

2000

"I regret to inform you...": Next-of-kin Notification and Official Condolences—The Case of Flight Lieutenant George J. Chequer, RCAF

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CLASS OF SERVICE	SYMBOL
Full-Rate Message	
Day Letter	DL
Night Message	NM
Night Letter	NL

If none of these three symbols appears after the check (number of words) this is a full-rate message. Otherwise its character is indicated by the symbol appearing after the check.

CANADIAN NATIONAL TELEGRAM

W. M. ARMSTRONG, GENERAL MANAGER, TORONTO

Exclusive Connection with
WESTERN UNION TELEGRAPH CO.
Cable Service to all the World
Money Transferred by Telegraph

FORM 6122

1944 FEB 1 PM 10 08

STANDARD TIME

RXAF88 32 2 EXTRA REPORT DELIVERY GB=RCAF OTTAWA ONT 1
1042

MISTER GEORGE CHEQUER=
3 ASHBURY PLACE OTTAWA ONT=

M9614 REGRET TO ADVISE THAT YOUR FLIGHT LIEUTENANT GEORGE
JOSEPH CHEQUER J TWO ONE FOUR IS REPORTED MISSING
AFTER AIR OPERATIONS OVERSEAS STOP LETTER
FOLLOWS=

CANADIAN PACIFIC
TELEGRAPHS
World Wide Communications

W.D.N. 11-12, GUYARD STREET, TORONTO, CANADA

BUCKINGHAM PALACE

The Queen and I offer you
our heartfelt sympathy in your
great sorrow.

We pray that your country's
gratitude for a life so nobly given
in its service may bring you some
measure of consolation.

George R.I.

RAAGS 8 NM

WINNIPEG MAN 11
G CHEQUER 1803
BURY PLACE OTTAWA

WALKS BE HOME SUNDAY MORNING TRAIN LOVE

GEORGE

CANADIAN PACIFIC
TELEGRAPHS
World Wide Communications

W.D.N. 11-12, GUYARD STREET, TORONTO, CANADA

Matters Now But Victory — Buy Victory Bonds

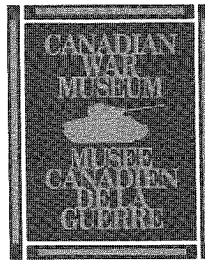
“I regret to inform you...”

Next-of-kin Notification and Official Condolences – The Case of Flight Lieutenant George J. Chequer, RCAF

Serge Durflinger

During the Second World War public memorialization and private bereavement complemented one another in lamenting the loss of over 42,000 Canadians on active service. The visible symbols of the nation's wartime grief included casualty lists and obituaries published in newspapers, religious services conducted to ease the grief of surviving relatives and friends, and various public commemorative ceremonies. Less frequently seen in public is the official and private correspondence received by Canadian families upon the deaths of their loved ones on active service.

It is not the *existence* of such correspondence that is little known. The poignant image of a shattered parent taking delivery of a dreaded telegram announcing the death, wounding, capture, or unknown whereabouts of a son, or sometimes a daughter, is well established. What is less-well understood is the varied nature and volume of the correspondence that notified and then attempted to console the bereaved families. These letters and sympathy cards emanated from public or governmental sources, including the deceased's unit commanding officer, unit chaplain, casualty officers from the service or branch in question, top-ranking service officers, government officials, cabinet ministers, and even Buckingham Palace. Most were personalized form letters. The sympathy cards were, of course, mass produced and disseminated as a matter of routine. Other private correspondence would arrive from friends of the deceased,



usually men having served in the same unit and parents of other servicemen having lost their lives or been captured in the same action.

These documents powerfully convey the mood of these troubled times. The wording, variety, and even physical nature of this correspondence evoke at once individual tragedy and, more broadly, the sad regularity of death among so many young Canadians in so short a time. While officialdom showed every single loss of life to matter, insistence that none of the lives were expended in vain permeates most official and private expressions of grief.

The Minister of National Defence for Air, Charles Power, whose own son was wounded and captured by the Japanese at Hong Kong in December 1941,¹ recorded in his memoirs that Canadians expected as much information as possible on the fate of their family members posted as 'missing' following air operations. He took a personal interest in casualty notification to the next-of-kin and the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) made a considerable institutional effort in communicating with families suffering the loss of a loved one. "It was inconceivable to the average parent of an R.C.A.F. airman," he wrote, "that the Minister of National Defence for Air should not know exactly where and how the boy was and what his status was." He went on:


If he was missing or otherwise a casualty, we were expected to have the full details of the action in which the boy was involved. We were obliged to give more attention to these matters than was

necessary in either Britain or the United States...In Canada no sooner was the notification sent to next of kin than inquiries began to arrive at our headquarters as to the circumstances and details; when lads were missing, we received persistent inquiries as to the prospects of good or bad news. I was very sympathetic to these inquiries and did my best to obtain further information; the Casualty Branch was instructed to put forth its best efforts to satisfy the demands made upon it.²

In July 1941, Power travelled to London to discuss with the Air Ministry and the Royal Air Force (RAF) a range of issues involving Canada's growing air force strength overseas and Ottawa's desire to "Canadianize" its commitment as much as possible. Among the topics broached was the need to facilitate the information flow regarding casualties suffered by members of the RCAF serving in RAF squadrons. On this particular matter, though not on all topics, the British authorities seemed entirely forthcoming and both services moved quickly to co-operate in next-of-kin notification.³

As the war progressed, and especially as the strategic bomber offensive against Germany expanded, RCAF casualty officers grew ever busier. In January 1943, the RAF's Bomber

Command formed No.6 Group, comprised entirely of Canadian bomber squadrons. Until sustained Canadian ground operations began following the invasion of Sicily in July 1943, the RCAF's bomber forces suffered most of Canada's combat fatalities. Moreover, thousands of Canadian aircrew served with RAF squadrons, nightly involved in air operations over enemy targets in Europe. From November 1943 to March 1944 in particular, Bomber Command undertook a series of punishing raids against Berlin. On the night of 30/31 January 1944, Bomber Command launched a massive attack against the German capital. It was the third such raid in four nights. Among the 534 bombers dispatched were 440 Lancasters, including the Lancaster Mark IIs of 514 Squadron, 3 Group, RAF. Despite the reported success of this devastating bombardment, the raiders did not escape unscathed. Thirty-two Lancasters and one Halifax bomber were lost, resulting in Allied casualties of 193 airmen killed and 53 taken prisoner.⁴ The only loss recorded by 514 Squadron as a result of this raid was Lancaster DS735, "A" for Apple, piloted by a 22-year-old Canadian, Acting Flight Lieutenant George Joseph Chequer of Ottawa. The Lancaster was shot down by anti-aircraft fire near Magdeburg,



CANADIAN PACIFIC TELEGRAPHS

World Wide Communications

W.D.N.T. GENERAL MANAGER OF COMMUNICATIONS, MONTREAL

RAA65 8 NM

WINNIPEG MAN 11

MRS G CHEQUER 1803

3 ASHBURY PLACE OTTAWA

DEAR FOLKS BE HOME SUNDAY MORNING TRAIN LOVE

GEORGE

1942 DEC 12 AM 1 10

Nothing Matters Now But Victory — Buy Victory Bonds

Chequer obtained his wings and a commission in December 1942 upon his graduation from No. 3 Service Flying Training School, Calgary. He and his parents saw one another for the last time that month. He arrived in Britain in January 1943.

before it had reached its target area. Chequer and another crewman, Flight Sergeant J.L. O'Brien, an Australian, were killed. Six others bailed out, of whom five became prisoners of war, and another, Sergeant R. Montgomery, a Scot, was drowned after landing in a lake. (There was one extra crewman aboard for training.) This was Chequer's ninth mission (and seventh to Berlin) since his first operational sortie on 16 December 1943.⁵

George Joseph Chequer joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in August 1940, serving as groundcrew in Calgary before remustering to aircrew in April 1942. He graduated as a pilot from the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) in December 1942, and was posted to 514 Squadron when it was formed in September 1943. The squadron was based in Waterbeach, Cambridgeshire and flew its first operational mission on 3 November 1943.⁶

Chequer was unmarried and, like many Canadians, had a number of relatives residing in Britain, including some in London, which was convenient when he took his leaves. He wrote home to his parents on average twice a month, occasionally asking for cigarettes, commenting

on the dampness of British accommodations, or telling them how he longed for a posting to warmer climes. On 26 September, he wrote his parents that his crew, two Australians, three Englishmen, and a Scot were a "very good bunch". Three weeks later he sent his parents a group snapshot of the men with whom he risked his life and remarked that they spent their leave time together.⁷

What follows is the 'paper trail' detailing the manner in which Chequer's parents and his sister, Eileen, learned of his death and attempted to cope with it. The documents require little commentary and include telegrams, letters from various authorities and individuals, and the formal expressions of sympathy the families of all casualties received. All the material is drawn from the archival and photographic collection of the Canadian War Museum.⁸ Text occasionally has been added to offer further information or chronological coherence. While no two Canadian families' correspondence files would ever be exactly the same, enough similarities exist between them to make the Chequer case a reasonably representative sample of RCAF casualty reporting.

CWM 19910181-011

George Joseph Chequer getting his wings.

Chequer wrote to his parents on 3 December 1943.⁹

...I can hardly realize I have been over here practically a year. I have just come back from leave. I spent it in London and had quite a good time. The folks are well and the only complaint is that they have not heard from you for quite some time...

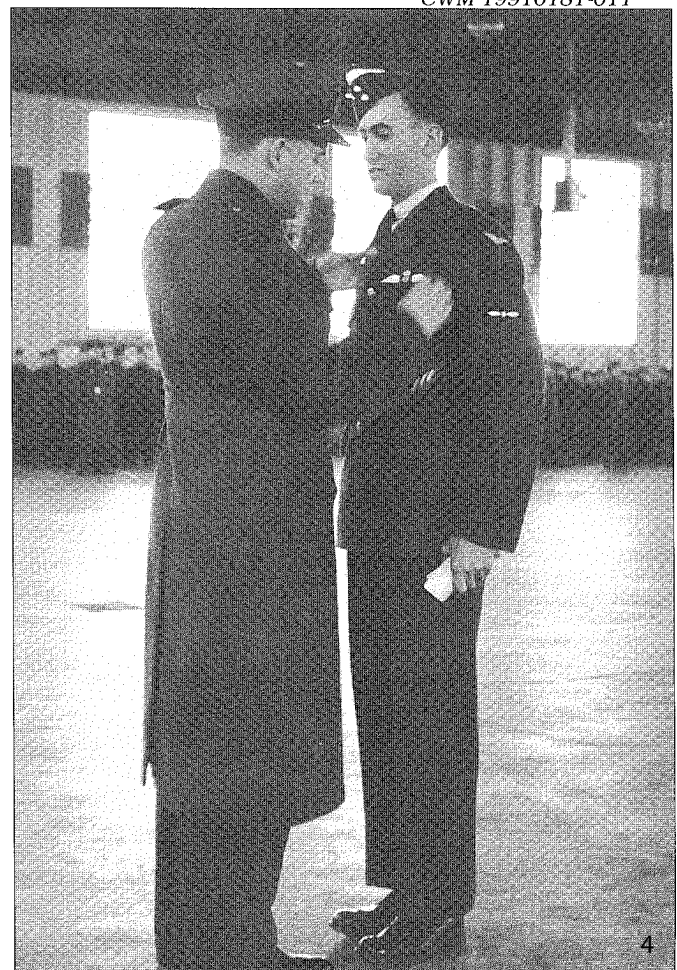
I just received two more packages of cigarettes, 300 in each one, but have not had the lot of 1000 yet, but I guess it is on the way. I have not received the other two parcels but I suppose they are following me around. I have been moved a couple of times just recently and the mail takes a while to catch up...

I am sorry that I can hardly send anything in the way of gifts, so all I can do is tell you to have the run of my bank account. So by all means have a good time. I would like you to cash a cheque for about \$75.00 and get anything you want for the three of you...

Everything is fine and dandy here, having a good time. So Cheerio for now.

Love,

George



The last known letter from him is dated 28 December 1943 and describes his Christmas celebrations at RAF Beachwater.¹⁰

Many thanks for the many fine Xmas things...the sheepskin vest is really swell, fits perfectly and is very warm. The chocolates were a treat, I suppose it was quite a job getting them. I have also received the carton of 1000 cigarettes, thanks a lot Dad. The cake also went down very well, we ha[ve] some quite good feeds when everyone gets their parcels together...Things are going quite well, nothing serious happening to date. I hope you had a good Xmas season, did you get a turkey after all? I suppose that turkeys were hard to get. I am glad to hear that tea is going to be unrationed again. I bet Dad will go on a tea binge and drink about 10 pots. Well I must close for now, so cheerio and all the best.

Love,

George

FORM 6122

CLASS OF SERVICE	SYMBOL
Full-Rate Message	
Day Letter	D L
Night Message	N M
Night Letter	N L

If none of these three symbols appears after the check (number of words) this is a full-rate message. Otherwise its character is indicated by the symbol appearing after the check.

CANADIAN NATIONAL TELEGRAM

W. M. ARMSTRONG, GENERAL MANAGER, TORONTO (956P)

Exclusive Connection
with
WESTERN UNION
TELEGRAPH CO.
Cable Service
to all the World
Money Transferred
by Telegraph

STANDARD TIME

1944 FEB 1 PM 10 08

RXAF88 32 2 EXTRA REPORT DELIVERY GB=RCAF OTTAWA ONT 1

MISTER GEORGE CHEQUER= 1042

:3 ASHBURY PLACE OTTAWA ONT=

M9614 REGRET TO ADVISE THAT YOUR SON FLIGHT LIEUTENANT GEORGE JOSEPH CHEQUER J TWO ONE FOUR TWO EIGHT IS REPORTED MISSING AFTER AIR OPERATIONS OVERSEAS JANUARY THIRTIETH STOP LETTER FOLLOWS=

RCAF CASUALTIES OFFICER.

On 1 February, George West, the chaplain of 514 Squadron, sent a hand-written note to Mr. and Mrs. Chequer.

...I understand the uncertainty and anxiety which you must feel. I was waiting up for the crews that night, and it was a great grief to all of us when your son's plane failed to return...[I]t is not unreasonable to hope that they may have escaped disaster by bailing out and became prisoners of war. But of course, there is no certainty about this, and it is not until official information comes through via the Red Cross that your terrible suspense will be ended...I know that whatever has happened to him...you can be sure that his chief thought was less for his own safety than for loyalty and devotion to duty. We here are deeply grateful for the help and sacrifices that you of the Dominions are making in the war and greatly appreciate the generous spirit which has inspired men like your son...[L]ike so many other brave men he has willingly hazarded his life for a great cause and we may be proud and thankful for his example...¹¹

No. 514 Squadron,
Royal Air Force Station,
Waterbeach, Cambs.
2nd. February, 1944.

Reference No.
714/0.2050/13/R.1.

Dear Mr. Chequer,

Prior to receiving this letter you will have received a Cable informing you that Son J.21428 Flight Lieutenant G.J. Chequer, Pilot has been reported missing as a result of an Operational Flight which took place on the night of 30th. January, 1944.

It is with very deep regret I am writing this letter to convey to you the feelings of the entire Squadron following the news that your Son has been reported missing.

At about 5.30 p.m. on Sunday evening lost an aircraft and crew of which your Son was the Pilot and Captain took off to carry out a Bombing Attack on BERLIN. This flight was vital and one of the many fighting and courageous efforts called for by the Royal Air Force. The flight should not have taken many hours but although other aircraft completed their mission your Son's aircraft failed to return.

The most searching enquiries through all possible channels and organisations have so far revealed nothing, but of course it will take some time for possible information to come through from enemy sources, and I can only hope your Son and crew are prisoners of war. Meanwhile further information may come available, if so, this will of course be passed to you immediately.

A Committee of Officers known as a Committee of Adjustment has gathered your Son's personal possessions together and will communicate with you in the near future.

My I again express my personal sympathy in your great anxiety

Yours sincerely,
H. J. Samson
Wing Commander, Commanding,
No. 514 Squadron, R.A.F.

ADDRESS REPLY TO:
The Secretary,
Department of National Defence for Air,
OTTAWA, Canada.

ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE
OTTAWA, Canada, 4th February, 1944.

OUR FILE 1022 - C - 5153 (R.O.4)
REF. YOUR
DATED

Mr. George Chequer,
3 Ashbury Place,
Ottawa, Ontario.

Dear Mr. Chequer:

It is my painful duty to confirm the telegram recently received by you which informed you that your son, Flight Lieutenant George Joseph Chequer, is reported missing on Active Service.

Advice has been received from the Royal Canadian Air Force Casualties Officer, Overseas, that your son was a member of the crew of an aircraft which failed to return to its base after a bombing raid over Berlin on January 30th, 1944.

This does not necessarily mean that your son has been killed or wounded. He may have landed in enemy territory and might be a Prisoner of War. Enquiries have been made through the International Red Cross Society and all other appropriate sources and you may be assured that any further information received will be communicated to you immediately.

Your son's name will not appear on the official casualty list for five weeks. You may, however, release to the Press or Radio the fact that he is reported missing, but not disclosing the date, place, or his unit.

May I join with you and the members of your family in the hope that better news will be forthcoming in the near future.


Yours sincerely,
T. R. Gunn
T. R. Gunn
Squadron Leader,
R.C.A.F. Casualties Officer,
for Chief of the Air Staff.

R.C.A.F. G. 11
9891-10 (10/4)

CWM 19950062-014-1

CWM 19950062-014-2

CWM 19950062-012-2



CANADIAN PACIFIC TELEGRAPHS

World Wide Communications

W.D. NEIL, General Manager of Canadian Pacific Telegraphs

RXAF13 34/33 2 EX GB REPORT DELIVERY

RCAF OTTAWA MARCH 6-1944--1203 PM

MR GEORGE CHEQUER
3 ASHBURY PLACE
++OTTAWA

M9572 REGRET TO ADVISE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS QUOTING GERMAN
INFORMATION STATES YOUR SON FLIGHT LIEUTENANT GEORGE JOSEPH
CHEQUER LOST HIS LIFE JANUARY THIRTIETH BUT DOES NOT GIVE
ADDITIONAL PARTICULARS STOP PENDING FURTHER CONFIRMATION
YOUR SON IS TO BE CONSIDERED MISSING BELIEVED KILLED STOP
PLEASE ACCEPT MY SINCERE SYMPATHY STOP LETTER FOLLOWS
RCAF CASUALTIES OFFICER.

1227 PM

On 20 April 1944, Squadron Leader W.R. Gunn, RCAF Casualties Officer, whose name appeared at the bottom of so many letters bearing grim news to Canadians, wrote George Chequer Sr., father of George Joseph, informing him of ways to contact the next-of-kin of other members of his son's crew.¹² Communication between families suffering losses at the same time was a common practice. Many experiencing the pain of sudden bereavement sought solace in others who shared their grief. But Mr. Chequer had already received a note dated 23 March from Sergeant H. Ewart Gulliford, Royal Army Ordnance Corps, father of Flight Sergeant R.L.


Gulliford, RAF, who had bailed out safely from the doomed Lancaster and been taken prisoner. Gulliford had received the good news about his son being a prisoner and hoped that Mr. Chequer had heard the same about his own son. Chequer replied on 3 April, informing him of George Joseph's death. Gulliford wrote back with a moving letter of 5 May. "I am truly sorry", he wrote, "that after going through the long agony of suspense, you should get the terrible news of your son's decease."

"I was not aware that any of the crew were dead until I had a letter from the parent of another boy, and I felt that by writing to you I had opened all your sorrows again. Will you please accept my very deepest sympathy in your loss?"

"The adjutant of your son's squadron described him as 'very experienced and seasoned'. I saw a photograph of the crew and your son appeared to be a very nice fellow..."

"I was notified by the Air Ministry on March 11 that [my son] was a prisoner of war in German hands, and we have received a card and letter from him. I will endeavour to find out from him any information he can give regarding your son and will pass it on at once..."¹³

CWM 19950062-014-4



OUR FILE 1622-0-1163 (R.C.A.F.)

REF. YOUR

DATED

ADDRESS REPLY TO:
The Secretary,
Department of National Defence for Air,
Ottawa, Ontario.

ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE
OTTAWA, Canada, 9th March, 1944.

Mr. George Chequer,
3 Ashbury Place,
Ottawa, Ontario.

Dear Mr. Chequer:

Confirming my telegram of recent date, I regret to inform you that the Royal Canadian Air Force Casualties Officer, Overseas, has advised me that a report has been received from the International Red Cross Society at Geneva concerning your son, Flight Lieutenant George Joseph Chequer, previously reported missing on Active Service.

The report quotes German information which states that your son lost his life on January 30th, 1944, but does not contain any further particulars. The International Red Cross Society is making every effort to obtain the location of your son's grave. However, I feel sure you will appreciate the difficulties attendant upon securing additional details.

Since this information originates from enemy sources it is necessary for the present to consider your son "missing believed killed" until confirmed by further evidence. However, in the absence of additional information, his death will be presumed after a lapse of six months from the date he was reported missing.

May I assure you and the members of your family of my deepest sympathy.

Yours sincerely,

R. E. Gunn S/O
Squadron Leader,
R.C.A.F. Casualties Officer,
For Chief of the Air Staff.

R.C.A.F. G. 32
(1001-543 (12/7))



October 24, 1944

Dear Mr. Chequer:

The Government has requested me to convey to you our deep sympathy in the loss of your dear son, Flight-Lieutenant George Joseph Chequer.

We wish to assure you that all members of the Ontario Government recognize the deep sense of obligation which the province owes for this great sacrifice which has been made to preserve all that we hold dear.

May I express my personal sympathy and the assurance that those who have paid the supreme sacrifice will never be forgotten by the people of Ontario.

Yours sincerely,

George Drew
George Drew

Mr. George Chequer,
3 Ashbury Place,
Ottawa, Ont.

CWM 19950062-014-9



DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE FOR AIR

CHIEF OF THE AIR STAFF
OTTAWA
2nd September, 1944.

Mr. George Chequer,
3 Ashbury Place,
Ottawa, Ontario.

Dear Mr. Chequer:

I have learned with deep regret that your son, Flight Lieutenant George Joseph Chequer, is now for official purposes presumed to have died on Active Service Overseas on January 30th, 1944. I wish to offer you and the members of your family my sincere and heartfelt sympathy.

It is most lamentable that a promising career should be thus terminated and I would like you to know that his loss is greatly deplored by all those with whom your son was serving.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Lockhart
Robert Lockhart,
Air Marshal,
Chief of the Air Staff.

CWM 19950062-014-7

TO: 188ET 6635.

PERSONAL

CANADA HOUSE,
TRAFALGAR SQUARE,
LONDON. S.W.1.

Dear Mr. Chequer,

This is meant to tell you how deeply my husband and I feel for you since we heard that your son is missing, - we know what these days of anxiety and doubt will mean to you.

Do know with what understanding and sympathy we are both thinking of you.

I had so hoped that I could write to you in my own hand, but, alas, the pressure of work here continues so great, that I know you will understand and forgive a dictated note.

Yours very sincerely,

Frances Margaret Massey

CWM 19950062-014-8

Once George Joseph Chequer was officially listed as missing, his family received condolences from a variety of sources. Closure was difficult to obtain and family members continued to receive correspondence related to their son's death for years to come.



To Mr. and Mrs. George Chequer
I have learned with deep regret
that Flight Lieutenant George Joseph Chequer, R.C.A.F.
has been reported missing.
The Government and people of Canada join
me in expressing the hope that more favourable news
will be forthcoming in the near future.

Charles F. Power
Minister of National Defence for Air

CWM 19910181-043



To Mr. and Mrs. George Chequer
This commemorates the gratitude of
the Government and people of Canada for the life of
a brave man freely given in the service of his Country.
Flight Lieutenant George Joseph Chequer, R.C.A.F.
His name will ever be held in proud remembrance.

January 30, 1944 *Charles F. Power*
Minister of National Defence for Air



BUCKINGHAM PALACE

The Queen and I offer you
our heartfelt sympathy in your
great sorrow.

We pray that your country's
gratitude for a life so nobly given
in its service may bring you some
measure of consolation.

George R.I.

These formal cards from minister and monarch
express official gratitude for an irreplaceable
loss.

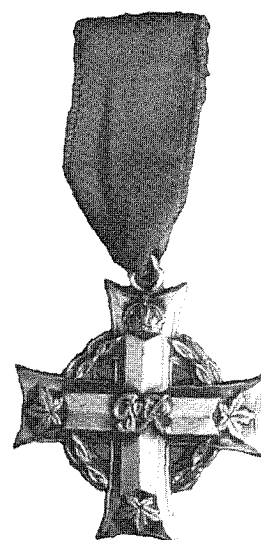
CWM 19910181-043

CWM 19910181-040



This Memorial Cross is forwarded to you by The Minister of National Defence for Air, on behalf of the Government of Canada, in memory of one who died in the service of his Country.

In addition to service medals, the next-of-kin of all Canadian war dead received a Memorial Cross, often referred to as the Silver Cross. Ottawa also awarded families a Memorial Bar to be attached to the ribbons of medals awarded deceased servicemen.



ATTN: REPLY TO:
THE SECRETARY,
DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE FOR AIR,
OTTAWA, ONTARIO



DOC FILE: J.21428 (R.C.)
REF. YOUR: [blank]
DATE: [blank]

ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE

OTTAWA, Canada, 9th August, 1946.

Mr. George Chequer,
3 Ashbury Place,
Ottawa, Ontario.

Dear Mr. Chequer:

Statements have now been received from members of the crew with your son, Flight Lieutenant George Joseph Chequer, of which, although they are of a distressing nature, it was felt you would wish to be advised.

According to members of your son's crew who returned safely to the United Kingdom, the aircraft crashed near Magdeburg, Germany, after having been hit by anti-aircraft fire just before entering the target area. On your son's instructions, the crew reported themselves as being uninjured and as the aircraft was ablaze your son instructed the crew to bale out. When the remaining members of your son's crew left the aircraft your son had not left and they have no further information concerning his fate.

You may wish to know of the several Services which have been set up on the Continent in an endeavour to obtain all particulars possible of crashed aircraft. Some information is available concerning a great many aircraft which crashed or were shot down by the enemy and every possible effort on an organized basis is being put forth to secure as complete details as possible. It is the duty of the Graves Registration Units which are under the control of the Military Authorities to enquire for and locate the graves of all personnel known or believed to have crashed and to have been buried in occupied areas.

A Royal Air Force and Dominion Air Force Missing Research and Enquiry Service has been organized for the purpose of research and enquiry in liberated territories into the circumstances of aircrews reported as casualties. This Service

--- 2 ---

R.C.A.F. G. NR
FORM 1-61 (10/12/39)

CWM 19910181-043

endeavours to obtain additional information to supplement that already received. The civilian population of these areas is being contacted by Radio, Press and Proclamations through the various civic authorities to centralize through this Service any information or concrete evidence they may have about Air Force personnel or crashed aircraft. Similar instructions have been issued to all Service personnel in these areas.

Please be assured that if at any time in the future additional information is secured, you will be immediately advised. I am sure you will realize, however, that in view of the vast number of enquiries confronting these enquiry Services, some considerable time may elapse before a further report is received.

May I again at this time extend to you and the members of your family, my most sincere sympathy in the great loss you have sustained.

Yours sincerely,

Forster

R.C.A.F. Casualty Officer,
for Chief of the Air Staff.

Durflinger: "I regret to inform you..."

George Joseph Chequer's crew, probably September 1943. Chequer is seated centre, front row.

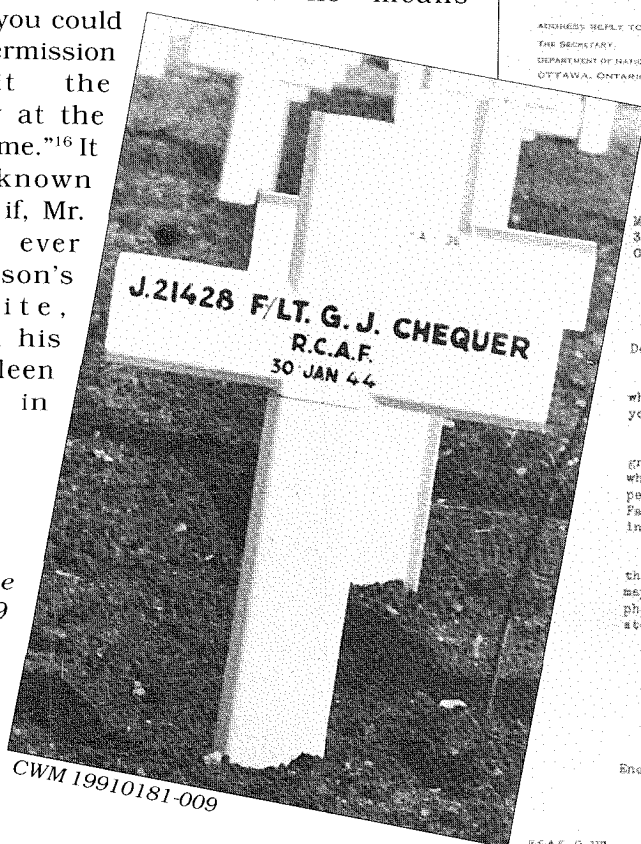


Mrs. Hennie Carey, the mother of another crew member of the downed Lancaster who had already lost her husband and a son-in-law during the war, replied to a note Mr. Chequer had written her at about the same time he was in contact with Sergeant Gulliford. Like Gulliford, with whom she was also in touch, Mrs. Carey was at first under the impression that all crewmen had parachuted to safety. "I never knew your son", she wrote on 26 May, "but feel we all do as Jackie [her son] could not express his gratitude to his pilot enough when on leave, he always said 'we crew put our lives in dear George's hands', which only proved to be true...I have your dear son to thank for my son's and the rest of the crew's being P.O.W.s"¹⁴

In January 1945, the air force returned to Mr. Chequer his son's birth certificate and school records – documents George submitted to the RCAF upon enlisting. Moreover, at Mr. Chequer's request, in February 1947 the RCAF sent him his son's flying log book.¹⁵ While no record of it can be found in the Chequer file at the Canadian War Museum, George Joseph's personal effects almost certainly were returned to his family as would any monies to which the dead airman would have been entitled. Any packages of cigarettes or food addressed to Chequer arriving at 514 Squadron following his death would have been opened and distributed among his squadron mates as was customary in cases such as these.

In September 1948, the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) informed Mr. Chequer that George Joseph's body had been exhumed from its location near the crash site and removed to the British Military Cemetery located in the British Occupation Zone in Berlin. Chequer and his Australian mid-upper gunner, J.L. O'Brien, were buried side-by-side as was common practice when interring aircrew who had perished together. A total of 527 Canadian airmen were buried in that cemetery. Unfortunately, due to the onset of one of the Cold War's earliest crises, the Soviet blockade of Berlin, the IWGC was forced to admit to Mr. Chequer that "we know of no means whereby you could obtain permission to visit the cemetery at the present time."¹⁶ It is not known when, or if, Mr. Chequer ever saw his son's gravesite, although his sister Eileen visited in 1958.¹⁷

Photo sent to the Chequer family in 1949 by RCAF.



ATTACHED REPLY TO:
THE SECRETARY,
DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE FOR AIR,
OTTAWA, ONTARIO.

OUR FILE: J 21428 (DPC)
REF. YOUR
DATED:

ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE

OTTAWA, Canada, October 24, 1949.

Mr. G. Chequer,
3 Ashbury Place,
Ottawa, Ontario.

Dear Mr. Chequer,

Please find enclosed a photograph which has been received from Overseas, of the grave of your son, Flight Lieutenant George Joseph Chequer.

Cemeteries are being handed over progressively to the Imperial War Graves Commission, of which Canada is a member, who are entrusted with the perpetual maintenance of the resting places of all our Fallen, and who will beautify the graves and surroundings, and erect a permanent headstone at each grave.

It is not necessary for you to contact the Commission. Any discrepancy as to rank, etc., which may appear on the temporary cross shown in the enclosed photograph, will appear correctly on the permanent headstone.

Yours sincerely,

J. G. Stephenson
for (J.G. Stephenson)
Group Captain,
for Chief of the Air Staff.

Encl.

R.C.A.F. G. 328
REVISED 1949
HQ 30-15-28

The healing process took years, and often was never completed, for literally hundreds of thousands of Canadians who lost spouses, relatives, lovers, friends, neighbours, and colleagues during the war. As one struggle ended, theirs only began. It is hoped that by showcasing some of the official correspondence stimulated by a single Canadian airman's death, some light will have been shed on the process of next-of-kin notification in Canada during the Second World War.

Notes

I am indebted to Carol Reid of the Canadian War Museum Archives for bringing the Chequer file to my attention.

1. Grant S. Garneau, *The Royal Rifles of Canada in Hong Kong 1941-1945* (Sherbrooke, Quebec: Hong Kong Veterans' Association of Canada, 1980), p.150.
2. Norman Ward, ed., *A Party Politician: The Memoirs of Chubby Power* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1966), p.231. There is room for much research into the processes and procedures by which information was conveyed to the families of Canadian casualties and the manner in which next-of-kin responded to the news itself as well as the nature of its transmission.
3. Brereton Greenhous, et. al., *The Crucible of War 1939-1945: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force Volume III* (University of Toronto Press and the Department of National Defence, 1994), p.46.
4. Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries: An Operational Reference Book, 1939-1945* (Viking, 1985), p.469; Martin Middlebrook, *The Berlin Raids: R.A.F. Bomber Command Winter 1943-44* (Viking, 1988), p.248. In the latter source Middlebrook cites the slightly different figures of 540 bombers including 446 Lancasters.
5. George Joseph Chequer, RCAF pilot's log book, Canadian War Museum (CWM) Archives Classification

58A 1 21.18 19910181-042 George Joseph Chequer file. See also biographical note prepared by Mrs. Eileen Galazka (née Chequer) accompanying letter to Canadian War Museum, 28 June 1994.

6. CWM Archives 58A 1 21.18 and 58A 1 21.19. See also Philip J.R. Moyes, *Bomber Squadrons of the RAF* (London: Macdonald and Janes, 1976), p.267.
7. CWM 58A 1 21.18 19910181-043.
8. CWM Archives, 58A 1 21.18 and 58A 1 21.19. One previously published similar exchange can be found in Terry Copp with Richard Nielsen, *No Price Too High* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1996), pp.195-196. However, space limitations allowed these authors to present only a fragmentary review of such correspondence accompanied by two partial illustrations of the documents concerned.
9. CWM Archives 58A 1 21.18 19910181-043.
10. CWM Archives 58A 1 21.18 19910181-043.
11. CWM Archives 58A 1 21.18 19910181-043.
12. CWM Archives 58A 1 21.19 19950062-014-5.
13. CWM Archives 58A 1 21.19 19950062-014-10.
14. CWM Archives 58A 1 21.18 19910181-043.
15. CWM Archives 58A 1 21.19 19950062-014-11 and for the log book 58A 1 21.18 19910181-042.
16. CWM Archives 58A 1 21.19 19950062-014-12, M. Campbell, IWGC to Chequer, 23 September 1948. See also H.F. Wood and John Swettenham, *Silent Witnesses*, (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974), p.138.
17. Galazka (née Chequer) to Canadian War Museum, 28 June 1994.

Serge Durlinger is an historian at the Canadian War Museum. He has recently published *Lest We Forget: A History of the Last Post Fund 1909-1999* available at <www.lastpostfund.ca>.