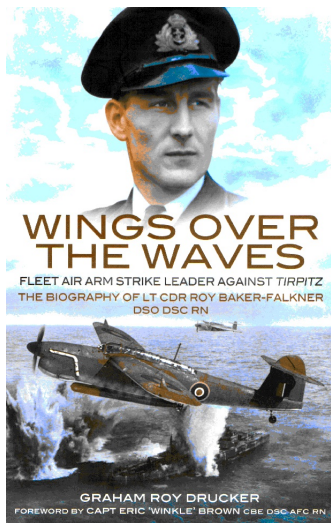


## A FORGOTTEN CANADIAN HERO

By Robert Williamson

For me, Remembrance Day is about relating stories of forgotten people and events that have a connection to our local heritage. That objective is more essential this year with all Remembrance commemorations subdued due to COVID 19 restrictions. It requires finding ingredients that make this news column especially memorable and emotionally appealing to the reader. I believe I have found those story components in a book entitled, "WINGS OVER THE WAVES", the story of a forgotten Canadian hero of the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm. His name was Roy Sydney Baker-Falkner, Lieutenant Commander (LCDR) Royal Navy.



The local connection links LCDR Falkner, the flight leader of the Fleet Air Arm squadrons on the aircraft carrier HMS Formidable to one of his pilots, fellow Canadian, Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray who won the Victoria Cross while flying a Corsair fighter escort. That aircraft is featured in the "Victoria Cross Flight" display at Hamilton's Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum. However, there is no mention of LCDR Baker-Falkner's involvement with Lieutenant Gray. Forgotten or not, his story is our way of commemorating the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of VICTORY IN EUROPE on Remembrance Day.



Victoria Cross Flight Courtesy CWHM shows the three aircraft whose Canadian airmen won the Victoria Cross

Falkner grew up on Vancouver Island. He was awarded a Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship to the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth, England. Upon graduation he joined the Royal Navy and was accepted into Flight Training School. In 1937 he met an English girl, Naomi Lord, at a Royal Naval College dance. She had been told by a fortune teller that she was going to meet a "tall, handsome stranger". Three days later Roy asked her to marry him and she replied, "I'd rather like that".

While he was learning to make dangerous carrier deck landings, he wrote Naomi letters to assuage her fears. He assured her that his Swordfish torpedo biplane was very safe and that you could walk faster than it when it flew into a strong headwind. He often used coded terms of endearment in his letters and referred to her as **his BILY girl**.

From 1940 to 42, Falkner's Swordfish squadron was assigned to support troop evacuation from Dunkirk. That led to bombing German invasion barges and U-boat pens on the channel coast. After 45 missions he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

Next, Roy was assigned the extremely dangerous task of testing a badly flawed new aircraft called the Barracuda dive/torpedo bomber. Falkner enjoyed composing satirical lyrics for popular songs like, **As Time Goes By** from the movie **Casablanca** - "You must remember this. A Barra's just a fish. On that you can rely. No matter how much we try. It will not fly".

But fly it did! On April 3, 1944, Roy led a dive bomber strike against the German battleship, Tirpitz (sister ship to Bismark), He made the first of many direct hits putting Tirpitz out of action for the coming D-Day invasion of Normandy. For this great success, he and his fellow pilots, including Robert Hampton Gray were presented to King George VI and General Viscount Montgomery on board the aircraft carrier HMS Formidable.

Two months later on July 18, 1944 off the Norwegian coast, Roy was conducting a routine anti submarine patrol in a Barracuda when he disappeared in a thick fog bank and was never seen again. He was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Order (next in precedence to a Victoria Cross) and MID (Mentioned in Dispatches) for bravery, leadership, flying skill and devotion to duty. Naomi desperately held out hope that he would be repatriated as a POW at war's end. She gave up her vigil when a spiritualist medium told her that a tall naval officer was trying to send her a message by tapping in Morse code.

Naomi's tombstone in a tiny Dartmoor church yard near Plymouth in Southwest England includes an epitaph in remembrance of her missing husband. It contains a Morse code endearment spelling the letters **BILY**, an acronym for "**B**eautiful **I** Love **Y**ou".

*Mountain Memories by award winning writer Robert Williamson for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society.*