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# VC or not VC?

## Bestowing a Battlefield Icon

Hugh A. Halliday

In January 1944, Wing Commander A.N. Martin, Commanding Officer of 424 Squadron, submitted a recommendation that Sergeant Vernon Frederick McHarg be awarded a Victoria Cross. Piloting a Wellington aircraft on the night of 26/27 January 1943, McHarg had remained at the controls of his burning aircraft, giving up precious seconds as his crew baled out of the doomed bomber, which crashed in flames before he could escape. The recommendation concluded by declaring, "Sergeant McHarg's deliberate sacrifice of his own life to save those of his crew is an outstanding act of bravery and devotion." To this the Station Commander added his own comments:

Some of his crew, now prisoners of war, have most justly said, "We can surely be proud of him." It is earnestly considered that this most valorous deed should be recognized by the award of the highest order of gallantry and in consequence strongly recommend the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross.

Notwithstanding the recommendation, Sergeant McHarg was granted no posthumous recognition whatsoever.

On the night of 21/22 June 1943, a Halifax of 408 Squadron went missing. Pilot Officer G.F. Pridham, the bomb aimer, reported that the aircraft had been hit by flak which killed two crewmen outright and mortally wounded a third. With fire sweeping the cockpit, fanned by winds howling through the shattered perspex, Sergeant Clifford C. Reichert (the pilot), stayed at the controls, keeping the bomber on a level keel to allow survivors, including Pridham, to bale out. In so doing he missed his own chance to escape; the Halifax exploded. On the basis of Pridham's evidence, RCAF authorities recommended some recognition for Reichert (who had been posthumously commissioned); on 1 January

1945 it was announced that he had been Mentioned in Despatches.<sup>2</sup>

In October 1943, while piloting a 422 Squadron Sunderland flying boat, Flight Lieutenant Paul Trueman Sargent attacked an enemy submarine in the North Atlantic in the face of withering anti-aircraft fire. Only three of his depth charges dropped; Sargent turned and made another run. By now the flak was brutal; two crewmen were killed; the navigator suffered wounds that proved fatal; controls were damaged and the aircraft was almost unmanageable. Sargent held to his course, dropped two depth charges which damaged (but did not sink) his quarry, then headed for a convoy. He forced-landed in heavy seas, and though the Sunderland sank quickly, the rest of Sargent's crew escaped and were rescued; Sargent went down with the aircraft. Sargent was subsequently recommended for a VC, a recommendation that was supported as far as Coastal Command Headquarters. Nevertheless, Flight Lieutenant Sargent was not awarded a Victoria Cross; instead he was Mentioned in Despatches.

The Victoria Cross - probably the most famous gallantry award in the world, the *Pour le Merite* and Congressional Medal of Honor notwithstanding - is a military icon, of near-mystical and quasi-religious significance. Yet it was created by humans, and its award is administered by humans. Its award has been subject to policies - and politics - which varied with time and circumstance. This paper is a look at those policies, with specific - but not exclusive - reference to RCAF experiences. I believe that when we are finished, the Victoria Cross may have lost some of its status as an icon - but conversely, I believe that those recommended, whether or not they received it, will have grown in our eyes.<sup>3</sup>

In retrospect, it is difficult to say why or when the Victoria Cross achieved its mythic status. Instituted by Queen Victoria in 1856, it was awarded generously until 1914, largely because for much of that time it was the *only* gallantry award available. No fewer than 522 were awarded between 1856 and 1913, often in quantities. Eleven went to defenders of Rourke's Drift (Zulu Wars, 22/23 January 1879). Three VCs went to Canadians saving artillery pieces from capture by Afrikaners in 1900.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, at various times authorities wondered if the Victoria Cross was being awarded too liberally. As early as 1864, Lord Lugard wrote that the VC was "losing its value... being looked upon in the light of a medal from the Royal Humane Society." The many awards for Rourke's Drift drew a protest that the VC was being awarded with "lavish prodigality." Even Queen Victoria questioned whether "the award might become too common."<sup>5</sup>

### **P/O Clifford Clarence Reichert**

REICHERT, P/O Clifford Clarence (J18083) - 408 Squadron (deceased) - Mention in Despatches awarded as per London *Gazette* dated 1 January 1945 and AFRO 721/45 dated 27 April 1945, No award. Born to Austrian parents at Thornhill, Manitoba, 25 October 1919. Enlisted in Winnipeg; Posted to 408 Squadron, 9 February 1943; killed in action, 21/22 April 1943.

Flying Officer G.I. Pridham, one of our recently exchanged prisoners of war, was an air gunner in Reichert's craft, and before returning to Canada, Flying Officer Pridham expressed a desire to have some recognition given to Reichert for outstanding bravery. Apparently, when the machine was hit by flak, two members of the crew were killed. Pridham was so severely wounded that his leg was hanging by the two back tendons and the pilot, although unscathed by flak, was enveloped in flames which were sweeping through the cockpit. The perspex was blown out, which permitted the flame to be driven right back into Reichert's face. In spite of this, Reichert maintained the plane on a level keel in order that Pridham and the observer could bale out. Pridham, when he found that his navigator was dead, baled out himself, and a few seconds later the craft exploded before Reichert could escape.

### **Sergeant Vernon Frederick McHarg**

McHARG, Sergeant Vernon Frederick (R118178) - 424 Squadron (deceased) - no award. Born in Watson, Saskatchewan, 28 September 1921; enlisted in Vancouver, 18 July 1941. Posted to 424 Squadron, 7 Dec. 1942; killed in action, 26/27 Jan. 1943.

On the night of January 26/27, 1943, Sergeant McHarg, V.F., was piloting a Wellington aircraft on a bombing mission to Lorient. He encountered exceptionally heavy enemy anti-aircraft defences and his aircraft was badly damaged and set afire. An attempt was made to control the blaze and continue the operation, but soon the fire was out of control and it was becoming rapidly more difficult to handle the aircraft. Sergeant McHarg ordered that the aircraft be abandoned. "The Air Gunner, Sergeant Vallis, K.G., jumped but his parachute caught in the aircraft and he had to climb back into the aircraft, release the parachute, and jump again. It was obvious that Sergeant McHarg could not hope to keep control of the aircraft for more than a few seconds, but he courageously stayed at the controls so that his crew might parachute to safety. The aircraft crashed in flames before he could leave himself. Sergeant McHarg's deliberate sacrifice of his own life to save those of his crew is an outstanding act of bravery and devotion.

As other awards were created - the Distinguished Conduct Medal in 1862, the Distinguished Service Order in 1886, the Military Cross in 1914, the Military Medal in 1916 - VC standards were raised. Yet those standards were not defined - could probably *never* be defined - and each case had to be decided on its own merits. The result was that uniformity of standards could not be attained, and the standards of 1914-1918 were very different from those of 1939-1945.

During the First World War the British Army, facing its greatest and most prolonged test in history, sometimes increased the issuance of medals to maintain morale. This also extended to "upgrading" recommendations to honours higher than originally intended - and possibly higher than merited. The Victoria Cross awarded Lieutenant (later Brigadier) F.M.W. Harvey, Lord Strathcona's Horse, actually began as a recommendation for a Military Cross following a routine trench raid; it was upgraded to a Distinguished Service Order at Corps level and

## F/L Paul Treneman Sargent

SARGENT, F/L Paul Treneman (J10828) - 422 Squadron - Awarded Mention In Despatches, effective 14 January 1944 as per London *Gazette* of that date and AFRO 874/44 dated 21 April 1944. Trained at No. 1 ITS, No.1 EFTS and No.1 SFTS. Public Record Office AIR 2/5010 indicates that he was recommended for the Victoria Cross which was not awarded. Recommendation was as follows:

On the 17th October 1943, Flight Lieutenant Sargent was pilot and captain of a Sunderland aircraft escorting an important North Atlantic convoy. The convoy was attacked by submarines and Flight Lieutenant Sargent sighted two surfaced U-boats in close company near to the convoy. There was very little cloud cover but, without hesitation, he pressed home a determined attack from a low level, taking avoiding action to minimize the effect of the intense fire from the two vessels. Owing to a mechanical defect only three depth charges could be released and these fell short. A few hits were

sustained by the aircraft and her return fire was so good that the decks of the U-boat under attack were seen to be clear of gun crews.

Flight Lieutenant Sargent at once made a second attack. To ensure the greatest accuracy, he maintained a straight course during the run-in and, disdaining the withering fire, released his two remaining depth charges. These straddled the submarine perfectly and it was seen to rise and then disappear.

During the second attack the Sunderland sustained many hits, two of the crew being killed, the navigator fatally injured and damage caused to the engine controls. The aircraft was almost unmanageable through lack of power. Before he died, the navigator provided a course to the nearest convoy and Flight Lieutenant Sargent descended in the very heavy seas with such skill that, with assistance from HMS Drury, uninjured members of the crew were able to escape. Unfortunately the gallant captain was trapped and went down with his aircraft. He had previously completed 34 sorties, involving 457 hours flying, and had invariably displayed great courage, skill and devotion to duty.



*F/L Paul Sargent and the crew of his Short Sunderland Flying Boat, 6 April 1943. Standing are Parker, Einarson, Tomlinson, Sargent, Shand and Needham; kneeling are Beats, Mesney, and Stafford; navigators Edwards and Charlton are not present (CFPU PL 15744)*

subsequently raised to a Victoria Cross at the level of GHQ.<sup>6</sup> The political impact of Victoria Cross awards was evident in the air war; William A. Bishop's controversial VC (awarded without the testimony of witnesses) was undoubtedly a tonic to the Royal Flying Corps at a time of very heavy losses. It was also a gesture towards "colonials" who made up a significant portion of the British flying services. In 1915, when Zeppelin raids on England were causing panic out of all proportion to their bomb loads, Victoria Crosses were awarded to the first two British pilots who shot down these airships; thereafter, a Zeppelin kill became a DSO action, and by 1918 it had been downgraded to a DSC, MC or DFC affair.

There is a substantial body of documentation respecting Second World War Victoria Cross awards. Although the material was declassified in 1974, much of the data remains to be tapped. I saw some of this during a 1995 research expedition, but could not examine it all, much less assess it. Nevertheless, several points - remarkable points, I believe - emerge from this cursory study, which justify further research.

Let us begin by remembering that "Man Proposes - God Disposes." In the case of the Victoria Cross (and many other awards at that time), many might be recommended for honours, but the rules of the game and the final decisions were in British hands. They were not inflexible hands in the case of at least one Canadian Army Victoria Cross - that to Lieutenant-Colonel C.C.I. Merritt - the British bent their own rules at the request of Canadians.<sup>7</sup> But in the end, it was British committees - and even King George VI himself - who made the final decisions. A vigorous Canadian effort to have a Victoria Cross awarded to Chief Petty Officer Max Leopold Bernays, RCN, helmsman of HMCS *Assiniboine* during a vicious surface battle with *U-210*, foundered in the face of British intransigence - whether at the level of Admiralty or Buckingham Palace is not clear - and a Conspicuous Gallantry Medal was ultimately substituted.<sup>8</sup>

The correspondence in Britain shows officials agonizing over who should receive a Victoria Cross and what might be substituted should a VC be vetoed. The problem was compounded by the fact that *posthumous awards* could be made with only three honours - the Victoria Cross, George Cross and Mention in Despatches. In the

hierarchy of gallantry awards, these were the two highest and the very lowest. A gallant man who survived his brave feat could be rewarded with many types of decorations - one who died could be given a VC, GC, or MiD - but nothing in between. Thus, in the three cases cited at the outset McHarg, Sargent and Reichert - it had to be a VC, an MiD - or nothing.

British authorities from the outset were uneasy about awards to fighter pilots - or more particularly, about Victoria Crosses awarded merely for piling up large numbers of "kills" - and whereas at least eight First World War Victoria Crosses - one-third of the air VCs of that conflict - went to high-scoring fighter pilots - Ball, Bishop, Barker, Hawker, Jerrard, McCudden, Mannock and Proctor - only two Commonwealth fighter pilots were awarded the Victoria Cross during the Second World War - and neither was a "high scorer" like Johnston, Malan or Beurling. There is more than a hint that Flight Lieutenant J.B. Nicholson's VC was motivated as much by political concerns (honouring Fighter Command as a body for winning the Battle of Britain) as by Nicholson's own heroism. The other fighter VC - to Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray - appears as much as anything to have honoured the Fleet Air Arm at the moment of victory.<sup>9</sup>

But what is most often stated in the Air Ministry correspondence (and widely communicated to senior officers in the field) is that a Victoria Cross should be awarded for *getting into trouble* and not for *getting out of trouble*. In other words, desperate acts of self-preservation should not count as meriting the Victoria Cross. Desperate acts to execute a mission would qualify from the suicidal attack on the Maastricht Bridges in May 1940 on through Guy Gibson's famous Dams Raid; desperate acts to save others would qualify (Andy Mynarski's Victoria Cross action is the finest possible example) - but furious self-preservation alone was not enough. William Barker's fight against odds of October 1918 would not have been a VC action by Second World War standards.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from David Hornell and Andrew Mynarski, how many members of the RCAF were recommended for Victoria Crosses? I know of seven men who were recommended and who did not receive it. They were Flight Sergeant Vernon Frederick McHarg, Pilot Officer Clifford Clarence

Reichert, Flight Lieutenant Paul Treneman Sargent, Flying Officer Harold Freeman, Pilot Officer Harvey Edgar Jones, Flight Lieutenant William Eugene McLean, and Flight Lieutenant John Alan Anderson.

Why did the Mynarski and Hornell recommendations succeed while these seven did not? It is significant that five of the seven - Jones, Sargent, McHarg, McLean, and Reichert - involved pilots staying at their posts while others were saved. In fact, this sort of thing happened with such frequency in Bomber Command that awarding a Victoria Cross in every instance would have devalued the award. "Uncommon valour" was actually so common that it could not be properly rewarded. Moreover, it was stated more than once that pilots had a duty to remain at their posts for as long as possible; it smacked a bit of the adage that "The captain should go down with the ship," which was almost literally so with Flight Lieutenant Sargent, who went down with his Sunderland.

This rule was bent slightly in the case of a posthumous VC award to Squadron Leader Ian Willoughby Bazalgette, a Canadian who had enlisted directly in the RAF. He, too, had remained with his burning Lancaster in an attempt to save comrades - he actually rode the bomber down to a crash-landing in France because two injured crewmen could not bale out, but the aircraft exploded just as he touched down. Nevertheless, events preceding this had marked Bazalgette out for a VC rather than a Mention in Despatches; with his aircraft already heavily damaged by flak, he had nevertheless pressed on to a target to execute the duties of Master Bomber, remaining over the target as his own plight worsened.<sup>11</sup>

As early as October 1942 consideration was being given to awards of Victoria Crosses for long-term, sustained gallantry rather than for specific daring deeds. In fact, only two such "periodic" VCs were ever awarded - to Wing Commander Guy Gibson and to Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, and then only after protracted discussions at Air Ministry Honours and Awards Committee level. Gibson is generally thought to have been awarded his VC for the famous Dams Raid, but Air Ministry correspondence reveals the extent of his service (four tours, 170 sorties) as a factor. Cheshire was, in fact, a very brave man who had won three DSOs and a DFC by 1944; he



*Canada's Air VCs in the Second World War*

*Clockwise from top left: P/O David E. Hornell, RCAF; S/L Ian W. Bazalgette, RAF; Lieutenant Robert H. Gray, RCNVR; P/O Andrew Mynarski, RCAF.*

*(NAC PA 5381 7; CFPU PL 130449; NAC PA 133296; CFPU PL 38262)*

had flown four tours totalling 100 sorties (536 operational hours) in the most dangerous of all RAF commands; there was almost nothing more to give him other than a Victoria Cross.

Nevertheless, Air Ministry shrank from rewarding further distinguished bomber pilots with a "long-haul" Victoria Cross; Group Captain J.B. Tait, recommended for a Victoria Cross, was granted a third Bar to his DSO, in part because authorities claimed that Tait's exploits (including the sinking of the *Tirpitz*) had been blown out of proportion by the press, and because they were loath to treat the Cheshire case as a precedent to be followed. Similarly, a VC recommendation for Group Captain P.C. Pickard (DSO and two Bars, DFC, three tours, 105 sorties, killed while leading the famous low-level raid on Amiens Prison on

## P/O Harvey Edgar Jones

JONES, P/O Harvey Edgar (J12866) - 233 Squadron (deceased) - Awarded Mention in Despatches, effective 1 January 1945 as per London *Gazette* of that date and AFRO 721/45 dated 27 April 1945. Home in Niagara Falls, Ontario.

Flying Officer H. Jones was the captain of a Dakota aircraft detailed to drop parachute troops to the Caen area on the night of 5/6 June 1944. The approach was made at a height of 600 feet above ground, in the face of heavy anti-aircraft fire. Approximately four miles from the Dropping Zone the aircraft was badly hit and set on fire. Flying Officer Jones continued heading towards the Dropping Zone and gave the signal for the parachute troops in the aircraft to jump, which they did successfully. He then ordered his crew to abandon the aircraft.

Flying Officer Jones could himself have abandoned the aircraft through the pilot's escape hatch at the same time as the crew were ordered to jump. Although well aware of the danger of remaining in the aircraft, he refused his parachute pack when it was brought to him and stayed at the controls to keep the aircraft on an even keel and maintain sufficient height for his crew to jump safely. Two of the crew jumped successfully after which the aircraft crashed and Flying Officer Jones was killed.

By his premeditated action in remaining at the controls until the mission was completed and the crew had left the aircraft, Flying Officer Jones deliberately sacrificed his life to carry out his orders and to ensure the safety of his crew. The dauntless courage and self-sacrifice displayed by this very gallant officer are a glorious example to all pilots in His Majesty's Service.

18 February 1944) was turned down on two grounds. Quoting Air Ministry minutes, these were:

- (i) He had already been sufficiently decorated in relation to other officers with comparable records of service.
- (ii) Press reports of his last sortie exaggerated its importance.<sup>12</sup>

I mention these instances because, in the absence of conclusive documentation, I believe that J.A.

Anderson's VC nomination was downgraded to a DSO because, like Pickard and Tait, the recommendation had been for a series of brave acts - another "long-haul" award - rather than for a single death-defying gamble. In fact, given the reluctance with which Air Ministry approved a VC for Cheshire and his four tours, it was unlikely that Anderson's recommendation would succeed, given that he completed only one tour.

The case of Flying Officer Freeman generated considerable correspondence within the Air Ministry. Leading a formation of eight Typhoons to attack a radar station prior to D-Day, his aircraft had been hit by flak; the tail was almost completely shot away. He nevertheless pressed on to his target, dived to very low level and fired his rockets with deadly effect. As he attempted to pull up, the wingtip of the following aircraft touched Freeman's fuselage; both aircraft crashed in flames. His VC nomination failed on several grounds; he was conducting a mission of a type carried out before and by many others - "part of the general offensive rather than as a forlorn hope entailing exceptional risk"; many others were taking the same risks as Freeman; it was not clear that the flak hit had damaged his aircraft beyond all hope of return. Freeman's VC might still have succeeded but for the fact that officers in Second Tactical Air Force disagreed; Air Marshal Coningham did not consider Freeman's bravery up to VC standards while Coningham's immediate superior, Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory supported the VC recommendation.<sup>13</sup>

But perhaps the most interesting correspondence is associated with David Hornell's Victoria Cross - a recommendation which succeeded. On 4 July 1944 the Air Officer Commanding, Coastal Command (Air Chief Marshal Sholto Douglas) forwarded the Hornell nomination to the Air Ministry. His arguments in support of the nomination were blatantly political:

Only one Victoria Cross has been awarded to Coastal Command in the course of the war. That award was made more than two years ago to the captain of a torpedo aircraft, who carried out a very gallant torpedo attack against a battle cruiser in Brest Harbour. I would point out that no award of the Victoria Cross has been made to any officer or airman engaged in anti-U-boat duties.

I feel that, apart from the outstanding heroism displayed by this officer, some recognition of the

## F/O Harold Freeman

FREEMAN, F/O Harold (J22448)- 198 Squadron (deceased) - Awarded Mention in Despatches, effective 1 January 1945 as per London Gazette of that date and AFRO 721/45 dated 27 April 1945. Home in Winnipeg; enlisted there 13 April 1940. Between 17 September 1943 and 24 May 1944 he flew 49 operational sorties (149 hours); destroyed one enemy aircraft plus shares in two others destroyed. Had shared in destruction or damage of a large number of ships. Killed in action, 24 May 1944 (Typhoon MN410); buried in France. No citation in AFRO or Canadian sources. Public Record Office AIR 2/5010 has recommendation for a Victoria Cross which was not granted.

On 24th May 1944, this officer piloted one of a formation of Typhoon aircraft detailed to attack a radar station at Jobourg on the western tip of the Cherbourg peninsula... The section led by Flying Officer Freeman flew very low in the face of fierce fire. A 37-millimetre shell hit his aircraft and practically shot away the tail. He managed to keep some sort of control and continued to the target. Diving below the level of the installation he was attacking, he released rocket projectiles into the structure with devastating effect. As he tried to climb away the wing tip of the following aircraft touched his fuselage. The two aircraft became locked together and crashed in flames 100 yards beyond the target. Flying Officer Freeman's fate has not yet been ascertained.

The radar station was so damaged that it was never used again... He displayed courage of the highest order in executing at all costs a task of supreme importance to future operations by the three services.

gallantry displayed by the crews of the anti-U-Boat squadrons in Coastal Command is well deserved.

The fact that this officer is a member of the Royal Canadian Air Force, serving in a Canadian squadron, if anything strengthens the recommendation, in that it would be some small recognition of the very great part played by Dominion squadrons and Dominion air crew personnel in Coastal Command's successful war against the U-boat.<sup>14</sup>

Air Ministry did not agree entirely with Air Chief Marshal Douglas; Flying Officer L.A. Trigg (RNZAF) had been awarded a posthumous



*F/O Hal Freeman (left) poses on the nose of a Typhoon with Cliff Abbot, and the squadron's mascots -Donald the Duck, Satan the Retriever and Nicky the "Heinz" pup, 6 January 1944. CFPU PL 26471*

On 9 August 1944 the Commanding Officer of 198 Squadron wrote to Freeman's uncle, J.C. Christie of Winnipeg:

This attack was carried out in circumstances which seem to have left a marked impression on all German personnel who saw it. They all alike describe with something like frank admiration how the pilot, his aircraft badly damaged and practically uncontrollable, carried on to the target and destroyed it.

...All the members of the squadron take an abiding pride in such an exploit. Harold's daring was always a feature of his own operations and it was most unfortunate that the collision should have occurred after such a brilliant achievement.

Victoria Cross in 1943 following a successful attack on a German submarine although he had not been a member of Coastal Command; rattier, he had flown under West African Air Forces control.<sup>15</sup> Within Air Ministry the Hornell case was considered "borderline"; three factors appear to have swung opinion towards a VC - the fact that he was flying a cumbersome, underpowered Canso amphibian; his skill in effecting a crashlanding on the water without injury to his crew; his sustained leadership in the 21 hours that followed when the survivors endured exposure to the North Atlantic and depressing



## F/O William Eugene McLean

McLEAN, F/O William Eugene (J35287) - 514 Squadron (deceased) - Awarded Mention in Despatches, effective 13 June 1946 as per *London Gazette* of that date and AFRO 726/46 dated 26 July 1946, Home in Toronto; enlisted there 25 July 1941. Trained at No.3 ITS (graduated 7 October 1941), No.21 EFTS (graduated 19 December 1941) and No.9 SFTS (graduated 24 April 1942). Killed in action 2/3 February 1945 (Lancaster NN772). Public Record Office AIR 2/5867 has recommendation for a Victoria Cross dated 17 June 1945 and signed by Wing Commander P.L.B. Morgan, Commanding Officer of 514 Squadron. McLean had flown five sorties (20 hours 35 minutes).

On the night of the 2nd/3rd February 1945. the above named officer was detailed as pilot and captain of a four engined heavy bomber to attack Wiesbaden.

The target was a heavily defended one, and just after the bombs had been released there was a loud explosion in the aircraft. Flying Officer McLean was then heard to ask the Flight Engineer if the starboard inner engine had been hit. He got no reply but almost immediately he himself confirmed that it was the starboard inner engine and that it was now out of action. At (his moment the Mid-Upper Gunner saw that the starboard inner engine was on fire.

The air bomber, who was down in the bomb aimer's position when the explosion occurred, then came up to see if he could give any assistance. At this moment, a large piece of white-hot metal came into the aircraft and lodged between the pilot's feet just aft of the rudder bar. The Air Bomber attempted to remove this with the aid of a flying jacket, but was unable to do so. Seeing this, Flying Officer McLean ordered the crew to carry out the emergency procedure for abandoning the aircraft.

Flying Officer McLean continued to control the aircraft in spite of the white hot metal, which by now was quickly setting fire to everything in its vicinity, including Flying Officer McLean's boots and clothing.

Just prior to leaving his turret, the Mid-Upper Gunner saw that the whole of the front part of the aircraft was on fire but the aircraft was still being kept steady which enabled him to reach the emergency exit and abandon the aircraft.

The Air Bomber, on his way to the emergency exit, noticed the Flight Engineer lying on the floor, apparently wounded or killed, so



F/O William Eugene McLean  
(CFPU PL 15814)

he called for a parachute pack, which he fastened to the Flight Engineer's harness. The pilot then told them to get out quickly. The Air Bomber then noticed that Flying Officer McLean was enveloped from head to foot in flames and that the whole cockpit was on fire. He then received a blow to the stomach and fell out of the aircraft.

The Air Bomber and the Mid-Upper Gunner were the only two survivors of the crew but they undoubtedly owe their lives to the outstanding bravery of the captain, Flying Officer McLean, who remained at the controls in order to steady the aircraft sufficiently to let his crew abandon it, completely disregarding his own safety and enduring what must have been extreme agony. Had he chosen, Flying Officer McLean was in a position to save himself but, crippled as the aircraft was, it is unlikely that any other members of the crew would have survived.

By his action, Flying Officer McLean set the highest example for outstanding bravery and courage, sacrificing his own life in attempting to save the lives of his crew and comrades.

It is very strongly recommended that this outstanding example of heroism be recognized by the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross to Flying Officer W.E. McLean.

## F/L John Alan Anderson

ANDERSON, F/L John Alan (J25399) - 419 Squadron - Awarded Distinguished Service Order, 6 February 1945 as per London *Gazette* of that date and AFRO 508/45 dated 23 March 1945. Home in Winnipeg; enlisted there 22 April 1942. Recommended for Victoria Cross by Wing Commander D.C. Hagerman, 23 October 1944.

Flight Lieutenant Anderson has completed 22 day and night operations against the enemy, during the course of which his outstanding devotion to duty and complete contempt of personal danger have been most remarkable. His determination to press home his attacks in spite of the fiercest opposition the enemy can put up has earned him the utmost admiration from all ranks.

On no fewer than ten attacks his aircraft has been badly damaged by enemy action but his enthusiasm to operate remains undiminished.

On July 28th, 1944, when detailed to attack Hamburg, his starboard inner engine failed when crossing Flamborough Head en route to the target. Although Flight Lieutenant Anderson was aware that he would probably lose height and be late on the target, he nevertheless, without hesitation, carried on, arriving on the target six minutes late and bombing from 8,000 feet below the main stream. On the return journey, when thirty miles off Heligoland, his aircraft was attacked by two FW. 190s, one dropping fighter flares while the other made no fewer than five attacks. These were all successfully evaded and the attacking aircraft was so badly damaged by his gunners that it broke off the attack and was last seen in flames going down in a steep turn. This officer then brought his aircraft safely back to base, still on three engines.

...On the 8th October, when attacking Bochum, 27 large flak holes were torn in his aircraft and, during an attack by two fighters, a cannon shell exploded in the fuselage, shortcircuiting the entire electrical system and causing all the navigation lights to burn. With great skill and coolness, he successfully evaded the fighters which were attracted by his lights and successfully returned to base with his aircraft in a badly damaged condition.

...This officer's most outstanding feat was performed during a daylight attack on the oil refinery at Bottrop on the 27th September. On arriving at the target it was found that this was obscured by 9/10th cloud cover. The target was sighted through a gap in the clouds too late to afford an accurate bombing run. Antiaircraft fire was very heavy, but without hesitation, Flight



*F/L John Alan Anderson*  
*CFPU PL 39735*

Lieutenant Anderson decided to do an orbit to ensure an accurate bombing run be made. At the beginning of the orbit, the aircraft was repeatedly hit by shell fragments and both port outer and inner engines were put out of action. The port outer engine was also set on fire, the hydraulic system was rendered unserviceable and the controls were damaged to such an extent that he had to call on the assistance of two members of his crew to pull manually on the rudder controls. With complete disregard of the heavy opposition, and the difficulty in controlling his crippled aircraft, Flight Lieutenant Anderson completed the orbit and made a steady bombing run, enabling his Air Bomber to attack the target very accurately.

Shortly after leaving the target, it was found that the starboard inner engine had also been badly damaged and was giving less than half power. Through superb planning, crew cooperation and flying skill, Flight Lieutenant Anderson successfully flew his crippled aircraft back to this country, with only full power from the starboard outer, half power on the starboard inner engine, and made a masterly landing without causing further damage to his aircraft or crew.

I consider Flight Lieutenant Anderson's great courage, whole-hearted enthusiasm to press home his attacks in the face of whatever opposition he may meet, and his brilliant flying skill and crew Captainty, fully merit the award of the Victoria Cross.

incidents including a failed life-boat drop. It is interesting to note, however, that the Air Ministry, having decided to support a Victoria Cross for anti-submarine work, proceeded to support *two* (Hornell and Flying Officer J.A. Cruickshank, a Catalina pilot in 210 Squadron).

Andrew Mynarski's Victoria Cross appears to have been much less political, yet the Air Ministry discussions concerning it reveal divisions and differences of opinion. It is worth remembering that in this instance the Canadians were not pushing for any specific award. Surviving crewmen had written to RCAF Headquarters asking if there could be some recognition for "Andy," and RCAF authorities considered it only in general terms; when RCAF Overseas Headquarters contacted the Air Ministry in February 1946, it was merely to request that the circumstances of Mynarski's death be investigated "with a view to the possibility of a posthumous award to P/O Mynarski." It would appear that Air Marshal Bottomry, Air Officer Commanding Bomber Command, recommended a VC for Mynarski, in a document dated 30 August 1946.

Yet once the recommendation had been submitted, officials within Air Ministry debated whether his actions had been up to VC standards. There was no doubt that had he survived, he would have received a Distinguished Service Order, but dying did not automatically upgrade his deeds to those befitting a Victoria Cross. The circumstances were similar to those of a VC to Flight Sergeant G. Thompson, RAF who had gone through fire twice to save comrades; Mynarski, it was suggested, might not qualify as he had attempted to rescue only one man. The Chief of the Air Staff disagreed. In a strong minute, dated 10 September 1946, he wrote:

In my view the **quality** of the action in the two cases was identical, the **quantity** was different because P/O Mynarski only had one member of the crew to try and rescue, Flight Sergeant Thompson had two. I suggest that the award of the VC should be given on grounds of quality and **not** of quantity.

Virtually all officers agreed that Mynarski had deliberately sacrificed himself in his attempt to save a comrade, and the recommendation was duly agreed upon.<sup>16</sup>

The debates indicate that, in the Second World War, the award of a Victoria Cross was to be made according to some undefined standard. Courage is impossible to quantify, and the attempts by some to do so only underline the futility of such efforts. Although it does not relate directly to Victoria Crosses, a document circulated in Canada in 1944 showed AFHQ thinking as it attempted to relate "risk" to "awards" according to a formula in which the odds of perishing were expressed as a percentage:

- (a) 85/100% George Cross. Acts of gallantry having entailed the supreme sacrifice or degree of risk equal to this condition.
- (b) 50/85% George Medal. Risk of life being extremely great but less than the degree covered in (a).
- (c) 25/50% Air Force Cross, Air Force Medal, Order of the British Empire, Member of the British Empire, British Empire Medal. The degree of gallantry being less than that of (b).
- (d) 1 / 25 % Commendation.<sup>17</sup>

The problems associated with deciding who got what were not unique to the RCAF, nor to the Second World War. This writer has found several examples of Victoria Cross nominations involving Army personnel which failed. Nominations for George Crosses have turned into awards of George Medals - or less. A Canadian Army report, drawn up in June 1946, laid down attributes of a satisfactory awards system. It merits extensive quotation:

- (a) the awards must go to those who most deserved them. If they do not, the whole system will quickly fall into disrepute...
- (b) the awards must be available on a scale liberal enough to permit recognition of outstanding achievement but not so liberal that they cease to have real value in the eyes of the recipients and of the army as a whole.
- (c) the awards must be granted with the maximum possible speed...<sup>18</sup>

These guidelines help explain the practices of the Second World War and caution us about administering honours today. Needless to say, the challenges of bestowing the right honours upon the right people for the right reasons are all the more demanding when one is dealing with what are - or should be - national icons.

## Notes

1. Directorate of History, National Defence Headquarters (DHist) 181.009 D.1552 (National Archives of Canada (NAC) Record Group (RG) 24 Volume 20601).
2. DHist 181.009 D.1515 (NAC RG 24 Volume 20601).
3. A fascinating and disturbing book by M.J. Crook, *The Evolution of the Victoria Cross* (Tunbridge Wells: Midas Books, 1975) goes into many aspects of the award. A British officer recommended for a VC in 1891 was not given this honour because he was commanding Egyptian troops; his valorous act was, however, deemed worthy of a DSO. Eight years later, in another case involving virtually identical circumstances, the War Office changed its mind and supported a VC nomination, (pp.248-250).
4. The situation was not unique to the Victoria Cross. In the United States, the Congressional Medal of Honor was distributed generously in absence of other awards. No fewer than 26 were spread among the 200 survivors of the Battle of the Little Bighorn (1876). On 11 May 1898, a three-hour raid on a cable station in Cuba brought the Medal of Honor to 48 men, and in the brief Spanish-American War no fewer than 111 Americans received this honour. See John Pelzer, "False Invasion Repelled," *Military History*, June 1993, pp.66-73. A failed three-week show of force against Korea in 1871 resulted in the award of 15 Medals of Honor. See Michael D. Haydock, "America's Other Korean War," *Military History*, April 1996, pp.38-44.
5. Crook, pp.254-256.
6. Ben Greenhous, Directorate of History. As of this writing (21 April 1996), this has not been confirmed by documents.
7. It was British policy that awards - even Victoria Crosses - could not be granted to persons who had been taken prisoner, until such time as they had died in captivity, escaped, or been released upon cessation of hostilities. Under these rules, Merritt - who had been captured in the Dieppe Raid - should not have been awarded anything until his liberation. Canadian army officials argued that Merritt was a "special case," and his VC was gazetted on 10 October 1942. Significantly, the other Canadian Dieppe VC - that to Honourary Captain John Foote - was not awarded until 1946, almost a year after Foote's liberation. For a more in-depth discussion of the awards granted for the Dieppe raid, see Hugh A. Halliday, "Dieppe: The Awards," *Canadian Military History*, Volume 4, Number 2, Autumn 1995, pp.34-42.
8. Privy Council Minute PC.8601 dated 23 September 1942 recommended the VC; Privy Council Minute PC.9802 dated 27 October 1942 revoked this; Privy Council Minute 9805, also dated 27 October 1942, changed the recommendation to a Conspicuous Gallantry Medal. This was awarded under the authority of London *Gazette* dated 3 December 1942 with the following citation:  

For valour and dauntless devotion to duty. Acting Chief Petty Officer Bernays was steering the HMCS *Assiniboine* during an action at close range with an enemy U-Boat. A fire caused by enemy shells broke out on the flag deck, compelling the telegraphmen to leave the wheelhouse, leaving Acting Chief Petty Officer Bernays alone. With complete disregard for his own safety, with flames and smoke obscuring his only exit, with enemy explosive shell fragments entering the wheelhouse, this comparatively young rating remained at his post for nearly forty minutes. Appreciating the crucial importance of his duties in an action, the success of which depended in a large measure on the precise steering of the ship and execution of telegraph orders, he not only carried out exactly and effectively all the helm orders but also despatched 133 telegraph orders, necessary to accomplish the destruction of the U-Boat. The final success of the sinking of the U-Boat was largely due to the high courage and determination of Acting Chief Petty Officer Max Leopold Bernays who, in circumstances of the gravest personal danger carried out not only his own, but two other ratings' duties in exemplary fashion. His conduct throughout the action added another incident of the utmost bravery to the annals of the Royal Canadian Navy.
9. Chaz Bowyer, *For Valour: The Air VCs* (London: William Kimber, 1978) outlines the circumstances of all Victoria Crosses awarded to air force personnel. Bowyer does not explore the processes of awarding Victoria Crosses.
10. Policy about awards and the standards attached to them was published in several circulars distributed to Command, Group and Station levels. See for example base Linton-on-Ouse file BL/S221-5, "Recommendations for Honours and Awards - Policy," DHist reference 181.009 (D1512), NAC RG 24, Volume 20600.
11. Public Record Office (PRO), Kew, London, AIR 2/5867.
12. *Ibid.* A book on the Amiens Prison Raid states that French civilians erected a cross on Pickard's grave giving his awards as "VC, DSO, DFC, Bar," suggesting that the French, at least, believed he had merited the award. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission presumably replaced the cross with a regulation headstone which would have omitted reference to a VC. See Jack Fishman, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down* (Toronto: General Paperbacks, 1982), p.490.
13. PRO AIR 2/5010.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Flying Officer Trigg's aircraft was set on fire by his target's flak but he pressed on, delivered a decisive attack, then crashed. Survivors from the U-Boat were picked up by British naval vessels; their fulsome praise of Trigg's courage led to the VC award - the only VC ever granted solely on evidence provided by the enemy.
16. PRO AIR 2/5867.
17. Air Vice Marshal J.A. Sully (Air Member for Parliament) to Air Officers Commanding in Canada, 6 June 1944, in DHist file 181.009 D.1688 (NAC RG 24 Volume 20605).
18. *First Canadian Army Report on Honours and Awards*, uncatalogued DHist document dated 1 June 1946.

Hugh A. Halliday recently retired from the Canadian War Museum. He is currently in the process of choosing a new project, probably to do with Air Force honours and awards.