

# “Every Challenge Head On” – Jeff Jeffery

by Ted Barris

*In November 2010, Jeff Jeffery, a former Halifax bomber pilot with 432 Sqn RCAF, Distinguished Flying Cross winner, and founding director/president of the Halifax Aircraft Association, died after a brief illness in Toronto. In his tribute, author and broadcaster Ted Barris reflects on the life of a one-of-a-kind Canadian.*

The very last time his hands gripped the controls of a Halifax bomber overseas, his aerial combat days were well behind him. It was mid-September 1995. A long lost Halifax bomber – ditched in Lake Mjosa, Norway, more than a half-century before – began to emerge from its watery grave. A salvage team and its undersea equipment had successfully raised the sunken warbird for RCAF veteran Jeff Jeffery to witness.

“The first thing I saw was her wingtip, then her ailerons, then the tip of the outer starboard engine propeller ... rising up out of the lake,” Jeffery recalled during an interview in 1997. “And I went out on the work barge, stood on the wing. I looked inside the cockpit, touched the throttles ... I put my arms around them and I cried.”

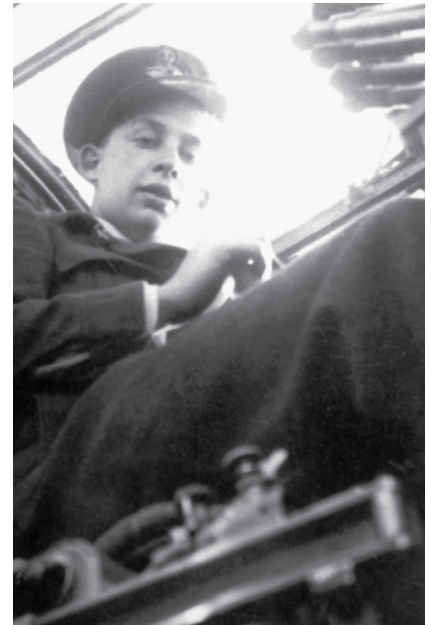
Jeff Jeffery’s rendezvous with Halifax NA-337 began in 1993. The decorated WW II bomber pilot and a number of his colleagues had gathered at a hotel café just off the end of a runway near Pearson International Airport in Toronto. They felt duty-bound to counteract negative

publicity surrounding the controversial CBC TV documentary “The Valour and the Horror,” by telling their version of the Bomber Command story, filming a documentary, writing a book and, if possible, finding and restoring a Halifax bomber at a museum in Canada.

Half a world away, Tore Marsoe and Rolf Liberg, two electrical plant employees in Hamar, Norway, compared notes about a common pursuit – piecing together the story of the Halifax bomber ditched in Lake Mjosa, in 1945, when they were just boys. Their search became so urgent in the 1990s, that on their own time and ticket they calculated the location of the downed aircraft, pinpointed it by sonar on the lake bottom and photographed its remains. They kept all their findings secret, hoping the right people would come along to help them retrieve the aircraft as a memorial to the Bomber Command airmen who’d helped liberate Norway during the war.

**A chance meeting between the Norwegians and the Canadian vets occurred in the fall of 1994.**

**“Do you realize how important the Halifax bomber is to Canada?” the Canadians asked Marsoe and Liberg in Oslo. “More than 70 per cent of all the 39,000 Allied missions on Halifaxes were completed by Canadian squadrons.”**



Jeff Jeffery piloted Halifax bombers to German targets and back safely through 32 combat operations.

The Norwegians listened intently as Jeff Jeffery and his comrades emphasized that their newly formed Halifax Aircraft Association (HAA) had hundreds of members who’d been looking, waiting eagerly to recover a Halifax for 50 years. At a critical moment in the meeting, Marsoe nodded to Liberg.

“Do you think Canada would like a Halifax as a memorial?” Marsoe asked. And he pulled out the sonar images of Halifax NA-337 sitting in 240 metres of water at the bottom of Lake Mjosa – the proverbial needle in the haystack.

The following summer HAA had raised the necessary \$300,000 from Veterans Affairs Canada, the National Air Force



Flying Officer Jeff Jeffery referred to them as the the "best crew in Bomber Command." R to L are: Bob Barnes, flight engineer; Fred "Red" Tanner, DFC, mid upper gunner; Wally Henderson, DFC, navigator; Jeff Jeffery DFC, pilot; Roger Chartrand, wireless operator; Bud Henderson, DFC, rear gunner; and Ken Underhill, bomb aimer.

Museum of Canada in Trenton, Ont, and individual veterans across Canada to underwrite the salvage. And by September, Jeff Jeffery had embraced those long-lost throttles, pitch levers and gauges in the cockpit of NA-337 in an emotional reunion. "My baby was back," he said.

In truth, Jeffery and his baby had only

*[Ed note: Canadian airline pilot and aviation history buff Karl Kjarsgaard was also a driving force behind the research and actual recovery of the sunken Halifax (please see "The Resurrection of a 'Hallie,'" Airforce, winter 2005/06)].*

just begun their final journey. Ten long years of searching for original parts, crating and transport of Halifax artifacts to

Trenton and the round-the-clock challenge of fundraising lay ahead. The association and its volunteers managed to generate more than \$1.5 million in their first decade. During one of numerous conversations this historian shared with the president of the Halifax Aircraft Association, the man juggled media appointments, HAA board meeting schedules, film editing decisions and correspondence.

"I received a letter from a doctor in Calgary," Jeffery said on that occasion. "He said he wanted to make a donation on behalf of his father, who'd been aircrew during the war. He said his father wanted to see the Hallie completed and never did. He said, 'But keep in mind he'll be watching you ... looking over your shoulder.' It makes everything I do feel worthwhile."

Following Jeff Jeffery's death on Nov 27th 2010, friends and family gathered in Toronto for a celebration of his life. A post-war working colleague, Chris Follows, noted the man's wry humour and sense of resolve; he remembered traveling with his veteran friend to Düsseldorf, some years after the war. Follows asked Jeffery if he'd ever been to the German city before. Jeffery paused, made some mental calculations and explained, yes, he'd been there 11 times ... but landed only five times. Follows remarked of his friend, "No matter how hard the wind blew from the west, Jeff never went east."

But then, Jeff Jeffery met every challenge in his life the same way – head on. Just before Christmas 1941, when Frederick E. "Jeff" Jeffery was a teenager,



his family lived in Vancouver. His brother was in hospital with spinal meningitis. It was a Sunday morning and Jeff heard a radio report that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. Anticipating an attack at any moment, Vancouver was immediately shrouded in an enforced blackout. Underage, but not uninterested, Jeff spent many of the following winter nights awake and on the lookout.

"I was sitting up on the roof," Jeffery said. "I was just a kid, 17 then. I was hoping to see a Japanese navy ship or airplane invading."

The next spring, when he turned 18, Jeff enlisted in the RCAF, earned his pilot's wings in the British Commonwealth Air

Training Plan and by mid-1944 had been posted overseas to 432 Sqn with 6 Group of Bomber Command based in Yorkshire, England. For many pilots and aircrew, the prospect of another night's flight to bomb factories along the Ruhr Valley, the V-2 rocket sites in France or major inland cities such as Düsseldorf or Cologne seemed daunting. But from the moment a briefing began, F/O Jeffery, the skipper of Halifax bomber "E for Eddie's Nightmare," approached each op with anticipation and a healthy dose of respect.

"When we were going out to the flightline to our aircraft in the van," he said, "I remember we could hear the engines (of the Halifaxes) warming up. There'd be a

lot of movement and a lot of noise, building up to a crescendo."

Take-off tension preoccupied every bomber pilot; Jeff Jeffery was no exception. He knew his Hallie faced its first great test accelerating down the runway with a full bomb load and tanks full of high-octane fuel. He often remembered the exhilara-

Depicted in the skies over York, England, Jeff Jeffery's Halifax VII bomber "Eddie's Nightmare" departs for a night's bombing run to mainland Europe. Copies of the painting by Barry G. Price helped raise funds for the restoration of the Halifax bomber on display at the National Air Force Museum of Canada in Trenton.



tion and anticipation of pushing the throttles forward, with every member of his crew “pushing their feet to the floor” to help the bomber get airborne. They all knew if the aircraft encountered an engine failure then, it was curtains.

“The Halifax was the only four-engine aircraft I ever flew,” Jeffery admitted. “But once you had control, you and the aircraft became one. We used to call it ‘the Beast.’ You could beat the aircraft up. You could throw it around the sky. And it would still behave ... and do what you wanted it to.”

His pilot’s flying logbook showed his first sortie – on July 25th 1944 – took the

crew of Eddie’s Nightmare to Stuttgart, Germany. The Bomber Command war diaries recorded that 461 Lancasters and 153 Halifaxes participated in that first of three nights of heavy raids against the city. It reported that 17 Lancs and four Hallies – almost five per cent of the force – were lost that night. Pilot Officer Jeffery’s aircraft and crew made it home safely. What his pilot’s log did not record, however, was a close encounter with a night fighter. Later, Jeffery recalled spotting the Messerschmitt coming down out of the night sky at about 2 o’clock from his starboard side. The fighter passed so close to the Hallie pilot’s windshield that he said he could count the rivets on the underside of the Me-109’s skin.

“Get him, Red,” Jeffery shouted into the aircraft intercom. “Shoot!”

“Get what?” the mid upper gunner, Fred Tanner, called back. “There’s nothing there.”

Experience told Jeffery either the German night fighter didn’t even see the Halifax or that he simply veered away so as not to be killed in a mid-air collision. In either case, Jeffery considered himself lucky. On another occasion, Eddie’s Nightmare was second in a bomber stream behind a Halifax that was attacked by a night fighter.

“(It) just blew up. A great, huge ball of fire and then black,” Jeffery remembered. “Just like mud, only black, dropping down with sparks in it. And that was the end of seven guys and an aeroplane.”

Halifax NA-337 enjoyed its official unveiling on Nov 5th 2005, a decade after its salvage from the lake in Norway. More than 2,000 visitors travelled to the National Air Force Museum of Canada in Trenton to watch as a shroud fell away to reveal the restored Hallie inside a nearly completed custom-built hangar. In fact, right to the last second, the restoration team – being recognized for its volunteer efforts that day – readied the bomber for its formal installation. For the occasion, veteran Jeff Jeffery had saved a bottle of vintage port, not to break over the Hallie’s fuselage, but to toast the 10,000 Canadians lost in Bomber Command between 1939 and 1945.

“The aircraft will never be flown,” Jeffery told *Airforce* magazine. “It is a perpetual symbol of the heritage left by those who flew and died for the cause of freedom.”

Technically Jeff Jeffery’s last flight in combat took place Christmas Eve 1944, when he piloted his Halifax bomber “E for Eddie’s Nightmare” to Düsseldorf and back. The raid against German airfields was designed to hinder the movement of supplies to the Ardennes battle area in Belgium. That night he completed his full tour – 32 trips. In fact, his CO had recommended Jeffery for the Distinguished Flying Cross after 26 trips. He often wondered what would have happened if he hadn’t completed the last six sorties. As it was, the DFC wasn’t actually presented to him for another three years. He remembered that Lieutenant-Governor Charles Arthur Banks actually made the presentation back home in British Columbia in 1948, but not before Jeffery had made a few alterations to his air force uniform.

“An awful lot of us had stitched a small ‘V’ in the back of our trousers, where we’d let them out so they would still fit,” he said. “You see, we got back to eating again after the war and put on a little bit of weight. When I got back from overseas, I weighed a grand total of 165 pounds.”

Slight in stature then, grand in reputation by life’s end, Jeff Jeffery responded to the needs of the world around him. He served his country in wartime. He supported and grew with family and community in peace. Last, but not least – in what began as a personal crusade – he plumbed the depths of a lake and a nation’s sense of its wartime legacy. He corrected an oversight by governments, historians and public knowledge. And he bequeathed future Canadians permanent memorial to a generation that gave the world a second chance.

Selfless to the end, Jeff Jeffery summed up his leadership in that crusade; as he wrote his speech for NA-337’s inauguration at Trenton in 2005, he remembered the way his wife and life-partner Elaine had described the campaign: “It was meant to happen,” he said. ➤

*(Ed note: Ted Barris is broadcaster, author and journalism professor at Centennial College in Toronto. Last fall, his bestselling book – “Breaking the Silence: Veterans’ Untold Stories from the Great War to Afghanistan” – was published by Thomas Allen Publishers. He is a member of the Air Force Association of Canada.)*