

AIR COMMODORE LEN BIRCHALL, WAR HERO (1915- 2004)

A native of St. Catharines, Len Birchall graduated from St. Catharines Collegiate and joined the Lincoln and Welland Regiment in 1932. After attending the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston, in 1937 he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force. Birchall flew defensive controls out of Dartmouth Nova Scotia and was attached to the Trans-Atlantic Ferry Command before joining 413 Squadron, which was operating out of the Shetland Islands, carrying out patrols off the coast of Norway, as well as covering convoys to Murmansk, conducting commando raids, and anti-submarine patrols.



The Squadron was transferred to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in early 1942 and it was there where Birchall, as a Squadron Leader, prevented another Pearl Harbour, a sneak attack on the island by the Japanese. Birchall and his crew were concluding a patrol on 4 April 1942, when they sighted the Japanese fleet steaming towards Ceylon. As the British air base on Ceylon lacked radar to warn of incoming attacks, Birchall was able to radio the location, speed, course, and composition of the enemy fleet to headquarters before being shot down by fighter aircraft and captured.

Not until after more than 3 years of torture as a POW he found out that his message was successful in reaching the naval base. He endured frequent interrogations accompanied by beatings. As a result of his signal, the British fleet was able to avoid destruction, the island was defended, and severe losses were inflicted on Japanese naval aircraft. His action earned him the Distinguished Flying Cross and the moniker 'The Saviour of Ceylon'. During captivity in a Japanese prison camp at Yokohama he was promoted to Wing Commander.

He was released 7 September 1945 and returned to St. Catharines on 11 October. In 1946, Birchall was made an officer of the Order of the British Empire. He retired in March 1981 from the RCAF and joined the faculty of Administrative Studies at York University as Executive Officer. His accomplishments over the Indian Ocean halted the Japanese in their plan to close the ring in the southern Hemisphere. Winston Churchill called Wing Cmdr. Len Birchall an, "airman who made one of the most important single contributions to victory" in World War II.

