

points of interest

HONORARY COLONEL CHARLEY FOX: AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

By Major William W. Beatty (USAF),
Captain Glenn Dean and Captain Peter Yip



Above: Honorary Colonel Charley Fox during World War II; Canadian WWII Spitfire CF photo

*Below: Honorary Colonel Charley Fox replicates a pose by a Supermarine Spitfire from a favourite Second World War photograph.
Photo: Warrant Officer Serge Peters*

Who was Charley Fox? Frankly, it was not that long ago that I did not know who he was, what he did and how he changed the course of history. However, one beautiful September day I met him, we chatted and, in an instant, he changed my life. After that short meeting I looked forward to meeting him again and buying him a drink of his choice; but I'll get to that later.

I am a United States Air Force exchange officer and am currently assigned to the Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre, Ottawa Detachment. Capt Glenn Dean and Capt Peter Yip are two outstanding Canadian officers assigned to my team. This past August Capt Dean mentioned that he was going to volunteer in this year's Battle of Britain ceremony. Recently stationed in Canada, I inquired about volunteering. Soon, Capt Dean, Capt Yip and I had volunteered to assist with the 2008 Battle of Britain ceremony. Our team was tasked to man the greeters' table and to direct the distinguished visitors, registered guests, veterans and general public to their assigned seats. A man and name unknown to me, Honorary Colonel (HCol) Charley Fox, was one of the registered guests.

An older gentleman, his chest heavy with medals, approached the table. Capt Dean pointed out who this gentleman was. He mentioned that the gentleman had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and was credited with injuring German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel during WWII, an event that changed the direction of the war. Duties of the position kept us busy throughout the ceremony. As a result I was not able to speak with HCol Fox, which was a strong aspiration of mine after hearing the quick summary of his history.

It was not until after the Battle of Britain ceremony had concluded that Captains Dean and Yip saw HCol Fox being photographed across the ramp. We immediately went over and introduced ourselves.

My first impression was that of a young man in an old man's body, and I immediately sensed that this man was a very proud Canadian. On that beautiful, sunny, blue-sky-filled September day I had a true gem of a moment. I was about to speak with a Canadian legend! When I introduced myself to him, he made it a point to spell his name, "C-H-A-R-L-E-Y" and again he emphasized that it ended in "L-E-Y." I proceeded to ask Charley, "How are you doing today?" Charley replied, "Well, I got up today, and at my age that is quite an accomplishment!" At that point we were all chuckling. Charley then gave each of us what appeared to be a business card. The card had his signature, contact information and on the reverse a picture of his "Last Patrol"; the flight of four Spitfires on May 5, 1945—considered the last sortie of the European War. Charley went into detail discussing each aircraft and who was piloting each one. We also spoke about Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee Jr. and his poem "High Flight." Charley asked us if we would show him where the Battle of Britain reception was being held and if we would show him the way. We were honoured to escort him and walked with him into the Canadian Aviation museum. During our short walk to the post ceremony function Charley looked at my shoes and said, "You have those shoes that you don't have to shine?" I said, "Yes." Charley said, "I let you know I still shine my shoes with Lincoln shoe polish." I looked down at Charley's shoes and thought, "Wow his shoes are just as shiny as mine."



Major William Beatty,
Honorary Colonel Charley Fox
and Captain Peter Yip
Credit: Captain Glenn Dean

Inside the Aviation Museum, Charley met up with some old friends and we went our separate ways after polite thank yous and goodbyes. We reveled in the knowledge and stories that Charley had passed on to us as we mingled at the reception. Later we decided to go outside and check out the Spitfires and Hurricanes that performed the flyby during the ceremony. Exiting the Aviation Museum we heard a voice from the balcony. It was Charley Fox! Charley saw that we were leaving and got our attention. Charley said, "I wanted to thank you for helping me!" We responded to him by expressing that it was our pleasure to help out and waved goodbye. Little did I know those would be the last words that Charley and I would exchange.

That evening when I made it home I emailed my second cousin, Bill Jones. Bill was a B-25 engine mechanic, who fought in Africa against General Rommel. I informed Bill that I met the man who was credited with taking Rommel out of the war and asked if he would like me to buy Charley a drink on his behalf. Bill instructed me to tell Charley, "thanks," and to buy Charley whatever he drinks no matter how much it costs. Sadly I won't be able to buy Charley that drink. However, I did learn during Charley's memorial that he liked a fine scotch.

The few moments I spoke with Charley are something that I will never forget. Charley was a kind man, and it is hard to imagine him as the skilled warrior he once was. What I did learn about Charley was that he was always thinking about the service of others. Whether it was talking about who he kept the faith with or who his long ago wingmen were, or was just saying thank you, Charley put others first. This is such a rare trait in today's society that we must ensure that Charley's selflessness continues to shine as an example to others for years to come. My hope is that Charley will be honoured in the Canadian War Museum. His examples of truly selfless acts of courage and bravery under fire would shine as a beacon to future generations. We owe a debt to the men and women who were like Charley; a debt that can never be repaid. We owe our freedom and lifestyle that we so dearly cherish to those silent heroes who never sought recognition for the sacrifices that they made. Charley, I salute you. I hope that I can follow your heroic examples and carry the torch to future generations of Americans. This Remembrance Day I will lift my glass with some scotch in your honour. Godspeed Charley Fox! ■

Major William W. Beatty was born in the Panama Canal Zone, Panama, raised in Washington state, but calls Alaska home. He was commissioned into the United States Air Force in 1997 from Central Washington University. Maj Beatty has held various positions including Deputy Chief of Wing Training, B-Flight Commander, Chief of Flight Deck Standards and Evaluations, and Squadron life support officer. He is an experienced E-3 (Airborne Warning and Control System) navigator with more than 2600 flight hours. Currently, he is assigned to Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre, Ottawa Detachment, as the Air Force Experimentation Centre B Team Leader.

Captain Glenn P.K. Dean is from Lower Sackville, N.S. In 1989, he enlisted in the Canadian Forces as a Communications Radar Systems technician. He was commissioned in 2001 and entered the Air Traffic Control career field. In 2007, he departed Canadian Forces Base Moose Jaw as the Chief Controller and was posted to his current position as the B1 Experiment Planner. Since 2007 Capt Dean has led various experimentation projects including the Combat Sky Satellite. He is heavily involved with the Vancouver 2010 Air Defence Communications project. Capt Dean, an avid photographer, recently won the 2008 DND "Best in Show Amateur."

Captain Peter J. Yip is from Kirkland, Que. He joined the Canadian Forces in 2003 and became a Communications and Electronics Engineering (Air) officer. In 2006, Capt Yip joined Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre, Ottawa Detachment, as the B2 Experiment Planner. He has orchestrated numerous experiments and projects including the Canadian Joint Precision Aerial Delivery Standoff System and Combat Sky Satellite. He is currently involved with the Vancouver 2010 Air Defence Communications project.