

---

# JOHN ALEXANDER GRIFFIN

---

**1922-2008**

---

***LIBERATOR PILOT,  
AVIATION HISTORIAN,  
AUTHOR,  
RACONTEUR,  
FORMER CAHS PRESIDENT  
AND GENTLEMAN***

***Bill Wheeler with Pat Griffin***



Undoubtedly, John Griffin, who died on 7 September, will best be remembered by CAHS members and aviation history buffs generally as the author of the monumental and much sought-after book, *Canadian Military Aircraft, Serials and Photographs, 1920-1968*, published in 1970 by the Canadian War Museum.

Long-time members will also recall that John (membership No 160) was the second president of our Society, taking over from our founding president George Morley in 1964 and serving until 1966, when he turned the presidency over to Pat Howard. John brought much needed experience to the position. At the time he was Manager, Material, of one of Canadian General Electric's plants in Toronto.

After firming up his arrangement with the War Museum and its Director, his good friend W/C Ralph Manning, to publish his book, John resigned from CGE in 1974 and moved to Ottawa with his family. He would accept a position with the Aerospace Directorate of the Department of Trade and Commerce. *CMAS&P* is a massive, almost 700-page book - weighing some eight pounds - a Bible for Canadian military aviation researchers. His daughter, Pat

recalls the many hours she spent helping her dad type the manuscript. Those vast lists, providing capsule histories of the thousands of aircraft on RCAF strength over a period of some 46 years, must have been a daunting task. Unfortunately, the production run was only 1500 books and of these a substantial proportion were presentation copies, leaving a relatively limited number for sale to the public for \$17.50 per copy. The rare *CMAS&P* that comes up for resale now commands a price in the hundreds of dollars,

The book was to be followed by subsequent volumes that would contain comprehensive data on all of the types listed. The Vickers Vancouver story in the Spring 2002 *Journal* (Vol 40, No 2) was provided by John, and was essentially the Vancouver coverage from the next of the planned series. It complemented the late Jack Hunter's recollections of flying the Vancouver that had appeared in a preceding issue. Unfortunately, when Ralph Manning retired from the War Museum, his successors decided that the Museum would not undertake any further major publishing projects.

Happily, in 2005 the data that John had accumulated for a follow-up volume to *CMA S&G* was updated to 1998 and published by

Vanwell as a collaborative effort with authors Robert H. Smith and Kenneth D. Castle as *Canadian Military Aircraft (Volume II)*. John had been gathering and organizing its contents until Alzheimer's made further work impossible.

When John was our president, the directors met in the basement recreation room of his home in Willowdale. We sat around a coffee table with an unusual centerpiece, the control column from a Spitfire. An adjoining room contained a treasure trove - all the material, beautifully organized and catalogued in dozens of colour-coded binders, that would eventually go into *CMAS&P*. Pat recalls her brother Donald christening their basement "the Mini Archives."

Part of the archives room was set up as a compact, well-equipped and well-planned workshop. John was the consummate craftsman. Pat writes: *"Handyman does not adequately describe John's ability to manufacture or repair just about anything that needed doing. Many hours were spent (by him) in his well-equipped, meticulously organized workshop. He and Beryl (his wife) tackled just about any household project you could imagine. Plumbing, electrical (problems), carpentry, you name it - John could handle it. His perfectionism, when it came to workmanship,*

was impressive. He always seemed to have just the special tool that was needed for whatever task presented itself. Or he simply created one. His children learned a lot about aeroplanes and tools by osmosis - through simply hanging out with him in his workshop/office."

John had flown Liberators in the wartime RAF and was an accomplished storyteller with a fund of amusing anecdotes from his Liberator days. He was not a large man and, on his first flight piloting a Lib, he settled into the left-hand seat only to find that he couldn't see over the instrument panel - he had forgotten his seat pack. Having to scurry from the aircraft to retrieve it was embarrassing. But, even sitting on this chute, his most useful view, he recalled, was from the side window.

Another story: Rying on coastal patrol far out over the South Atlantic, he and his crew spotted a destroyer that they identified as being Free French. Signalling by Aldis lamp, they requested permission to fly low, alongside for photographs. The response from the destroyer was prompt, brief, and in very plain English: "F--- off!"

John's most memorable Lib story involved a flight across the top of the African continent. While refueling in Morocco, he and his crew were driven to a local restaurant for a meal.

Everyone, except John, opted for an exotic chicken dish, a choice that, while tasty, would prove unfortunate. Later, in the air over the Mediterranean on their way to Egypt, the entire crew (with the exception of John) began experiencing severe stomach cramps. Soon the Elsen (chemical toilet), located in the rear fuselage was overflowing. The crewman stationed there could stand it longer. Picking up a fire axe he chopped the Elsen loose and dumped it out of the aircraft.

Unfortunately, the crew's stomach problems persisted and, with no toilet, they soon became desperate. John solved the problem by opening the Lib's sliding bomb-bay doors just a few inches, in effect turning the bomb bay into a Rying outhouse. And his improvisation worked well. However, when they landed in Cairo and began to taxi in, they were instructed by radio to stay in the aircraft and remain on the airfield's perimeter. Very shortly, the station commander arrived in a jeep loaded with stepladders, mops and several buckets of water. They were not to bring the Lib in until the rear fuselage and tailplane - their aircraft was painted in Coastal Command white - had been given a very necessary scrubbing down. The foregoing are only a sampling of John Griffin's many amusing stories, which also included anecdotes relating to the Quebec's south-shore Irish settlers from whom he was descended.

Bob Bradford quotes John, "When you taxied a B-24 out to the runway, you were in for a long drive." His meaning is made doubly clear by another quote recalled by Bob, "The B-24 was the only aircraft ever taken on strength by the Royal Canadian Air Force that depended on the curvature of the earth to take off"

At a Toronto Chapter meeting, when our speaker did not show, John gave us an off-the-cuff talk on the RCAF aircraft procurement policy that turned out to be one of our better presentations. Chapter president at the time was his very good

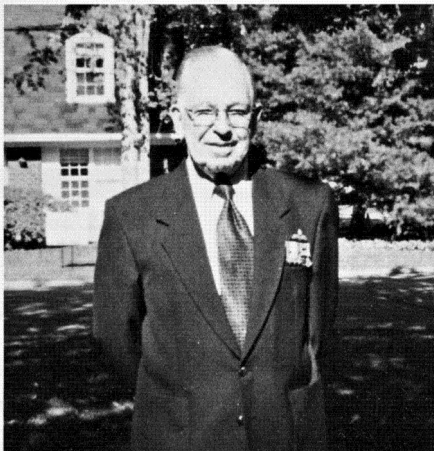
friend and often collaborator, John Beilby, a Willowdale neighbour. The two Johns teamed up with Ken Molson (founding Curator of the National Aviation Museum) to research markings for the Curtiss JN-4 (Can) Canuck, then recently acquired, and now an important exhibit in the present Canada Aviation Museum in Ottawa. The templates for the black cat squadron insignia and other markings that ir bears were prepared in John's basement office/workshop.

Pat describes her dad as "unassuming, humble, private, a soft-spoken gentleman," and recalls the many hours he spent responding comprehensively to enquiries that came from restorers, artists and others who were simply interested, regarding the histories, colour schemes and markings of Service aircraft. He had become the ultimate authority on such matters and was more than generous with his time. For example, in 1965, when this writer was commissioned to illustrate a boys' book, *Fighter Pilot*, by R.J. "Chick" Childerhose, dealing with the fictional exploits of two young Canadians who joined the RCAF early in the war, and eventually flew Hurricanes in Britain. John suggested appropriate squadron designator letters for the aircraft they flew. The code "LA" had been reserved for a Canadian fighter unit, but never assigned.

On another occasion, I showed John an old aerial shot of the harbour at Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay) given to me by the late A. E. de M. "Jock" Jarvis. Nothing was known about the photograph. While there were a number of lake boats in the picture there was also a solitary aeroplane, a Vickers Vedette moored at the old downtown seaplane base. The image was tiny, but, under a magnifying glass, two letters could just be discerned on the upper wing, an early RCAF G-CY registration. From his files, John quickly extracted a card containing the service history of this aircraft. The picture had been taken in September of 1928, while the machine was being delivered new from Montreal to its

base in Manitoba. Since it never returned east, this would have been its only visit to Port Arthur.

Before his CAHS involvement, John had been a



**Heading photograph:** Ft John Griffin RCAF, RAF Liberator pilot. GRIFFIN FAMILY. **Left, above:** a recent shot of John at home in Ottawa. GRIFFIN FAMILY. **Left:** wearing his Sunday-best, teen-aged John Griffin poses with a Curtiss-Reid Rambler III, possibly at Cartierville, Que. J. GRIFFIN VIA W. WHEELER.

volunteer instructor with the Air Cadets. After fielding questions about colour schemes from cadets who were building plastic models of RCAF aircraft, John realized how little information was available. While contemporary magazines such as *RAE Flying Review* regularly provided such information on British, German or American aircraft, there was scant Canadian coverage. He began systematically gathering relevant material. Eventually he could produce either a chip or a Munsell colour-chart reference for any hue ever used on RCAF aircraft. The yellow applied to RCAF training machines, for instance, had varied considerably over the years.

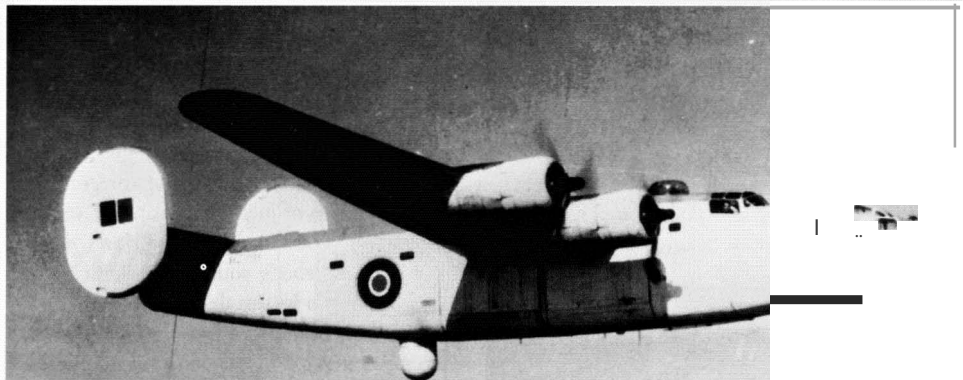
His intent was to preserve and foster an interest in RCAF history in any way he could. Pat remarks that, as an aviation historian, 'John had an uncanny ability to know the future value of information or artifacts and he was a meticulous record-keeper. This is obvious from the massive amount of material that he donated to the RCAF Heritage and History Division. He was convinced that the information must be preserved for future generations and it was his mission to ensure that this was so for all matters relating to Canadian military aircraft.'

John enjoyed a wide circle of friends and his enthusiasm was infectious. Doug Anderson once commented that he was the sort of guy you responded to by wanting to help in any way you could. If you had a photograph he could use, you were happy to give it to him. John was an active member of the CAHS, contributing some 15 articles, including the previously mentioned Vancouver story, to our *Journal*. He was also, as has been said, involved as an instructor with local Air Cadet squadrons.

'Unfortunately he suffered a stroke about nine months after retiring,' Pat recalls. But 'he determinedly recovered the use of his right hand so that he could resume his research and work on his manuscript. It was a labour of love and took many years to complete. But his final book (*Canadian Military Aircraft, Vol II*) was published shortly after he entered the Perley Rideau Veterans' Home, suffering from advanced Alzheimer's. It was difficult to accept that all of John's carefully accumulated knowledge was no longer accessible to him or to others. Thankfully he had been able to document some of it in his publications.'

John's determination was also apparent from the improvement in his speech, which had become painfully slow and obviously difficult after his stroke. This writer spoke with him at fairly regular intervals by phone and was struck by how rapidly he improved in only a matter of months.

In Onawa, as Pat recalls, 'John spent considerable time at the Canada Aviation Museum, doing research, answering questions or, as many suspect, just hanging out with the aeroplanes. For many years, on Canada Day after he retired he would volunteer to sit in the cockpit of the



Liberator and tell visitors what it was like, flying the aircraft during the war.'

In 1977 John collaborated with the late Sam Kostenuk to produce another large and impressive volume, *RCAF Squadrons and Aircraft*. Termed a "Squadron Continuity" by Sam, the book provides brief but comprehensive histories of all RCAF units — listing aircraft representative of those flown by the unit (with photographs of principle types), the locations from which they operated, squadron commanders and other useful information. John also teamed up with George Fuller and Ken Molson on the compilation of *Canadian Aeronautics, A Chronology, 1840-1965*, published by the CAHS in 1983. John supplied all of the military entries.

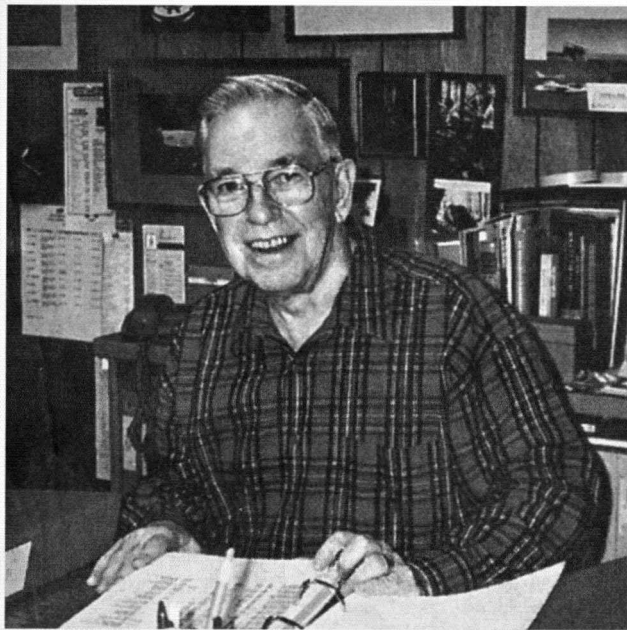
As his old friend Ron Wylie recalls, John played a significant role in the saving of the Avro Arrow nose section that is now displayed at the CAVM. Ron, a member of the RCAF Reserve, discovered the Arrow relic stored in a building near the Aviation Medicine facility at the RCAF Avenue Road Staff School. This was after Dieffenbaker's minions had so assiduously assured the destruction of all the Arrows at Avro's Malton plant. Ron immediately contacted John

***"His interest was to preserve and foster an interest in RCAF history in any way he could."***

and took him to see his discovery. John wasted no time in phoning Ralph Manning. The nose section was soon safely on its way to Ottawa, with its future assured.

John died in hospital early on 7 September. Beryl ("Bud") his wife of 63 years had been at his bedside until late the previous day. They had met and at Brockville and married after the war. The previous afternoon he had seemed well, and his sudden passing came as a shock. John had been suffering from Alzheimer's for the past four years and his condition had steadily deteriorated.

Born in Trois Rivières, Quebec, John's early schooling was in Westmont, Quebec, and then



Opposite, top: F/i John Griffin, RCAF, second from left, with his 200 Squadron, RAF, Liberator crew. Opposite, bottom: on RAF Consolidated 8-24 Liberator Mk 11/ similar to the machine flown by John. Left: 1993, John in his study/workshop, as he will be remembered by his family, and so many of his friends and fellow CAHS members. GRIFFIN FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS.

in Brockville, Ontario. His mother died when he was 12 and he spent his youthful summers at the Stewart family farm near Maxville, Ontario, with his aunts and uncles. He found that he enjoyed farm work. Once he caught the flying bug he took a part time job in a shoe store to earn the money for flying lessons. By the time he joined the RCAF in October 1941, he had obtained his pilot's licence. Although aptitude tests recommended streaming as a navigator, John managed to dig in his heels and become a pilot. By mid 1943, he was flying Libs with 200 Squadron on anti-sub patrols out of Yundum

in Gambia on the west coast of Africa. This was where the Free-French destroyer episode occurred. Later that year, 200 Squadron moved to India, patrolling the Bay of Bengal in search of enemy shipping.

After his move to Ottawa John maintained his pilot's licence and did not give it up until 1987. Flying would seem to have been the only sport that John enjoyed. *"He didn't play sports - no golfing, no football, no baseball, no hockey - and he wasn't a fan either. Nor did he play card games, like bridge or poker. He didn't enjoy hunting or even fishing particularly, nor did he drink or go to bars,"* says Pat.

But he was a loving and attentive father and grandfather. *"He took his children on many trips to the Royal Ontario Museum to see the Egyptian and other exhibits."* And *"Of course he wasn't*

*all serious, He could be struck by the humour in something and be reduced to helpless laughter, referred to as 'Gramp's Giggles,' when he couldn't stop laughing long enough to get the end of the joke out."*

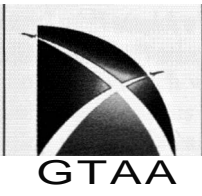
















John donated the fruits of a lifetime's research to the library at the Billy Bishop Museum in Heritage Park located at 1 Canadian Air Division Headquarters in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In recognition of his generosity, the library has been renamed the *John Griffin Library*. With John unable to be present, Betyl and Pat represented the family at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. In Pat's words, *"John would have been humbled to see his collected books and research papers, that he had so carefully catalogued, so beautifully displayed. The family is grateful that his collection is in such good hands."* Pat was heartened and impressed by what she described as the "reverence" with which John's material was treated.

A lengthy and well-written tribute to John titled "Pilot who flew wartime Liberators became leading aviation historian" by Buzz Bourdon appeared in *The Globe and Mail* of 10 November.

I would like to close with a final quote from Pat, *"His family and friends will miss John for so many reasons, both personal and professional. To some of you he was the aviation expert, or the co-worker. To his family, he was the person they were privileged to have as a husband, father, grandfather, brother and uncle."*

*Bill Wheeler with Pat Griffin*

## Corporate Members

	<b>Honeywell</b>	 <b>VAC DEVELOPMENTS LIMITED</b> Brampton, Ontario	 <b>Messier-Dowty</b> SAFRAN Group
	<b>Bathurst Inlet Lodge</b>	 <b>Cydne Manufacturing Inc.</b> Mississougo	
	 <b>VAC AERO</b> INTERNATIONAL INC. 1371 SPEERS ROAD ONTARIO L8L 2S5 TEL: (905) 827-4171 FAX: (905) 827-7496	<b>CBR TECHNOLOGY INC.</b>	 <b>HOPE AERO</b> PROPELLER & COMPONENTS Mississauga, Ontario
		<b>REIL INDUSTRIAL ENTERPRISES LIMITED</b>	 <b>Aero</b> THE JOURNAL OF THE EARLY AIRCRAFT
<b>RODGERS RV SHOWS LTD.</b>	 <b>GPA</b> GRANDE PRAIRIE AIRPORT	<b>PRINCE GEORGE AIRPORT</b>	 <b>HURRICANE CONSULTING</b>
	 <b>G's Aircraft Belts Inc.</b> AMO #107-99	 <b>Quality Aircraft</b> AMO #7-117-117-117	<b>BOMBARDIER AEROSPACE</b>