

WEEK OF REMEMBRANCE: ROY BORTHWICK, 87: AVIATOR AND BUSINESS MANAGER

Obituaries

RCAF bomber pilot destroyed the real bridge over the River Kwai; Skilled flier from Vancouver won the DFC for his part in a daring, long-range attack on a vital link in the 'death railway' the Japanese laid across Burma and Thailand

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VICTORIA -- **Roy Borthwick** piloted the bomber that destroyed a bridge known to movie-goers as the famous span in the movie *The Bridge On the River Kwai*. At the time of the 1945 attack, the Vancouver pilot and his crew had no idea their dangerous mission would one day become one of the more renowned incidents of the Second World War.

Mr. Borthwick, an RCAF flight lieutenant, was based with the Royal Air Force's No. 159 Squadron near Calcutta, India. Many Canadians served in the crews for the B-24 Liberators at the Allied base, and he had logged more than 2,000 hours flying time on a variety of missions. Many of these involved long round trips amounting to more than 4,800 kilometres, including a successful mine-laying operation off the coast of Malaysia.

An attack on shipping at Satahib Bay in what is now Thailand led to a risky assignment for the pilot. His unenviable task was to distract the defenders while other crews bombed and strafed vessels in the bay. Not only did he manage to draw fire from anti-aircraft artillery on the ground, he scored a direct hit on a 3,000-ton depot ship, which, set ablaze, soon sank.

Daring and brave though these escapades were, it would be his role in an attack on a bridge over a Thai river that would bring reporters and historians in search of his insights many years after the war.

On June 24, 1945, Mr. Borthwick piloted one of 11 bombers sent on an all-day mission to bomb the bridge at Kanchanaburi, a station on an important supply link known as the "Death Railway." The Japanese occupiers had compelled native workers and Allied prisoners of war to complete a Bangkok-to-Rangoon route through the jungle. Many thousands of these slave labourers died under appalling conditions and unspeakable torments.

Mr. Borthwick had developed a technique to avoid fire from the heavy machine-guns likely to be found at either end of a bridge, he told James Elliott of *The Hamilton Spectator* in 1998. "Instead of climbing up and away from the bridge after the bomb had gone, I would dive down and hug the ground, about 30 feet or so, have my nose gunner hose the area right in front of us for maybe three or four minutes, then climb up to 1,000 feet and come down again."

The pilot succeeded in making five passes along the river, each time dropping a 1,000-pound bomb. The bombs smacked into the muddy water before exploding 11 seconds later. One of them, likely the first, destroyed a span of the steel-and-concrete railway bridge.

Only many years later did the mission and, especially, the target become iconic in the popular imagination thanks to a novel written by a Frenchman. Pierre Boulle had been the overseer of a Malaysian rubber plantation when war broke out, after which he worked as a secret agent organizing resistance to the Japanese. He was captured by the Vichy French while trying to escape by floating along the Mekong River on a makeshift raft, and spent a year in prison.

After the war, he wrote several stories, novels and memoirs about his wartime escapades, the most famous being *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*, published in 1954. The movie, which had a slightly different title, was released three years later. Starring William Holden and Alec Guinness and directed by David Lean, it was a huge hit at the box office and won seven Oscars.

Mr. Borthwick was entertained by the movie, but somewhat disappointed in the retelling, his widow said

recently. The captivating story of PoWs building the bridge only to have it destroyed by Allied commandos was entirely fictitious.

While he emerged unscathed in the attack on the Kwai bridge, Mr. Borthwick had a close call after a low-level attack on another railway bridge near Three Pagoda Pass, south of Moulmein. He was pulling up after dropping his payload when one of the crew delivered an urgent message.

"Skipper, we've been hit in No. 3 [engine] and we've got black smoke pouring from it," the flight engineer reported.

The engine seized and burst into flame. Attempts to extinguish the blaze failed.

"Now, our only option was to ditch, and this is not good news," Mr. Borthwick wrote in a memoir published online by the British Columbia chapter of the Burma Star Association. "Very few Liberator ditchings were successful, as they had a tendency to break up badly when they hit the water. The soft bomb-bay doors would collapse, water hitting the aft bulkhead with such force it would break the back of the aircraft.

"Since we had no alternative and the fire was threatening to break into the wing, then to the gas tanks, we prepared for ditching. The rest of the crew moved onto the flight deck and [I was secured] to my seat and backrest with the Sutton harness so I wouldn't go through the instrument panel when we hit the water.

"When we were down to 50 feet above the water, I began easing off the throttles to just above stalling speed. At 20 feet, ready to cut the throttles, I saw out of the corner of my eye no flames."

The pilot rammed on more power. Low on the fuel, he decided to land on a small dirt strip on Akyab, a small island in the Bay of Bengal from which the Japanese had retreated. He landed the bomber with great skill, the nose of the plane coming to a stop against the jungle foliage at the far end of the runway. A British Army officer soon arrived by jeep with a present of a bottle of Scotch. Somehow, the bomber had missed several bomb craters left by a recent enemy attack.

Shortly after war's end, Mr. Borthwick was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for displaying "cool judgment, courage and great devotion to duty."

Roy McIntosh Borthwick's father was a Scottish émigré who opened a grocery in Vancouver with a man named Killick. Their B&K Economy Stores would grow to become a citywide chain. At Christmas, young Roy accompanied his father in delivering food hampers to needy families. He played on rugby and swim teams at Magee High School.

With an older brother in the navy, he decided to enlist in the Royal Canadian Air Force. He joined up in 1941 and, after undergoing initial training at Edmonton, he took his first flights at Lethbridge, Alta., before graduating to twin-engine Ansons at Fort McLeod, Alta. One of his instructors had been a Hollywood stunt pilot, teaching an eager pupil some tricks which he would find handy in evading enemy fire.

Keen to get overseas, the pilot instead spent another two years on Prince Edward Island before being returned to the West Coast to train on Liberators at Boundary Bay airport south of Vancouver. They were then ordered to travel to Montreal, where they would receive newly built Liberators to fly to North Africa and on to Asia. The planes, as it turned out, were not yet ready and he sailed instead by troop ship from Halifax to Greenock, and then from Southampton to Bombay.

After the war, he sought a pilot's job with Trans-Canada Airlines. Unfortunately, his application went astray and many other demobilized flyers had generated a lengthy queue by the time it was found. The opportunity had slipped away, so he instead became a marketing manager for the family's grocery stores.

By that time, he had started a family. In 1947, he had married June Turkington, whom he had known years before. Nicknamed Lari (pronounced Larry), she had picked up the moniker at boarding school (on Saturdays, the girls paired off at dances, the taller ones instructed to lead, a role for which they teasingly earned boy names). After the war, he was reunited with her and a romance was kindled on the North Shore ski slopes that overlook the city.

Mr. Borthwick later worked as a manager with a heavy-equipment company involved in major road-building projects commissioned by the province's Social Credit government.

He spent his 50th birthday on the Pacific as a deck hand aboard a yacht skippered by his friend John Dunfield in the biannual Victoria-to-Maui race.

Late in life, he returned to the pool as a competitive swimmer, joining his wife on a four-person team in which

the other two swimmers – one deaf, one blind – were in their 80s. The team established a record for oldest relay team, a standard owing more to the advanced age of the Borthwicks' teammates than to any particular speed in the pool. So slow was his quartet that officials tried to shoo him from the starting block, thinking he was preparing for an upcoming race. He informed them he was, in fact, responsible for swimming the anchor leg, at last entering the water long after all other teams had finished.

ROY BORTHWICK

Roy Borthwick was born on July 28, 1920, at Vancouver. He died on Oct. 15 at West Vancouver. He was 87. He leaves June, known as Lari, his wife of 60 years. He also leaves his sons Steve and Jim. He was predeceased by a sister and two brothers.

Illustration

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