

# BARRAGE

The RCA Museum News

THE RCA MUSEUM  
CANADA'S NATIONAL ARTILLERY MUSEUM



January 2023

## Return of the Brandon Santa Claus Parade



After a two-year hiatus, we were excited to take part in the much-anticipated Brandon Santa Claus Parade on November 19th. Organizers cancelled the parade over the last couple of years due to the pandemic, so our staff were eager to return and face the cold! On the night of the event, spirits were high as thousands of children and their families lined the Downtown streets. Light snow fell to the ground, creating a picture-perfect Christmas scenery.

This year was our fifth participating, and we chose a 1952 Dodge M37 to decorate. Affectionately nicknamed Doris, the truck spread holiday cheer with blinking lights, festive decor, and Christmas music. The old pickup had a shaky beginning with problems starting up, yet our mechanic managed to join the rest of the parade.

Our truck did not bring home any awards this year, but we still had a lot of fun participating in the festivities. A big thank you to our mechanic for the hard work involved in the vehicle preparation.

## Women in the Canadian Army

RCA Museum staff recently added a female mannequin to their Second World War display, as women in the Canadian Army gained importance during that period. Although female Gunners were never in active combat roles, they served as plotters, telephonists, recorders, and predictors in plotting rooms and did administrative work in anti-aircraft batteries. Museum visitors can spot the new mannequin proudly sporting a well-adorned Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC) uniform.

The CWAC uniform, a home-front winter dress, consists of an olive drab-coloured jacket and skirt made from barathea (a soft fabric blend of wool, silk and cotton). A distinct part of the women's uniform is a lozenge-shaped cap badge with three maple leaves, the CWAC's insignia. On each side of the jacket's notched lapels are collar dogs of the helmeted Greek Goddess of War, Athena. Brass buttons also depicting Athena decorate the front of the coat and the dark brown epaulettes. This ensemble combines nicely with a matching brown tie, leather gloves, stockings, and issued shoes.

The uniform features unique decorations specific to its time. For example, both sleeves include colourful hexagonal patches representing volunteer service with the Canadian Pacific Force and Corporal rank chevrons. A small round badge with the red letters GS, for General Service, near the left wrist signifies volunteering for service overseas. On the opposite sleeve is a patch with four red chevrons, one for each year of service. The mannequin also carries a canvas bag with a gas mask and a leather handbag for personal items.

Women have played a significant role in the Canadian Militia for over 100 years, from a dozen nurses during the North-West Rebellion of 1885 to over 2,800 nurses during the First World War. The government of Canada authorized women to serve alongside their male counterparts in 1941 and officially integrated the CWAC into the Canadian Army in 1942 to increase the military force. During WWII, 50,000 women served in the Canadian Army—21,624 of them were in the CWAC. They had various roles ranging from the more traditional ones, such as cooking and cleaning, to the pioneering ones in the technical and mechanical fields. Many female soldiers served overseas, primarily in Britain.

Canada disbanded the CWAC after the war in 1946, then reformed the corps and ultimately abolished it in 1964. Henceforth, women could join the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), but with some occupation restrictions. In 1971, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women issued recommendations that led the CAF to ease constraints on women soldiers – they were no longer limited in enlistment numbers or employment opportunities. It was not until 1989 that women could join The Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery (RCA).

Today, all military occupations are open to women, representing 15.9% of the CAF. Women wearing the uniform are ambassadors of Canada paying tribute to the CWAC trailblazers. During WW2, Canadian women in CWAC uniforms stood tall, faced adversity and countered gender stereotypes.



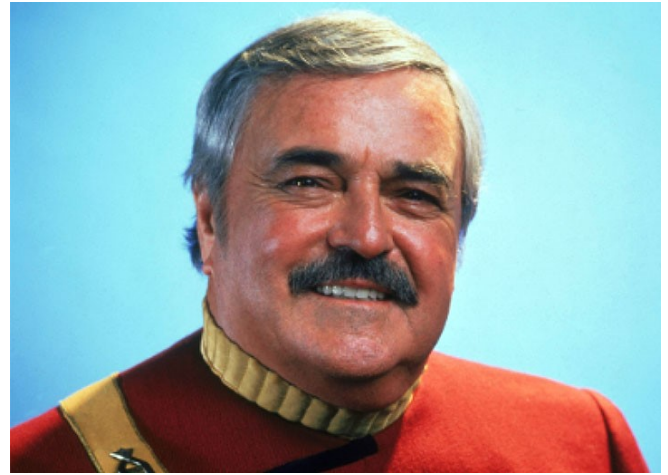
By Venessa Léger



## Canadian Air OP Squadrons during the Second World War

You may be surprised that Canada had three Air Observation Post (Air OP) squadrons under the Royal Air Force's (RAF) command during the Second World War. The first two squadrons, No. 664 and No. 665, participated in Air OP missions in the Netherlands and Germany starting in 1945. Their primary operational role was to direct artillery fire from the air to enemy targets. They formed the third squadron, No. 666, in March 1945, which never flew in operational missions. An excellent secondary source, *Canada's Flying Gunners* by LCol (Ret'd) D. L. Fromov, CD, documents this proud RCA history.

A famous Canadian Gunner and Air OP pilot was Captain James Doohan (1920-2005), who played Scotty on the TV series *Star Trek*, shown to the right. Doohan was part of the third squadron, No. 666. He said, "You had to be some sort of a fool to volunteer [to be an Air OP pilot] or have a strong desire to fly." Being an Air OP pilot meant extensive low-level flying, essential to evade enemy aircraft and ground fire.



The RCA Museum has a scrapbook from Lt E. J. Ambrose, an Air OP pilot and part of No. 664. Lt. Ambrose qualified from the first of six Air OP courses for Canadian Gunners, course No. 37. Note the photo of the first qualifying graduates, with Lt. Ambrose in the back row centre, dated 19 December 1944. They certainly all look proud of their achievement.

The RAF formed No. 664 Squadron on 9 December 1944. Pilots trained at No. 2 Elementary Flying Training School RAF in Cambridge, England, then at Larkhill, England. The first commanding officer of No. 664 was Major Dave R. Ely, as shown in the photo above. They were under the command of No. 70 Group RAF Fighter Command in England. In December 1944, they had 16 Auster Mark IV aircraft, and in January 1945, they were ready for deployment.

The RCA Museum is fortunate to have an Auster Mark V from the period in our storage facility. During the Second World War, the three Canadian Air OP squadrons deployed Auster Mark IVs and Mark Vs. In the future, we will display the Auster Mark V in our museum. Curators have discussed elevating the Auster approximately 20 feet in the air in the WW2 section to save on floor space, which will help tell an essential Gunner story during the Second World War.



In March 1945, No. 664 deployed to the Netherlands and participated in operational missions over enemy territory. Once deployed, they transferred to No. 84 Group Second Tactical Air Force (2 TAF). From the Netherlands, Lt Ambrose included one photo of himself with two other pilots. Lt Ambrose is in the centre, Lt Jones is to the left, and we could not identify the pilot on the right.



Lt Ambrose took many photos from the window of an Auster in flight documenting the extensive artillery bombings of German enemy territory, including bombed-out buildings shown below left. Note the image below right of an Auster taking flight in the Bad Zwischenan, home to one of the largest Luftwaffe airbases in Northwest Germany.



During the final phase of the war, Air OP pilots helped locate enemy targets in Holland. By 4 May, No. 664 was operating in Northwest Germany, proving highly mobile and able to fly at a moment's notice. They completed missions for the 1st Polish Armoured Division, 1st British Corps, and HQ Netherlands District. After VE Day, the squadron continued flying duties for the Canadian Army Occupation Force until early 1946. No. 664 disbanded on 31 May 1946.

We are fortunate to have the photo album of the first Canadian Air OP squadron, No. 664, and lucky to have an Auster Mark V in our collection. They both help tell an important story about the Canadian Air OP squadrons and Canadian Gunner pilots during the Second World War.

## Izzy Doll Labelling



Artifact labelling helps visitors to understand museum artifacts. In many cases, without a clear storyline or narrative, a visitor cannot determine the meaning or value of an artifact. In our current Canadian peacekeeping exhibit, curators display three pocket-sized dolls (Izzy dolls), measuring approximately 15 centimetres, that require a written description to explain their significance. The dolls are niche artifacts, and our curators had to tell an important story to reveal the hidden narrative.

Master Corporal Mark Isfeld served in Croatia as part of the United Nations peacekeeping contingent from 1992 to 1994. While on a mission, he found a doll in the rubble of a bombed house and noticed local children had no toys to play with, which inspired him to ask his mother to knit the pocket-sized dolls. He believed the dolls would comfort children and make positive connections between Canadian soldiers and the local population. He understood the symbolic power of giving dolls to children during peacekeeping missions. Master Corporal Isfeld died during a mine-clearing operation on 21 June 1994. Canadian soldiers continued to give out dolls in honour of Master Corporal Isfeld and named them Izzy dolls. Volunteers can knit Izzy dolls and send them to deployed Canadian troops worldwide, and soldiers have distributed 1.3 million dolls to date.

The Izzy dolls have little meaning without the story behind them. Our curators added artifact labelling to tell this important story, including a short bio on Master Corporal Isfeld and the story behind the Izzy dolls. These dolls are an example of artifacts that require a written explanation to explain their historical importance. We hope this added labelling encourages active participation and engagement in the peacekeeping display and helps to explain the legacy of Master Corporal Isfeld. His story and the Izzy dolls have significant international importance and reflect positive Canadian values toward protecting children in conflict areas worldwide.



## Deciphering Cyphers

Upon entering the museum's Artillery Gallery, visitors pass two small cannons standing guard solemnly. If they examine the pair, they will notice some elegant-looking crests decorating the barrels. These markings, called monograms or cyphers, hold information about the ownership, the manufacturing, and the date of the cannons. Guns crafted after the late 1600s generally comprise two cyphers: one closer to the muzzle, representing the Master General of Ordnance, and the other nearer to the base, called the royal cypher, identifying the reigning monarch.



The cypher of John, Earl of Chatham (Master General of Ordnance from 1807 to 1810).

Serving generals could earn the title of Master General of Ordnance, a senior position in charge of all ordnance, which included artillery. Starting in 1693, each succeeding Master General of Ordnance had his cypher, much like a family crest, that featured an initial typically encircled by a classic design of natural elements or inscriptions, topped with a crown associated with his peerage.

As for the royal cypher, it helps identify an individual ruler. It features the sovereign's first initial followed by 'R,' which stands for *Rex* or *Regina*, the Latin words for king and queen, respectively.

A royal crown sits atop the lettering. Presently, one of the most familiar monograms belongs to Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. It features the letters E II R for Elizabeth II, *Regina*, surmounted by the St. Edward's Crown.



The royal cypher of Queen Elizabeth II

Other standard markings found on old cannons are the name of the manufacturing company and the year of casting, as well as the gun's weight, often represented by three numbers on British guns: hundred-weights (cwt), quarters (qr) and pounds (lb). Manufacturers sometimes added a fourth figure: the imperial ton. Some cannons also display serial numbers on their trunnions.

Today's artillery does not depict the Master General of Ordnance cypher, as the British Artillery abolished the senior general position in 2013. However, it continues to feature the royal cypher of Queen Elizabeth II. With the recent passing of Her Majesty and a new sovereign soon to be crowned, we are already starting to see His Majesty King Charles III's royal insignia in circulation.



The royal cypher of King George III (reigning from 1760 to 1820) on a bronze 3-pounder smoothbore muzzle-loading gun at the museum. Year of manufacture, 1810.

## Camp Hughes

During the First World War, the Canadian Militia established a network of military training sites across Canada to train six hundred thousand recruits for the Canadian Expeditionary Force going overseas to fight on the Western Front. One of the seventeen training sites was Camp Hughes near Carberry, Manitoba, 132 kilometres west of Winnipeg, south of the Trans-Canada Highway. The Canadian Militia trained upwards of thirty-eight thousand recruits at Camp Hughes in 1915 and 1916. In 1916, it was the second-largest training camp in Canada and the second-largest community in Manitoba. Today, Camp Hughes is a Provincial and National historic site containing one of the only First World War trench systems.

In 1909, the Canadian Militia proposed land between Sewell Station and Carberry, with direct access to the Canadian Pacific Railway, as a suitable location for the main summer training camp for District 10. The district included Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the District of Keewatin, Kenora, Rainy River, and Thunder Bay. The Canadian Militia obtained the necessary approvals for an initial summer training camp in June 1910, with 154 officers and 1,315 men attending.

In 1915, the CPR changed the name of Sewell Station to Hughes Station. The Militia also renamed the camp, in honour of the Minister of the Militia, Lt. General Sir Sam Hughes, K.C.B., to Camp Hughes. The main features of Camp Hughes were 10 kilometres of trench system, a rifle range, grenade grounds, artillery ranges and observation posts, and a cemetery. In 1915, 414 officers and 10,580 men trained at Camp Hughes. In 1916, the numbers increased to 880 officers and 25,067 men, with an additional 1,600 staff responsible for training recruits. In the summer of 1916, Camp Hughes was the second largest camp in Canada, training approximately 26 thousand, behind Camp Borden, which had 30 thousand.

During the First World War, the Militia sent mainly infantry and artillery troops to Camp Hughes. For example, in June 1915, the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th Batteries C.F.A. (all part of the 5th Brigade) moved to Camp Hughes for training. In 1915, the 37th and 38th Batteries also trained at Camp Hughes. At Camp Hughes, they had two new Mark IV 18-pounders and a full complement of obsolete 12-pounders (Canadians used this gun during the Boer War). Each battery relied on horse-drawn artillery, and the 12-pounder was good for mounted manoeuvres. A pre-war field artillery battery required four 18-pounder guns.

When war broke out, the Canadian Expeditionary Force upgraded to six 18-pounder guns per battery, matching the British, causing many artillery batteries to be combined or redistributed.

Camp Hughes is known for its extensive trench system that still exists today. The Militia completed the replica trench system in 1916, and veterans returned from France to train the recruits. The trench was realistic and full-scale, allowing for the training of 1,000 soldiers. The recruits learned to fight in conditions similar to the Western Front, training for twelve weeks in the trenches and rifle ranges. Each battalion trained in the trench network, establishing daily routines, sentries, listening posts, and going over the top into the no man's land. The soldiers would enter the trench system through the communication trenches that led to support trenches, then to the frontline trenches.



The frontline (fire) trench is approximately 1 km long and could hold two companies of men. The trench system also included underground dugouts designed to protect soldiers from artillery bombardment. The Militia also built shallow enemy trenches on opposing high ground, similar to German defences on the Western Front. They also had a two thousand-yard-long rifle range with 500 targets and a grenade school where they practiced throwing live grenades into designated pits.

In 1915 and 1916, the Militia made many infrastructure upgrades, adding buildings along the boardwalk and other areas, including an Army Service Station, bake house, bake ovens, guard house, hay storage, and veterinary hospital. They added a camp commandant hut, a headquarters building, a hospital, a medical supplies building, a photo studio, a post office, a prison, and a target house. The hospital at Camp Hughes accommodated over 300 patients. In 1916, the hospital treated 3,815 patients, with 11 reported deaths (six buried in the

Camp Hughes Cemetery). The camp also had a bank, a barbershop, a camp newspaper, grocery stores, a milk depot, six movie theatres, and even a heated, in-ground swimming pool. Business owners placed restaurants and laundries outside the camp.

After 1916, the Canadian Expeditionary Force stopped training at Camp Hughes due to a lack of recruits and the introduction of conscription. With less need for military training sites, Camp Hughes closed in 1917, including all the businesses on the boardwalk. After the First World War, the Militia reopened the camp for summer

training and continued operations until 1933. Back in the 1920s, Camp Hughes contained 138 square miles of training ground, including swamps and bogs, which was not conducive for military training. The main reason for moving it 15 miles south to Camp Shilo was the poor and unsuitable land at Camp Hughes. In 1934, the Militia dismantled Camp Hughes, with some buildings relocated to the newly established Camp Shilo.

Many battalions and batteries that trained recruits at Camp Hughes distinguished themselves in battle during the First World War. Many fought in France and Belgium, including at the Somme, Vimy Ridge, Hill 70, Passchendaele, Amiens, and Cambrai. For example, the Fifth Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery trained at Camp Hughes, then bombarded Vimy Ridge for three weeks before the Canadians advanced and took the

ridge on 12 April 1917. Canada mobilized 620,000 during the war, with a 39% casualty rate, 67,000 killed and 173,000 wounded. Many soldiers that trained at Camp Hughes never made it home, with the camp representing Canadian service and sacrifice.

For a hundred years, residents used Camp Hughes as pasture land, and the trench system has faded into the landscape due to natural erosion. Today, Camp Hughes consists of 10 kilometres of trenches in various states of decay. The original buildings are no longer on the site, and the dugouts are gone, but indubitably artifacts remain below the ground surface for future

discovery. Visitors can pay their respects at the cemetery containing six soldiers that died while training. They can walk the 10 kilometres of First World War trenches and experience Canadian history and heritage.





## Not to be Read!

**"It seems strange and useless that I should have to die for this,"** Canadian Spitfire Pilot William Fortt said in a heartfelt letter to his parents 16 months before he died in a fiery plane crash in Essex, England, on 12 April 1942.

Dale Murray donated the military medals of Pilot William (Bill) Fortt, Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). Bill was the son of Colonel Ronald Fortt, a WW1 veteran out of Vancouver, BC. Bill volunteered just before the outbreak of war in August 1939. The doctor completing Bill's medical described him as "a fine looking young man... with above average intelligence." In August 1940, he earned his Pilot's Flying badge and joined the No. 1 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit, RAF, in the UK.

The collection includes a rather unusual letter with the markings on the outside, "Not to be Read." A death letter - to be sent to his parents if he died in action. In the letter, Bill mentioned that he didn't meet his father's expectations, stating he was not a "normal son" and was too quiet. Bill said he "crammed more living and contentment [in his short life] than most people [get] in a normal lifetime." He then said about Cynthia, likely his girlfriend, "I wish I could leave some kind of love that will last all through her lifetime," then ended the letter with "Goodbye... my dear ones, love to you, William."

With a bit more checking, Bill had flown in operational missions at three times the average rate of most Spitfire pilots and was courageous and competent. One month before the ill-fated flight, he suffered a severe hernia and wrote to his parents. Bill talked about his ill health and trouble breathing, noting that a medical officer recommended six months of operational leave, but his Commanding Officer only gave him one month off. He also sharply criticized his CO in the letters. The army censors intercepted the letters, and Bill received a reprimand. Bill's CO told him he was not measuring up and had a despicable nature.

Soon after, on 12 April 1942, Pilot William Fortt flew in the ill-fated reconnaissance mission destined for enemy territory. When at high altitude, eyewitnesses say the Spitfire did a sustained, high-speed nose-dive to the earth, resulting in the plane exploding and burning on impact. The RCAF could not determine why Bill lost control of the Spitfire; they speculated that he blacked out due to a lack of oxygen. Ultimately, we do not know why this brave pilot crashed the Spitfire and died at 21.

Canadian Pilot William Fortt was a courageous soldier that penned loving words to his family. Bill completed many operational missions but died mysteriously, under questionable circumstances, flew his Spitfire at high altitude, then nose-dived to a "strange and useless" death. Bill was one of the 17,397 Canadian RCAF airmen that did not survive the Second World War, and his tragic yet courageous story deserves retelling. The curious 'Not to be Read' letter only adds to the mystery and intrigue.



Bill with a Spitfire Mark V.

By Andrew Oakden

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## Contact Us

Telephone : (204) 765-3000 Ext. 3570  
Fax: (204) 765-5289  
Email: [rcamuseum@forces.gc.ca](mailto:rcamuseum@forces.gc.ca)  
Website: [rcamuseum.com](http://rcamuseum.com)  
Facebook: RCA Museum

**The Royal Canadian Artillery  
Museum (The RCA Museum)**  
Building N-118  
CFB Shilo  
P.O. 5000, Station Main  
Shilo, Manitoba R0K 2A0

**Musée de l'Artillerie royale  
canadienne**  
(Musée de l' ARC)  
Bâtiment N-118  
BFC Shilo  
C.P. 5000, succursale Main  
Shilo (Manitoba) R0K 2A0

Telephone : (204) 765-3000 poste 3570  
Facsimile : (204) 765-5289  
Courriel : [rcamuseum@forces.gc.ca](mailto:rcamuseum@forces.gc.ca)  
Site Web : [rcamuseum.com](http://rcamuseum.com)  
Facebook: RCA Museum

Director/Directeur  
Senior Curator  
Assistant Curator/Conservatrice adjointe  
Collections Manager/Gestionnaire des collections  
Front Desk/Reception

Andrew Oakden  
Jonathan Ferguson  
Dayna Barscello  
Clive Prothero-Brooks  
Venessa Léger

Ext/poste 3763  
Ext/poste 3531  
Ext/poste 3577  
Ext/poste 3076  
Ext/poste 3570

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