

The Many “Shades” of Gray

-The Story of Two Members of the RCAF from Medicine Hat who during WWII Made the Ultimate Sacrifice for Love of Country

By William J. Anhorn K.C. ICD.D

“About the Author”

William J. Anhorn was born and raised in Medicine Hat, Alberta and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree (Political Science) from the University of Calgary and a Bachelor of Laws degree from the University of Alberta. He returned to his hometown of Medicine Hat in 1976 and practiced law for over 35 years as a senior partner with the Law firm of Pritchard and Company. He retired in 2012 and he and his wife Joan Elaine Anhorn (Medlicott), a retired teacher, continue to reside there. Always having a keen history in and more recently genealogy, he has researched and written numerous articles on various topics of interest including a series of articles on his own family and his extended family



(Medlicott/Mclvor) and their history.

His interest in history includes the history of Medicine Hat and has researched and written several articles on the history of his hometown. He currently is a member of the Medicine Hat Genealogical Society and the Medicine Hat Historical Society and Past Chairman of the Historical and Heritage Resource Management Committee of the Medicine Hat Exhibition and Stampede Company.

He is a frequent contributor to the Alberta Genealogical Society newsletter, *Relatively Speaking*

Introduction:

“History and Genealogy Often Intersect with Interesting Results”

I have always had a keen interest in history and more recently genealogy, and from time to time, I have researched and endeavored to document my family's history and my wife's family history, for what purpose, I was never exactly sure. I have always enjoyed researching and writing, which was a natural mainstay of my chosen profession. In my retirement, I continued with this passion for writing and have written several articles on history, genealogy and other topics that I found of interest. Of particular interest were stories relating to the history of Medicine Hat and some of its more interesting characters.

My passion for history, in particular, the history of WWI and WWII has been long standing and no doubt was inspired by my wife's family (Medlicott). Although none of my immediate family (Anhorn) was involved in either the First World or Second World Wars, both my wife's father (Norman) and her Grandfather and Great Uncle (Medlicott) participated in each



campaign.

Norman Medlicott was a young 18 year old when he volunteered and enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force in World War II. Although he left his home in Medicine Hat, where he was born, as a “boy”, he returned back to his hometown as a man having observed and experienced all the hardships and difficulties of war.

Norman Medlicott

His father, Thomas Medlicott was a part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force during WWI, being a member of the 175th battalion. This regiment was composed of young men from Medicine Hat and the surrounding area, who enthusiastically volunteered to join the war effort.

Her Uncle Edward Medicott was a member of the famed Calgary Highlanders.

My Grandfather on my mother's side, William John McIvor, after whom I was named, fought in WWI as a member of the 5th Scottish Rifles. My early recollections of my grandfather was his brogue Scottish



accent and that he had served gallantly in WWI and saw action overseas.

Subsequent research reveals that he had enlisted at age 18 in the British Army on the 26th of January 1917 (Reg. #41711). He was discharged from service in 1919 at age 21 and shortly thereafter, immigrated to Canada, residing in Medicine Hat for an extended period of time, before retiring and moving to Vancouver, B.C.

All of these extended family members returned from the First and Second World War safely, but not without their own “scars and wounds” both physically and mentally.

Others, unfortunately, were not so lucky and many Canadians paid the ultimate price for love of country.

Thomas Medicott (circa 1915)

In 2019, my wife and I traveled through France and Belgium and visited such historic WWI sites as the Canadian Memorial at Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele, Hill 60, Ypres and the infamous Menin Gate. Only in visiting such places and walking among the row upon row of white markers in the Canadian and British War cemeteries does one fully appreciate the full nature and extent of the carnage and the terrible loss of life that occurred when so many young men, having heeded the patriotic call, made the ultimate sacrifice.

The same holds true with the ravages of WWII, and the fact that so many Canadian lives were lost in defending Europe and the rest of the free world from the tyranny of the Third Reich and “fighting” for democracy and freedom.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)

- *“A Soldier of the Great War – Known Unto God.”*

Following World War I, the British government established the Imperial War Graves Commission in 1917 to care for the overseas graves of the Empire’s war dead. The new organization developed out of the British Army’s Graves Registration Commission, established in 1915, and in 1960 it was renamed the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC).

The British Empire including Canada chose to bury its battlefield dead from the First World War near the sites where they had fallen, and not to repatriate remains to their home countries, as many grieving families and politicians had demanded. While thousands of bodies had been buried in makeshift graves during the fighting, military units, assisted first by the Red Cross and later by official grave registrars, had made efforts to note temporary sites for future reburials. After battles, special grave detachments attempted to collect the unburied dead for proper burial, and to disinter remains from temporary graves for proper reburial elsewhere.

After the Armistice, this process began in earnest with the vastly expanded Imperial War Graves Commission moving remains into newly established imperial military cemeteries. The process involved tens of thousands of burials and took many years. It still continues today on a smaller scale as agricultural or construction work across old battlefields regularly uncovers additional human remains.



The CWGC imposed a sense of social equality in its cemeteries and made no rank distinctions in the physical construction of grave markers. Each simple white headstone carries the name, rank, and unit symbol of the deceased, and a religious symbol if the soldier's religion was known. The unknown dead carry an inscription chosen by British author Rudyard Kipling, who lost a son during the war:

"A Soldier of the Great War – Known Unto God."

No other personalized adornments were allowed other than the opportunity for next of kin to pay for a short motto to appear at the bottom of headstone.

The same procedure and methodology was adopted in dealing with war dead from World War II.

Unlike WWI however, many of the war dead from the Second World War, rather than being buried in massive commemorative cemeteries, were often interned in small local cemeteries in close proximity to where they died. Identifying and recording their "final" resting place was a daunting task.

Nonetheless, the CWGC have taken exhaustive steps to identify, record and preserve the identities and location or final resting place of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice in defense of freedom. This effort has resulted in the creation of an extensive database, with a treasure trove of information.



This is the story of two of those patriots from Medicine Hat and their story is a compelling reminder of the sacrifice that so many young men made, which sacrifice should be honored and never be forgotten.

Let me explain.

In the course of doing some research on another unrelated subject, I came across a picture of two RCAF airmen from WWII and the “picture” caught my attention, as the men depicted in the photo were identified as childhood friends from Medicine Hat. Both were purportedly crew members of a WWII bomber, which is pictured in the background.

These two airmen from Medicine Hat were identified as Kenneth MacGregor Gray and Allan John Middleton.

I was intrigued by the photo and “filed” the picture away with the idea that at some point, when I found the time, I would investigate further these men who called “Medicine Hat” their home and research and tell the story about the role they played during the Second World War as members of the Royal Canadian Air Force.(RCAF)

My “instincts” told me that there was a story to be told here which might form another interesting chapter in the history of Medicine Hat. Like many of my research projects and resulting articles, my passion for history and genealogy have often intersected with some very interesting and surprising results.

This was no exception!

Little did I know that their story would be an amazing story of courage and sacrifice, and one, which clearly should be documented and more importantly shared as part of the legacy of the place, I myself, call home-Medicine Hat.

But let’s start at the beginning.....

The Gray Family of Medicine Hat and Their Own Legacy

Kenneth MacGregor Gray was born on the 9th day of July 1914 at Vancouver B.C., the son of William Henry Gray (1886-1950) and Molly Adeline McGregor (1885-1962)

He had 8 siblings:

-William M (1917-1984)

-Walter (1926-2008)

-Robert (1920-1980)

-Richard J [“Dick”] (1920-1990)

-Edward [“Ted”] (1918-1981)

-Betty (1918-)

-Helen (1913-1995)

-Donald (1912-1986)

The patriarch of the family William Henry Gray was born in Ontario but he and his wife (“Molly”) following their marriage, resided in Vancouver B.C. where the first and second of their nine children were born. (Donald- 1912 and Kenneth-1914). The 1916 Canada census shows the family unit as having moved to Medicine Hat, residing firstly at 81 Fourth Street S.W. and later at 8 Aberdeen Street. It is here that the remaining children of the Gray family were born.

In the early thirties, William Gray, with that many young sons and in Walter Gretzky-like fashion, decided that an outdoor hockey rink would be a suitable project to keep his “boys” and their friends in the neighborhood occupied and to give them some wholesome activity, and no doubt, to help keep them out of trouble. With the assistance of A.P. Burns, who was the owner of a local lumber store called the Gas City Planing Mills, Mr. Gray along with the assistance of others in the local neighborhood community constructed a hockey rink measuring 192 feet long and 96 feet wide on four 50 foot vacant lots situated at east of 8 Aberdeen Street, in an area where the Gray family had now taken up residence.

The rink was lit by a string of 5 lights supported by tall telephone poles. A 5’ high fence was contracted round the sides of the rink and a 10’ high curved fence was built at either end. Large amplifiers were installed at the west end to “broadcast” music which was controlled from the Gray home. A heated office was built, along with heated change rooms for both boys and girls.

There were confirmed reports that on cold calm winter nights “music” from the rink could be heard across the entire city.

At least 5 organized hockey teams can claim to have been created and had their origins at the “Gray” rink, including the Safeway Midgets, the “Wolfpack” intermediate team, the juvenile Blue Bombers, and the precursor to the Medicine Hat Tiger Junior Hockey team, which was sponsored by the New Club Café (Chris Jeffries). Most if not all of the Gray boys were involved with these teams as either players or coaches.

During this period prior to the Second World War, many local athletes can claim to have had their NHL hockey careers started on the “Gray” rink including Joe Fisher and the infamous Dorohoy brothers.

One of the Gray boys, “Dick” Gray himself became an accomplished hockey player and coach and later was the player/coach of the Lethbridge Maple Leafs who won the World Hockey Championship in Europe in 1952.

With the advent of WWII, the rink was taken over by the City and later moved but the “impact” that this facility had in the early years as a convenient and popular attraction for “young people” in the Hat cannot be underestimated.

It is a part of the Gray Family legacy and an important part of the history of Medicine Hat but as you can well imagine there is more to this incredible story!

A Strange Twist of Fate....



Flight Lieutenant Kenneth MacGregor Gray

The start of the Second World War disrupted the plans of many young men who felt the compelling need to volunteer and join the war effort. For the Gray family from Medicine Hat, the contribution to the “defense of freedom” was unparalleled as 6 of the 7 sons of William and Molly Gray joined the services,

including Kenneth MacGregor Gray, who joined the Royal Canadian Air Force and became a pilot with the 405th Squadron.

Ken Gray attended Connaught School (1920-1928) and Alexander High School (1928-1932). He worked in Manitoba in a gold mining operation and then as a passenger agent for a commercial passenger airline-TWA before answering the “call” and joining the RCAF in January 1940 at age 26.



Flying Officer Allan John Middleton

Allan John Middleton was born on the 26th day of August 1921 at Medicine Hat, the son of Earnest and Maude Lillian Middleton. He attended Alexander Primary School and Toronto St. School and graduated from the Alexander High School in 1939. He became employed as bank clerk with the Royal Bank at Medicine Hat before taking a leave of absence and enlisting in the RCAF. The family resided at 444 Belfast Street. Prior to his deployment overseas with the 405th Squadron, Allan John Middleton married Enid Gwendolyn McCloghry of Toronto, Ontario.

Like many of life’s interesting twists, and whether by accident or design, Ken Gray and Allan Middleton became members of the same bomber crew during WWII and served gallantly overseas both as members of the RCAF 405th Squadron.

The “Fateful” Mannheim Mission

At 10:52 P.M. on the evening of August 9th, 1943, 457 bombers including aircraft of the 405th RCAF squadron left on a night raid over Mannheim, Germany. Many of the aircraft on this mission departed from “Gransden Lodge”.

Gransden Lodge Airfield was a WWII wartime airfield located 10.1 mi (16.3 km) west of Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, England and operated as part of the operational RAF Bomber Command from April 1942 until the end of the war.

The 405th RCAF Squadron which primarily flew the Handley Page Halifax Bomber (I, II & III) operated from Gransden Lodge from 1942 until the end of the war.

A Handley Page Halifax II Bomber identified as HR872 with markings LQ-K piloted by **Flight Lieutenant Kenneth MacGregor Gray** was among the many aircraft that left Gransden Lodge aerodrome on this fateful mission over Mannheim.



The flight crew included the following:

-Sgt. D. A. Black-RCAF

-F/S J. H. Evans-RCAF

-F/S J. Hanna-RCAF

-Sgt. H. King – Royal Air Force

-F/O Allan John Middleton-RCAF

-F/S C.W. Pickering-RCAF

The subsequent operational and bomb assessment report following this night time raid indicated that due to heavy cloud cover, the bombing of the target area was described as being “*scattered*” but much damage was inflicted on the “enemy” including 1316 buildings being destroyed or rendered useless and 42 industrial premises having “*suffered loss of production*”.

The operation was considered a major success with “*only 9 aircraft lost*” representing statistically a 2% attrition rate.

One of the aircraft lost on the Manheim Mission was the RCAF Halifax II Bomber identified as HR872 with markings LQ-K piloted by Flight Lieutenant Kenneth Gray.

The subsequent operational debriefing from other aircraft that participated in the raid indicated that the “Gray” bomber was shot down by a German night fighter and crashed in an area NW of St. Hubert, Belgium.

Initial reports indicated that the entire flight crew were “*missing in action*”.

This information was regrettably communicated to the family of Allan John Middleton and Kenneth MacGregor Gray.

One can only imagine the grief and sorrow and veiled "hope" that accompanied this notification with the words "missing in action" that was sent to the Middleton and Gray families in Medicine Hat and to the wife of Allan John Middleton. (Enid Middleton) who was residing in Toronto, Ontario.

8
24th August, 1943.

CAN/J14502/P4.Cas.

Dear Mrs. Middleton,

It is with deep regret that I must confirm the information which you have already received from Air Force Headquarters, Ottawa, which stated that your husband, Flying Officer Allan John Middleton, was reported missing as the result of air operations on the night of the 9th/10th August, 1943.

Your husband was a member of the crew of a Halifax aircraft, which took off at 10.52 p.m. on the night of the 9th August, for an attack on Mannheim, Germany, and failed to return. No information has since been received concerning him, however, enquiries are continuing through the International Red Cross Committee and other available sources, and I can assure you that any news which may be forthcoming will be communicated to you at once by Air Force Headquarters, Ottawa.

Please accept my deepest sympathy with you in your great anxiety.

Yours sincerely,
MILTON A. FOSS

(Milton A. Foss) Flight Lieutenant,
for Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief,
Royal Canadian Air Force, Overseas.

Mrs. A. J. Middleton,
228 St. George Street,
Toronto, Ontario,
C A N A D A.

BT.

FRENCH CANADIAN

OTHER

NEXT OF KIN AS SHOWN ON
REC. OF SERV. & RELATIONSHIP

MRS. ENID G. MIDDLETON, (WIFE)

ADDRESS

1111 BELFAST ST.

MEDICINE HAT, ALTA.

NAME
ADDRESS
D.A.B.

AGREES

*228 St George St
Toronto*

NEXT OF KIN AS SHOWN ON
CAS. SIG. & RELATIONSHIP

ADDRESS

FATHER'S NAME

ADDRESS

MR. & MRS. ERNEST MIDDLETON,

LIVING ON ENLISTMENT

YES

MOTHER'S NAME

ADDRESS

1111 BELFAST STREET
MEDICINE HAT, ALTA.

LIVING ON ENLISTMENT

YES

WAS MEMBER ATTACHED TO R.A.F. AT ANY TIME? YES

IF CASUALTY OCCURRED IN CANADA DID MEMBER HAVE SERVICE OUTSIDE CANADA DURING WAR WITH THE GERMAN REICH? YES/NO

IF ON LEAVE, STATE DATE LEAVE COMMENCED AND WHETHER ON LEAVE WITH OR WITHOUT PAY?

CASUALTY DETAILS:

AUTHORITY CAS. SIG. NO.

AIR MIN KMY-----POX836-----d-29-JAN-44.

NR103/31 JAN.

PREVIOUSLY REPORTED "MISSING" 10-AUG-43 AFTER AIR OPERATIONS (OVER SEAS)
(OVER MANNHEIM, GERMANY.)

NOW "PRESUMED DEAD" 10-AUG-43 FOR OFFICIAL PURPOSES.



Beyond that, little information was available as to the exact circumstances of the “crash”, and more importantly, the fate of the crew members. The official notification was that the airmen were “**missing in action**”, which was a rather disquieting description, which only created a great deal of angst and anguish to family and loved one’s back home, being obviously and completely uncertain as to their fate.

More unsettling was the subsequent revised notification- “**now presumed dead**”.

Staff Sergeant Richard “Dick” Gray, brother of Kenneth Gray was determined to find out more about the fate of the Halifax bomber and its crew and he launched his own investigation a year later while he himself was on active duty overseas.

The Investigation and Remarkable Conclusion

In a detailed letter to the RCAF Headquarters dated November 13th 1944, Sgt. Gray advised that he had received information from a reliable source that F/O Allan Middleton, a close family friend and member of his brother’s crew, had been buried in a local cemetery in Florennes, Belgium. Determined to discover more about the fate of his brother and other crew members of the Halifax bomber, he enlisted the services of a Belgian army officer who had family in the area and who was familiar with this part of Belgium and together, they traveled to this part of the country.

Upon visiting the local cemetery and making enquiries of the local citizenry another unusual twist of fate occurred. It was determined that a “cousin” of the Belgian army officer was well familiar with the “crash” of the Halifax bomber on August 10th 1943. He apparently was one of several local men who had immediately attended the scene before the arrival of the local German garrison. He was interviewed and he offered some startling information.

The Belgian advised that in the early morning hours on that date (August 10th, 1943) a RCAF bomber had crashed about 5 miles from Florennes near a town called “Awenne”. He indicated that it was typical that the Belgians in the vicinity would “rush” to the crash site as soon as possible, hoping to get there before the local German platoon arrived in order to lend or offer assistance to any survivors.

He and several others from the town arrived at the crash site and observed two parachutes on the ground but no trace of the servicemen. An effort was made to bury the parachutes before the arrival of the Germans to the scene.

Three bodies were found in the wreckage and were identified by the names, Middleton, Pickering and Hanna. All three bodies were recovered by the Germans and buried in the local Florennes Cemetery with the assistance of the local citizens. Two other gravesites were noted alongside the others but were unidentified but nonetheless were known as being members of the ill-fated Halifax bomber.

It was clear from this information that the “Gray” Halifax bomber was the aircraft that crashed near Florennes.

The immediate fate of the other crew members was unknown, including the two who had apparently successfully parachuted out of the aircraft. Sgt. Gray concluded that it was possible that one of the parachutists was his brother, Kenneth Gray and that he may have survived the crash and was either alive or regrettably, was possibly one of the unidentified men buried in the cemetery.

Seeking more information, Sgt. Gray attended the local Police Commissioner of Florennes who was responsible for maintaining local records of these types of incidents. The Commissioner confirmed and corroborated the earlier information provided by the Belgians who had attended the crash site but offered some further “stunning” details.

He reported that the German military officers in command of the area refused to provide information about the identity of the two airmen in the unmarked graves. He added that the Germans always “stripped” or removed any and all items of value from the “dead” including cigarette cases, rings and jewelry but typically offered up any identifying “dog tags” or other information that would confirm the name of the deceased airmen.

In this case, however, the local German commandant refused to provide this information but the Police Commissioner was able to get close enough to the bodies and their paraphernalia to be able to identify a nametag. He stated with a reasonable degree of certainty, that one of the names he was able to observe of one of the deceased men had the surname “Gray”.

The unusual reluctance to offer up information on the identity of the deceased men by the Germans was attributed to the circumstances giving rise to the death of the two airmen, who successfully parachuted out of the aircraft and survived the crash.

It was reported that the two airmen having parachuted safely “ran” into a nearby forest and were followed or chased by the local German garrison that had arrived on the scene shortly thereafter. The servicemen who were pursued into the woods had a “running” gun battle with the German detachment. Eight German soldiers were killed before the two airmen themselves were killed. The reluctance to provide any “identification” by the Germans officers was attributed to the fact that the two airmen, having resisted capture and having put up a valiant fight, had “*caused the death of eight of their German soldiers*”.

Sgt. Gray based on this information was confident that one of the ‘fighters’ was his brother, Kenneth MacGregor Gray of Medicine Hat, who rather than surrendering and being captured, fought to his death, alongside one of his fellow crew



members!

The Aftermath

At the request of Sgt. Dick Gray and based upon his own investigation, the RCAF carried out further efforts to determine the names and precise identities of the deceased airmen and the exact location of their internment. The RCAF investigation confirmed that on August 10th, 1943 the Halifax bomber piloted by Kenneth MacGregor Gray was shot down over Awenne, Belgium. Witnesses from Awenne, and the nearby towns of Arville and Ninwart reported that the Germans attended the crash site with 7 coffins and picked up the bodies of several airmen, who were all badly mutilated.

After they left the scene, locals from the area further examined the crash site and discovered two other bodies and that one body was buried in the local Awenne cemetery and the other in the local Arville cemetery. German war records and local burial records confirmed that the two burial sites belonged to two crew members of the Halifax bomber and that the other remaining crew members were all buried in the Florennes Cemetery.

All of the gravesites were exhumed but it was impossible to make a positive identification and the result was that the remains of the airmen in the Awenne and Arville cemeteries were collectively interned with the other airmen in the Florennes cemetery.

The identities and location of the gravesites noted for the archives and database of the CWGC are as follows:

Florennes Communal Cemetery, Florennes/ Belgium

Gravesite no. 60-J. Hanna

Gravesite no. 61- C.W. Pickering

Gravesite no. 62- A. J. Middleton

Gravesite no. 63, 64 & 65- K.M. Gray, H. King* & D. Black*

Gravesite no. 66-J.H. Evans

(*respectively and collectively interned from the Awenne and Arville cemetery)

It was only through the efforts of Sgt. Dick Gray of Medicine Hat that this information was uncovered and the location of the gravesites of these brave men were identified and preserved for antiquity.

In conclusion, the Chief of Air Staff of the RCAF acknowledged the effort of Sgt. Dick Gray in investigating and bring some closure to the “fate” of the men of the Halifax II Bomber identified as HR872 with markings LQ-K piloted by Flight Lieutenant Kenneth MacGregor Gray and offered the following to the Gray and Middleton families:

“I sincerely hope that you find some consolation in the fact that your son risked his life willingly in the defense of freedom. What we owe to him is beyond estimation. May you be fortified by the spirit of courage and hope which enabled him to discharge his duties whatever the cost.”

The Moral Tragedy of War

The simple story of the valor and courage of the crew of the Halifax bomber is not unlike thousands of other stories of other pilots and crew members who made the ultimate sacrifice over the skies of Europe during WWII.

But more importantly, this simple story of two boyhood friends from Medicine Hat, humanizes this deadly conflict and puts in greater perspective the human cost of war, by identifying someone who was a real person, who like all of us had hopes, dreams and



aspirations.

These “dreams” were dashed in a tragic few seconds,
and for the family and those loved ones that were left behind, began the “start” of a real life tragedy, one
that was repeated a thousand times over throughout our country.

This is the unforgettable moral tragedy of war and is yet another interesting chapter in the history of
Medicine Hat.

LEST WE FORGET!

William J Anhorn K.C. ICD.D