

Foreword

I was born in the small town of Fort St John in northern British Columbia, Canada, where my dad managed the Hudson's Bay Company store. Before he retired from the company and we moved to the coast, I recall as a small boy, the great construction activity and the presence of many army personnel and trucks around the town. Fort St. John was the second town on the recently opened Alaska Highway and the nearby large airport was part of the Northwest Staging Route for delivery of aircraft for the defense of Alaska and of the Soviet Union.

When I was five years old, I observed my dad decorating the old pump-up style gas pumps of our recently purchased country grocery store near Victoria, BC, with color crepe paper ribbon. He told me that it was because it was V-J day. I later learned about the significance of that day and of V-E day, and have often contemplated what our lives would have been like if they had not occurred.

Participating in the preparation of several of David Bruhn's books has contributed to this education. His subjects, usually ones that have either escaped the attention of naval historians, or been ignored, draw attention and honor to those often-unheralded individuals who made tremendous contributions in areas many of us are entirely unfamiliar with. In *Eyes of the Fleet* he introduced us to U.S. Navy seaplane tenders, and combat operations of the patrol aircraft they supported in World War II. This book focuses on the tremendous contributions made by their tended flocks of sea planes, as well as squadrons of Royal New Zealand and the Royal Australian Air forces of similar aircraft, to downed pilots in the Pacific through air-sea rescue.

Salvation from the Sky spans the war from the desperate days of 1942 when the Japanese were almost within striking range of Australia and New Zealand to the final days of it, when invasion of the Japanese homeland was imminent. From David's co-author Stephen Ekholm comes the story of the seaplane tender *Coos Bay*, a core thread that is followed and returned to often in this book. Hers is just one example of the histories of the many tenders that could have filled this role.

Naval Air Power proved its new, predominant role early in the war in Europe with the British attack on the Italian Fleet at Taranto, Italy, on 11 November 1940. Fairey Swordfish torpedo-bombers launched from the aircraft carrier HMS *Illustrious* sank one battleship and damaged two others, shattering greatly cherished beliefs about the dominance of battleships and naval gunnery. Japanese naval officers studied the attack

carefully, particularly how the British had been able to employ airdropped torpedoes in the shallow harbor, without them striking the bottom, and used this information as a model for their subsequent 7 December 1941 carrier aircraft attack on Pearl Harbor. The sinking of the battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser HMS *Repulse* in the Pacific off the eastern coast of Malaya by Japanese bombers on 10 December 1942 gave further proof of the ascendancy of war planes.

Air combat, anti-aircraft fire and operational and weather problems produced huge numbers of aircraft casualties for the Allies. In some cases, uninjured pilots and aircrewmembers were able to parachute from their damaged aircraft (bale out) or escape it before it sank following an ocean landing (ditch). Reaching the ocean surface was neither easy, nor a certainty, and those able to do so were left stranded in life jackets or life rafts, often in shark-infested waters which might also be under enemy control or patrolled by the enemy. It was intolerable that this situation could be allowed to exist given the huge sacrifices and the risks that these flyers faced in combat missions. Accordingly, the rescue measures described in this book were put into place.

Initially, air-sea rescue was performed on an as-required basis by seaplanes engaged in multiple types of missions, but as the numbers of combat aircraft and missions they flew dramatically increased, dedicated resources were allocated to rescue efforts. In addition to air-sea rescue by seaplanes, these measures also involved surface ships and submarines all under coordinated U.S. Navy and U.S. Army Air Force command. Even putting humanist values aside, the business case was easy. The benefits of avoiding the cost and time of recruiting replacement crew far outpaced that of the costs of recovery of existing ones. Further, air-sea rescue measures provided a huge morale booster. Aircrews flying combat missions day-after-day, had some reassurance that if shot down or forced down by mechanical failure, they had a good chance of being rescued. The many examples related in this book and the hundreds of rescues proved that the Pacific air-sea rescue practices were hugely successful.

I am grateful for having an opportunity in this foreword to highlight Canada's participation in the Pacific war. Many people have the perception that Canada's involvement in the Pacific was practically nonexistent compared to that in the European theatre. It may have been less but not insignificant given our country's then small population. Prior to Pearl Harbor, Canada had been engaged in the European conflict for two years with most of her expanding naval assets devoted to protecting merchant shipping braving the U-boat wolf pack-patrolled North Atlantic to bring life sustaining and military supplies to Britain.

Yet from 8 December 1941, the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and continuing to Christmas Day of that year, a 1,975-man Canadian force (Royal Rifles and Winnipeg Grenadiers battalions), part of the reinforcement forces, desperately defended Hong Kong against the Imperial Japanese Army's 38th Infantry Division while sustaining immense casualties. Those not killed spent the duration of the war in Japanese prison camps. At war's end only 1,225 of the original force returned to Canada.

Many do not realize that the long tentacles of Japanese imperialism extended to the North as well as South Pacific. Japanese submarines attacked Canada's and America's west coasts, sinking ships and so panicking local populations that the assets of Japanese immigrants were seized and their owners and their families were forcibly transported to detention camps in both countries. Further, Alaska's Aleutian chain was invaded. Canada, in spite of very limited resources, supplied troops, planes and naval vessels in combating this northern aggression and in patrolling coasts of both nations, even to the extent of basing squadrons of RCAF patrol aircraft in Alaska, where the Americans lacked resources to cover patrols and coastal defence.

Later, the 5,300-member 13th Canadian Infantry Brigade departed Nanaimo, BC, on 12 July 1943, aboard U.S. transports bound for Adak, Alaska to operate under U.S. command. This was a contingent comparable in size to Canada's better-known involvement in the Dieppe raid. Fortunately, this force suffered none of the combat losses resulting from the Dieppe disaster—the Japanese slipped away before they could be attacked. The Alaskan campaign is described in an excellent book, *War on Our Doorstep*, by Brendan Coyle.

Finally in 1944, after victory in Europe, Canada was able to participate actively in the British Pacific Fleet with our newly commissioned cruiser HMCS *Uganda*. Also, together with other Commonwealth nations, mainly New Zealand, she contributed through embedded air crew in the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm. Among those Canadians serving valiantly aboard the RN fleet aircraft carriers was Lt. Robert Hampton Gray, RCNVR, from Nelson, British Columbia. He was Canada's last winner of the Victoria Cross, one of the only two earned by the Fleet Air Arm during the war. He was killed, a few days before VJ Day, while sinking a Japanese escort vessel on 9 August 1945 at Onagawa Wan (Bay), Honshu, Japan.

Photo Foreword-1



Lt. Robert Hampton Gray, RCNVR.
Canadian government, photographer unknown

As a final note I salute the foundation aircraft of the air-sea rescue described in this book, the Consolidated PBY flying boat, widely known as the Catalina, but here in Canada in our amphibian version, as the Canso. Widely used and loved throughout the world both before and after the war it was a remarkable aircraft. On reflection, it gives me some pride in knowing that many of the planes described in this book were built by Canadians in a Boeing plant less than thirty miles from where I am writing this in White Rock, British Columbia. After the war this versatile machine was used all over the world for a wide variety of purposes. My dad's old employer, the ancient Hudson's Bay Company, founded 1670, even employed one in their fur trade operations in northern Canada and the Arctic.

The Canadian version was named for the strait in the province of Nova Scotia that separates Cape Breton Island from the mainland. An alternate anecdotal version of the naming is that when an inspection team from the RCAF first saw the strange yacht-like aircraft they remarked "it can never fly." The response by a Consolidated Aircraft Corporation engineer was "Can so."

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