in decades. When it was complete, the canoe and its paddlers travelled to France and paddled upstream on the Seine to the Musée de l'Homme, thanks to Dr. Lévi-Strauss.