

Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray, VC, DSC, O-29020



Source: Nelson Museum, Nelson, BC

Lieutenant Robert Hampton (Hammy) Gray. Photo Nelson Museum and Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Trail BC, 2 November 1917**
- **Enlisted: Calgary Division RCNVR, 18 July 1940**
- **Civilian Occupation: Student**
- **Death: Killed in action with 1844 Squadron (HMS *Formidable*) on 9 August 1945**
- **Honours: Victoria Cross, Distinguished Service Cross, Mention in Despatches**
- **Commemorated: HALIFAX MEMORIAL, Panel 13; A statue of his bust is located at the Valiants Memorial, Ottawa, ON; Grays Peak in Kokanee Glacier Provincial Park in BC is named in honour of Jack and Hampton Gray; and many memorials across Canada**

The recipient of the last Victoria Cross awarded to a Canadian during WWII and the only VC awarded to a member of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve during the Second World War, Lieutenant Gray's wartime service has been well documented. Born on 2 November 1917 in Trail, BC, to John Balfour Gray (a Scots, presbyterian immigrant and Boer War veteran) and his wife Wilhelmina of Nelson, BC, "Hammy" as he was known, spent his youth in Nelson, BC where the family had moved, with his older sister Phyllis and younger brother John "Jack" (lost on 27 February 1942 while serving in the RCAF). He was a popular, gregarious youth with a fun-loving nature and an engaging sense of humour. With cherubic facial features and a stocky build, he took ribbing from his friends on his appearance with his characteristic aplomb and lack of personal vanity. He worked at the local Sheep Creek mine in his senior high school years and during his first years at university, having enrolled in 1936 at the University of Alberta at Edmonton.

In 1940 he was in the pre-med program at the University of British Columbia having decided to pursue a career in medicine. At UBC, he was active in campus life. He worked as an editorial staff member of the university newspaper *The Totem* in the company of Pierre Berton - who would achieve post-war literary fame. Hammy's efforts on staff at the newspaper were recognized with his appointment as editor-in-chief for 1941. While at UBC, he supported the Student Peace

Movement; he shared with many young Canadians at that time the feeling that the conflict in Europe did not directly threaten Canada and, with memories of the First World War's legacy, determined not to get involved in the conflict. A personal perspective that would change, as with many of his fellow youthful Canadians, as the dire consequences of the war made apparent the threat posed to the Canadian way of life.

He never fulfilled the editorial role offered as he decided at the close of the 1940 university term to enlist in the RCNVR and with his two longtime friends, Jack Diamond and Peter Dewdney, as they drove in his father's borrowed car to Calgary with the intent of joining at the Calgary Division RCNVR (later known as HMCS *Tecumseh*) having heard of a special program for selected Canadian volunteer ratings to enroll for service as potential officer candidates on loan with the Royal Navy.

Hammy and friends joined a contingent of 150 Canadians from universities nationwide for training in the United Kingdom at HMS *Raleigh* in Cornwall. They became known as the "*Canadian Raleighites*,".



From Left to Right: Robert Hampton (Hammy), mother Wilhelmina Gray, and John Balfour (Jack) Gray; 1940. Flight Sgt Jack Gray died in 1942 during an air bomber crash. He was 20 years old.

Photo: Canadianletters.ca

They achieved an enviable record of war service as a group. Having enrolled in the RCNVR on 18 July 1940, Hammy took passage from Montreal with a group of the new *Raleighites* aboard the *Duchess of Richmond* for an England still fighting for survival during the Battle of Britain on 10 September 1940. Thus began his wartime service with the RN, and after a lengthy, somewhat dispiriting training period, he took the opportunity offered to join the rapidly expanding RN Fleet Air Arm (FAA) with some twenty fellow Canadians. The RN carrier force was growing quickly in meeting the demands of naval airpower during the Second World War. British carriers featured armoured flight decks that proved a vital development for RN carrier operations in the Mediterranean and later Pacific campaigns under severe air threats. The names of the ships *Victorious*, *Illustrious* and *Formidable* would be etched in history, with the latter ship of particular significance for Hampton Gray.

Hammy was drafted to HMS *St. Vincent* at Gosport in January 1941 to commence basic seamanship and preparatory flight training on the 23rd Pilots Course. He was then posted to No. 24 Elementary Flying Training School in Luton in March 1941, followed by a placement in June at No. 31 Service Flying Training School located at RCAF Station Kingston, Ontario. This was one of the training facilities in Canada, the US and the UK where Fleet Air Arm trainees were sent after they completed elementary flight training. During this posting, Hammy had the opportunity for Leave, and he visited Nelson. He completed his flight training in September 1941, earning a promotion to Sub-Lieutenant (temp) in the FAA. After taking another break in Nelson, he returned to the UK.

While awaiting transport in Halifax, Hammy saw the wartime movie *Target for Tonight* about RAF Bomber Command that featured his brother Jack an RCAF Air Gunner in the semi-documentary

feature. That November, he arrived at HMS *Heron* in Yeovilton, the Royal Naval Air Station (RNAS), where operational flying training was conducted in Hurricane fighter aircraft being introduced into service with the FAA. While there, he had the opportunity to meet with Jack before he was killed in a crash as his bomber was returning to its base in Doncaster from a mission. Hammy's cousin, Tom Gray, had previously been shot down while serving in the FAA during the 1940 Norwegian Campaign and was a POW.

Upon completing his operational flying training toward the end of February 1942, Hammy was posted to HMS *Kestrel* at Worthy Down, near Winchester, flying Skua aircraft with 757 Squadron in training roles.

In May 1942, Gray was sent overseas to serve in the African theatre of operations. He spent two years flying missions in this theatre with service in 789, 795, 803 and 877 squadrons located in Simonstown, South Africa, Kilindini, Kenya, Tanga, Tanganyika (now known as Tanzania) and a primitive airfield in East Africa, where he was bitten by a scorpion. There are three notable events from this period:

- In late August 1942, Hammy learned that his friend Jack Diamond, with whom he had joined the RCNVR in Calgary, was killed when the Fairey Albacore he was flying crashed during a sortie over the North Sea.
- On 7 December 1942, the first anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack, Hammy was finally able to serve at sea with his squadron aboard HMS *Illustrious* for two months,
- On 31 December 1942, he was promoted to Lieutenant.

With his new rank came responsibilities as a senior pilot and second-in-command. He enjoyed flying the Sea Hurricane, and his squadron duties kept him busy. Still, the news of friends from his training days lost on operations was a constant reminder of the human cost of the war being exacted on the FAA. He developed his leadership and flying skills and earned the loyalty of his fellow pilots with his easygoing manner.

Overall, Hammy found his African service monotonous and lacking operational flying challenges far from the critical theatres of operations. Frequent periods of short leave exploring the African hinterland and the cities of Nairobi and Mombasa alleviated some of the ennui of this posting.

Lieutenant Gray's concern with missing out on meaningful wartime service was alleviated with a posting back to England in early February 1944, followed by a ten-week leave period before his next operational posting. He hoped he would now have the opportunity to serve in an active theatre of operations. During his home leave in Nelson, he expressed his dissatisfaction with his record of service to that point to his longtime friend Jim Allan. When Hammy began his leave, a new FAA squadron - No.1841 - was formed-up in Brunswick, Maine. This squadron was equipped with the Chance Vought Corsair, and Hammy would fly this aircraft in his next phase of



operational service. Upon his return to the UK, he would complete his conversion training to this type with 748 Squadron in HMS *Heron* at Yeovilton, UK.



**Corsairs and Barracudas ranged on HMS Formidable's flight deck. 17 July 1944, Kåfjord, Norway.
Photo: Imperial War Museums**

On 6 August 1944, Lieutenant Gray reported aboard HMS *Formidable* as a senior pilot replacement for the 1841 Squadron – he was finally where he had wanted to be since joining in 1940: serving in an operational carrier squadron on active combat duty. He did not have long to wait for his first combat experience as *Formidable* had already been heavily engaged in the FAA effort against the threat posed by the German battleship *Tirpitz* from its heavily defended lair on the Norwegian coast in Kaafjord.

On 24 August, as part of *Operation Goodwood*, which involved a heavy RN force centred around three carriers, Hammy led a flight of Corsairs in support of an attack on the battleship by a force of FAA Barracuda bombers. The Corsairs strafed anti-aircraft batteries defending the ship from the shores of the narrow fjord. During a second attack on 29 August, Hammy led the Corsairs in a very low-level strafing attack against heavy fire from three German *Narvik* class destroyers in the fjord. His aircraft was hit, and most of the rudder was blown away by a 40mm shell. Hammy was able to return to the carrier and orbited for forty-five minutes to allow other damaged aircraft to land before he brought his Corsair down on the deck. He was awarded a Mention in Despatches for these actions worded:

“For undaunted courage, skill and determination in carrying out daring attacks on the German battleship Tirpitz.”

He had quickly established a reputation for aggressiveness and willingness to engage his targets at very close range in his attacks in disregard to enemy fire that was belied by his self-effacing, easygoing character when not in the cockpit. He readily won the respect and camaraderie of his squadron mates as an integrated part of the team, even as a newcomer to the experienced group of flyers during his combat flying initiation.

When HMS *Formidable* returned from the *Tirpitz* operation, it was readied for deployment to the Pacific as part of the British Pacific Fleet (BPF) operations in collaboration with the US Pacific Fleet. This operation aimed to close in on the Japanese homeland islands. The air group underwent a lengthy period of intense combat effectiveness training, which unfortunately resulted in three pilot fatalities due to accidents. The ship also underwent repairs and maintenance on its way to the Pacific theatre. After a long voyage, *Formidable* finally docked at Sydney Harbour in Australia on 10 March 1945.

On arrival in Sydney, Hammy received news of the loss of another Canadian friend, Bud Sutton, killed in an airstrike in January from HMS *Illustrious* against the Japanese airfield at Palembang,

Sumatra, when his Corsair was hit by ground fire and crashed in flames into a hangar full of Japanese planes.

Formidable sailed with the Canadian cruiser HMCS *Uganda* from Sydney to meet the BPF at Leyte in the Philippines on April 4th. They joined HMS *Indomitable* and HMS *Indefatigable* on April 14th in the fleet operational area, replacing the battle-scarred HMS *Illustrious*. *Illustrious* had been hit by a Kamikaze that left her with a blackened island, damaged machinery, and the crew and air group fatigued after months of continuous combat operations.

The BPF, consisting of the carriers *Victorious* and *Implacable*, along with battleships, cruisers, and destroyers, was a significant and battle-experienced part of the United States Navy (USN) Task Force 57. During operations in late 1944, the American allies did not fully appreciate an important construction feature of RN ships. However, the benefits of the three-inch armoured decks on British carriers, despite carrying a smaller air group than their US counterparts, were evident during the Kamikaze threat faced by allied naval forces approaching Japan. RN carriers sustained Kamikaze hits with limited damage and interruptions to their flight operations. In contrast, USN carriers with wooden flight decks over light steel would typically be out of action for months in similar situations.

The survivability and battle damage resiliency of their carriers was a significant advantage for the British in Japanese home waters. Thanks to this feature, their crews were spared the devastating losses experienced by US carriers during Kamikaze attacks. For example, in operations supporting the invasion of Japanese-held Okinawa in March 1945, four US fleet carriers were knocked out of action with heavy loss by the suicidal Kamikaze attacks. The USS *Franklin* suffered severe damage, resulting in 724 killed and 265 wounded crew members. The ship managed to reach the United States mainland because of heroic efforts in damage control.

On 16 April 1945, HMS *Formidable* commenced its participation in Operation *Iceberg* – the BPF's



efforts to interdict the air reinforcement of Kamikaze operations from Japanese-held Formosa against the USN off Okinawa. This operation involved carrier air strikes against supporting airfields in the Sakishima Gunto islands situated between Formosa (now Taiwan) and Okinawa. Lieutenant Gray led a flight of Corsairs from *Formidable* in the initial ground attacks against targets of opportunity at Ishigaki and Miyako airfields suppressing anti-aircraft fire at those fields and strafing aircraft on the ground. This was perilous combat, and the loss of pilots shot down and damaged aircraft mounted. These operations turned into a lengthy air campaign that required multiple return strikes to airfields that were constantly repaired overnight by the

Japanese in their desperate efforts to continue to flow Kamikaze aircraft to the battle in Okinawa. The BPF was ultimately successful in its interdiction mission, but at a considerable cost in aircrew lost and aircraft destroyed or damaged. Kamikazes struck the *Formidable* itself in May on two occasions. The carrier sustained damage and casualties but again proved the armoured flight deck's resilience. The ship was also seriously damaged and threatened by an accidental hangar

fire, all to the effect that the ship departed the operational area for Sydney on 22 May 1945 for urgent maintenance, repair and replacement of aircraft and personnel.

The British Fleet, with three carriers of the 1st Carrier Squadron - *Victorious*, *Implacable* and *Formidable* (*Indomitable* and *Indefatigable* undergoing refit and repairs), sailed from Sydney again on 28 June with the addition of the harder-hitting power of 40mm Bofors guns to replace the 20mm Oerlikons where possible – a lesson learned from the suicide Kamikaze attacks the carriers had endured during Operation *Iceberg*.



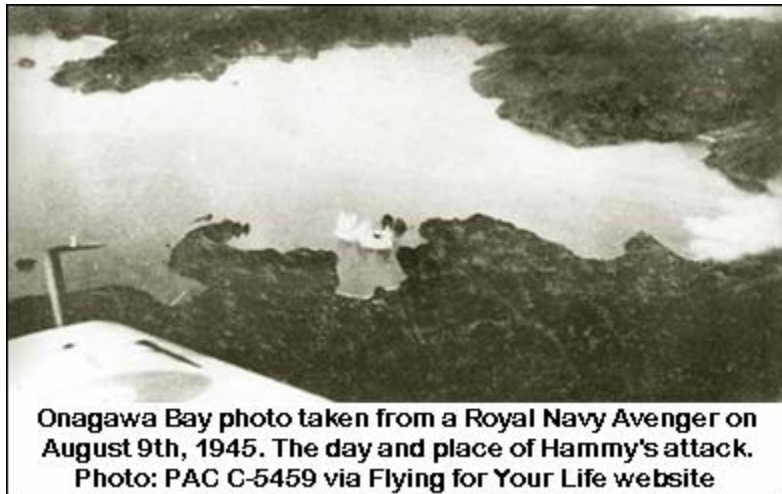
This sortie was to set the scene for the finale of the Pacific War and, tragically, Lieutenant Gray's own life. The BPF - designated as Task Force 37 (TF37) - joined the USN Third Fleet under the command of Admiral "Bull" Halsey, known for his aggressive style of command. It was clear that the war was to be taken to the Japanese Home Islands with strikes on enemy naval and air forces, shipping, port facilities and airfields in preparation for the planned invasion of Japan to end the war. In keeping with this objective, this overwhelming allied naval force steamed to the waters off the Japanese coast - east-by-northeast of Tokyo - within a carrier strike range of 130 miles by 17 July.

Serving in the TF 37 were over 30 Canadian FAA pilots, including Hammy, who would be engaged in this final stage of the Second World War. Lieutenant Asbridge would be the first of these Canadian flyers to fall in a low-level strafing attack against an airfield in the Tokyo area. The intensity of these flight operations grew as numerous "ramrod" fighter-bomber sweeps were conducted against targets in the Shikoku Island area and southern Honshu by *Formidable's* Corsairs against determined and accurate anti-aircraft fire. Throughout this period, Hammy was extremely busy with his squadron duties while leading sortie after sortie in the dangerous low-level, flying against heavy ground fire. He won the admiration of many for his imperturbable and unruffled demeanour to the stresses of his shipboard role and his daring and fearlessness in the cockpit. He attacked and sank a Japanese destroyer furthering his reputation for proficiency in attacking naval shipping. This led to his recommendation for the Distinguished Service Cross on 31 August with the citation that read:

"For determination and address in air attacks on targets in Japan, on the 18th, 24th and 28th July 1945".

On 6 August, the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima - the end of the war was now only days away and weather conditions from the 6th curtailed flying operations from *Formidable* until the 8th of August.

By the morning of 9 August, it was widely understood that Japanese resistance could cease at any moment. The RN Captain Ruck-Keene, commanding *Formidable*, was aware of this and passed on to squadron commanders that unnecessary risks were to be avoided in air operations that day – even as they were required to continue. All pilots were briefed on this direction and were only to conduct a single low-level attack on a target to reduce the risk. That day three Ramrod missions were scheduled against the threat of Kamikaze aircraft on airfields in Honshu and shipping in bays along the coast, with Hammy leading a flight of eight Corsairs in the second sortie.



Just before launching, Hammy was advised that the primary target had been changed from the airfields to shipping, based on a report that reconnaissance aircraft had sighted a coastal convoy in the Onagawa Bay area. During the flight southwest from where they crossed the coastline, the eight-plane formation led by Hammy passed by the seaway side of Onagawa Bay. He observed the shipping in the bay and noted over the radio to his wingman that there appeared to

be destroyers in the anchorage. The flight then investigated the airfield in the Matsushima Bay vicinity further southwest. Previous air strikes had hit the airfield, and the Corsairs confirmed that there was little left to attack there.

After completing his orbit of the area, Hammy headed back inland in a northward loop, intending to attack the Onagawa anchorage from the landward side. He planned to use the topography as a cover to enhance the element of surprise in the attack on the shipping there. He executed a diving attack strategy, descending from 10,000 feet over the steep hills of the valley leading to the Bay and ultimately flying at a low altitude above the sea for a final bombing and strafing run towards the anchored ships.

Although as this was the best tactical choice, the Japanese anti-aircraft gunners on the ships and surrounding the bay fully expected an attack from this direction. As soon as Hammy, in the lead aircraft, flew over the terrain and water, they aimed intense anti-aircraft fire at his plane. Smoke from the Corsair indicated hits almost immediately, and the aircraft lost one of the two 500lb bombs carried under its wing. Lieutenant Gray continued the attack run at fifty feet even as flames appeared on the underside of the engine. He released his remaining bomb at close range, passing very low over his target - the destroyer escort IJN *Amakusa*.

The bomb hit the ship on its port side and reached the engine room before it detonated; this caused a secondary explosion in a nearby magazine that blew out a significant portion of the ship's starboard side.

Amakusa immediately began to list to starboard and, within minutes, capsized and sank with the loss of seventy-one of its crew. As Hammy's aircraft flew on past the sinking ship, it was suddenly engulfed in flame and jinked to the right, rolling and crashing inverted into the sea in an explosion of spray and debris that was witnessed by Sub-Lieutenant Storheill, his Norwegian wingman, who had been flying close abreast of his leader.



Donald Connolly, Finale, picturing the action in Onagawa Bay, Japan, 9 August 1945, from which Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray, VC, DSC, was posthumously awarded the RCN's only Victoria Cross.
Source: Canada War Museum website

Over the radio, the exclamation: "There goes Gray" was heard at the crash. The seven-remaining aircraft, most bearing damage from anti-aircraft hits during their bombing and strafing run, gathered in their post-attack position formation circuiting out over the entrance to the bay with their pilots feeling anger and shock at the sudden loss of their leader. Despite the warnings during the pre-flight briefings against making multiple attack runs, they returned to the anchorage two more times. They dropped the remaining bombs and strafed the ships, leaving the bay filled with smoking wrecks. After completing these additional runs, they returned to *Formidable*.

Later that morning, a final Ramrod attack was carried out to destroy any remaining shipping targets in the bay and surrounding airfields. Tragically, Lieutenant Anderson's Corsair crashed while returning to the carrier. His engine had failed due to a damaged fuel tank, causing him to run out of fuel just as he was about to land on the deck. He was the last Canadian to die from enemy action in the Second World War.

As *Formidable* was preparing to launch this last attack of the day at 1202, Pacific Fleet Time, an American B-29 bomber dropped a second atomic bomb on the city of Nagasaki. On 10 August 1945, a Japanese announcement declared Japan's willingness to enter into negotiations to end the conflict. The war was over. At 1300 hrs on 12 August 1945, *Formidable* set a course to return to Sydney, leaving the operational area.

On the return to Sydney, Admiral Vian, commanding the BPF, convened a meeting with Captain Ruck-Keene of *Formidable* and Lieutenant Gray's squadron Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Commander Bigg-Wither. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss an appropriate recommendation for a gallantry award in recognition of Lieutenant Gray's actions at Onagawa Bay. The consensus was that the most appropriate recommendation would be to award the Victoria Cross. The recommendation was accepted, and on 13 November 1945, it was announced that the King had been graciously pleased to approve the award of the Victoria Cross to Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray. The citation reads:

"For great valour in leading an attack on a Japanese destroyer in Onagawa Bay on 9th August 1945. In the face of fire from shore batteries and a heavy

concentration of fire from some five warships, Lieutenant Gray pressed home his attack, flying very low in order to ensure success. Although he was hit and his aircraft was in flames, he obtained at least one direct hit, sinking the destroyer. Lieutenant Gray constantly showed a brilliant fighting spirit and most inspiring leadership."

Hammy's Victoria Cross represented recognition of not just his valour but that of so many others of his fellow Canadian FAA aircrew who served and were lost. The likes of his friends Jack Diamond, Bud Sutton and many others from his training class and squadron mates.

In addition to his three gallantry awards, for his service, Hammy Gray was awarded the following campaign medals, the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Africa Star, the Pacific Star, the Defence Medal, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with clasp and the War Medal.

His mother, Wilhelmina (Mina) Gray, was awarded the Silver Cross. In 1969, Mina Gray was named the National Silver Cross mother. During the national Remembrance Day ceremony in Ottawa on November 11, 1969, Mina laid a wreath at the base of the National War Memorial on behalf of all mothers who have lost a child in military service to Canada.

For the Gray family in Nelson, BC, the awarding of medals and awards could never replace the loss of two sons. Her sons hold the unwanted titles of being the first Nelson, BC serviceman (Jack) and the last Nelson, BC serviceman (Hammy) to die during the Second World War.

Postscript: Hammy's remains have never been recovered, but in 1989, local residents erected



a memorial to Lieutenant Gray's valour at a site overlooking Onagawa Bay. It is the only memorial erected to a former enemy on Japanese soil. The 2011 earthquake destroyed the memorial. It was replaced and rededicated in 2012 and serves as a symbol of reconciliation between the Japanese and Canadian nations.

Other memorials, public locations, and facilities have been dedicated to Lieutenant Gray in the intervening years since he died in 1945 at the age of 28; these include the following:

- The Halifax Memorial on Panel 13.
- A statue of his bust is located at the Valiants Memorial National Cenotaph Mall in Ottawa.

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- A plaque at the Royal Canadian Legion and other locations in Nelson.
- A plaque in the HMCS *Tecumseh* Wardroom in Calgary.
- Robert Gray Park in Ottawa.
- The former Hampton Gray Memorial School building in Halifax at CFB Shearwater was named in his honour.
- The VC winner monument in Barrie, Ontario.
- Induction into Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame in 1974.
- A monument at the BC Air Museum at Victoria Airport memorializes all Canadians lost during FAA operations during the Second World War.

Prepared By*:

Paul Seguna, CD, Lieutenant Commander RCN (ret'd). Formerly a member of HMC Ships *Discovery* and *Scotian* 1974-82. Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph research team

* All stories are edited by the project crew, and sometimes altered to conform to the Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph format, length and content parameters.



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- part of a series of videos on the Armoured Carriers website at:
<https://www.youtube.com/@ArmouredCarriers> . An excellent, matter-of-fact video production of recorded primary source interviews with FAA veterans who were acquainted and flew with Lt. R.H. Hampton Gray Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database