



Wing Drift

September 2023

Message from the Chairman

Hello Wing Members,

I hope everyone had an enjoyable summer. I think this summer was the hottest in quite some time. Unfortunately, we had to suffer through with a less than adequate air conditioning system but did our best to stay cool with extra fans circulating the air. We will remedy that situation for next year through our fundraising efforts and GoFundMe page.

The 779 'Black Knight' Squadron are parading again with over 100 cadets. On September 19th, 2023, the Squadron held a Change Of Command Parade at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum. After more then 6Yrs as the Commanding Officer, Major Piotr Skrzypczak has transferred command over to his Adjutant, Captain Marilyn Coleman.



Squadron On Parade



Relinquish the Flag of Office



Accept the Flag of Office

The BCATP Graves Decoration was held at St. Paul's Anglican Church on September 24th, 2023. This service commemorates those RAF pilots and servicemen who lost their lives during training maneuvers here in Southern Ontario during WWII. The Church congregation, Members of the 447 Wing, 779 'Black Knight' Sqn. and Veterans were in attendance.

Bev and I took a drive down to Trenton to tour the National Air Force Museum of Canada and attend the Ad Astra Stone Service. The Service is hosted by the Museum and as a joint effort by the RCAF Association and 8th Wing, CFB Trenton. The 8th Wing Pipes & Drums and Ceremonial Concert Band were also on hand. Guests gather to pay tribute to the names on the Stones; those who have served or will continue to serve in Canada's Air Force.

This was an enjoyable day, fantastic weather. If you have not toured the Museum and Memorial Gardens, I strongly suggest you make the time to do so; and if time permits, stop in at the 413 Wing. They are 5-minute drive from the museum.



RCAF Association, Ontario Group Chair Walter Peckham



C130J Hercules Flyby

[Ad Astra Ceremony « National Air Force Museum of Canada](#)

Message from the Chairman (Cont'd)

April 1st, 2024 is the 100th Anniversary of the Royal Canadian Air Force and your Board of Directors are looking into ways to celebrate this momentous occasion.
Stay tune for upcoming events and dates.

We continue with our usual, weekly activities, such as Seniors' Euchre on Tuesday afternoons (1:30pm) and Karaoke on alternating Wednesday nights (7pm). The Country Rambler' will continue their weekly "Open Mic" on Thursday nights and Friday Night Bands will be back again - 2 Bands per month.

The Wing Calendar of Events are posted on the Wing Bulletin Board.

Fly Safe; Stay Healthy.

Respectfully Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Cuffe". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'M'.

Michael Cuffe
Chair, 447 Wing RCAFA

September 2023

1941 crash of Flagship Erie airliner told in both riveting play and book

Photos and report by Gord McNulty

Witnesses who saw and heard the airliner flying erratically may have thought it was probably one of the wartime training aircraft that beat a path over the area day and night.

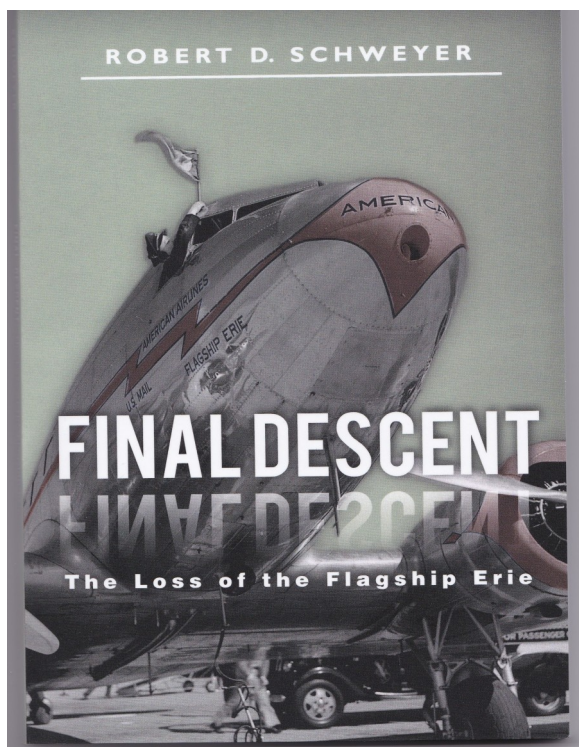
Within moments, the American Airlines DC-3 plunged into a farm field at Lawrence Station, 14 miles southwest of St. Thomas, at a steep angle. Seventeen passengers and three crew members lost their lives. The tragedy on the night of October 30, 1941, was the worst aviation disaster in Canada at the time.



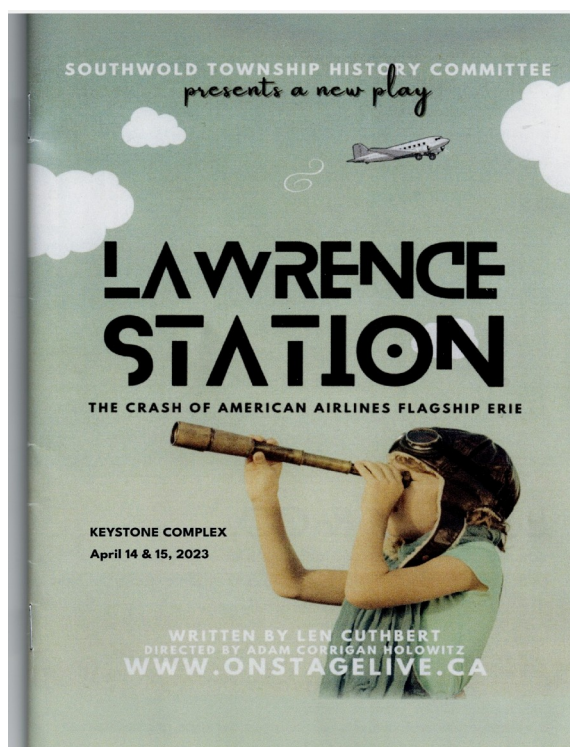
Tragic scene — the wreckage of the Flagship Erie (Photo by Chester W. Phillips, Moorhead Minn.)

The poignant story of how the routine flight from Buffalo to Detroit went horribly wrong was impressively described in the book *Final Descent: The loss of the Flagship Erie* by Robert Schweyer of Jarvis. In another welcome turn of events, the story has also been told in a play that premiered this year.

The play, “Lawrence Station, the crash of the Flagship Erie,” was staged at three locations in southwestern Ontario in April. My wife Angie and I were fortunate to attend this fine stage presentation at Strathroy. It was a rewarding experience.



Cover of Final Descent by Rob Schweyer



Lawrence Station, an excellent new play, premiered in 2023

The play is based on Schweyer's book. A keen aviation historian, Schweyer was employed as assistant curator and curator at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum for eight years. He completed a manuscript before his untimely death from Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2010.

His family, in a fitting tribute to both the author and the victims of the accident, self-published the book in 2014. Schweyer sketched the lives of the people who perished and the impact on their families and the community in his well-researched account.

Everything was in order when Captain David I. Cooper, a highly respected American Airlines pilot, took off from Buffalo at 9:03 p.m. in a reliable Douglas DC-3. First Officer Richard Cooper was making his first trip as co-pilot. Stewardess Mary Blackley was enjoying her new-found airline career.

It was a typical late autumn evening in Buffalo, overcast, with a ceiling of 3,500 feet. The flight was cleared only to Detroit, since a lowering of ceilings to below minimums for scheduled arrivals in South Bend, Indiana and Chicago was anticipated.

Cooper reported passing over Jarvis at 9:39, advising that he was proceeding routinely at 4,000 feet and that weather conditions were fairly good. He was never heard from again.

Shortly after 10 p.m., as drizzle began, residents of tiny Lawrence Station heard the engines of an aircraft surging.

Startled observers saw the twin-engined airliner descend in right turns, while making sudden roller coaster-like movements that must have been nightmarish for those on board. The crew pushed the engines to the limit trying to gain altitude, but the *Flagship Erie* continued to spiral downward. It missed a farmhouse before finally hitting the ground at high speed. A huge fire erupted as gasoline and oil spewed from ruptured fuel tanks and bedlam erupted in Lawrence Station.

Despite the reduced visibility, the blaze could be seen as far away as St. Thomas. Would-be rescuers and neighbours quickly flocked to the burning wreckage and spread the news.

Officers and men of the RCAF bombing and gunnery school at Fingal, eight miles to the south, were among the first to arrive and provided guards at the scene. Virtually all of the physical evidence that might have helped to determine the cause of the crash was destroyed.

The grim story made front-page headlines in virtually every major Canadian and U.S. newspaper. It was the worst plane crash in American Airlines' history and the company's first fatal accident involving the seemingly invincible DC-3.

Exhaustive investigations failed to solve the mystery. Speculation persisted that the aircraft might have struck a goose, so 200 military personnel were mobilized for an intensive ground search of goose remains. They covered hundreds of acres of farmland in a fruitless effort.

Investigators probed various theories, such as jamming of the controls, possibly caused by automatic pilot malfunction; a vagrant bolt of lightning blinding the crew; carbon monoxide from the exhausts incapacitating the crew; the health of the pilot; and more. Cooper had suffered for several days from torticollis, an annoying and often painful condition more commonly referred to as wryneck. He was cleared to fly three days before the accident. In the end, there wasn't any evidence to bolster any of the suppositions.

Schweyer concluded he was "personally convinced that something either jammed or failed aboard the aircraft suddenly and without warning."

The crash underlined the need for flight data recorders or "black boxes" that eventually became widespread. Schweyer dedicated his book to the 20 crash victims who, he felt, had not died in vain as their loss had helped to produce essential improvements in aviation safety

Just as the book is an achievement of which the Schweyer family can be proud, the new play is also commendable. It's rightly described as a living memorial to the people who were lost that night and the caring citizens who came forward with as much support as they could. I was grateful when Cindy Schweyer, Rob's widow, phoned to alert me to the play.

Full credit is especially due to playwright Len Cuthbert, who was inspired to take the painful story to the stage in 2020 while he was riding a bicycle through Lawrence Station.

Cuthbert noticed a commemorative plaque, created by the Southwold Township community, that was dedicated to the passengers and crew. The long overdue plaque was unveiled in September 2018. A large gathering of residents attended, as well as 26 Americans who lost family members in the crash --- including three of the 34 children who lost their fathers.

A lot of heartache is involved in the play. Like the plaque, it is another powerful reminder of the lives lost and the many area residents who were first responders and desperately tried to assist.

Cuthbert's creatively written but very factual script featured three talented actors. They played multiple roles such as stewardess Mary Blackley; switchboard operator Edna Lumley; residents who rushed to the scene of the crash and alerted friends and neighbours; radio range station operators along the route of the flight; radio station DJs in Buffalo and South Bend, Indiana, and more.

The three actors were Eve Cohen, a newcomer to Canada who studied theatre in Los Angeles; Sarah Hagerty, a graduate of the University of Windsor's Bachelor of Fine Arts Acting program; and Kydra Ryan, Associate Producer and ensemble member of AlvegoRoot Theatre in London.

The play held the attention of the audience for the entire 90-minute performance without an intermission. A quality production, it reflected Cuthbert's experience staging plays in Canada, the U.S. and Europe.

Cuthbert is trying to interest other theatres and community playhouses in Ontario to stage the dramatization. We can only hope he'll be successful. This important historical play recalls a story that should always be remembered and definitely deserves large audiences.

A Recent Visitor to 447 Wing



Mr. Jack Finan was a recent visitor to 447 Wing. Sure looks good for a man in his 104th year. Congratulations Jack and wishing you many more to come.

Photo by permission of Dan Welsh.

The 447 Wing is OPEN

Sunday & Monday	CLOSED
Tuesday & Wednesday	11:30am to 10:00pm
Thursday & Friday	11:30am to 11:00pm
Saturday	11:30am to 8:00pm

Kitchen Hours

Tuesday & Wednesday	11:30 am to 8:00pm
Thursday & Friday	11:30am to 9:00pm
Saturday	11:30am to 7:00pm

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<https://www.facebook.com/The-447-Wing-140212226825200/>

The Wing Drift is published quarterly. If you have any articles, suggestions, etc for future editions, they can be sent to the 447 Wing email address (447winghamilton@gmail.com).

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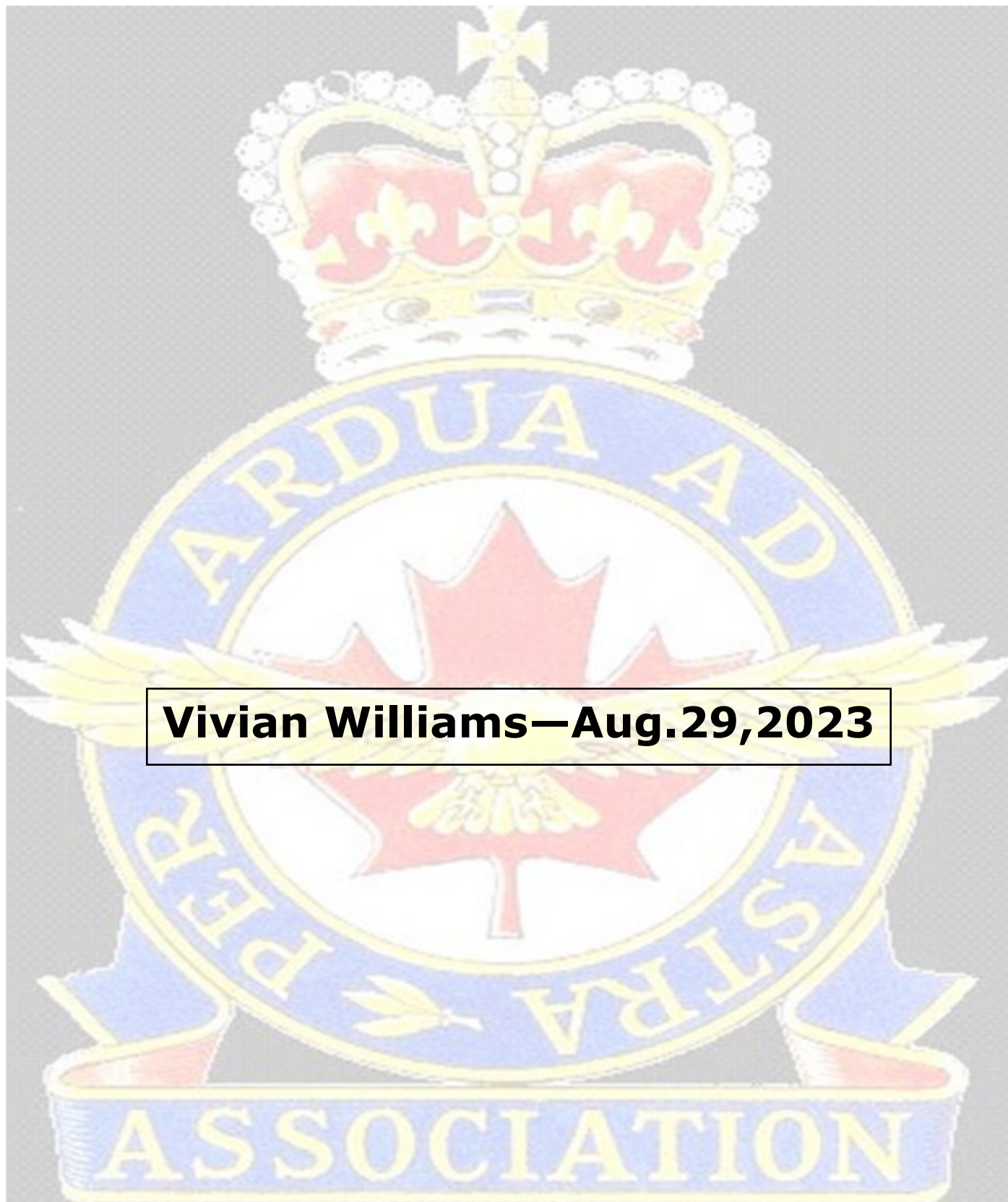
447 (City of Hamilton) Wing***Past Presidents***

Aiden Finn CD	(1983)
Gord Rowland	(1995—1998)
Judy Brown	(2000, 2008)
6 Presidents served during	(2003 & 2005)
Bill Grahlman CD	(2008-2017)
Jim Hooton CD	(2017-2019)



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Russ Newton	(1963,81,91)
Jim Robbins CD	(1964-65)
Carl Whaley CMCD	(1966)
Sterling McAllister CD	(1967)
Doug Thornewell	(1968)
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Bill Carey	(1970)
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Scott Lumsden	(1980)
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Harry VanZeben	(1997-99,2001-02)
Frank A. Begley	(2007)

IN MEMORIAM



Vivian Williams—Aug.29,2023



MISSION STATEMENT

The Royal Canadian Air Force Association of Canada is a national aerospace and community service organization to: commemorate the noble achievements of the men and women who have served as members of Canada's air forces since its inception; advocate for a proficient and well equipped air force; and support the Royal Canadian Air Cadet programme.