

## **“Sometimes the Story You Want; Is Not the Story You Are Going to Get”**

**by Gerry Madigan**

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with files from Bruce MacDonald, Antigonish, NS; and  
Rolf Martin, Guernsey, Channel Islands, United Kingdom

## 1 April 2020

This story begins April Fools' Day. I hunkered down like many Canadians to wait out the ravages of COVID-19. It has been a most unsettling time for many of us; especially if you are of an age with health conditions or a compromised immune system. No doubt, you have taken the warnings very seriously and now are self-isolating and practicing social distancing.

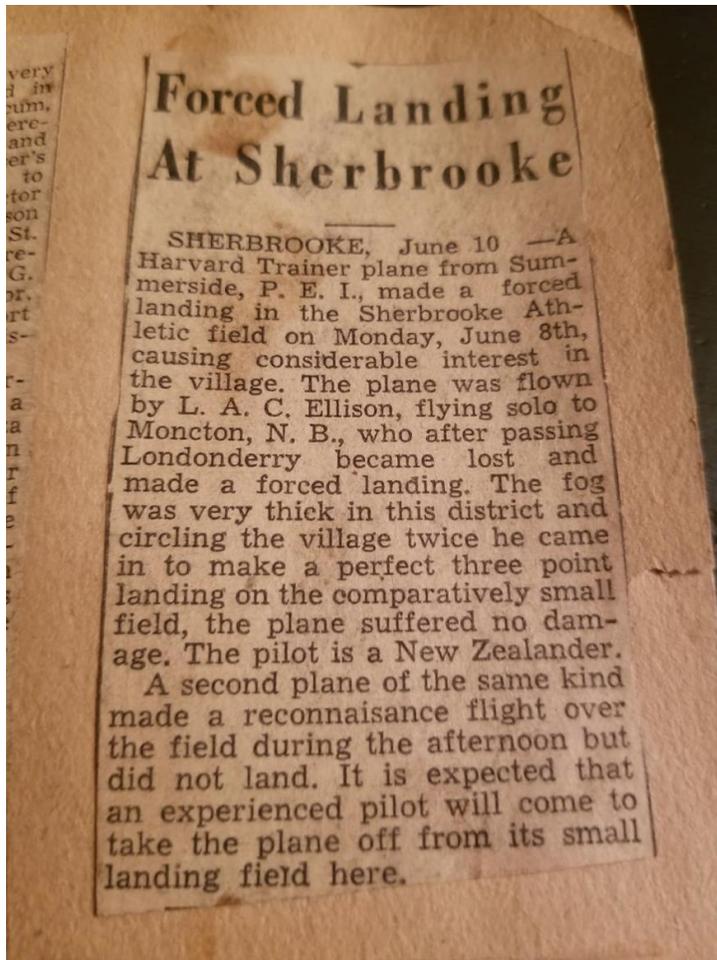
For some that has been quite the challenge. No one likes to be fettered and isolated from friends, family or their daily routines. But on the other hand, this pandemic may also have provided new opportunities as well.

Not to downplay the profoundly serious economic nature and challenges faced by many Canadians, industry, and families, this pandemic has also been an opportunity to refocus our lives. Now we have come to learn what is truly important, the time to find out what is most important to us. And perhaps this is also the opportunity that gives us a sense of the shared trial, the communal experience of the Greatest Generation, during the Second World War.

I was sitting around bored to the gills, with writer's block, dithering on another story. It was going nowhere in a hurry and I needed a bit of a break when opportunity knocked. From out of the blue, I received an e-mail from colleague and fellow historian Bruce Macdonald, of Antigonish. Bruce concentrates on the local history of World War One and Guysborough County in particular.

Bruce too was self-isolating at home. He was lucky to have had the foresight to borrow a stock of old Casket news archives, kindly lent to him before the crisis unfolded. He soon came across several articles of interest to me, one of a forced landing in Sherbrooke, NS in June of 1942.

Bruce, knowing I've a deep interest concerning the war on the Homefront, regarding Guysborough County in particular, wrote; "I've been going through the wartime editions of the Antigonish Casket as part of our research on local Antigonish 2nd World War soldiers and came across the attached item. Apparently, a young New Zealand pilot training out of Summerside, PEI, in June 1942 became lost and landed his aircraft at the Sherbrooke race track. The attached article provides a little more detail - have you ever heard of this incident?"



*Antigonish Casket" 10 June 1942*

It was all news to me! I was immediately intrigued. This story gave me the much-needed boost to get off the couch and investigate. It was a welcome change of scene. I needed something else to refresh my own mind and outlook, something positive to do and look forward to. And that is one lesson we need to relearn here; our lives need some purpose and focus each day.

As with every new project, where does one begin?

The first step was to extract what you can from the material in front of your eyes. The Casket news articles provided key clues and others like the photograph of Harvard Trainer, numbered

Serial AK 2533 from the Winn Campbell, family archive.

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## Stranded Plane Takes Off Again

Early last week a New Zealand flying student from the Summerside school in P. E. Island lost his bearings when out on a practice flight, and finally made a successful landing on the race track at Sherbrooke. Under normal conditions the track enclosure was too small to permit taking off again, but R.C.A.F. crews came in and after several days work with grader and tractors extended the field so that the plane was able to get away safely last Friday.

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*Antigonish Casket* 11 June 1942

The Antigonish Casket recorded the event as “Early last week a New Zealand flying student from Summerside in P.E. Island lost his bearings when out on a practice flight, and finally made a successful landing on a race track at Sherbrooke.” It was determined that the track enclosure was too small to permit taking off again. This necessitated the need for RCAF crews to come in and, after several days working with graders and tractors, “they extended the field so that the plane was able to get away safely last

Friday.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> - "Antigonish Casket", **Stranded Plane Takes off Again**, 11 June 1942

## Harvard Trainer Serial AK 2533



*With permission Winn Campbell, family archives, Sherbrooke airplane photo, March 2020*

I incorrectly assumed with some basic facts in hand, further investigation would be an easy go. April Fools! It was not to be an easy go at all. It all started with the origins of the Harvard aircraft. The aircraft in the picture is a single engine Harvard Trainer used in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP).

Winn Campbell's family photographed this aircraft at the time, and it provided a big clue to its provenance. From the records, Harvard 2533 was a part of the aircraft establishment for No. 9 Service Flying Training School RCAF. This flight school operated under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan at Summerside for a time.<sup>2</sup>

Harvard Trainer Serial AK 2533 had an interesting life. It was one of the first aircraft taken on strength, early on during the war. That can be determined from

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia, **CFB Summerside History Second World War**, 2020

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CFB\\_Summerside](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CFB_Summerside)

Accessed: 28 Mar 2020

its four-digit serial number. Later additions to the fleet were documented with a five-digit serial number.

Harvard (AK 2533) was transferred about the country side. Its service life began at Uplands, then it was transferred to Summerside along the way, and then finally onto Moosejaw, where it was struck off due to a flying accident in 1943. It was clearly on establishment at Summerside June 1942.<sup>3</sup> We can further place its location to a certain unit based on the segregation of aircraft types.

There were three air stations in Prince Edward Island during the war, all operating under the BCATP. Each had its own unique aircraft establishments. RCAF Station Charlottetown hosted No. 31 General Reconnaissance School that employed twin engine Anson aircraft.<sup>4</sup>

The second airfield of note was RCAF Station Mount Pleasant. Built in 1940, it was a relief landing field for No. 9 Service Flying Training School, located at nearby RCAF Station Summerside. But its function soon evolved as the BCATP expanded.

By September 1943, RCAF Station Mount Pleasant evolved from a relief field to a full training facility. It became the home of No. 10 Bombing and Gunnery School (B&GS). The aircraft establishment for this unit included the Avro Anson, Fairey Battle, Bristol Bolingbroke and Westland Lysander.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the third airfield in Prince Edward Island was located at Summerside, home to No. 9 Service Flying Training School RCAF. Harvards were used there to train airmen for various roles. No. 9 SFTS was transferred to RCAF Station Centralia in July 1942. The unit was replaced by No. 31 General Reconnaissance

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<sup>3</sup> R.W. "Bill" Walker, Canadian Military Aircraft, Serial Numbers, Harvard RCAF 2533 History

[http://www.rwrwalker.ca/RCAF\\_2500\\_2550\\_detailed.html](http://www.rwrwalker.ca/RCAF_2500_2550_detailed.html)

Accessed: 1 April 2020

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia, **RCAF Station Charlottetown**, 2020

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RCAF\\_Station\\_Charlottetown](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RCAF_Station_Charlottetown)

Accessed: 28 Mar 2020

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia, **RCAF Station Mount Pleasant**, 2020

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RCAF\\_Station\\_Mount\\_Pleasant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RCAF_Station_Mount_Pleasant)

Accessed: 28 Mar 2020

School RCAF. These timings place the aircraft and personnel at Summerside or at the very least, on Prince Edward Island in June 1942.<sup>6</sup>

But as of June 1942, the Harvard was still on establishment and was its mainstay! But by the process of elimination, we can narrow our search to, and confirming that Summerside was the home station for Harvard 2533! The clues concerning the airfield also narrowed down the field of search for an “LAC Ellison” from the 10 June 1942 Casket article.

The rank of the airman raises some concern regarding his status and training as a pilot. A leading aircraftman (LAC) or leading aircraftwoman (LACW) is a junior rank in some air forces. Airman would have held this rank normally while undergoing basic or elementary flight training. But by the time they would have reached an advanced training unit, most would have likely been promoted to Sergeant or Flight sergeant. This is suggestive that LAC Ellison may have been either an Air Observer (AOS) or Bombing and Gunnery (BGS) and not necessarily a pilot trainee.

A pursuit through the records was attempted to further identify the airman. That proved difficult with many turns, twists, and blind alleys. The fact that the 10 June article identified the Airman only as LAC Ellison, RNZAF was most unfortunate. His initials or a surname would have assisted greatly! But how hard could it be to identify LAC Ellison? Difficult.

One would think that plugging his name into various search engines would yield the answers to the man’s identity. In fact, that raised more questions than answers, but it also yielded a wealth of information in other ways, leading to new on-line contacts who provided much help in developing this story about a Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) Airman.

Five-point three percent of the 131,000 trainees who graduated in Canada under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan came from New Zealand. Many were trained in New Zealand first though. Some 2,910 pilots were trained to elementary standards in New Zealand first, before posted to BCATP facilities in

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<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, **CFB Summerside History Second World War**,2020

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CFB\\_Summerside](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CFB_Summerside)

Accessed: 28 Mar 2020

Canada. Amongst the throng sent here to continue training, were some 2,700 wireless operator/air-gunners, 1,800 navigators, and 500 bombardiers.<sup>7</sup>

### The Hunt for LAC Ellison

The question now was how to identify which Ellison served at Summerside, home to No. 9 Service Flying Training School RCAF from this vast number. An internet search quickly narrowed it down initially to at least three RNZAF airman with “Ellison” as part of their name structure. Two were listed as a family name, and another as a surname:

- Firth , Ellison George Sgt (412218 ) -RNZAF
- Ellison, Flt Sgt DAVID WILLIAM COLL (4215146) -RNZAF
- Ellison, Flt Sgt Bruce Woodward (4310166) – RNZAF

All these individuals led interesting but short lives. All warranted research and had a story to tell.

Our first investigation leads to Sgt 412218 Ellison George Firth. He trained as a wireless Air Gunner, and served with 75 (NZ) Sqn that was initially based at RAF Feltwell. He was subsequently posted to RAF Mildenhall, RAF Newmarket and finally RAF Mepal in Cambridgeshire. His Squadron saw action over France, Norway, Belgium, Italy, Sweden and Germany.<sup>8</sup>

In October 1942 , 75 Sqn (RAF) was located at Mildenhall and was equipped with the Vickers Wellington Mk III twin engine bomber.<sup>9</sup> Sadly Sgt Firth was lost in action 13 October 1942. He was only 19 years old.

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<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia, **New Zealand Airman Training Numbers**, 2020

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British\\_Commonwealth\\_Air\\_Training\\_Plan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Commonwealth_Air_Training_Plan)

Accessed: 28 Mar 2020

<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia, **No. 75 (New Zealand) Squadron RAF**, 9 February 2020

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No.\\_75\\_Squadron\\_RAF#The\\_New\\_Zealand\\_Squadron](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No._75_Squadron_RAF#The_New_Zealand_Squadron)

Accessed: 8 April 2020

<sup>9</sup> Rickard, J (24 March 2007), No. 75 Squadron (RAF): Second World War,

[http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units/RAF/75\\_wwII.html](http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units/RAF/75_wwII.html)

Accessed: 8 April 2020

Sgt Firth was 16 years old when war was declared. His service details and enrolment proved difficult to find at this time. But it is possible that he may have trained as a wireless air gunner here in Canada. And depending on his training location and postings, it is also possible that he may have been in PEI at the time of this forced landing at Sherbrooke, June 1942. But that is only speculation and conjecture for the time being.

Given the time between the incident of June and his death in October 1942, Sgt Firth would have had to be speedily rushed from training into action. Given the needs of familiarization and further advanced training of the RAF for new incumbents, Sgt Firth's possible whereabouts weighs heavily in the consideration, that he may have been posted or was likely elsewhere in the United Kingdom at the time.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly the life of Flt Sgt David William Coll Ellison was investigated. Flt Sgt DWC Ellison served in the Pacific theatre of war. He was only 20 years old when he was killed in action 18 September 1944. He was buried at Bourail Memorial Cemetery in New Caledonia. He left to grieve his parents, John Ellison and of Emmeline Ellison (nee McDonald), of Featherston, Wellington, New Zealand.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Flt Sgt Bruce Woodward Ellison was a RNZAF navigator who served with 148 (RAF) Sqn. He was lost on operations 12 September 1944 at the age of 26. He was the son of Percy Charles and Gwenllian Glamorgan (nee Richards) Ellison of Napier Hawke's Bay, New Zealand.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Murray Peden **A Thousand Shall Fall**, Stoddart, 1988 (paperback), pg. 193-241.

<sup>11</sup> Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Flt Sgt David William Coll Ellison  
[https://www.cwgc.org/search-results?term=Ellison&name=Ellison&fullname=Ellison&tab=wardead&fq\\_warliteral=2&fq\\_servedwithliteral=New+Zealand](https://www.cwgc.org/search-results?term=Ellison&name=Ellison&fullname=Ellison&tab=wardead&fq_warliteral=2&fq_servedwithliteral=New+Zealand)

<sup>12</sup> From Commonwealth Grave Commission. Website Grave registration, **Bruce Woodward Ellison**  
Source: <https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2816815/ellison,-bruce-woodward/#&gid=null&pid=1>

Accessed: 27 Mar 2020



*Commonwealth Grave Commission.*

*Bruce Woodward Ellison*

Flt Sgt BW Ellison trained in Canada in 1942. On first appearances, this suggests he may have been the airman in question guarding the lone Harvard aircraft that forced landed at Sherbrooke 8 June 1942. His service records suggest otherwise though.

Bruce Woodward Ellison was born 24 May 1918, Napier Australia. He enlisted in the Royal New Zealand Navy 18 December and immediately embarked for England 20 December 1940. He served at various shore stations in the United Kingdom; St Vincent, Gosport, and Daedalus until he transferred to the RAF exactly one year to the day of his initial enrolment 18 December 1941.<sup>13</sup>

Bruce wanted to be a pilot in the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm. He noted that desire on his application of 27 November 1939. But that was not meant to be.<sup>14</sup>

Flt Sgt Ellison was transferred to the RAF, 18 December 1941, and reduced in rank to AC2. He was subsequently promoted to LAC when remustered to air observer RAF, then was transferred to Canada for BCATP training in August 1942. All this occurred some months after the forced landing in Sherbrooke.<sup>15</sup> This placed him elsewhere when the Sherbrooke incident occurred, unless of course, if his records were inaccurate.

Regardless, Bruce Woodward Ellison's life was typical of the young men who passed through and trained in Canada under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. Especially those who came from afar as New Zealand.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Rolf Martin, Guernsey, Channel Islands, United Kingdom, Archives, **Personnel Records, Flt Sgt Bruce Woodward Ellison, 4310166, RNZAF Deceased 11 September 1944**, email 31 March 2020, File BE1.JPG

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, Rolf Martin Archives, 2020 File BE1.JPG

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, Rolf Martin Archives, 2020 File BE1.JPG

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, Rolf Martin Archives, 2020 File BE1.JPG

## **Service and Sacrifice Bruce Woodward Ellison**

On 28 September 1942, Bruce Woodward Ellison was transferred to No. 5 Air Observers School, Winnipeg Manitoba. He graduated and was awarded his Air Observer's Badge, 22 January 1943. He was promoted Sgt 1 May 1943 and subsequently promoted Flt Sgt 1 November 1943. In the meantime he re-embarked for the United Kingdom February 1943.<sup>17</sup>

As was common in the day, Flt Sgt Ellison was processed through another round of operational training schools, first No.11 Elementary Flying School, Perth Scotland, for further training as an air navigator. He found his way into advance training in April 1943 to No. 36 (Navigators) Advanced Flying Unit, Staverton, Gloucestershire, where he trained on the Anson. Finally he was posted to No. 19 Operational Training Unit, Kinloss, Scotland where he crewed up and trained on Whitley Bombers.<sup>18</sup>

Flt Sgt Ellison was transferred to the RNZAF on 1 November 1943 and proceeded to No.1652 Conversion Unit at Marston Moor, Yorkshire. He trained on and converted to the Halifax bomber.

Flt Sgt Ellison did not proceed immediately on "Ops". In March 1944 he was assigned to the Bomber Development Unit at Newmarket. From there he was posted in April to the Ferry Unit Pershire, Worcestershire, from whence he proceeded to Blanche Maison in Algiers by way of St Mawgan in Cornwall.

Flt Sgt Ellison finally landed at Rabat in Africa. On 15 June 1944 he journeyed to Foggia on a Dakota aircraft to join No. 148 Squadron at Brindisi. This is where his true journey on "Ops" began and sadly was to end.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, Rolf Martin Archives, 2020 File BE1.JPG

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, Rolf Martin Archives, 2020 File BE1.JPG

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, Rolf Martin Archives, 2020 File BE2.JPG

## A Sad Turn of Events

Flt Sgt Ellison took part in 18 Operational sorties. His last was the night of 11/12 September 1944. His aircraft was assigned to drop supplies to partisans in North Western Italy. The aircraft failed to come home.<sup>20</sup>

Flt Sgt Bruce Ellison was a part of the crew of HALIFAX BB412 of 148 Squadron (RAF) stationed at Brindisi, Italy - 334 Wing, of the Balkan Air Force.

The mission given Halifax II BB412/C and its crew 11 September 1944 was not only the re-supply of partisans in Northwest Italy, but also quite possibly, an insertion of operatives as well. Halifax II BB412/C took off at 1930 hours. The pilot in command was Pilot Officer J E O'Brien, RCAF.

Regrettably somewhere en route to the Val Grande area in the vicinity of Ivrea, 45km NE of Turin, Halifax II BB412/C was lost. It flew into the side of a mountain about 25 metres below the summit at 2345 hours, taking to their deaths the eight crew, a British Army officer, two Czech Army personnel and two unidentified dispatchers (possibly Italian partisans). All were buried in a collective grave in Milan.

Flt Sgt Bruce Woodward Ellison, RNZAF, navigator was only 26. He was on his 19th operation, six short of completing his first tour.<sup>21</sup>

## The Difficulties

It was difficult to ascertain at this point whether any of the RNZAF candidates served in Canada at the time of the forced landing 8 June 1942. There may have been an unknown Ellison RNZAF who survived the war, and then again, it was always possible that the nationality was incorrectly recorded in the Casket of 10/11 June 1942.

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<sup>20</sup> ibid, Rolf Martin Archives, 2020 File BE2.JPG

<sup>21</sup> Royal Air Force, Commands, **HALIFAX BB412**, information posted HALIHAX BB412  
**Author:** DEVIS UGHETTI (Guest), **Time Stamp:** 09:24:44 Wednesday, March 29, 2006  
**Source:** <http://www.rafcommands.com/archive/08661.php>  
**Accessed:** 28 March 2020

A broader net was cast to determine if there were any other Ellisons who may have trained in Canada either RCAF, RAF, RAFVR, RAAF, or other. Several were found and their stories and fates are worth recounting here as well.

ELLISON, F/O Phillip Patrick (J18370) – RCAF. Phillip Patrick Ellison was a distinguished RCAF officer, the recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross. He served with No.408 Squadron. His DFC Award was effective 5 July 1945. He survived 56 operational sorties during the war, effectively surviving what was two tours of operations. That was not only an outstanding achievement but was also a wondrous tale of survival! His citation reads in part “Throughout his lengthy period on operations, this officer has displayed exceptional ability as a tail gunner, and at all times has shown marked keenness to engage the enemy”. Phillip Patrick Ellison returned home to Canada to civilian life and died in Saskatoon, 13 April 1995.<sup>22</sup>

A contemporary of the time was LAC 402970 Ronal Edward (Ron) Ellison, of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). Ron Ellison was amongst the throng of Wireless Operators and Air Gunners of the 5th Canadian Draft (Canada 5). Their RAAF course was held at the Wireless School, Montreal, Canada from 2 February to 23 June 1941.

A number of these attendees were remustered or were provided additional training as Bomb Aimers or advanced gunners. Their courses were held at Jarvis, Canada from 26 June to 25 July 1941. It is unlikely that Ron Ellison was held back in Canada for a year. Most of his course mates were posted to Europe upon completion of training and commenced operations by 1942.

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<sup>22</sup> 408 "Goose" Squadron Association, **ELLISON, F/O Phillip Patrick (J18370) – Distinguished Flying Cross – No.408 Squadron – Award effective 5 July 1945**

Source: [http://www.forfreedom.ca/?page\\_id=1192](http://www.forfreedom.ca/?page_id=1192)

Accessed: 26 Mar 2020



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P02739.005

*in public domain Fourth Row 402970 LAC Ronal Edward (Ron) Ellison (6<sup>th</sup> from left)*

The fate of LAC Ron Ellison is unknown. But there was always an outside chance that he may have been posted to an advanced gunnery school in Prince Edward Island in 1942 like many of his peers.

This is only a small sample of the young men who held either a family or surname of Ellison. Some may have trained here in Canada, but many more may have served with Canadians elsewhere, particularly in the Pacific theatre.

One such place was Singapore. It was here where many Canadians were held as Prisoners of War, and here where many who fought in the Pacific theatre are also buried.

ELLISON, Aircraftman 2nd Class, EDWARD, 1484330. Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. 29th November 1943. Age 21. Husband of Josephine Ellison, of Birkenhead. Column 429.

ELLISON, Flight Lieutenant, HENRY VICTOR, 60903. Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. 24th March 1942. Age 44. Husband of Wynfrid Dodson Ellison, of Abingdon. Berkshire. Column 412.

ELLISON, Private, SASSOON, 7532581. 1 (Malay) Field Amb. Royal Army Medical Corps. 1st September 1945. Husband of Chik binti Sudin, of Singapore. Column 105.

ELLISON, Driver, WILLIAM HENRY, T/182525. 35 M.T. Coy, Royal Army Service Corps attd Royal Artillery. 12th September 1944. Son of Philip and Edith Ellison, of Crowton, Cheshire. Column 99.

*Britain at War, Singapore Memorial Roll of Honour (Ellison)*<sup>23</sup>

Listed amongst the dead of the Singapore Memorial Roll of Honour are memorialized names of four Ellisons , two airman RAF, voluntary reserve, one a private with the Royal Army Medical Corps, and another with the Royal Army Service Corps and Royal Artillery. That was a considerable weight of humanity consumed in the cauldron of war for just one family name alone.

All had ambitions, aspirations for the future, and most likely, loved ones, whose lives too were impacted and were either left unfulfilled or bereft. It was a tremendous loss not only for their nations but also for their loved ones, both known and unknown. Each deserves to be remembered in some small way, and we must remember. Sometimes these young people crossed our paths in nebulous ways, like the forced landing of an aircraft, on a sports field in Sherbrooke, NS in June 1942.

And after so many years, we tried to find the story behind the forced landing and find that sometimes the story you want, is not the story you are going to get! Sometimes, you will simply find a better one.

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<sup>23</sup> John Wheedon and Ron Taylor **Britain at War, Singapore Memorial Roll of Honour**, March 2020

Source: [https://www.roll-of-honour.org.uk/Cemeteries/Singapore\\_Memorial/E/html/el.htm](https://www.roll-of-honour.org.uk/Cemeteries/Singapore_Memorial/E/html/el.htm)

Accessed: 6 April 2020

