

Hurricane Pilot

THE WARTIME LETTERS OF W.O. HARRY L. GILL, D.F.M., 1940-1943

**Edited by Brent Wilson
with Barbara J. Gill**

**GOOSE LANE EDITIONS and
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Introduction

On February 12, 1942, Flight Sergeant Harry L. Gill, flying his Hurricane bomber over the English Channel, attacked German warships escorting the battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, damaging at least one enemy motor vessel and an Me 109 German aircraft. Shortly afterward, the nineteen-year-old Gill was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal (D.F.M.) for his exploits. Before he could receive his medal from the King at Buckingham Palace, however, Gill was transferred to India, where he was killed in action in January 1943.

Gill's story, as seen through his wartime correspondence, makes an important contribution to our understanding of the relationship between war and society on a number of levels. First, it shows how New Brunswickers contributed to Canada's effort during the Second World War, particularly through the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (B.C.A.T.P.) and the individual aircrew who participated in the air war against Germany and Japan. Second, the correspondence shows how that war affected individuals on a more personal level, leading some, like Harry Gill, to make the ultimate sacrifice for their country.

Harry Lewis Gill was born in South Devon (now Fredericton), New Brunswick, on May 9, 1922, the eldest child of Herbert and Mabel Gill. Gill grew up in a house on the corner of Union and Gill Streets in South Devon along with his younger siblings Ralph, Lloyd and Florence. He attended Devon Superior School and graduated from the Vocational



Gill's grave shortly after his death in January 1943. In mid-1946, the Imperial War Graves Commission reinterred his remains at the Maynamati War Cemetery in Bengal, India (now Bangladesh).

Harry L. Gill Collection

Department of Fredericton High School in June 1939. Along with his father, Gill worked as a labourer at the Devon Lumber Company until he was laid off, after which he was a service station attendant and bottle washer. He applied to join The Royal Canadian Air Force (R.C.A.F.) in February 1940, but was advised to wait for aircrew intakes. Subsequently, the eighteen-year-old Gill enlisted at Moncton on August 22 and left for Ontario, where he became a trainee in the B.C.A.T.P.

Over the next several months, Gill underwent training at various bases in Ontario and Quebec, and in April 1941 received his pilot's Wings. Now a Sergeant, he proceeded soon afterward to England, where he was attached to The Royal Air Force (R.A.F.) to undergo advanced operational training. Indeed, Gill was one of thousands of Canadian airmen who flew for forces other than the R.C.A.F. during the war and whose services are therefore often overlooked. In mid-July, he was assigned to No. 607 Squadron, R.A.F., and began flying missions against enemy targets in France in a Hurricane fighter-bomber. He was promoted Flight Sergeant in November 1941. After being awarded the D.F.M. in March, he and his Hurricane squadron were transferred to India, where, on May 1, he was promoted Warrant Officer, Class I Temporary.

In late summer 1942, Gill's squadron began active operations against the Japanese air forces and, on December 23, Gill destroyed a Japanese army fighter and damaged three bombers. On January 17, 1943, the twenty-year-old Gill was shot down and killed by four Japanese air-

craft near the Burma border. In mid-1946, the Imperial War Graves Commission moved Gill's remains from its initial gravesite to the Maynamati War Cemetery in Bengal, India (now Bangladesh).

Gill's accomplishments as a Hurricane pilot were honoured in many ways over the next several years. In April 1943, a memorial consisting of a framed photo of Gill in uniform was unveiled during an assembly in the Fredericton High School auditorium, his younger brother, Ralph, drawing aside the Union Jack to reveal the photograph. In April 1944, Gill's mother, Mabel, received his D.F.M. from the governor-general at an investiture ceremony at Government House in Ottawa. In August 1944, Gill's attack on the German warships that won him the D.F.M. was featured in *Canadian Heroes*, a national educational magazine devoted to presenting Canadian personalities to young Canadians. The two pages from the magazine are reproduced in the Appendix to this volume, while the magazine's colour cover appears on the back cover. In November 1944, Gill's parents dedicated a window in his memory in St. Mary's Parish Church in Devon, where he had been a parishioner. In May 1948, Gill's was among sixty-two names that appeared on a mural unveiled at Fredericton High School in memory of boys from the school who were killed during the war. Finally, in June 1948, the Geographic Board of Canada approved the naming of Gill Lake, near Chesterfield Inlet in the Northwest Territories, to honour him.

Throughout his wartime service, Gill regularly corresponded with his parents and young siblings, writing more than sixty letters between August 1940 and November 1942. The letters provide an immediacy and unguarded spontaneity that is often lacking in memoirs written years after the war and sometimes distorted by the passage of time. Though most of the letters were written to his mother, the teenaged Gill at times was surprisingly candid about his experiences.

In the letters, Gill is transformed from a small-town New Brunswicker into a mature Canadian serviceman who eventually finds himself fighting in a global war halfway around the world. Gill vividly describes the vigorous and demanding flight and ground training he received through the B.C.A.T.P., which Canada developed in December 1939 to train airmen from across the Commonwealth. Gill's thrill at learning how to fly



Gill's mother Mabel (left) wearing his D.F.M., which she received from the governor-general at Government House, Ottawa, in April 1944. Harry L. Gill Collection

comes through clearly as he progresses through the various schools of instruction. Despite his lack of a college education, unlike many of his fellow trainees, he perseveres and takes great pride in winning his Wings and promotions. Later, he describes his life as a young fighter pilot flying Hurricanes in an R.A.F. squadron where, for a time, he is the only Canadian among a group of young men from Britain, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Gill develops close friendships with his fellow pilots, many of whom are killed in action or become prisoners of war. When he is awarded the D.F.M., his English flight commander describes him affectionately as a “Harry the wizard bloke.” Gill’s letters also make clear his appreciation of the benefits he received from the service, including good pay, an education and medical care.

Gill’s personal qualities also stand out. Despite the great events occurring around him, he is still a young man away from home for the first time, and his family and community remain important to him.

Correspondence with family and friends greatly boost his morale. No matter where he travels, he never stops writing about home and the fellow New Brunswickers he meets, asking for copies of local newspapers and thinking about his plans for the future, particularly concerning his girlfriend, Lorna. Gill retains a strong sense of humour throughout, no doubt trying to allay his family's worries about him and keeping up his own spirits. Only in his letters to his father does he raise the possibility that he might not return home. And he also remains self-effacing, playing down his own accomplishments, especially as they appear in newspapers. Yet he shows pride in the R.C.A.F. and its contribution to the war effort.

* * *

Harry Gill's wartime letters and his extensive collection of personal photos and other items, including his flight log, form the basis of this book. The letters reproduced here represent about two-thirds of those found in the collection. They have been edited to ensure uniformity in spelling and dates. Details, such as dates and places, have been checked against Gill's flight log and personnel file and No. 607 Squadron's war diary, and, in a few places, errors have been corrected. To ensure a smooth flow to the narrative square brackets have not been used to indicate where words were added nor ellipsis where passages were deleted. Researchers who wish to inspect the unedited versions should consult the complete collection, which is housed at the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick.

Much to Gill's dismay, the letters he wrote after going overseas were censored and sensitive information removed. Because he initially wrote on both sides of the page, sections of the letters that seem quite innocent are also missing. During his overseas service, especially in South Africa and India, Gill experienced many sights to which he was clearly unaccustomed. In his descriptions of African and Indian women, for example, he uses language considered racist today. These passages have been left as Gill wrote them, however, to show a young man's view of the world that is often missing from the wartime literature.