



MARITIME PATROL AND RECONNAISSANCE FORCE HALL OF HONOR

Air Commodore Leonard Joseph Birchall

Royal Canadian Air Force

Air Commodore Birchall was born in St. Catherines, Ontario and entered the Canadian Armed Forces in 1933. He was selected for pilot training in 1937 and, at the outbreak of World War II, was flying convoy and anti-submarine patrols over the North Sea in his Consolidated Catalina PBY, initially from Nova Scotia and subsequently from the Shetland Islands. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, his squadron was transferred to the western Pacific to provide a reconnaissance force for the Royal Navy fleet operating there. Flying a patrol two days after his arrival at Ceylon, on 4 April 1942 and at the far edge of his search area, ships were spotted on the horizon. Determined to investigate, he discovered the approaching ships to be the Japanese invasion fleet, including 5 aircraft carriers. His aircraft was immediately set upon by the carrier's fighters but, before being shot down, he was able to successfully notify Ceylon and the Royal Navy fleet at Ceylon harbor of the approaching onslaught. With 3 of his crew dead, Air Commodore Birchall and his remaining crew were picked up by the Japanese and spent the remainder of the war in various POW camps. Of vital importance, the Royal Navy fleet was able to withdraw and Prime Minister Winston Churchill dubbed Air Commodore Birchall, "The Saviour of Ceylon" and added that the saving of the fleet was instrumental in the defeat of the Germans in North Africa, as this fleet was able to move into the Mediterranean.

Serving as the senior Allied officer in four Japanese POW camps, Air Commodore Birchall was instrumental in decreasing the Allied POW death rate from an average of 30 percent early in the war, to less than 2 percent by war's end. He repeatedly stood up to the Japanese, including striking a guard who was forcing a wounded Australian to work. At a dockside prison camp later in the war, Birchall ordered all of the prisoners to stop working until sick and wounded men were excused. For all of his efforts, he suffered repeated beatings and solitary confinement. He was finally liberated by American troops on 27 August 1945. His efforts in the POW camps was well known throughout the Allied world and he was recognized by the UK with induction as an officer in the Order of the British Empire, by the US with a Distinguished Flying Cross for his warning to Ceylon and induction as an officer in the Legion of Merit by President Truman for "His legendary exploits throughout Japan that brought renewed faith and strength to many hundreds of ill and disheartened prisoners." Canada recognized him with the Order of Canada and induction into Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame.

Air Commodore Birchall retired in 1967 but remained an Honorary Colonel at the Royal Military College of Canada until his passing. On that date he had earned five service clasps representing 62 years of service, matched only by one other person - Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother.