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Fighting spirit

Canadian WW2 airman continued to attack Japanese warships while plane was ablaze

By John Boileau



Lt. Robert Hampton (Hammy) Gray is the Royal Canadian Navy's only recipient of the Victoria Cross. (Library and Archives Canada)



Aviation artist Geoff Bennett's portrayal of Gray's final flight. Flak bursts around Gray's Corsair fighter-bomber as he presses home his attack against Japanese warships. (Shearwater Aviation Museum)



In October 1952, Gray's mother Wilhelmina opened the Hampton Gray Memorial School for the children of servicemen stationed at Shearwater. Today, it is used as a community centre.



The aircraft carrier HMS Formidable after an attack by Japanese kamikaze aircraft. The ship experienced substantial damage during the attack but survived to fight on. (Photos from Shearwater Aviation Museum)

IN 1940, 22-year-old "Hammy" Gray was a student at the University of British Columbia. He joined a fraternity, became editor of the yearbook and participated in the fun side of campus life. A friendly, slightly chubby individual with a great sense of humour, Gray studiously avoided sports.

Then, in July, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Voluntary Reserve as an ordinary seaman because, in his words, "I was getting a little mad at Hitler."

Five years later, Lt. Robert Hampton Gray became the last Victoria Cross recipient of the Second World War. His VC is also the last one awarded to a Canadian, as well as the only one awarded to a member of the Royal Canadian Navy or to a Canadian fighter pilot.

After enlisting, Gray travelled to HMCS Stadacona in Halifax while waiting for transportation overseas to join the Royal Navy for officer training. He lived in austere accommodation at the Exhibition Grounds, his boredom broken only by "seemingly endless route marches around Bedford Basin."

In Britain, Gray transferred to the Fleet Air Arm, the British naval air service, and returned to Canada to complete his pilot training in 1941. After graduation, he was back in Halifax, crammed with thousands of others into Y Depot (today's Windsor Park).

Gray returned to Britain that November and after service in East Africa was posted to 1841 Squadron, on the aircraft carrier HMS Formidable. His squadron flew the Chance-Vought Corsair, an American airplane that eventually equipped 19 naval air squadrons.

The Corsair, specifically designed for carrier operations, was the fastest aircraft in the fleet and had the greatest range. The Mark IV, which the squadron received in 1945, had a top speed of over 650 kilometres per hour, with

a maximum range of 2,500 kilometres and a service ceiling of 10,000 metres. It carried an impressive bomb load of 900 kilograms. By the end of the war, the Corsair had flown more operational sorties and destroyed more enemy aircraft than any other British navy fighter.

The mission for Formidable's aircraft was to sink the massive, heavily-armoured, 47,708-tonne German battleship Tirpitz, holed up in Norway's Kaafjord. Gray was ecstatic; after four long years he was finally going into action.

Gray flew two attacks against Tirpitz. On Aug. 24, 1944, he led his Corsair flight in close strafing runs, his .50-calibre machine-guns chattering away against flak locations to draw their fire from British aircraft attempting to bomb Tirpitz. But the attack on Tirpitz failed, at a cost of seven aircraft.

Gray attacked again on Aug. 29, leading his flight in a low-level strafing run through a storm of anti-aircraft fire against three of Tirpitz's protective destroyers, allowing others to bomb the battleship. A 720-kilogram bomb hit the warship forward of the bridge, penetrated eight decks and then frustratingly failed to explode.

During Gray's run, a 40-mm cannon shell hit his Corsair, ripping off most of its rudder and causing other damage. Gray flew back to Formidable and circled for 45 minutes, patiently waiting his turn to land. Flak had shot down one Corsair and damaged 11 others.

Gray received a mention-in-dispatches "for undaunted courage, skill and determination in carrying out daring attacks" on the German warship.

In April 1945, Formidable joined the British Pacific Fleet, which was supporting American carrier groups against Japan. Gray went into action on April 16 in an operation off a small group of islands midway between Formosa and Okinawa. While the Americans fought it out on Okinawa, further to the northeast, British aircraft attempted to prevent Japanese airplanes from reaching the invasion area. Gray led his flight against two airfields, attacking airplanes on the ground and anti-aircraft gun emplacements. Similar attacks continued against other airfields over the next few days.

No matter how hard they were hit, the Japanese always repaired their airfields overnight, and were ready to send aircraft to the battle raging around Okinawa by the next day. In 12 days of operational flying, Formidable's three squadrons lost 47 aircraft downed by flak or other causes. In return, the British had neutralized Japanese airfields for various lengths of time and destroyed 45 of their airplanes.

Formidable suffered two kamikaze attacks when Japanese airplanes purposely crashed onto the flight deck, causing explosions and fires. These attacks destroyed 18 aircraft and damaged another two, while casualties were nine dead and several injured. The carrier was able to launch aircraft within a few hours in both cases.

On July 28, Gray was leading a Corsair fighter-bomber flight when he scored a direct hit on a Japanese destroyer, sending it to the bottom. He received the Distinguished Service Cross for his "determination and address in air attacks on targets in Japan."

On Aug. 6, an American B-29 bomber took off on a mission that changed warfare — and the world — forever. The Enola Gay dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, instantly incinerating thousands of people and buildings. The Atomic Age had begun.

As it was apparent that the war would end shortly, pilots were told not to take unnecessary chances. On Aug. 9, Gray led eight Corsairs, each carrying two 225-kilogram bombs, over Onagawa Bay in northern Honshu. Several ships rested at anchor in the bay, surrounded by steep hills.

Gray led the attack, approaching low from inland. A hail of anti-aircraft fire from the 900-tonne ocean escort Amakusa, the destroyer Ohama, a minesweeper and a subchaser streamed towards him, knocking off one of his bombs and setting his airplane on fire.

Nevertheless, Gray kept on his course, 15 metres above the water, and dropped his remaining bomb only 45

metres from Amakusa. Smoke and flames were streaming from his Corsair. As he passed over Amakusa, his bomb smashed through the hull and crashed into the engine room, where it exploded, instantly killing 40 sailors. Amakusa listed and began to sink.

Gray's blazing Corsair continued seawards, enveloped in heavy smoke and flames. Then his aircraft slowly rolled over on its back and disappeared into the water in a violent burst of spray. The remaining Corsairs strafed the burning wreck and surviving crewmen. Amakusa soon went under, taking another 31 sailors with her. In all, 157 Japanese perished in the attack.

About two hours later, the Americans dropped their second atomic bomb, this time on Nagasaki. The Japanese surrendered the next day.

Senior British officers agreed on the VC as the only suitable honour to recognize Gray's gallantry. Their recommendation noted his "brilliant fighting spirit and inspired leadership; an unforgettable example of selfless and sustained devotion to duty without regard to safety of life and limb."

Today, a simple granite cairn stands in Sakiyama Peace Park, overlooking Onagawa Bay and opposite the site where Gray's Corsair crashed. Erected by the Japanese in 1989, it is the only known monument honouring an Allied serviceman in all of Japan.

John Boileau is the author of Valiant Hearts: Atlantic Canada and the Victoria Cross.