

No “Small” Feat: The Wartime Exploits of Squadron Leader N.E. “Molly” Small, DFC, AFC

By Darrell Hillier

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Squadron Leader Norville E. “Molly” Small. Photo courtesy Canadian Forces Joint Imagery Centre.

During the Second World War, Gander became home to several Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) squadrons tasked with carrying out antisubmarine patrols and convoy escort work over the stormy northwest Atlantic. One of these, No. 5 Bomber Reconnaissance (BR) Squadron, arrived in November 1942 operating Canso aircraft. Readers may recall that for many years the Canso was this province’s primary forest firefighting aircraft. Of pre-war design, its intended purpose however, was as a maritime patrol bomber.

In the early morning dawn of 7 January 1943, No. 5 Squadron lost one of its Canso's on the south side of Gander Lake. Accident investigators later surmised that the aircraft, heavily laden with depth charges and fuel, might have been caught in a severe downdraft before reaching sufficient height while crossing Gander Lake. Not until the following day did search aircraft spot the Canso's two survivors waving distress signals on the shoreline of Gander Lake. Five airmen were lost in the accident, including Squadron Leader Norville E. "Molly" Small, a decorated officer, leader, tactician, and innovator.

It was these qualities that brought Small to Gander only days before the accident. His was to be no routine operational patrol. Small, accompanied by an experienced Canso crew from Nova Scotia, had been assigned to carry out an endurance demonstration, going some six or seven hundred miles out to sea in a Canso stripped of excess equipment to allow extra fuel. Small discussed the weight reduction matter with all aircraft captains, records No. 5 Squadron daily diary on 5 January, and resolved to eliminate 1,269 pounds of equipment. This involved changing from 450-lb depth charges to 250-lb Torpex depth charges, removing the bow and tunnel guns and one thousand rounds of ammunition from each blister gun, and other minor equipment reductions. Small hoped to extend the patrol range of the RCAF's Cansos to the mid-Atlantic where German U-boats operated freely because aircraft based in eastern Canada and Newfoundland lacked sufficient range to reach them. Regrettably, within minutes of departure the life of this remarkable airman would come to a tragic end.

Norville Small was born in Allandale, Ontario, in 1908, and in 1928 he joined the fledgling RCAF. He trained as a pilot and received his wings in 1931. He next served on Canada's west coast, accumulating several thousand hours on seaplanes, flying boats, and twin-engine aircraft before resigning in 1937 to fly commercially. One employer, Canadian Airways, commended Small as "a pilot of outstanding ability and sound judgment." The onset of war in 1939 prompted Small to reenlist in the RCAF. A posting to No. 10 (BR) Squadron in eastern Canada followed and here the capable Small took on multiple duties. He served as an advanced flying instructor and carried out reconnaissance flights around the Labrador coast and over Hudson Bay and Hudson Strait. For a short period in 1941 he took up flying with the Royal Air Force

Ferry Command, making five aircraft deliveries from Bermuda to the United Kingdom before being posted to another RCAF squadron. His efforts and abilities as a pilot and leader did not go unnoticed. In March 1942, Air Force Headquarters in Ottawa gave him command of a squadron at Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, and in April he made an unsuccessful attack on a German U-boat. June found him in command of 113 (BR) Squadron, also at Yarmouth, and a recipient of the Air Force Cross in recognition of his devotion to duty and tireless work since the start of the war.

Small assured himself a place in Canadian aviation history when on 31 July 1942 he attacked and destroyed U-754 southeast of Cape Sable with four well-placed depth charges from a Hudson bomber. This marked the first success by an aircraft from Eastern Air Command, which directed air operations on Canada's Atlantic coast and in Newfoundland and Labrador. Small, ever the innovator, had by this date adopted the British RAF Coastal Command tactic of using white aircraft camouflage, becoming the first squadron commander in Eastern Air Command to do so. He had also established a system whereby aircrews waited in full readiness on twenty-four hour standby and arranged as well to be contacted immediately should intelligence information from intercepted U-boat radio transmissions reveal a probable enemy position. Such a system led to the destruction of U-754.

Senior officers considered Small an outstanding and enthusiastic leader, a master pilot, and an excellent tactician. Air force historian W.A.B. Douglas described him as Eastern Air Command's "outstanding pilot and its most conscientious student of maritime airpower." Indeed, for his exceptional "airmanship, courage and devotion to duty...in the face of the enemy" during six U-boat attacks, his initiative in completing difficult tasks in adverse weather, and his assistance in effecting a number of sea rescues, Small received the Distinguished Flying Cross, effective 1 January 1943. Six days later his life was ended, but his innovations lived on. "It was largely due to the efforts of Small," praised Douglas, "that Gander-based Cansos were able to make a series of promising attacks at maximum range" several weeks after his death.

Squadron Leader N.E. "Molly" Small, DFC, AFC, and his four comrades, Pilot Officer Donald Hudson, Pilot Officer John Mangan, Flying Officer Aubrey Tingle, and Sergeant Harold White rest in Gander's Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery. Small was thirty-three and married at the time of his death; an airman deserving of his honours and awards, and deserving too of recognition in a street name in Gander.