

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

FROM GASPÉ TO CEYLON

Recalling highlights of the
career of a very distinguished
Officer of the Royal Canadian
Air Force, Leonard J. Birchall,
O.B.E., D.F.C.

KEN ANNETT

FROM GASPE TO CEYLON

PREFACE In the field of aviation it has been the privilege of Gaspesians to have known outstanding airmen. A previous article of "GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY" (#81) recalled the remarkable life of Count Jacques de Lesseps whose career won for him the Legion of Honour, the Croix de Guerre, the Distinguished Service Cross (U.S.A.) and the Order of the French Nation. Lost in storm over the St. Lawrence in October, 1927, he was buried at Gaspé Basin where his monument stands. Only thirteen years later, with World War II in progress, there arrived in Gaspé a young Royal Canadian Air Force Officer, Leonard J. Birchall, whose career would be equally significant as that of Count de Lesseps. His posting to Gaspe is recalled in the following extract of his letter to the author of this series:

"Dear Mr. Annett,

...You are very right that I operated out of Gaspé during the war. I was stationed in Dartmouth, N.S. during the Munich crisis and then stayed on to fly the STRANRAER flying boats. I went to Gaspé on 30 May 1940 to shadow the Italian ship, CAPO LINA, which was trying to get out of Canada. Italy declared war and while we were shadowing the ship it ran itself aground on Big Bic Island in the St. Lawrence and set fire to the ship. I then stayed on at Gaspé with a small detachment and one STRANRAER. We stayed at the BATTERY PARK while the men stayed at the ONE ASH INN. While in Gaspé I flew the cover for convoys up the St. Lawrence and out to Sydney. I left there 30 September '40 to go back to Trenton, Ontario.

I met up with some of the men from Gaspé in my last P-O.W. camp in Japan and we were liberated from there....

Sincerely,

L.J. Birchall "

BACKGROUND

A native of St. Catharines, Ontario, Len Birchall was interested in planes and flying from his early youth. After his graduation from the Royal Military College, Kingston, on the eve of World War II, he entered the Royal Canadian Air Force as Pilot Officer. With the outbreak of war he served at Dartmouth, N.S. and at Gaspé, as mentioned in the letter above, on convoy patrols.

Following service on Canada's East Coast he was posted with his RCAF Squadron to Norway, again on patrol duty, but now in a more active war zone and in very harsh weather conditions.

THE THREAT OF JAPAN

The entry of Japan into World War II with her attack on Pearl Harbour was quickly followed by unprecedented Japanese military, naval and air successes marked by the fall of Hong Kong, the Philippines, Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia. There was great concern for the safety of India and the Suez Canal route. India, with her population of more than 400,000,000 was a known goal of the Axis Powers. There, the war lords of Japan expected to join forces with those of Hitler's Germany in a blue-print for total world conquest. With the fall of the great naval base at Singapore in February, 1942, the way lay open for Japanese naval forces to open attack on India.

It was this crisis situation that led to orders for Squadron-Leader Birchall and his men to move from Norway to Ceylon. It was from their new base on the Indian Ocean that Birchall and the crew of their CATALINA flying boat would play a historic and decisive role in the war. For, near the end of a long, tiring patrol over the ocean to the South of Ceylon, they sighted an approaching Japanese invasion fleet and were able to report it to their base before their CATALINA was shot out of the sky by a flight of Japanese fighter aircraft from an aircraft-carrier of the enemy fleet. Half of Birchall's crew were killed - the survivors, including the wounded Birchall were plucked from the sea, subjected to merciless Japanese interrogation, and eventually thrown into brutal prisoner-of-war camp. However, their warning message had been received with the result that steps were taken in time to save India from sea-borne invasion by the Japanese.

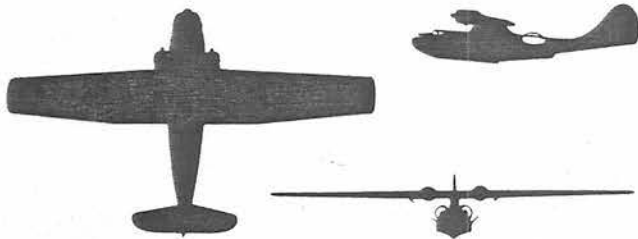
PRISONER OF THE JAPANESE

The brutal and traumatic experience of Squadron-Leader Birchall and his men as prisoners-of-war of the Japanese for three and a half long years could fill a volume. Birchall's determination to defend his fellow prisoners from the harsh, inhuman treatment meted out by Japanese guards drew down upon himself particular punishments. He won, however, the confidence and respect of his companions in captivity

PRISONER OF THE JAPANESE

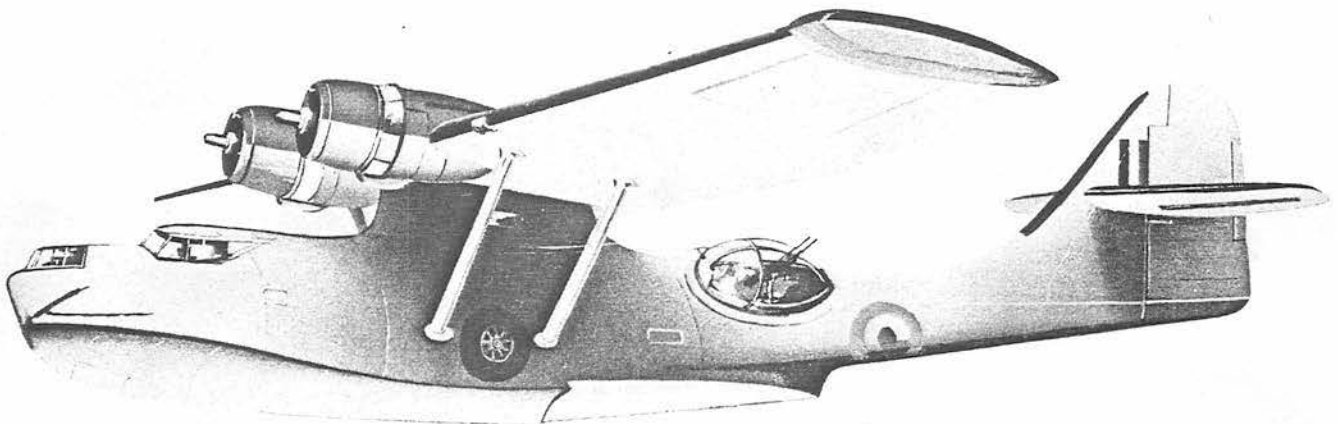
(ctd)

and helped them maintain hope for eventual freedom. Not until release from prisoner-of-war camp by the liberating American forces did he learn that he had been awarded not only the DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS but also the ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE.

**CONSOLIDATED CATALINA**

The Catalina flying boat entered service with the U.S. Navy in 1936. During the war some 650 Catalinas were flown by the RAF and RCAF on anti-submarine patrols. One piloted by Sqdn. Ldr. Leonard Birchall saved Ceylon from surprise attack in April 1942 when Birchall sighted a Japanese fleet and radioed a warning before he was shot down. Flt. Lt. David Hornell, flying a version of the Catalina called the Canso, won the V.C. for a courageous attack on a U-boat and for his bravery when the crew had to ditch in the icy Atlantic. He died from exposure shortly after rescue.

Consolidated Catalina III (Canso A) flying boat. All-metal stressed-skin construction. Endurance 14 hours at 100 knots with 2000-lb. bombload (Mark I, 17 hours at 100 knots).



THE POST-WAR YEARS

Len Birchall continued to serve with distinction in posts of senior responsibility with the Armed Forces of Canada in the post-war period. He was Commandant of the Royal Military College and a valued military counsellor to Canadian delegations in Washington, D.C., and at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.(NATO). His service was reflected in his rise from Pilot Officer and Squadron Leader to that of Air Commodore and finally, General.

On retirement he continued to serve on the Boards of Directors of educational and cadet organizations and to speak often on youth leadership training. The survivors of Japanese prisoner-of-war camps continued to have his influential support.



Battery Park Hotel, Gaspé

Closeup:

The savior of Ceylon



Although their country was not to play a major role in the Pacific war, Canadians got into it in many ways as individuals or in small groups. The most crucial figure of them all was an RCAF pilot who fought there only briefly and didn't know for years what he'd achieved.

In early 1942 the Japanese surged forward. Malaya was overrun. Singapore fell. The Philippines, Burma, Java, Borneo, Sumatra were invaded. As April opened, a large Japanese naval force sped west across the Indian Ocean toward the strategic island of Ceylon with its British naval base.

At the same time a Catalina flying boat, piloted by Sqdn. Ldr. Leonard J. Birchall of St. Catharines, Ont., was flying to Ceylon on a posting to the tropics. Only a few weeks before, his 413 Squadron had been patrolling off the Norwegian coast in freezing weather.

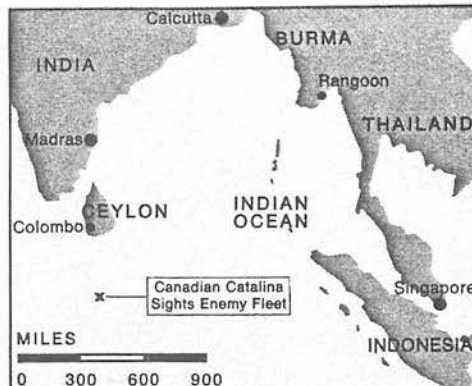
On April 4, the squadron was ordered out on reconnaissance over the Indian Ocean. From Birchall's diary:

... Our task was to be in a position approximately 250 miles southeast of Ceylon at first light and to patrol this area during daylight to ensure that no enemy shipping, especially carriers, approached close enough to run in during the night and launch an air strike at first light against Ceylon.

During the day we received a message to change course to due south of Ceylon. About one hour before our patrol was finished, the moon came up and we decided to extend our patrol time to get an exact astro fix by using moon and sun shots. This took us about 350 miles due south of Ceylon.

As we were preparing to return, we noticed to the extreme south a small dot on the horizon. With lots of fuel, we turned

to identify it. Just as we got close enough to identify it with binoculars, we noticed several more ships. Our identification proved them to be Japanese: battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers and troop carriers in convoy. Being at a low altitude, we



had managed to get under the enemy outer air screen and close enough to identify all the ships, their position, course and speed.

We immediately coded a message and started transmission. During this time, Japanese aircraft spotted us. We were halfway through our required third transmission when a shell destroyed our wireless equipment and seriously injured the wireless operator. There was no cloud cover or other protection, and we were now under constant attack. Shells set fire to our internal tanks. We managed to get the fire out, and then another started, and the aircraft began to break up. Due to our low altitude it was impossible to bail out but I got the aircraft down on the water before the tail fell off.

All the time we were under constant strafing. The crew managed to evacuate the aircraft with the exception of one air gunner whose leg was severed. He, unfortunately, went down with the plane. Eight of us swam away from burning gasoline spread out over the water. Two were seriously injured and unconscious and we had them in life jackets. The strafing continued and we had to dive each time the enemy fired. The two in life jackets could not do this and were killed. This left six of us and we stayed in a group until a destroyer put out a boat to pick us up. Three were badly wounded. The rest of us, although we had several wounds, were fairly well off.

The Japanese had picked us up to find out whether we had been able to send a warning, and to obtain information on the defenses of Ceylon. We denied having gotten a message away and said we had only arrived in Colombo the day before and had no knowledge of the defenses. Despite severe beatings we stuck to our story and it

appeared to be accepted. We were then placed in the forward paint locker where three could lie down, two could sit and one had to stand. We remained like this for three days during the attack on Ceylon. We were given no medical treatment and only a cup of soup each day.

Following the attack we were transferred to the aircraft carrier *Akagi*. We arrived at Yokohama the day after the famous Jimmy Doolittle air raid on Tokyo. We were paraded before the populace who vented their anger on us. It was not until the end of the war that I found out our message had gotten through and had been of value. . . .

LEONARD J. BIRCHALL

It had indeed. On receipt of Birchall's message, Ceylon went into a fever of activity. As Leslie Roberts records in *There Shall Be Wings*:

... Merchantmen in Colombo harbor were ordered to sea to escape. Defenses were mounted. Thirty-six Hurricanes, recently arrived, were put on instant alert. A second Catalina, sent out to keep watch on the Japanese fleet, did not return but reported the enemy's changed position.

When the Japanese launched a great air attack on the city on Easter Sunday, with 50 bombers and as many Zero fighters, it was repulsed with great losses to the enemy though the port and city suffered substantial damage and the Royal Navy lost two cruisers and a destroyer to low-flying bombers.

It was the first check to the Japanese drive through the Far East; they retired and did not come back. A single Canadian Catalina and its crew had averted a second Pearl Harbor. Birchall was awarded the DFC as "the savior of Ceylon." . . .

He was later awarded the Order of the British Empire for his conduct as a prisoner. He took brutal treatment because he repeatedly intervened when the Japanese beat prisoners or denied them medical treatment.

But Birchall's greatest tribute involved no award at all. Someone once asked Winston Churchill what he considered the most dangerous moment of the war. He said his greatest alarm came when he heard the Japanese fleet was heading for Ceylon at a time when the Germans were threatening to seize control of Egypt. Ceylon would give the Japanese control of the Indian Ocean. This, added to enemy control of Egypt, would "close the ring" and make the future black indeed. Disaster was prevented, said Churchill, by the man who spotted the Japanese fleet. His was "one of the most important single contributions to victory."