

A REMEMBRANCE DAY CHRONICLE -THE FRANCES WALSH STORY

The following article was published by the CBC on Remembrance Day 2018. It ties together the heroic efforts of Frances Walsh, a teacher at a one-room school near Calgary, with LAC Karl Gravel and F/O James Robinson, two airmen from 2 Wireless School in Calgary, and Daniel Fitzgerald, a young air cadet from Canmore. The museum is pleased to display the 'George Cross' medal that was presented to Frances Walsh.

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'I dragged him away from the fire': Homefront heroism and a tragic crash by a prairie school

The sputtering of the biplane's engine was the first sign of trouble as it roared low past a schoolhouse



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The memorial of the 1941 air training accident near Big Spring School. ((Dave Gilson))

The sputtering of the biplane's engine was the first sign of trouble as it roared low past a one-room schoolhouse in the Prairies that morning in 1941.

Moments later, the Royal Canadian Air Force flight smashed to the ground with an explosion that rattled classroom windows.

The teacher and some of her students sprinted hundreds of metres to the crash site in a gully. There, they found a young crew member — uniform ablaze and missing an eye — trying to climb back into the flaming wreckage.



Teacher Frances Walsh, who pulled Gravell from the flames, was awarded the George Medal for her bravery. (Bomber Command Museum of Canada)

"His clothing was on fire and, after proceeding away from the aircraft, he turned back to it," the teacher, Frances Walsh, later told the military in a witness statement.

"He hadn't quite arrived back at the aircraft when I reached him, and then I dragged him away from the fire and rolled him on the ground to extinguish the flames from his clothing."

Despite heroic efforts, both the 19-year-old trainee, Leading Aircraftman Karl Gravell, and the 44-year-old pilot, Flying Officer James Robinson, died that November day. Walsh, who was 29, suffered burns to her face, arms and hands.



Fly-.Off. James Robinson.
Jasper. Alta.

Flying Officer James Robinson was an Alberta lawyer and First World War veteran who returned to duty as a flight instructor. He died instantly in the crash. (Submitted)

The crash at the Big Springs School, north of Calgary, is just one of countless Canadian stories about sacrifice and bravery during wartime. It's also a reminder that many played out on the home front, thousands of kilometres from combat zones.

Hundreds died in training accidents

Their deaths were far from the only ones as more than 130,000 people took part in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan during the Second World War.

More than 1,400 air crew died in training-related accidents across the country, the Bomber Command Museum of Canada estimates.

The dead include Canadians, Britons, Australians and New Zealanders.

At least 80 were training at Calgary flight schools.

"It was just that it was such a huge effort that there [were] bound to be a lot of guys killed," said Dave Birrell, director of the museum in Nanton, Alta.

"A lot didn't even make it overseas but were killed in places like flying over Calgary and in places like a schoolyard."

'Did I get Jimmy out?'

Investigators believe Robinson died instantly in the crash at Big Springs School. A First World War veteran, Robinson had returned to his home town of Jasper, Alta., to settle down, raise a family and practise law.

When the Second World War rolled around, he returned to duty and was praised by fellow fliers for his skills and dedication as an instructor.

Gravell was born in Sweden and had moved to Canada with his parents in 1937, settling in Vancouver.



Leading Aircraftman Karl Gravell was posthumously awarded the George Cross for bravery after his training aircraft crashed near Big Springs School north of Calgary in 1941. (DND Archives)

He joined the air force in March 1941, just eight months before the crash. He was posted to No. 2 Wireless School in Calgary, where he trained as a wireless operator and air gunner.

Despite losing one of his eyes when the plane plowed into the ground, he still struggled to try to reach Robinson.

As the teacher pulled him back by his parachute harness, Gravell was slipping into shock, at one point asking: "Did I get Jimmy out?"



The Menasco Moth biplane was completely destroyed in the crash, as shown in these photos taken by investigators in 1941. (Library and Archives Canada)

While one student sped off on his bike for help, others fashioned a makeshift stretcher for Gravel out of a schoolhouse door.

Once help arrived he was rushed to the Col. Belcher Hospital in Calgary.

He died later that day.

A doctor told an inquiry that Gravel might have survived had he not raced back into the flames. He was posthumously awarded the George Cross for his heroism.

Investigators couldn't determine the cause of the crash but suggested the type of airplane, a Menasco Moth, had been underpowered, overweight and likely ill-suited for its training job.

Cadet's mission turned memorial

Loved ones mourned, the war effort moved on and the details of this tragedy seemed destined for obscurity within government files.

Then, more than five decades later, a 15-year-old Alberta boy rediscovered the story and gave it new life.

Daniel Fitzgerald was an air cadet in 1995 when he spearheaded a year-long effort — with the help of family, friends and fellow cadets — to erect a cairn near the crash scene in the Prairies between Cochrane and Airdrie.



Air Cadet Daniel Fitzgerald, shown at age 15 in 1995, stands in front of the cairn he led efforts to create at the site of the 1941 training accident. (Daniel Fitzgerald)

What started as a volunteer community service project soon turned into a passion. Fitzgerald still gets emotional about it nearly a quarter-century later.

He felt a bond with Gravell that grew deeper after meeting the young airman's elderly mother.

"It made it very real seeing how hard it was for her and everything she went through."

Teacher felt she didn't deserve medal

Alongside the two airmen on that memorial is a photo of Walsh — who became the first Canadian woman to be awarded one of the Commonwealth's highest awards for non-combat bravery, the George Medal.

She downplayed the decoration in a letter to Gravell's mother.

"I am very honoured at receiving the George Medal, but I feel that I do not really deserve it. If only I had been able to have helped your son enough to have saved his life."



Sandy Robinson and Lisa Gravell, two relatives of the men who died in the crash, pay tribute with Daniel Fitzgerald, left, at the unveiling of the memorial. (Daniel Fitzgerald)

Today, Walsh's niece, Maureen Poucher, says she was never really surprised that the "colourful" aunt who came to live with her family in B.C. would have raced into the heart of a crisis to help.

"She wouldn't have hesitated to do anything like that. She was quite the lady."

A terrible twist of fate

Poucher says Walsh's wartime efforts included working shifts in a munition factory in eastern Canada during a summer break.

But tragedy and a terrible twist loomed ahead for the teacher. In 1955, Walsh's 18-year-old son, who had joined the air force, was killed in a flight-training accident in Manitoba.

It crushed Walsh, who died six years later of complications related to cancer, her niece said.

Back at the former crash site, the schoolhouse is gone, but the memorial remains. Fitzgerald occasionally visits and ponders its legacy.

"We just wanted to try to tell something that was a little bit different, that people may not consider in their daily lives, about the costs of war closer to home."