



Spring 2023

VIMM Newsletter

Vancouver Island Military Museum

RCAF Ace from Nanaimo F/O John “Jack” Neil DFC MiD

By Greg Devenish

On August 23, 1944, F/L Jack Neil, a Spitfire pilot, was engaged with a number of German fighters just outside Paris. Outnumbered and outgunned, this would be his last flight of the war. Jack would serve out the remainder of the war in Stalag Luft I, a German prisoner of war camp. Like so many of his generation, he volunteered early and joined the RCAF. He saw action over North Africa and later over occupied France. He was shot down three times, became a decorated fighter pilot, and

was credited with 6 aerial victories.

Jack's portrait is displayed proudly in the VIMM Hall of Honour. This is his story.

John “Jack” Neil was born in Nanaimo on Nov. 17, 1919. His father, John, was a veteran of WWI with the Mounted Rifles. His father worked in the coal mines and with his wife Ayr had five children. Jack

came from a good home and was described as, “even tempered with a good personality.” At the age of 16, he had his first contact with an airplane. Jack offered to watch over a visiting biplane all night while the pilot stayed in a local hotel in Nanaimo. In return, Jack was offered a flight. Jack tricked his younger brother, Don, into watching the plane while he went out on a date. The next day Jack got his first ride in a plane, and he was hooked.

When the war started, Jack was eager to join the RCAF. He and a friend hurried off to Vancouver, but both were turned down as they did not have a college degree. Disappointed, the pair put their names on a waiting list. It wasn't long before the RCAF reached out to the high school graduates and Jack was posted to 2 Manning Depot in Brandon, Manitoba. His final training postings were to Sea Island in Vancouver and Dauphin, Manitoba, where he learned to fly Harvards. He graduated in June of 1941 and was sent overseas to RCAF Bournemouth, a staging base, and then on to 57 OTU, for training in Spitfire fighters. His logbook shows that by the time he was posted to his first squadron he had accumulated over 218 hours flying. He was posted to 124 RAF squadron. His logbook indicates his time was spent on convoy patrol.

Continued on page 4.



Jack Neil's portrait in VIMM.

Vice President's Message

From Brian Mc Fadden



The VIMM, overlooking Nanaimo Harbour

I have some good news to report in this issue! When construction began in 2019 on the new Marriott Courtyard Hotel, the only site available for a construction zone was Piper Park on the area adjacent to the military museum. This meant erecting a fence surrounding three-quarters of the Piper Park grounds to allow for a building site office and several large metal C-can containers for storage.

In our summer newsletter last year, I reported that the projected opening date for the hotel was scheduled for December 2022. Welcome news indeed, if a tad optimistic; however, we have been assured that the construction site and the containers will be gone by the end of March. The construction, coupled with the road closures, noise, and endless deliveries of materials, is finally coming to an end, much to the delight of all of the establishments who call this area of the downtown, home. Or, as the tourism brochures rightly call it, *Nanaimo's Dynamic Waterfront*.

It will take a few months for the city parks department to repair the grounds and landscape the park which has a commanding view of the inner harbour and surrounding coastline. Thankfully, for the last two years the museum has been able to continue to

function with some adjustment to the hours of operation. This is a testament to the commitment and dedication of the front desk staff and especially our Volunteer Coordinator, Bruce, who managed to juggle work schedules to accommodate everyone. As you can see in the accompanying pictures the hotel is an impressive building and its proximity to the nearby Convention centre will no doubt bring many more visitors to the museum over the summer months. I must admit the hotel is a great addition to the down town core, and once the park is restored to its former glory, the last few years of disruption will just be a distant memory.



Piper Park during construction.



The new hotel will open soon.

Lest We Forget - The Fallen 9000

Two British artists with The Sand and Ice Sculpture Gallery, created an unforgettable and thought-provoking work entitled *The Fallen 9000*, to commemorate International Peace Day. Together with a group of volunteers they covered the beach in Arromanche, France, with the silhouettes of 9000 fallen soldiers.

The sculptures were created by raking the sand over stencils to create a dark imprint. The idea was to produce a visual image of what is otherwise almost an unimaginable representation of the thousands of human lives lost during the WW II Normandy landings. There is no distinction between nationalities, they are known only as *The Fallen*. The stencilled human figures existed only briefly before being washed away by the incoming tide; however, the message remains a powerful symbol of the cost of lives in one of the most pivotal battles of the Second World War.



The Fallen on Arromanche beach next to Mulberry.

In the first photo you can clearly see the sand figures and the remains of sections of the reinforced concrete floating harbours called Mulberry, which were constructed in England then towed across the channel with the allied invasion force.

From Brian McFadden



The building is upper left.

The second photo shows a building just above the beach. This building is also shown in the painting which depicts troops of the Canadian Third Division landing on Juno Beach, D-Day June 6, 1944.



Canadians storming Juno Beach, with building on right part visible.

Nanaimo's Jack Neil

Continued from page 1



Jack Neil in the North African desert, 1942

The war in North Africa was not going well. German General Erwin Rommel and the Africa Corps were advancing on the Suez Canal and the call went out for pilots. Jack was eager to go and was posted to 274 RAF squadron in Feb. 1942 at El Adem, flying Hurricane fighters. Conditions at the base were spartan. There were no runways or hangars. Pilots dug their own slit trenches and temperatures could reach over 38C.

Food was limited to

hard tack, corned beef, and tea. Sand got into everything including the aircraft. Ground crews worked tirelessly on the Hurricanes, keeping them in readiness to scramble against enemy planes or to carry out sweeps looking for ground targets.

On May 28 Jack claimed his first victory, a German JU-87. He wrote in his logbook, Objective!! I destroyed one JU-87 and saw bullets going into several others. From June to July, 274 RAF was constantly on the move as the Axis forces pushed the allies back to Egypt. Logbook entries indicate he was completing up to 4 sorties a day and on July 15 he claimed his second victory. Much time was spent attacking enemy truck and tank convoys. Ground anti-aircraft fire, called "ack ack," was a constant threat. On July 21, Jack was hit and crash landed in the desert but returned to base. On November 5, he was shot down again over the Mediterranean. He wrote in his diary.

...Another dawn sortie... support of 8th Army now clobbering Germans after Alamein - Big Push. We are on our way! Flying Hurricane fighter bombers...1/2 hour out 8000 ft all set to attack... I signal my flight to go to target - 10 o'clock below. We're diving down - 300 mph (target at German front line at Alamein) ... shells exploding all around us ...Bang! My right wing tip flies off ... I pull up, take evasive action, no control, heading out to sea - one look at dash 900 ft altitude, get over side ...pulled cord...chute opened...swung once hit the water...break open dingy...no paddles, no yellow dye - 1 survival pack, thank God, but no water to drink.

Jack spent 18 grueling hours swimming and hand paddling to land. Once ashore, he avoided German capture and was picked up by Australians. Jack was made a member of the "Caterpillar Club," an unofficial

award for airmen who used their parachute to survive. Officially, he was also awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC).

In November 1942, "Operation Torch" was underway. With joint Anglo-American landings in the west of North Africa and 8th Army driving west from Egypt and Libya, the Axis armies were being pushed into Tunisia. Jack's flying focused on convoy patrol. He was promoted to pilot officer and his pay was increased to \$6.25 a day! On May 22, 1943, his logbook indicated a "probable." *Intercepted JU 88 ...4 good bursts and got his engines on fire ...JU 88 damaged confirmed as probable.* With the Allied victory in North Africa in May 1943, Jack was rested, posted to instructional flying in Cairo and then



Jack ready to fly.



returned to Nanaimo for a well-deserved leave. In his hometown of Nanaimo, he received a hero's welcome.

Jack returned to England in June of 1944 with 83 RAF Group flying Spitfire Mk. IXs. This unit had been formed to destroy German V1 flying bombs, called buzz bombs, one of Germany's secret weapons. This unmanned jet aircraft was loaded with an 817 kg bomb and enough fuel to get to London. The buzz bomb was faster than the Spitfire, so pilots had to dive from above and either shoot it down or fly alongside and, using the fighter's wing, tip the buzz bombs wing to make it crash. Jack was credited with eleven buzz bombs.

In July he was posted to 441 and 421 RCAF squadrons. 421 was part of 144 Wing commanded by Britain's top ace, W/C J.E. Johnson. Jack's logbook records numerous sorties attacking ground targets and escorting bombers. *Shot up Gerry staff and truck smokers*, Jack wrote, *Caught German Convoy ...Good show, got 2 staff cars, two trucks*. On July 25th he scored a victory over a Me-109 fighter.

On August 23, Jack's logbook ends. The mission that day was flying a sweep near Paris. Jack wrote later,

They [FW 190s] were below us...Wing Commander gave the "tally ho"...Our 16 Spits engaged at least 30 plus...which I destroyed two FW 190s. The first fight was a piece of cake....I started climbing up looking for more Huns ...I soon found them ...I was in a tight spot ...I was on my own ...I got on the tail of an unfortunate 190 gave him a 2 second blast of cannon...He went down in flames...then things got really hot...I fought like hell later going for the Big Chop—wounded by cannon shell splinters and bailed out-POW!

Jack was interned in Stalag Luft 1 in Barth, Germany, near the Baltic Ocean. He kept a diary, and it gives a good insight into the life of a prisoner of war. There were long stretches of boredom and food was always on everyone's mind. By March 1945 the Germans were in full retreat. Unlike in other camps, the prisoners of Stag Luft I were not forced to also retreat, as they were too far north. On May 1, the German commandant handed the camp over to the POWs. On May 2, the Russians arrived, and they ordered the freed prisoners to move but showed no interest in the POW's welfare. The prisoners refused to go. Fortunately, American paratroopers also arrived and settled things down.

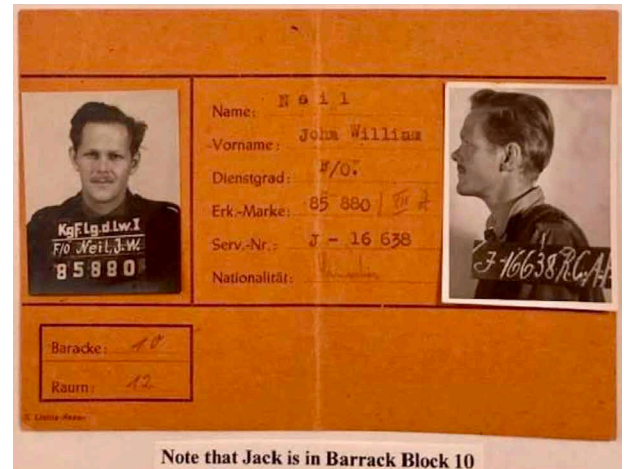
Following the war Jack returned to Nanaimo and married Lavina Foster. They had five children. Jack had

a successful career in real estate and spent many hours fishing.

Jack was President of Branch 10 of the Royal Canadian Legion and served as an instructor with the Air Cadets for ten years. On July 13, 1993, Jack passed away.

The final flight for Jack was the spreading of his ashes over Wolf Mountain near Mount Benson, west of Nanaimo. The ashes were spread by his son John from the back seat of a Harvard trainer. The pilot was Phil Calin, a former cadet who was introduced to flying in a Harvard by Jack, many years before on a cadet trip to Manitoba. Phil never forgot that, and he ended up buying that same Harvard and felt it was only fitting he participate in this final tribute. Thank you to John Neil for information about his father and access to Jack Neil's logbook.

Visitors to VIMM should also look for our display, *Ace Island*, featuring Vancouver Island aces in the First World War - Raymond Collishaw, Joseph Fall, Charles Hickey, and Osborne Orr.



Prisoner of war card issued by Germans.

Bud Walcott – Eagle Squadron RAF

By Angus Scully

Lynn Rosen and Steve Giordano of Bellingham, Washington, USA, have made a generous donation to the VIMM - the personal photo album of Bud Walcott, RCAF pilot, member of the Eagle Squadron of the RAF, and then a fighter pilot with the USAAF. The album contains photographs and documents collected by S. B. "Bud" Walcott of Lenox Mass., during his career in the RAF, the USAAF, USAF, and commercial aviation.

Bud Walcott came to Canada in 1940 to join the RCAF. The great ace, Billy Bishop, headed a recruiting programme that attracted nearly 7000 Americans to volunteer here. Of those who joined the RCAF, 250 went on to join the Eagle Squadrons of the RAF, squadrons made up of American pilots. Bud Walcott was one of those. Photos show him in early training.

As a sergeant pilot he went to England to join one of the three Eagle Squadrons in the RAF, learning to fly Hurricane and Spitfire fighters. Most of his flying in 1941 was low level strafing over the French coast.

On his way to England via New York, Walcott was photographed with Michelle Lane of Montreal. The original caption said, "Bud Walcott of New York, flier of the Royal Canadian Air Force, who is about to join the American Eagle squadrons."

In April 1942, Walcott was the pilot of one of 47 Spitfires launched from the American aircraft carrier Wasp in the Mediterranean Sea to fly over enemy controlled water to Malta. Walcott crashed in Algeria and was taken prisoner by the Vichy French. Ten months later he was freed after the Allied invasion of North Africa and transferred to the US Army Air Force. He spent the next year flying P-39 Airacobras

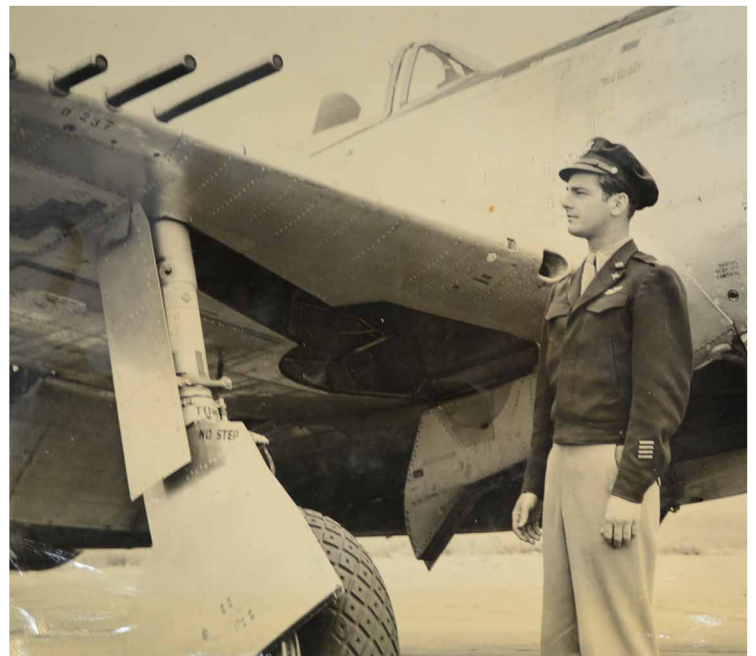
and P-47 Thunderbolts on escort and patrol missions during the North African campaign. He was returned to the US in 1944 and became an instructor in P-47s.

After the war, Walcott remained in the air force and was transferred to Berlin where he was on duty during the Berlin air lift. He left the USAF in the early 1950s and began a long and successful career in commercial aviation, flying helicopters. He worked in Canada, the Caribbean, South America, India, and Pakistan.

This album illustrates the career of a courageous American who joined the RCAF and served faithfully throughout the war. Further information about the Eagle Squadrons can be found at

www.media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/28/2001330139/-1/-1/0/AFD-100928-005.pdf

** or scan this QR code.*



The original caption reads, "Capt. S. B. Walcott of Lenox, fighter pilot, combat veteran of both England's RAF and the United States AAF, is standing beside a P-47 fighter plane at his new station, the San Bernadino (Calif.) Air Technical Services Command. He is a test pilot."

On Display at VIMM - Bofors 40mm Gun

By Angus Scully

The largest item on display at the VIMM is a 40mm Bofors gun which we acquired in 2017 from the RCN after it was decommissioned from HMCS Nanaimo. The Bofors gun has a long and interesting history, which includes Canadian made guns and mountings for naval and army use.

Developed in the 1930s by the AB Bofors Company in Sweden for low level defence against aircraft, the gun was quickly adopted by navies and armies around the world. The Bofors gun was designed to fire two rounds per second, although the operational rate was about

80 – 90 rounds per minute

The range was 4900 meters. In 1938, the United Kingdom made an agreement with Bofors to manufacture the gun, an agreement that allowed production in the Commonwealth as well. By the Battle of Britain in 1940, there were 474 guns in



Bofors guns were used for decades on RCN ships

place in the UK, and by 1943 1,414 were in place defending the British Isles. Thousands more were used by the Royal Navy and in army light anti-aircraft regiments operating around the world.

Canadian production started in 1940 at the Dominion Bridge Company in Vancouver and the Otis-Fensom Elevator Company in Hamilton. By the end of 1942, 200 Canadian guns rolled out of these plants every month. One is on display at Fort Rodd Hill National Historic Site near Victoria, as used by 27th AA Regt., RCA, to defend the fort and Esquimalt.



Canadian self-propelled Bofors gun. Canadian built Ford 3-ton F60B 4x4.

When the USA entered the war, it too adopted the Bofors and soon hundreds of American companies were producing parts and assembling finished guns, including Chrysler, Firestone, and the York Lock and Safe Company. American production was impressive – 22897 guns for the army, 8 000 for the navy, and 9 000 for Lend Lease, of which 5 500 were sent to the Soviet Union.

Interestingly, Bofors guns were also used by the enemy. Germany used guns captured from France, Poland, Belgium, Norway, and the UK. Germany also captured factories in Norway and Hungary that had been making Bofors guns and kept up production for their own forces.

Japan also captured guns from the British and Netherlands and used them in its own air defences.

Canadian engineers made significant contributions to the use of Bofors guns during WWII. The Canadian design for a single gun naval mounting was dubbed the Boffin and used on Canadian and Australian ships. A special light weight mounting was developed to allow the Bofors gun to be easily transported by aircraft. Canadian built Ford 3-ton F60B 4x4 trucks were adapted to mount a Bofors, making it self-propelled. This mounting was used by Canadian light anti-aircraft regiments in Italy and NW Europe.

DISPATCHES

from VIMM



DISPATCHES

Acquisitions

A Chinese army ammunition belt from the Korean War, donated by museum volunteer Joe Pighin. Now on display.

Up Spirits! A tot measure for rum ration, and a beer record punch card, now on display.

Copies of documents and photos related to Jack Neil.

Copies of documents related to HMCS Athabaskan in the Korean War.

Copies of documents related to John Colvell, the "Tin Man" in the Great Escape.

The logbook of Flight Lieutenant E. L. Corcoran DFC.

Army Museum of Western Australia.

From Angus Scully: "The volunteers and permanent military staff at the Army Museum of Western Australia in Freemantle, Western Australia, were once again generous hosts when I visited them in January. We were able to discuss museum holdings and procedures. Their display of real Victoria Crosses is most impressive, as is the story of establishing a secure display. The loan of a Victoria Cross to Ireland required a special law passed by the Australian parliament. Richard Bennett and other volunteers played a lead role in that. Many thanks to Graeme Johnson for hours spent on a personal tour. This huge museum is a must for anyone visiting Perth and Freemantle in Australia."

Angus Scully and Graeme Johnson (right) at the entrance to the Army Museum in Freemantle. A few of the vehicles in their impressive collection can be seen.



More News About Private Green, Buried in Australia

In the Fall 2022 issue of this newsletter, we briefly told the story of the death in Australia of Private Dermott Joseph Green of the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals. (See <https://militarymuseum.ca/newsletters/>) Graeme Johnson in Perth forwarded the story to Greg Ivey who lives on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, near the cemetery. On March 3, the anniversary of Green's death, Greg placed a memorial wreath on the grave. Greg's friend, Ian Curtis, of the Military History Society of Australia found documentation about Pte Green. Many thanks to our Australian friends.

Private Dermott J. Green is buried at the Woombye War Cemetery, Queensland. Greg Ivey placed flowers on the grave on the anniversary of Green's death. Photo by Greg Ivey.



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