

Flying Officer Adrian Ralph Taylor A Newfoundlander's Sacrifice on D-Day

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On 6 June 1944, the allied nations of Canada, Great Britain, and the United States launched Operation Overlord, the invasion of northwest Europe. Among the tens of thousands of D-Day participants in this, the Second World War's most climatic battle, was Newfoundlander Adrian Ralph Taylor. By day's end, Taylor would number among the several thousand allied dead.

Adrian Taylor was born in September 1918 on Bell Island, and completed schooling at Prince of Wales College in St. John's. In 1939, he enrolled at

Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, and while there joined the Canadian Militia, becoming a member of the Mount Allison University Contingent, Canadian Officers Training Corps.

In April 1941, during his second year at Mount Allison, Adrian enlisted in the RCAF in Moncton, New Brunswick. His appearance, intelligence, and personality impressed recruiting officer L.T. Chapman. Taylor is "keen to fly and should quickly adapt himself to [the] training schedule," the officer wrote. Chapman ranked Adrian "above average" and recommended him for pilot training.

In May, he started basic training in Toronto, followed by Technical Training School in St. Thomas, Ontario, and then back to Toronto for Initial Training School (ITS). The results at ITS determined a recruit's

next posting, either flying training, navigation, or wireless school. In September 1941, the air force sent Adrian to No. 7 Elementary Flying Training School in Windsor, Ontario, where he learned basic flight and navigation. After about fifty hours flying time in a single engine Fleet Finch "primary" trainer, he progressed to No 14 Service Flying Training School in Aylmer, Ontario, where potential fighter pilots trained on the single-engine, more powerful North American Harvard aircraft. In January 1942, Adrian earned his wings and was promoted to Sergeant.

The following month he was posted to 126 (Fighter) Squadron in Nova Scotia, flying Canadian-built Hawker Hurricane fighters. August found him back in Newfoundland at RCAF Station Gander, then considered an overseas posting. Now promoted to Flight Sergeant, he commenced flying Hurricanes with 127 (Fighter) Squadron, commanded by Squadron Leader P.A. Gilbertson, previously a Spitfire pilot in the United Kingdom. At some point Adrian inherited a nickname. Fellow airmen referred to him affectionately as "Newfie" Taylor.

At Gander, fighter aircraft protected the base and patrolled the coastline. During high alert, Hurricanes were kept in a state of readiness, awaiting orders to scramble. Squadron duties included dawn and dusk patrols, sector reconnaissance, and search and rescue. Adrian had a hand in on the latter when he located a missing bomber. The lone survivor had walked some distance towards Gander before encountering a ground search party.

To prepare for a possible overseas posting, considerable time went into training. Pilots practised low level and formation flying, machine gun attacks, tail chasing manoeuvres, dog fighting, scrambles, and aerobatics. Adrian had the distinction of joining the Caterpillar Club during one such training flight. Founded in 1922 by Leslie Irvin, the first to make a free-fall or delayed-opening parachute descent, the Caterpillar Club honoured all whose lives the parachute had saved. Members of his club, named for the silk worm that spins the silk used in parachutes, received a certificate and a caterpillar brooch.

On the night of 22 November 1942, Adrian failed to return to Gander while carrying out authorised aerobatics and circuits. His Hurricane had gone into an uncontrollable inverted spin at eight thousand feet

during an aerobatics manoeuvre. At two thousand feet he bailed out in darkness, descending safely into the Newfoundland wilderness. Search aircraft took to the air at daybreak. Shortly before noon, 127 Squadron Hurricane pilot Flight Sergeant Tribner spotted the missing airman near Indian Bay Pond, his parachute spread out as a signal. Other aircraft arrived, dropping food and blankets. An amphibious Canso flew a track back and forth, guiding Taylor to Indian Bay Pond where a second Canso awaited. The walk took two hours. Adrian paddled out to the Canso in a collapsible dinghy carried under the parachute in flight. The dinghy capsized as he reached the aircraft, soaking him in cold water. Suffering from exposure, he was flown to Gander and taken directly to hospital. He returned to duty the following day none the worse for his ordeal.

In July 1943, now promoted Flying Officer Taylor found himself in England and shortly assigned to 186 Squadron, Royal Air Force (RAF), located at Ayr, County Ayrshire. Operations in England took on a different tempo from those back “home” at Gander. He flew Hurricanes with the squadron, which late in 1943 converted to Hawker Typhoons. The rocket-equipped Typhoon excelled in a low-level close support role, attacking enemy airfields and communications.

Early in 1944, Adrian was posted to 183 Squadron, RAF, again flying Typhoons, attacking enemy communications and flying bomb sites in northern France. As summer approached, plans were shaped for the allied invasion of northwest Europe, scheduled to take place along France’s Normandy coast. On 6 June, with naval and air forces bombarding German coastal positions, thousands of British, American and Canadian troops headed ashore. Among the airmen in support that day was Adrian Taylor.

Taylor’s six aircraft section included 183 Squadron’s commanding officer, Squadron Leader Felix Hugh Lawrence Scarlett, whose report the following day described the circumstances of the D-Day mission:

I was Leader of the section in which F/O Taylor was flying when reported missing. I was detailed to attack enemy troop movements in the area south-west of Caen. During this operation we were ‘bounced’ by 12 M.E. 109s. I gave the order to break and one aircraft was seen to spin in and burst into flames on crashing. Two other aircraft were seen chasing two

M.E. 109s inland. Owing to the cloudy conditions and poor visibility it was difficult to ascertain what happened to these two aircraft.

I ordered the aircraft to re-form, but only two aircraft joined me, three being missing. We orbited the scene of the crash, but there were no signs of the other two, or the enemy aircraft ... It was impossible to identify the letter of the aircraft that crashed owing to the camouflage paint.

Ten days later, the St. John's *Evening Telegram* reported Adrian Taylor as missing. He remained missing until January 1946 when a Flight Lieutenant J. Marchissio, search officer with the Missing Research and Enquiry Unit, RAF, "discovered the grave of an unknown British airman in the cemetery of Vendeuvre." Upon questioning the local Curé, Marchissio found that the airman had crashed on D-Day. A visit to the crash site revealed a tail fin bearing the aircraft number R8973. The number matched that of Adrian's missing Typhoon.

Adrian's aircraft, assumed to have been shot down by a Luftwaffe M.E. 109, crashed some twenty miles southeast of Caen. The Germans had permitted Monsieur Charles Anfai, in whose field the aircraft crashed, to bury the pilot. The local Curé conducted the funeral service. In May 1946, with the Research and Enquiry Unit's investigation complete, an RCAF Casualty Officer officially notified the Taylor family by mail that Adrian's grave had been located. "I hope it may be of some consolation to you to know," the officer concluded, "that your gallant son's grave is in sacred care and keeping."

Today, Adrian Ralph Taylor rests in St. Valery-en-Caux Franco-British Cemetery near Dieppe. On Bell Island, he is remembered on the local War Memorial and in a hymnbook donated to the United Church by his sister. He is remembered too, on the Newfoundland Airmen's Memorial¹ located inside the North Atlantic Aviation Museum in Gander. Among the museum's collections is a propeller blade, salvaged from the Hurricane Adrian bailed out of that night in November 1942.

¹ Since this article was first written, the Airmen's Memorial has been relocated to the Gander Heritage Memorial Park