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# Historical Society News

[www.oakvillehistory.org](http://www.oakvillehistory.org)



**Volume 58 Number 3**

**Fall 2024**

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# OAKVILLE MUSEUM CELEBRATES THE ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE CENTENNIAL

Michael Johnson

April 1, 2024 marked the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). In anticipation of this centennial, my wife and I pitched to the Oakville Museum the idea of an exhibit to recognize Oakville's outsized contributions to the RCAF. Many of the stories highlighted in the exhibit "Oakville's Pathway to the Stars" belong in a novel or on the big screen – flying aces, spy drops to the Resistance, and great escapes.

They highlight the amazing ingenuity of Oakville's men and women, working on innovations that changed the post-war world. All of the stories are testaments to the patriotism and sacrifice demonstrated by Oakville families in support of the RCAF and the involvement of Oakvillians of all ages and demographics.



Entrance to the RCAF exhibit at Erchless

While the RCAF was not officially created until 1924, Canadians were leaders in aviation history even before February 1909 when the Silver Dart's flight over Nova Scotia's Bras d'Or Lake marked the very first flight in the British Empire, a flight more successful than that of the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk. During the First World War, over 20,000 Canadians served with the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). As early as 1917, the RFC opened Canadian

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airfields to train airmen, and the federal government helped fund an aircraft factory in Toronto. Many of us have heard of Canadian aces like Billy Bishop and Wop May, but Oakville had its own Great War aces; Charles Bremner Green was responsible for eleven victories, and Ernest James Salter for nine.

When Bremner Green and Salter re-enlisted in the Second War, they were joined by many Oakvillians, most of them young men aged 19 to 29. Of the 42,042 Canadians who died in the Second World War, over 40% were RCAF. Oakville had a population of about 4,000 in 1939. Forty-one of the town's casualties, or 1% of the population, died during RCAF service. The young faces on the Oakville High School memorial photo that holds pride of place in the new OTMH are a moving record to this tremendous sacrifice.



Charles Bremner Green

Aircrew from Oakville served in all war theatres, from the bomber offensive against Germany, the Pacific theatre, to guarding Canada's coasts and combatting the U-boat threat to convoys supplying Great Britain. Many Oakville pilots and other support staff were decorated for their outstanding courage and service. The team of pilot Rayne Schultz and radar operator Vernon Williams shot down five bombers, three of them on one mission. Hit by return fire, they made it back to base on only one engine. Both were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Bill Markey flew 34 missions by day and night, often in adverse weather in the weeks leading up to D-Day. He was awarded the French Croix de Guerre for his outstanding efforts as a bomb aimer. Nineteen-year-old Peter Barnicke found himself working with the Special Operations Executive dropping supplies and agents to Resistance movements

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## RCAF Centennial

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in Occupied Europe, especially France and Norway. It was hazardous work as the Germans infiltrated Resistance groups, and the dropping point could be an ambush. Barnicke was lost on November 9, 1944, when his Stirling disappeared over the North Sea.

At least six Oakville flyers were taken prisoner. One of them, Roy Brown, managed to escape from a train which was carrying prisoners to Germany. Belgian Resistance fighters delayed its departure, and when the car Brown was in derailed, he was able to slip away.

Several Oakvillians were held in Stalag Luft III, immortalized by the film "The Great Escape". A total of 76 men escaped before the tunnel was discovered and three made it to freedom, but 73 were recaptured and 50 executed by direct order from Hitler. The escapees were supported by their fellow prisoners who hid soil from the tunnel, distracted guards, prepared clothing and forged papers for the chosen few.

Oakville's contributions to the RCAF during the Second War showcased the innovation and ingenuity of its citizens. Oakville was the only town in the entire nation to host one of the five military convalescent hospitals, situated in the Foresters' orphanage on Bond Street; the rest were in major cities. Late in 1944, the military realized that traditional military hospitals were not meeting the needs of women joining the Women's Division of the RCAF and its Army and Navy counterparts. To serve them, two Women's Health Services Centres were created, one in British Columbia and the other in Oakville. A more relaxed environment with personalized quarters resulted in a high success rate for healing.

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Alex Velleman and Alvin Duncan were just two of the many who trained in the new technology of radar, which provided the Royal Air Force with the vital information they needed to win the Battle of Britain. Alvin Duncan was the great-grandson of another innovator,



Alvin Duncan exhibit, Erchless

Samuel Adams, a free man who came to Oakville originally as a blacksmith, and invented the technique of stone-hooking. Duncan was one of only two Black Canadians chosen to operate the top secret radar in the UK. RCAF radar operator Alex Velleman promoted the role of women in the Air Force when he masterminded a practice attack on his own radar station using seven Airwomen with pistols tucked in their purses.

One of the captured ladies asked for her purse and took her captor prisoner. Velleman and Duncan brought back what they learned to postwar Oakville. Velleman served as chief engineer for CHWO radio until his retirement. Duncan initially worked for Avro Aircraft, but set up a television repair business after the company was put out of business with the cancellation of the Avro Arrow in 1959. John and Joan Flippance, the founders of another well known audio-visual business in Oakville, Flippance and Carr, were also former Avro employees.

William Grammell, who had trained as a bespoke tailor on London's Bond Street, came to Oakville after serving in the British Army in the First World War. He re-enlisted in 1940, this time in the RCAF, offering his tailoring skills. His expertise earned him multiple commendations

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## RCAF Centennial

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for uniform designs that improved fit and saved cloth. After the war he returned to his shop and continued to tailor uniforms for officers posted to Central Command on Kerr St. While he was away, his wife managed the store, raised four daughters and made candy in her “spare time”. The girls also contributed to the war effort, selling the candy to raise money for the Red Cross. The two older girls worked as farmerettes in the summer holidays.



Mrs Grammell, her daughters and the store front

The RCAF centennial year provides a reminder of the importance of remembrance and commemoration of our courageous men and women and all who supported them. Canada’s missing airmen are still being found both in Canada and around the world. John Young’s bomber was initially located in Gander Lake immediately after crashing, but slipped off a ledge into very deep water when divers attempted to recover it. It was located for the second time in 2022 but is still precariously positioned and has not been recovered.



Wreck of the “Liberator 589D”, deep in Gander Lake, Newfoundland

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The planes carrying Oakville's Charles Dynes and "Buff" Ramsay were found within the first few years after they crashed, they were spotted by chance, Ramsay's on Vancouver Island and Dynes' on Black Mountain in Quebec.

Oakvillians in all walks of life were part of the support team, and this self-sacrificing and patriotic spirit lived on after the war when the town's squadron of the Air Cadets was formed. Named the "Golden Hawks" in 1968, this highly successful squadron, whose archival contributions have pride of place in the current Erchless museum exhibit, celebrates its 75th anniversary in 2026.

In honour of Remembrance Day, on Friday, **November 8 at 6 pm, Erchless Museum will host a Curator's Talk** with local historians Michael Johnson and Terry Murphy. They will lead a slate of guest speakers detailing the special contributions and heroic sacrifices made by local members of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

The exhibit "Pathway to the Stars: A Centennial Celebration of Oakville's Contributions to the Royal Canadian Air Force" will remain open from 4:30 to 6 pm in advance of this event. Admission is free.



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## Kudos...

The OHS was very pleased to present Chief Warrant Officer Jillian Alwyn with a bursary in the amount of \$1000 to assist with her post secondary studies. Miss Alwyn will be attending Brock University studying Honours Neuroscience in the field of Neurobiology. As well as attending Army Cadets for 6 years, she has extensive volunteer experience, including assisting the OHS with the Mayor's Picnic and the annual yard sale. She has tutored younger grades in math and science, assisted with poppy sales and worked as a Sales Associate at The Bay. Jillian is a 3 time honour roll student and won the Technology award in 2022 and the Cosmetics award in 2021 while attending St Ignatious of Loyola High School.

Congratulations Jillian, we wish you all the best in your future endeavours!



OHS Director Greg Munz and recipient  
CWO Jillian Alwyn



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## Culture Days/Fall Fair

October 5 was a gorgeous day, and people flocked to the downtown to celebrate Culture Days.

The Thomas House was open with cookies baking over the fire and a knitting/crocheting demonstration.

The OHS offices hosted a Fall Fair with baking and handicrafts for sale, several local vendors and Pioneer Pics in front of our decorated hearth.

Over 600 people attended one site or the other.

A heartfelt thank you to everyone who participated.





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# Once in a Lifetime!

George Chisholm

If you live south of the QEW, it's hard to miss the fairly frequent flights of the Avro Lancaster heavy bomber. It can easily be recognized by the sound of its engines as it flies at low level from Mount Hope along the Lakeshore. This past summer I was a passenger on one of those flights thanks to a combined birthday and Christmas gift from my family. Brenda and I arrived at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum at the Mount Hope airport on a hot, muggy Saturday morning in June to find a terrific surprise - our older son and his family had made the trip down from Haileybury to see the flight. Our younger son arrived from Burlington, so we all went into the cool building to check in. We were informed the morning flight would likely be a go, but they wanted to take off asap due to the extreme heat. After a familiarization session with the aircrew and museum staff, we headed out to see the Lancaster being towed out to the flight strip. The eight passengers and four crew boarded, the engines started and we were off.



Towing the Lancaster out of the hangar

7,377 Lancasters were built starting in 1942, with 430 of them built by Victory Aircraft in Malton, Ontario. There are only two still flying; one

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in England and one in Hamilton. VR-A, known as Vera, was built in July 1945 and is equipped with four US-built Packard Merlin engines each developing about 1700 hp. They are very loud. The plane was acquired by the museum in 1977 and 11 years of restoration were required before it flew again. It is named after Pilot Officer Andrew Mynarski, VC, whose Lancaster was shot down on 13 June 1944. He died trying to save his friend who was trapped in the rear turret. His friend miraculously survived.



Did I say the engines are loud? Once in the air, we were free to get up and move around, checking out the view from the cockpit and the two roof domes. It is not easy to move around inside the plane. We flew from Mount Hope, over Oakville, across the lake to St Catharines, along the lakeshore, then over Niagara Falls where we had to go up to



View of Niagara Falls

avoid the sight-seeing helicopters. The return trip took us along the Lake Erie shore, then cross-country back to Mount Hope. The flight lasted about an hour. Since the day was so hot and the engines are water-cooled, two of them were shut down before we landed and the second flight of the day was cancelled.

This plane being one of only two in flying condition, you can imagine the museum is extremely protective of it. People come from around the world for a flight, and the maintenance is very carefully tracked.

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The volunteers are passionate about caring for the Lancaster, and there are strict protocols for everyone's safety.

If you have a chance to visit this excellent Museum, it is well worth it. They have many vintage planes on display, a flight simulator, a canteen and a great gift shop.

Volunteers are actively restoring more aircraft, and rides are available on 10 vintage planes. A WWII plane ride makes a great gift for that hard to buy for individual or to mark a milestone birthday. Tickets for all flights go on sale online on November 15 at 9 am and the Lancaster sells out within minutes. Details can be found at [www.warplane.com](http://www.warplane.com)



Passengers, flight crew and re-enactors



## Annual Festive Gathering

St John's United Church  
262 Randall St  
December 6  
6-9 pm



All members welcome



# Oakville Remembrance Day Services 2024

Chris Vokes Memorial Park Cenotaph, Bronte

November 5, 10:50 am

George's Square Cenotaph, Oakville

November 11, 10:30 am

Memorial Park Memorial, North Oakville

November 11, 10:50 am



## LEST WE FORGET

**We are open:**

**Tuesday, Thursday and Third Sunday of the month 1:00 -4:30**

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