



VINTAGE NEWS

THE TRAGEDY AND



THE TRIBUTE TO THE

BUFFALO 9

By James Griffith



THE CANADIAN WARPLANE HERITAGE MUSEUM REMEMBERS
CANADIANS WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES IN THE SERVICE OF PEACE

It was a typically hot sunny day with light winds over the eastern Mediterranean on the early afternoon of August the 9th, 1974. United Nations flight 51 chugged its way along the centre line of airway, Green 2, maintaining 11,000 ft, at a sedate speed of 205 kts. It was en route from Ismailia, Egypt to Damascus via Beirut. The cargo aircraft was an

unarmed Canadian Forces de Havilland Canada (DHC) Buffalo, 115461, painted in the unmistakable United Nations livery of white and blue.

It was shortly after the latest round of the never-ending sparring between Israel and its Arab neighbours. The UN was as usual, trying to referee the latest tension-filled peace settlement. Canada as usual, committed boots on the ground and delegated 116 Air Transport Unit (ATU) to provide logistical air support for the UN observers on the Golan Heights. Using three Buffalo aircraft, 116's flight crews and ground support were based at Camp Shams, on the outskirts of Cairo. The tented camp, shared with the army, was described by the unit Medical Officer as being a malodorous, unsanitary and vermin-infested facility. At least half the camp dwellers were incapacitated at any given moment by watery diarrhoea and projectile vomiting, the evil twins of "gypo-gut".



Canadian Forces de Havilland Buffalo 461 on the ground in the Middle East prior to August, 1974. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca



Canadian Forces de Havilland Buffalo 461 (last in line) on the ramp at Beirut Airport on 27 July 1974 just over a week before she was blown out of the sky on a peacekeeping mission. (from left to right Buffalo 452, 460, and 461) Photo by F/L Don Fish via www.buffalo461.ca



Canadian Forces Buffalo 461 loads cargo from a United Nations minibus. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca

The prime concern of flight crews was not the elapsed time between en route navigation fixes but rather the elapsed time it took to anxiously run from the aircraft's parking

position, on stopovers, to the nearest lavatory. A retired 116 ATU pilot reached at his home near Peace River, Alberta, put it rather succinctly saying, “Flying was great, country wasn’t.”

The unit was tasked to operate scheduled flights six days a week, Monday through Saturday, between Ismailia, Egypt and Damascus then back to Beirut for the layover. Westerners were not welcome in Syria, being subject to constant shadowing by the military and the not-so-secret police. It was thought better for the security of the Buffalo and its crew to lay them over in a friendly country, that being Lebanon.

Unfortunately the peace agreement was hanging by the most tenuous of threads. Navigating the relatively short distance between Ismailia and Damascus necessitated a rather convoluted route to avoid Israeli airspace almost doubling the mileage. The routing took flight 51 out over the Mediterranean, 50 nm off shore, then back inland just south of Beirut to cross the Syrian border 25 nm east of Damascus under the baleful, prying eyes of everyone’s defence radars.

Captain Gary Foster commanded Flight 51 and Captain Keith Mirau was First Officer. Both were rated as superior pilots. The navigator, Captain Robert Wicks, volunteered to fly all the extra flights he could get, so much was his hatred of, “tenting”, his personal definition of dreary life at the dreaded Camp Shams.

Master Corporal Ron Spencer, the flight engineer and Corporal Bruce Springer, the loadmaster, filled out the rest of the crew roster. The four passengers, Master Warrant Officer Gaston Landry, Master Warrant Officer Cyril Korejwo, Corporal Michael Simpson and Corporal Morris Kennington served on active duty with the Canadian Contingent United Nations Emergency Force (CCUNEF) at Camp Shams.

Foster, his crew and passengers were undoubtedly in good spirits, enthusiastically anticipating the attractions of a Friday and Saturday night in Beirut. This being a Friday flight meant they would enjoy a long layover of 32 hours instead of the usual 16. It would mean clean sheets, edible food without the usual hordes of flies, and allow them two consecutive peaceful nights’ sleep without interruption from the noisy camp critters under canvas at Shams.



CapT. George G. Foster

PILOT/CREW CAPTAIN



Capt. Keith B. Mirau

CO-PILOT



CPL. Morris H. T. Kennington

PASSENGER



Cpl. Michael W. Simpson

PASSENGER



MWO Gaston Landry

PASSENGER



Acting MWO Cyril B. Korejwo

PASSENGER



MCpl. Ronald C. Spencer

FLIGHT ENGINEER



Cpl. Bruce K. Stringer

LOADMASTER



Capt. Robert B. Wicks

NAVIGATOR

The crew and passengers of United Nations Flight 51. Photos via www.buffalo461.ca

The crew had filed a standard International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) flight plan as demanded by the peace agreement, guaranteeing them the same protection as civilian airliners. As well, Syrian military over-flight clearances were passed to United Nations Headquarters (UNHQ) for distribution to all appropriate authorities. Or had they?

A few minutes after passing Beirut, First Officer Mirau made the compulsory position report (PX) to Beirut Air Traffic Control over the Dakweh Beacon, Lebanon, at 12:46 local time, (ATC) just prior to crossing the Syrian border. The ancient city of Damascus would have just been coming into view over the snub nose of the Buffalo. Mirau promptly changed to Damascus ATC, repeated the routine PX, including the estimate for Damascus, received the latest weather from them and read back the Damascus approach clearance at 12:51:

“Roger we are cleared to Damascus VOR to maintain 8000 cross Mike Echo Zulu at 10,000 or above.”

This was the last transmission heard from UN flight 51. Or was it? Six minutes later and 11,000 ft below them, an employee of the American Embassy in Damascus was returning from days off in Beirut. He was casually driving along the Beirut-Damascus highway at a leisurely 55 mph due east when, to his astonishment, a missile passed over him traveling in the opposite direction. He distinctly recalls seeing a second stage of the missile ignite, said he jammed on his brakes, stopped, leapt out his car and tried to visually follow the missile’s trajectory.

He stated, “At that time I noticed a silver coloured plane flying in the air and it seemed to be smoking from the tail.”

He said that he did not see an explosion or pieces falling off the aircraft. He had probably witnessed a glancing blow, or a near-miss by either a proximity or commanded detonation by a Soviet-made surface-to-air SA 2 missile.

Purpose-built as a high altitude interception missile, the SA 2 was not particularly accurate at 11,000 ft. It did not have to be. Its warhead contained 450 lbs of high explosive (HE) fragmentation projectiles with a lethal radius of 215 ft. Even a near miss could have done severe damage to UN 51.

Had the crew seen the threat coming... perhaps the launch flash of the missile to the east of them, or its tell tale smoke trail?

Had they taken evasive action? According to a retired Buffalo pilot and resident of St. Catharines, Ontario, “Buffalo crews often talked, over a few beers, about how to evade a SAM attack, turning into the sun or whatever but we all agreed it was probably futile.”

Except that an outrageous attempt to make use of one of the Buffalo's STOL capability just might work. Did Foster try it? The props were found against the stops in the STOL mode.

It is impossible to imagine the frantic pandemonium going on the inside the Buffalo as white-hot, flesh-tearing, shrapnel ripped through it. Had the rudder and elevator control cables in the vulnerable T-tail been severed or damaged? Were they on fire? After the first hit, it was seen trailing black smoke.

Why didn't they broadcast a distress call? It could be they did since investigators revealed evidence that the Syrians had clumsily erased two-and-a-half-minutes of conversation from the ATC communication tapes.

The truth of some of the mystifying questions will never be known. The Buffalo carried no flight data or cockpit voice recorders.

Back on the ground the most credible of the witnesses, the American, was horrified to see a second missile strike the Buffalo in the left wing area approximately a minute to a minute-and-a-half later. This time he said, "it bucked and it shook and I saw pieces fall." There was no mistake it was a direct hit. The left wing was on fire and the descent attitude had suddenly increased to a steep dive.

Seconds later a third missile struck the burning hulk in the cockpit area at about 500 ft above the ground. The American witness explained, "The plane blew apart and she took a nose dive from what was left of it and it went straight into the ground."

A lumbering, defenseless Buffalo was no challenge for the last two, deadly accurate SA6 SAMs, capable of acquiring fast maneuvering targets from 300-69,000 ft each with a lethal war head containing 135 lbs of fragmentation HE.

It was the first time a Canadian military aircraft had been shot down since the Second World War. The Syrians, to their credit, rushed helicopters with medics to the crash site immediately, but it was obvious as soon as they arrived that there were no survivors.

Canadian and UN observers were on scene within four hours in spite of a ham-fisted attempt by the Syrian liaison officer to misdirect the team to the site. Even while being threatened by their Syrian minders and prevented at gunpoint from doing a full sweep of the debris field, the UN team surreptitiously gathered key material evidence and witness statements from locals under the very noses of their Syrian watchdogs.

The Syrians tried to sustain a theory of an onboard fire and explosion until the incontrovertible evidence of missile parts found in the wreckage of the Buffalo, reliable eyewitness statements and the unmistakable dithering of the ATC communication tapes was tabled. They finally admitted that the Buffalo had indeed been shot down by a missile but that it had taken place in a border area where confused fighting was taking place and that the missile was not theirs.



Canadian and UN investigators examine the largest remaining components of the destroyed Buffalo on the desert floor. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca

The UN relied heavily on the Canadian investigation's conclusions but at the request of Canada's external affairs department, two cause factors in the shoot-down were deleted because they might embarrass the UN and Syria. The first conclusion in the secret document marked, "For Canadian Eyes Only," exposes the confusion that seems systemic in UN peace keeping operations. The second suggests that the Syrian Government, from the highest levels, selected the deliberate destruction of a UN aircraft. The Syrians steadfastly refused to accept any liability for the destruction of the aircraft or for the lives of the peacekeepers.

Sadly, in August of 1974, the Canadian news cycle was flooded by a media feeding frenzy on the resignation of US President Nixon on August 8th, the day before 461 was shot down. The Toronto Globe and Mail, the largest newspaper in Canada gave scant coverage of the first news of Flight 51 on August the 10th, the day after the shoot-down. The Globe's banner headline railed against a Toronto transit strike, eclipsing even the Nixon fiasco.

From mid-July to mid-August in 1974 Canada lost 25 soldiers in a 30-day period. It was the greatest loss of life in a month since the end of the Korean War - more than any single month in Afghanistan to date.

An airman on duty at Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Trenton groused, “ I was in Trenton working the night that they brought the bodies home... nobody was informed until the a/c [aircraft] was 30 minutes out. The WO [Warrant Officer] on shift had to rush around and try to find enough guys with full uniforms, (in those times we used to wear working gear) so as to act as a proper honour guard, we had to check out the mess and drag people from the barracks.”

At the time members of the Canadian Forces were advised by the military brass not to wear their uniforms in public: it might offend Canadian anti-war sentiment. The repatriation of what was left of the bodies of the nine airmen had to represent an historic low point in respect for and by the Canadian military.

Over the intervening years, the families of the nine, felt betrayed by the Government for failing to push for compensation from the Syrians or at least extract an official apology from them. Ottawa seemed more concerned for the sensibilities of the perpetrators and the reputation of the United Nations than for the innocent victims. It was only through the tenacious persistence of Captain Foster’s widow that in 2002, the findings of the boards of enquiry were finally declassified under the freedom of information act.

Now after 28 years, the families of the nine peacekeepers would know how and why their loved ones had died.

The nine UN peacekeepers onboard Flight 51 became known as the *Buffalo Nine*. The name sanctifies the many sacrifices made by Canadians serving under the UN flag. Peacekeepers are plucked from the ranks of Canada’s three military services as well as the RCMP, provincial police forces, diplomats and even civilians. They were cobbled together and sent to some of the most difficult and unfriendly places around the world. Like the members of 116 ATU, they were usually unarmed, inadequately equipped, forced to live in primitive conditions, eat strange and often contaminated food, communicate in diverse languages, and put up with tortuous chains of command.

The savage Syrian missile attack on August 9th, 1974, represented the single greatest loss of life in a single event by Canadian peacekeepers. It was for this reason that the Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping (CAVUNP) representing military and civilian peacekeepers, pestered the government to set aside August 9th, as National Peacekeeper’s Day. It wasn’t until June 18th, 2008, that Bill C-287 was finally passed in Parliament making August the 9th an official day in Canada, commemorating Canada’s Peacekeepers.

The spirits of the *Buffalo Nine* are irrevocably linked forever to the DHC Buffalo aircraft that carried them to their deaths. This rather humble utility aircraft, displaying the Canadian Forces serial number 115461 on its tail and known simply as 461, came to symbolize the sacrifice of the *Buffalo Nine* and all the other Blue Berets who have died in the service of Canada, keeping the peace for the nations of the world.



Unfriendly Skies - deHavilland Canada Buffalo of the Canadian Armed Forces overflies Damascus, Syria. The white paint of the UN livery is blasted away in the slipstream to reveal her original CAF green. Photo via www.buffalo461.c

There would be no phoenix-like resurrection from the ashes for Buffalo 461. Very little that was recognizable as an aircraft was spread over a large debris field more than a mile and half long and located in a decidedly unfriendly country. Only two fragments of wreckage from 461 survive today. A section of the aircraft's fin reposes in the Violent Peace Gallery of Canada's War Museum in Ottawa and one of 460's propeller blades inscribed with the names of the *Buffalo Nine* is proudly on display at the National Air Force Museum of Canada at CFB Trenton.

Events elsewhere, however, were conspiring to provide a more fitting and tangible icon for the memory of the *Buffalo Nine* and their compatriots and, fate, according to famous aviation writer Ernest K. Gann, is the hunter.

On a rainy November afternoon in far off Sudan, a Buffalo (c/n 85 carrying registration number 811) of the Sudanese Air Force (SuAF), attempted a landing to relieve a battalion of government troops dug in against SPLA rebel attacks. It was 1984 and the latest African coup du jour was raging in the Sudan. The rainy season had flooded the low lying airstrip forcing a landing on a nearby ridge smack in the thick of the fighting. Tall savannah grass obscured a ditch half way down the landing patch. In spite of an otherwise superb combat landing by the Sudanese pilot, it hit the unseen ditch, snapping off the nose wheel, damaging the nose structure and stranding the aircraft.

As night fell it was bracketed by rebel small arms fire. Mortars thumped most of the night. The defenders were not deterred. Daybreak found the marooned Buffalo miraculously unscathed in spite of the determined overnight rebel attack. Government forces drove the rebels off, leaving the Buffalo looking like a beached whale on the only dry spot on the muddy plain. There was only one way to get it out - fly it off the high and dry ridge!

Thanks to a Canadian Forces Air attaché in Cairo, Colonel George Miller, a replacement nose wheel assembly was found, transported to the front, welded on, and the aircraft flown to Khartoum with the nose gear extended. It was the beginning of an odyssey that would take this war weary veteran from the tropical regions of the South Sahara to the snow swept ramp of Hamilton's John C. Munro International Airport.

After languishing for three years at the Khartoum airport the SuAF decided to have the aircraft repaired at the Lockheed Martin Company in South Carolina. It hopped through North Africa and Europe then leap-frogged across the Atlantic via all the usual desolate watering holes with the nobbled nose wheel firmly welded down and locked.

Work on SuAF 811 at Lockheed Martin proceeded at a rate commensurate with the flow of cash from Sudan. Payments, timely at first, gradually dwindled to a trickle and finally stopped altogether leaving 811 moldering in the company's open air storage facility until they got tired of looking at it and put it up for auction as scrap metal.

DAC Aviation International of Montreal, a company operating Buffalos in Africa, was the successful bidder of the remains of 811. Doug Nagy, one of many sharp-eyed volunteers at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum, (CWHM), heard of the purchase through his business and noted that DAC was willing to donate SuAF 811 to the CWHM, sans engines. Moreover, DAC would even help support the move to Hamilton by donating their resources.



452, a sister Buffalo to 461 flies over the Prince Edward County, Ontario landscape not far from her home base at CFB Trenton on Lake Ontario. The photograph looks to be a post-paint publicity photograph taken before deployment. The Buffalo is a slab sided, unpressurized, twin engine turbo prop aircraft with a high tail out of proportion to its snub

nose. Its long springy oleo legs attached to the single axle dual main wheels combined with a stubby nose gear make a smooth landing a real challenge for all but the virtuosity of only the very best of pilots. In short, it has all the alluring lines and charm of a two-ton cube-van with similar handling characteristics. It wasn't meant to be pretty or easy to land, rather its purpose was similar to what the aforementioned delivery truck was meant to do; move medium loads of cargo or people over relatively short distances into and out of short, unimproved air strips in all weather from the tropics to the arctic. Militarily, it fulfilled the role of a heavy-lift helicopter but better, at more than half the initial price and a quarter of the maintenance costs. Its excellent performance makes it ideal for search and rescue. DND photo via www.buffalo461.ca

Meanwhile...

Doug Nagy was scratching his head trying to figure out how to convince the CWHM that although ugly, small in production numbers, and not well known, the proffered Buffalo should be added to the museum. Not even the fact that the Buffalo was the progenitor of the DHC (now Bombardier), Dash-8 and all its derivatives, undisputed darling of the world's commuter airlines seemed convincing enough until one of Nagy's side kicks, Bruce Gall, remembered the 1974 Syrian incident. As Nagy recalls it, the "peacekeeper" theme was conceived by CWHM member Bruce Gall in November 2002 and formed the basis of our pitch to CWHM for permission to recover the airframe".

Once the CWHM realized the significance of the project and what it represented to Canada's proud UN peacekeeping reputation, they embraced the project. The transformation of SuAF 811 to 461 would, at least in the Canadian context, put it on a par with the museum's famous Mynarski Lancaster.

Unfortunately, 811 was too far gone to ever fly again. It would be a static display aircraft only. Moreover, the 28 ft 9 in height of its T-Tail, too high to clear hangar doors relegated it to the ramp.



In December 2002, volunteers from Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum, Carolinas Aviation Museum, and DAC Aviation International went to Greenville, South Carolina to prepare the ex-Sudanese Air Force Buffalo for shipment to Canada. Effort was slowed by an icestorm which effectively shut down the area for a couple of days. A second effort in early January 2003 was required to complete the effort. Here we see the SuAF Buffalo on the ground in a backlot at Lockheed Martin. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca

CWHM volunteers were dispatched to South Carolina and with the help of the South Carolina Aviation Museum volunteers, DAC aviation, their cranes and flat bed semi-trailers, 811 was dismantled, and trucked to Hamilton. By January of 2003 all the bits and pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that was 811 were strewn on the icy cold concrete ramp at the side of the CWHM hangar. All the re-construction work, therefore, would have to be done outdoors. It would be up to Nagy and his crew to somehow put Humpty together again!



A big rig and flatbed, fresh from the sunny Carolinas, drops off the main components of the former Sudanese Air Force Buffalo ready to begin her transformation to Buffalo 461. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca



The fuselage sits on a flatbed trailer outside the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum, while a crane donated by Aurora Crane sidles up next to it to lift the big pieces to the ground. Here we can see the completely exposed nose section where the wheel well is supposed to be. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca

Working outdoors through the finger numbing cold of Hamilton winters and the sun and stifling humidity of summer, the work continued on the unprotected ramp until completion six and-a-half years and untold man-hours later. Besides the hangar door problem, other hurdles had to be jumped. A crane was needed to attach the wings and other unwieldy large bits of fuselage into place on the fuselage. Thankfully a local construction company, Aurora Crane, donated a crane and operator while the CWHM volunteers provided the expertise to make sure all the pieces of the puzzle fit.

The whole nose area including the cockpit floor, not just the nose wheel, had been severely damaged in the Sudan landing. Just by chance one of the volunteers, on a weekend jaunt in his car near Newmarket, Ontario, spotted what looked like the unmistakable snub nose of a Buffalo sticking out of a pile of refuse in a junk yard. Remarkably it was the nose section of the first-ever Buffalo produced, c/n 1.

A deal was struck and in one day a CWHM crew removed the nose wheel well section using only metal cutting saws, large crow bars and much explicit language. The reclaimed nose wheel well allowed easier reconstruction of the nose structure and made the aircraft safe for display.



Members of the Buffalo 461 team scavenge a nose section and wheel well from the discarded hulk of Buffalo Number One. It's sad to think that something like the prototype for such an important aircraft as the Buffalo would end up in such an ignominious state. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca



The wheel well section (taken from the junkyard Buffalo found in Newmarket, Ontario) has been joined to the main fuselage prior to final attachment and skinning. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca



A photo taken shortly after work was completed on the nose section and wheel well sub-project. The well is installed and the outer skin panels now block out the ravages of Canadian winters. The nose gear oleo is seen in the extended position. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca



Back out into the light of day, the main wing section is mated to the fuselage main section. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca

Finally, when DAC donated the aircraft, the GE YT-64-GE-4 turbine engines were long gone. Thankfully all the nacelles were intact and sand bags replaced the engines as ballast to balance the aircraft so that it would sit properly on its tricycle undercarriage. Props and reduction gear boxes were available to mount on the front of the nacelles giving the aircraft a flight ready appearance.

Nagy and Gall's crew of CWHM volunteers, although small at first but which grew over time to 20 or more, was a mix of aviation enthusiasts from across the social fabric of the Hamilton-Niagara area and beyond. Many of the team members had no direct links to, or experience with, aviation other than a fascination with flight. What they all had in common was a willingness to embrace new untested skills and above all enthusiastic dedication. The group even included the nephew of Captain Robert Wicks, the navigator on UN Flight 51. Surprisingly only two professional pilots were on the team, Bob Yorke, a retired Air Canada pilot and retired Canadian Forces Buffalo pilot, Wally Adam. Miscellaneous aircraft parts and services were either donated or paid for out of their own

pockets. Wally Adam expressed the spiritual motivation of the team with the words; “It was truly a labour of love”.



Much of the work on the Buffalo 461 project was carried out while the airframe remained outside on the ramp. In summer this meant for sweltering conditions and blistering metal, while in the winter major components had to be swept of snow and ice before continuing work. Here the aft fuselage containing the ramp doors is mated to the main section. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca



The deplorable condition of the cockpit control panel is evident in this image taken before work was begun. All instruments are missing and at the bottom we can see right through the hole in the nose section where work on the wheel well had stopped - leaving the interior of the aircraft wide open to the elements and fauna of South Carolina for years. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca



What a difference hard work and respect can do. The old girl looked as fine on the inside as she did on the outside. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca



The distinctive high T-tail (that so many de Havilland Canada products would carry after the successful Caribou design) is hoisted into place on the aft fuselage. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca

Finally in September 2008, Buffalo 811 or rather 461, was ready for painting. The CWHM briefly considered a modern yellow Search And Rescue, (SAR) scheme but it was discarded quickly when the multiple benefits of the Peacekeeper theme were considered. In a touching ceremony members of the Wicks and Landry families of the Buffalo Nine, painted the finishing touches of the distinctive blue and white colour scheme of the United Nations on the bulbous nose of the almost complete aircraft.

It wasn't until July of 2009, that the replication of 811 as 461 was completed with a unique rendering of its interior for display. The starboard interior is finished in the troop carrying configuration while the port side and ceiling has been left naked, as it were, to expose the skeletal tubing, wires and cables of the various operating aircraft systems.



Electrical lines were tested and some exterior lighting was made functional as shown in this night photo below . Photo by Rick Lund via www.buffalo461.ca



On the day of the dedication, the Buffalo with two lives drops her ramp in welcome to visitors and families of the fallen. Photo by The One and Only George Mayer via www.buffalo461.ca

The replication was complete but the re-incarnation was not and wouldn't be until the aircraft was formally dedicated.

Venerating a Canadian Icon of Peace

Global warming notwithstanding, people in Southern Ontario will long remember the summer of 2009, as the summer that wasn't - except that is, for the 500-600 spectators but especially the 100 or so parade participants, who attended the dedication of Buffalo 461 on August 9th, That proved to be an unexpected exception to the cloudy, cool damp summer.



Sunday 9, August 2009 was chosen as the dedication date as it was the 35th anniversary of the shoot down of Buffalo 115461 and the 2nd Annual "National Peacekeepers' Day", a national day of commemoration recently enacted by the parliament of Canada. Our restored Buffalo was dedicated in memory of the nine servicemen who perished on August 9, 1974, and to all Canadian peacekeepers. Here the tireless restoration crew poses with the newly dedicated Buffalo 461 and the Lieutenant General of Ontario, David C. Onely. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca

When Don Bowman headed up the QEW in 2005, from his home in St Catharines towards Hamilton International Airport, he had no idea that he would put his personal touch to a string of serendipitous events that charmed the life of Buffalo SuAF, 811. He was about to embark on a journey for the next three and a half years that would test his organizational skills acquired over 25 years of military service including all three braches Army, Air and Navy.

What led Bowman to the CWHM that day? He meant only to present a cheque to David Rohrer, CEO of the CHWM, a donation on behalf of the Royal Niagara Military Institute but learning of the Buffalo project tweaked his own connection with the shoot-down in

1974. A short while after the tragedy Bowman served as a peacekeeper at Ismailia, Egypt, home of 116 ATU.

Naturally Bowman's curiosity was mightily piqued, as president of the Cpl Albert Storm Niagara Chapter of the Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping, (CAVUNP); he was ecstatic. A hand shake clinched a collaboration of the CWHM and CAVUNP to finish and dedicate Buffalo SuAF 811 as UN flight 51. Given the pace of reconstruction both parties hoped 461 would be ready on the 35th anniversary of the Syrian atrocity, August 9th 2009.

Energized by grey power, Bowman's elderly web-savvy rangers, connected with veterans' groups world-wide with the tale of 461 and the planned dedication at Hamilton. They committed a total of 71 veterans' organizations, military, and paramilitary units with three bands, and politicians including Ontario's Lieutenant Governor to take part in the dedication. Major and individual sponsors generously helped to defray the costs of the show. Former members of 116 ATU joined the gig and planned a re-union the evening before the dedication.

With so many diverse units ranging from teenagers to octogenarians and no chance for a rehearsal until the morning of the event; how do you marshal them together for a proper parade? If you are Don Bowman you get your friend, retired, no-nonsense Major Lance Steel to be Parade Commander. Steel was his name and steel was his resolve (in the event he would need it).



Buffalo 461 as she was on the day of her dedication. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca

It was raining steadily the evening of August the 8th, but it didn't dampen the spirits of the 130 pensioners and escorts of the 116 ATU re-union at the CWHM hangar. The museum's cherished aircraft were pushed into corners in the hangar to make room for the re-union. Cramped as the diner tables were, what pilot would complain when surrounded by such a grand collection of planes? Many expansive yarns were spun of ill-spent youth and past exploits. Who knows, some of them might even be true.

Although forlornly parked outside on the ramp in the rain that evening, some of the celebrants ventured out to the Buffalo, perhaps to even sit in the pilots' seats and muse about their role in serving the unit and by extension the UN. It would take an insensitive person not to imagine themselves seated in the aircraft no matter as crew member or passenger on Flight 51, not to sombrely visualize the horror as the missiles tore into the aircraft.



With the sun streaming in, the cabin of Buffalo 461 looks like a peaceful place, but it does not take too much of an imagination to conjur up the terror and chaos of those last minutes after the 3 missile hits. The Buffalo Nine are enshrined in a gallery of their smiling faces on the bulkhead to the left of the door to the cockpit. A hallowed place indeed. Photo via www.buffalo461.ca

Sunrise August 9th and the celebrated Buffalo squatted bleakly in a thick cold fog. The sobering atmosphere and the promise of afternoon thunderstorms did not bode well for the pomp and pageantry planned for the afternoon. In fact the steely major was denied his

promise of a morning pre-parade rehearsal by heavy, rumbling, thunderstorm rain. Somehow if the parade was to come off at all, he would have to wing it.

Meteorology is not an exact science!

At precisely 13:30 sharp, half an hour before the planned start of the ceremonies, the rain stopped, the skies cleared and the Buffalo sparkled in its pristine white and blue UN livery. Spectators expectantly took their seats. The prevailing mood was neither mournful nor joyous but rather quietly subdued. From a distance the plethora of Blue Berets, sprinkled liberally throughout the crowd, looked like a flowering field of prairie flax. The temperature began to rise.

By 14:00 hrs Major Steel re-took command from the elements and within minutes positioned the entire parade. His Honour, David C. Onley, Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, arrived 12 minutes later, mounted the dais, accepted a vice regal salute, inspected the veterans, the CWHM restoration and the others in the parade. The inevitable speeches began and the temperature continued to rise.



Major Lance Steel (could their be a more fitting name?) musters a diverse group of veterans and former peacekeepers in honour of the Buffalo Nine. Photo by Kool Shots via www.buffalo461.ca

As Mrs. Ronda Spencer-Lee read the poem she had written in elementary school the year that her flight engineer father was shot down in 461, white tissues suddenly appeared from nowhere to wipe many a leaky eye. Wreaths were laid at the portable cenotaph by dignitaries including the Silver Cross Mother, Mrs. Loyola Helen Park, mother of Cpl Simpson, passenger on 461. And the humidex hit 43.

At 15:45 hrs August 9th, 2009, 35 years to the day, after the loss of UN Flight 51, Charles P. Beaton (ret'd), RCAF, chaplain of the CWHM performed the consecration of the Buffalo rebuilt as C115461.

This life size icon officially represents, not just the ultimate sacrifice of the crew and passengers aboard UN Flight 51 but all Canadian men and women whether military or civilian who have laid down their lives for their country in the name of peace: may God rest their souls.



A portable Cenotaph was utilized for the dedication ceremony and almost miraculously, the clouds parted and the sun shone down in almost Syrian heat - a rare occurrence in the summer of 2009. Photo by Kool Shots via www.buffalo461.ca

Finally the mournful notes of the last post echoed around the silent ramp followed by the forlorn wail of the lament played by a lonely piper. Now even the eyes of the most hardened veterans were glistening perhaps from the bright sun or more likely the memory of forgotten and fallen comrades. As military custom demands, the two minutes of silence were followed by reveille and the playing of Oh Canada. The dying notes of the national anthem were drowned out by the sound of Pratt and Whitney engines as a venerable DC-3 of the Museum performed a valiant low pass... and in its wake, at last, came a cooling breeze.

Major Steel led the veterans in a Column of Route march past to the rousing tune of The Maple Leaf Forever played by the massed bands. A more appropriate choice of music to wind up the event could not have been made. The crowd drifted away to the coolness of the hangar to partake of refreshments before heading home in their cars. They would

have much to reflect on at the end of a memorable day that would prove to be the hottest day of the non-summer of 2009.

Jim Griffith



With the CWH Museum in the background, Buffalo 461 is visited by serving aircrew of the Canadian Air Force. Photo by Howard B. McGann via www.buffalo461.ca

Epilogue

Thanks to the dedicated work and passionate attention to detail of the WCHM volunteers, 461 represents final closure for the families of the victims on Flight 51 and in a general sense, all the families who lost friends and loved ones in the name of United Nations peacekeeping. The humble Buffalo tangibly reflects closure as well for many Blue Berets who over the years have wondered why their efforts did not seem to be fully appreciated by either the government or the people of Canada. They see 461 and the monuments erected in Calgary and Winnipeg built with funds by CAVUNP units in those cities as final recognition of their noble efforts.

It is truly unfortunate that 461 cannot squeeze into the CWHM hangar but it can be viewed and toured at the Museum by requesting a ramp guide happily supplied by the staff. The left wall of the fuselage is graced with portraits of the Buffalo nine and the CWHM re-construction crew. A trip to the museum is well worth the effort.



The restoration crew combined the experience, talents and enthusiasm of a wide range of individuals - young and old. Here they pose with a photograph of the original 461 in flight. Bravo Zulu. Photo by Kool Shots via www.buffalo461.ca



Vintage Wings of Canada would like to extend our congratulations and gratitude to the Buffalo Nine team and all the folks at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum who conceived of and completed this remarkable project. Photo by Kool Shots via www.buffalo461.ca