

Life after death

Flt Lt Howard Jones on the Bluenose Skyranger,
built by Air Cadets to honour the memory of
men not much older, who gave their all

IT'S 10.20pm on Saturday 14 October, 1944. You have taken off from RAF Croft in Yorkshire to join a large force of Allied bombers for a raid on Duisburg in the Ruhr.

Your Halifax B3 bomber is flying at 20,000ft over the East Midlands when fire breaks out on the starboard outer engine. You are carrying seven 1000 lb bombs and six 500 lb bombs, but none of the nearby airfields want you to make an emergency landing, because they're launching their own bomber squadrons to join the raid. You are directed to RAF Church Lawford, west of Rugby, Warwickshire.

That was the situation that the Royal Canadian Air Force crew members of 434 Squadron Halifax bomber MZ920 found themselves in.

They never made it to RAF Church Lawford. Two crew members bailed out and sur-

vived. Five perished as the aircraft crashed at Dunchurch, near Rugby, where there is now a memorial stone to Sgt G Grant RAFVR, Flight Engineer; F/L DZT Wood RCAF, Pilot; F/O WR Ewing RCAF, Navigator; Sgt O Parsons RCAF, Mid Upper Air Gunner; and Sgt D Ward RCAF, Rear Air Gunner.

This is the story behind the Bluenose Skyranger, G-WEPW, whose registration represents the initial letters of the aircrew's surnames.

The BMAA has a long-running initiative to get young people involved in flying and aerospace engineering. The New Horizons build-a-plane project delivers a Skyranger kit to schools and youth organisations.

The aircraft is built by enthusiastic teenagers under the supervision of staff, BMAA ▷

Proud cadets
from 29F
Squadron at the
RAF Cosford
Airshow 2023





Above
At RAF Cosford
Airshow 2023

Right
The memorial
in Dunchurch,
Rugby, to the crew
members of Halifax
B3 bomber MZ920



▷ members and a qualified inspector. The completed aircraft is then sold on the open market, recovering the cost of the initial kit and other project costs, thereby funding the next project.

29F (Rugby) Squadron, RAF Air Cadets, received their Squirranger kit in March 2018. Since then, well over 100 young people from the squadron (from over 12 different schools in and around Rugby) have contributed to the aircraft build.

It took us a while to get some momentum behind the project. Reading the manual first always helped, but many of the build tasks were new to the adult staff, let alone the cadets.

We created a routine whereby staff would do the head-scratching ahead of cadets being involved, or even staff making a start on the task so that we could be sure what needed to be done.

The aircraft ended up covered in Post-it notes with build manual references. Cadets choose a Post-it note, got a briefing from the (apparently knowledgeable) staff, then got on with it independently.

There were frequent visits to Sywell to ask for advice and bits from the ever-helpful Flylight team. Close-up photos of Squirrangers at Sywell complemented the manual (but we never seem to have the photo we needed).

Gary Masters, the BMAA-appointed inspector, showed us how fast tasks could be done if you knew



A recreation of the Halifax B3 bomber MZ920, call sign WL-C

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We were very grateful for the expertise that helped us

BMAA CEO Rob Hughes with Air Cadets and guests at the RAF Cosford Airshow. The history of the Halifax bomber story is documented in the aircraft logbook

what you are doing and had just the right tool in the back of your van.

There were times when we thought we had taken on too much, but we were very grateful for the expertise that helped us. That was a great lesson for the staff as much as the cadets.

The aircraft slowly began to take shape, with the pile of tubes and components gradually reducing.

Covid strikes

Then, as cadets turned up for their Monday parade evening on 23 March 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the national lockdown due to Covid. Cadets were sent home, and 29F Squadron did not meet face-to-face for another 18 months.

When they finally did, the work restarted, with new cadets getting experience of basic engineering skills. They looked for their 12.3 and 8.8 tensile steel bolts. They knew why Nyloc nuts are used, and how to squirt Loctite 243 without making too much mess.

They took great care, looking after their own health and safety and knowing that others' lives may depend on the care they took with their particular build task.

There were a lot of engineering skills required in the project, such as riveting, composites, metal cutting, pipework, electrics etc, all carried out using appropriate tools, which for most was a new experience. And the tools sometimes got put away again in the correct places on the shadow board!

We initially had a self-imposed sense of urgency, >



Top
The Bluenose schooner forms part of the 434 Squadron crest

Middle
The Bluenose Skyranger is the only aircraft that wears the cap badge of the Air Training Corps

Bottom
The plaque on the instrument panel listing the names of the crew members who lost their lives



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It's been a lesson
in perseverance

▷ but in reality, the BMAA has been very patient with us as long as the project was progressing.

There were evenings when groups of our younger cadets had a task explained to them, then each had a practice go on some scrap metal before taking it in turns to do it for real on the actual aircraft. That was the whole evening gone.

For those cadets, it was a great learning experience, with the sense of achievement of saying: "I did that bit". That's a bigger prize than the actual build progress.

The project was started by me, Flt Lt Howard Jones RAFAC, as the Squadron OC and a former microlight pilot.

It was an excellent project for the Air Cadets, and I cannot thank the BMAA enough for providing this opportunity for our young people.

If anything, it has proved to be a little ambitious, but one nut and bolt at a time, the cadets have completed each section of the aircraft until we now finally have the end in sight. It's been a lesson in perseverance!

Whilst it may not have been the fastest aircraft build project, it has certainly engaged the greatest number of potential pilots and engineers.

And it hasn't just been used as an aircraft build project. Sgt Antony Webb, an engineer on the squadron staff who also looks after training for new cadets, said: "We teach all of our new cadets about the principles of flight as part of their initial cadet training, and it's great to be able to flick the Power-Point off and walk them over to a real aircraft."

"They can sit in the aircraft and actually see the control surfaces move in response to their inputs."

Over the course of the project, many cadets have left to start engineering apprenticeships and degree courses. They may have made those career choices anyway, but all of them have referenced on their application forms their unique experience of working on an aircraft build project.

We've had many visitors. The local Cub Scouts have used our plane to get their aircraft badges, and we've had a succession of VIPs who have been shown the project by our cadets – a great experience for both parties.

Notable visitors who have been invited to put a rivet in the aircraft include BMAA CEO Rob Hughes, the Mayor of Rugby, the RAFAC Regional Commandant (Wales & West), the local MP and the OC Warwickshire and Birmingham Wing.

We took the aircraft to the RAF Cosford Airshow in 2023 and 2024, adding to our list of VIP riveters: the Commandant RAF Air Cadets, the Royal Canadian Air Force's UK Air Attaché, the Deputy



Chief of the Air Staff and Les Escadrilles Air Jeunesse (the French Air Cadets). All of it was great publicity for 29F Squadron, the RAF Air Cadets and the BMAA.

It was during lockdown, as the cadets “met” over Teams, that they started thinking about an appropriate registration for the aircraft.

They frequently took part in Remembrance ceremonies throughout the year, which had included the 75th anniversary of the 434 Squadron Halifax crash, which was attended by descendants of the crew, who flew over from Canada to take part.

It was the cadets themselves who came up with the idea of using the initial letters of the aircrew’s surnames, and with the help of Rob Mott, BMAA Chief Inspector, the CAA allocated the registration G-WEPW.

The custodian of the memorial to the crew, Theo Claassen, has kept contact with the family members of pilot Donald Wood and navigator Bill Ewing. They’re extremely proud of what the Air Cadets have achieved, and honoured that they have chosen to dedicate it to the Halifax crew.

The 434 Squadron recruited from Nova Scotia, where the Bluenose sailing ship is a provincial emblem. The vessel is incorporated into the 434 Squadron crest, which forms part of G-WEPW’s aircraft’s livery.

There is a plaque on the instrument panel recording the names of the aircrew members, to whose memory this aircraft is dedicated, and the 434 Squadron crest sits alongside the aircraft’s G-WEPW registration letters on the side of the aircraft.

And as a final tribute, the cadets have painted the prop spinner bright blue – the Bluenose Skyranger. □

Above

Colonel Jonathan Bouchard, Royal Canadian Air Force, reads the instrument panel plaque listing the names of the Halifax bomber crew

Below

Air Commodore Tony Keeling, Commandant RAF Air Cadets, and BMAA CEO Rob Hughes were two of the VIP visitors to the Bluenose Skyranger display at this year’s RAF Cosford Airshow

