



RCAF veteran John Newell became an ace pilot when he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force to fight in the Second World War — he was so good at flying, the military felt he was more valuable to the war effort as a trainer than as a fighter pilot, and Newell was never sent overseas. *PAT MCGRATH*

Second World War veteran fights for recognition for wartime pilot trainers

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John Newell never got to fly a Spitfire in a dogfight with the Luftwaffe, but he put his life on the line nearly every day of his wartime service.

Newell, 94, was a flying instructor with the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, a massive training program that turned out more than 130,000 air crew for Allied forces during the Second World War.

It could be deadly work. Plane wrecks from the time are still found today, sometimes with the bodies of their crew inside. Newell remembers one trainee, a New Zealander, who lost control of his plane during a mock bombing attack near Shirley's Bay. The young flier smashed into the frozen Ottawa River.

"They found his teeth in the instrument panel," Newell says, still cringing more than 70 years later. "It was terrible."

He's campaigning to have the sacrifice of BCATP trainers recognized with a bar or a clasp, just as veterans of the Allied bombing effort were recognized in 2013.

"I'm not asking for a medal, just recognition. They could make a clasp for the war medal like they did for the guys in Bomber Command. They could put BCATP on it. At least people would know I didn't spend all my time sitting in an office.

"We lost all kinds of students. All kind of instructors," he said. "An air force person killed in Canada is just as dead as an air force person killed overseas."

Some 50,000 Canadians flew in Bomber Command with the Royal Canadian Air Force and Britain's Royal Air Force. About 10,000 of them would die.

But to get there, they had to be trained. Between 1940 and 1945, at more than 150 airfields across Canada, young men from around the world learned flying, navigation, gunnery, aircraft maintenance and



John Newell was a flight instructor in Ottawa during the war.

other air force trades. U.S. president Franklin Roosevelt referred to Canada as the "aerodrome of democracy."

Officially, 856 BCATP students died in training incidents, more than the number of Canadians killed in the defence of Hong Kong and nearly as many as died in the raid on Dieppe. National Defence historian Jean Martin argues the number of RCAF members who died in Canada is actually much higher — perhaps as many as 3,000 — since many died in non-flying incidents or in crashes after they completed their flight training.

"It was an enormous effort," said historian Jack Granatstein, former director of the Canadian War Museum. "Especially considering that the Canadian Air Force at the beginning of the war was 2,000 or 3,000 people and the airports didn't exist. They went from a

standing start to where there were airfields all across the country and there were people here from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa ... all over the world."

Newell grew up in Ottawa, a "plane crazy" kid who built rubber-band-powered balsa wood models of his own design. On the rare occasions when an airplane was sighted over Ottawa, he would chase it as far as he could until it disappeared from view, dreaming of the day he'd be at the controls.

Newell was working at the British American Bank Note Company on Gladstone when he tried to enlist in the spring of 1942, but his boss convinced him to stay around long enough to train a replacement. He finally signed up that October and trained in Victoriaville and St. Jean in Quebec, before returning to Ottawa for bombing and dogfighting training.

The trainees would fly their bright yellow single-engine de Havilland Harvards and Cornells over Shirley's Bay to practise bombing, strafe fields of hay bales near Greely for ground attacks and fly mock dogfights over Val-des-Bois to learn air-to-air combat. Newell finished near the top of his class, but his dream to be a fighter pilot was dashed when he was told he'd be staying in Canada.

"I was more valuable to the air force as a trainer than I would be as a fighter pilot," he said.

He spent the rest of the war teaching at Rockcliffe Air Station.

Winning formal recognition for BCATP trainers will be a tough sell.

"The bars that have been issued have been for action fatalities — Bomber Command, Dieppe, Hong Kong," Granatstein said. "It would be tough to make the case for training, however important it was."

Military awards and honours are issued by Veterans Affairs Canada. In an email, the department acknowledged the "very important contribution" the BCATP made to the war effort, but said the decision about what types of service are recognized with a decoration rests with the Chancellery of Honours, part of the Governor General's office.

A spokeswoman from the Chancellery of Honours said there was no specific recognition for BCATP trainers, whose service is already marked by existing general service issued at the time.

"It is fairly rare to have a specific recognition for one group in particular," wrote Marie-Pierre Bélanger.

The Second World War ended before Newell got overseas. He was mulling an offer to become a civilian bush pilot in the North when his old employer at the bank note company convinced him to return. He stayed there until he retired and never piloted a plane again.

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