

### **William Cameron Stewart – In Memoriam**



I only knew him by reputation, like “well Billy Stew says” or “that’s not the way Billy would do it”. One day a fellow pilot was telling me about pulling the drag chute before lowering the nose in a CF104. Normally this would cause the nose to slam down hard, but Billy had a technique that would prevent that... pulling back full aft on the stick at “just the right moment”. I remember my response: “Well, I think I’ll just leave that to Bill”.

– Joel Paton, 17 Dec 2013.

William Cameron Stewart, born June 11, 1934, in Campbellton, New Brunswick, the second of five children of William & Marian (Jones) Stewart, died after a remarkably original life, without almost ever having to wear a tie, of instant heart failure at an advanced age, almost exactly as he had hoped, in Halifax, December 6, 2013.

Bill grew up in Dalhousie, N.B., joined the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) at the age of 17, and became a proficient pilot on, among other aircraft, the [Chipmunk](#), [Harvard](#), [T-33](#), [F-86 Sabre](#), [CF-104 Starfighter](#), and [DHC-5 Buffalo](#).

Early in his career, while training on the F-86 in Chatham, N.B., he once telephoned friends in Dalhousie to say he would race them to the cliff, hung up, then arrived in his aircraft, pulling up from low on the water to pop up above ground, just as they did. He courted his future wife Annabelle Mott, the girl next door, by flying low over her high school while in session, upside down to hide his identifying numbers, until his commanding officer told him to stop.

He once had to eject from an F-86 when the engine started disintegrating. He prided himself on almost never swearing, however the final seconds of the plane recording consist solely of a series of very strongly worded epithets. When his parachute caught high up in a tree, and he realized he was going to be waiting awhile for rescue, the first thing he did was slap his breast pocket to make sure he had his cigarettes.

Once on survival training in the middle of the forest with another pilot, he watched a colleague come out to give them an airshow in an F-86, and when he came over the top of his final loop, he went back into his tent, because he knew the maneuver was not survivable, and did not want to watch. He said he could never make the investigator understand later that the only way the pilot could have had a chance was to accelerate much faster on the way down, so he might have had enough G to pull out of the dive.

He spent the middle of the 1950's flying F-86's at [3 Wing](#), Canada's NATO base in Zweibrucken, Germany. During this time, the height of the “cold war”, when jets were new and no shots were fired, for one two-year period his record books show the loss of fellow pilots at a rate of one every two weeks. In the end, [107 RCAF pilots](#) died flying the F-86.

In 1959, at the advanced age for a fighter pilot of 24, he was selected to join Canada's new jet aerobatic team [The Golden Hawks](#). Over the next three years he flew in the box, second solo, and lead solo roles. The Hawks did airshows across Canada, with stops in the US, helping to put the RCAF on the national stage, boost recruiting, and raise Canada's profile within NATO and beyond.

In 1961, he moved from the Hawks to a recruiting role in Halifax, N.S., married his sweetheart Annabelle Mott, and had a son the following year. While driving his car, he once pointed out the window and announced to his passenger, a Sergeant at the time, "moo cows!".

Bill was subsequently transferred to RCAF Station Cold Lake, Alberta, to learn to fly the Canadair-built CF-104 Starfighter, Canada's contribution to NATO's nuclear strike capability. The F-104 was [supersonic](#), the first fighter capable of flying at Mach 2, twice the speed of sound or more than 2,000 kilometers an hour. It became known as the "widow-maker", with [37 CF pilots](#) and 110 of Canada's 238 Starfighters lost over almost 25 years of service. During his subsequent postings in Germany, every couple weeks Bill would spend a few nights sleeping within a few yards of his plane, so he would be ready to launch within minutes if called and fly just above the tree tops at high speed across Europe to drop a 70 kiloton nuclear bomb on some major target east of the Berlin Wall. He said there were escape plans, but no-one believed they would be returning.

In a scary world, for a long time, he helped show that democracy could deploy better, faster, more dangerous, much cooler fighter aircraft, piloted by brave and extraordinarily talented men, in a combination capable of unleashing unprecedentedly lethal effects very quickly almost anywhere in the world. He was on the front line of the deterrent that gave dictators pause, helping to keep the free world safe, by putting his life on the line, often several times a day. Of course, he did not look at it that way.

He once split a CF-104 lengthwise along the bottom, pulling what engineers later determined to be 14 G's, fighting against a stick physically pushing back to try and keep the wings from ripping off, at one point blacking out, in a barely successful attempt to avoid a very sudden, supersonic landing. The largest pieces of the airplane were bulldozed into a pit and covered with sand. He said he heard, much later, that the investigation concluded it was not his fault.

Once when he headed out on a vacation, pulling a trailer with a large red station wagon, a colleague in an CF-104 found him on the highway and then put on an airshow that stopped cars along the highway for miles. When he finished nine years, and remarkably more than 2,000 hours on the CF-104, including instructing the next generation, he gave a series of solo aerobatic airshows at bases across Canada, as the Air Force paid tribute to a man that could take a "rocket with a pilot in it" through attitudes and positions and maneuvers that seemed to defy the abilities of the plane, man, and often physics itself.

Doing a job this extreme, so new, so far from natural occurrences, so dangerous, with global nuclear war and his potential role in it as a constant back-drop, while friends and colleagues died suddenly and regularly around him, had a cost. It was a cost he was willing to pay, to have as much fun as he did, but it was steep. Like any good man of his time, he kept it mostly inside, behind a genuine – yet very much willed – constant cover of humour and good will. However, the cost could still be seen, sometimes, in what he could not do, in what he was compelled to do, in the way he talked so off-handedly when the subject of death came up, while staring levelly at a far away horizon.

Basically, he was an elite athlete in the most extreme individual sport. He took up weight-lifting in high school to protect himself, knocked down his main bully, and had no more trouble. He was the smallest boy on his high-school basketball team, and helped them make it to the provincial finals. From time to time he played volleyball, badminton, racquetball, and squash. Once to tie rope to the branch of a tree to make a swing, within the presence of still living witnesses, he backed up for a good start, then ran up the trunk and swung himself onto the branch. He had the kind of hand-eye coordination and balance that set him apart from most of the rest of us. It is

true that you can “tell who is a fighter pilot” in a group, with a confidence of purpose that seems effortless and absolute. It may also be that these are the kind of men needed to be a fighter pilot, capable of a supreme focus within the arena, and a stillness away from it, of the very best athletes. These gifts gave him the opportunity to have the most fun he could have, and kept him alive in many close calls, where the penalties were absolute. And afterward, he had absolutely no interest in organized sports. After all the hours of millisecond control of so many thousands of pounds of thrust, he was wrung out, spent, never able again to be excited by teams of earth-bound men battling back and forth in an enclosed space.

Unusually for someone in his position, in Zweibrucken, Germany, and Summerside, PEI, he lived in the local town instead of on the base. In the 1960's, at 3 Wing in Germany, and again in the 1970's, in Cold Lake, Alberta, he edited the Base newspaper, putting out publications with avant-garde, self-referential, relativistic multimedia content that, had The Rolling Stone magazine or Marshall McLuhan been aware, may have caused them to switch vocations to find something more original to do. He played with video cameras when animated title sequences required stop-action capture of a board with velcro letters, and was inventive with it. He played with reel-to-reel tapes in the early sixties, mixing channels and sound effects, when the Beatles were still playing in bars. He made tables, chairs, beds, book-cases, and a couch. He could sit down with a guitar, piano, or harmonica and just start playing – in a different life he would have been a fine professional musician. No one ever saw him draw, however he wrote unusually beautifully, with a bold script that had the consistency and elegance of calligraphy.

He was in it for the flying. He was a pilot's pilot. He once answered a questionnaire by saying he was not ambitious. He respected the Forces, orders, and the chain of command, and genuinely believed in the absolute commitment of the military code to honour and integrity. However, the point, why he joined and what he always wanted to do, was command an aircraft capable of flying more powerfully than any vision humanity had before imagined, and fling it around the sky at the very edge of its capabilities and the limits of human experience. Sometimes when dogfighting he would maintain a turn so tight under such high G he would “grey-out” and lose the ability to see, completing the turn solely by touch until his vision came back. He said Canadians won a lot of NATO competitions because they developed this ability.

After CF-104's, he did a stint commanding the CF recruiting centre in Edmonton, Alberta. In his last posting with the CF, he flew Buffalo aircraft from Summerside, PEI, for search and rescue, dropping pumps to ships in trouble, and medevacing sick kids to major hospitals. In the middle of this posting, he was called to serve six months wearing a blue cap, as lieutenant-colonel and Commanding Officer of the 116 Air Transport Unit in Ismailia, Egypt, providing support for the [UNEF II](#) peacekeeping forces in the Mideast.

After he retired from the CF, he served in a variety of roles for the Canadian Department of Transport, including enforcement, risk management, and safety. During this period, and even more after retiring, he went through a large number of high performance motorcycles, including the Special Edition 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary Honda Gold Wing, which he immediately traded in the following year since he said the newer model had better steering. He drove his machines, “the next thing to a 104”, across Canada several times, and circled the continent from the California Redwoods to the Florida wetlands. When he finally decided his legs were not as strong as he wanted, the rebel with a safety margin gave up his bike the same way he gave up flying, with a considered decision, and, as far as anyone could tell, without looking back. He said that he always figured out what his limit was, pulled back 15%, then carefully worked as long and hard as he could, practicing for years, to move that limit steadily outward. It is likely the philosophy that enabled him to excel, while staying alive.

He loved technology. In 1971, he bought his squadron some of the very first calculators, costing \$400 then, with the most beautiful little buttons made before or since. He started working with Amateur Radio in the 1970's, learned Morse code, and later talked with people all over the world using the simple dipole antenna on top of his house. He pushed early computer use in the

Department of Transport. Two days after he heard about the Internet he bought a Macintosh and signed up for an account. He loved radios, phones, binoculars, knives, flashlights, and sunglasses, not necessarily in that order.

Many fathers claim they had to walk a mile to school on the railroad tracks uphill both ways. Few of them, on showing his kids his childhood home for the first time, are found to live directly across from the school main door, as close as one can get without living in the actual building itself. For several years he played 78 RPM records at scary 33 speed on large speakers out the windows on Halloween. An expert extrovert mimic, he was comfortable at rest and alone. Every glass or cup he put down slowed dramatically in the last few inches, and came in for a perfect landing. He was an honest man, who tried to always “give 15 minutes to the Queen”. He said that what he wished for most was for people to be less selfish and greedy. He was always upset about injustice, but almost never actually angry about anything. He cried a very small number of times. He was hard and soft, and felt, empathized, and loved deeply.

In 2011, he was diagnosed with a terminal lung disease, and was most concerned about a slow decline. After an earlier heart attack on a squash court, and later a quadruple bypass, he had pushed his body to the limit – although, as he flew, always carefully and a bit at a time. In the end, he had his mind, mobility, and independence, and expired when his heart simply stopped.

To the extent he had any spiritual beliefs, he often said he thought that reality was infinite. His written instructions in case of his passing state no preference for his earthly remains, since (copy-and-paste from his typing): “I will be long gone and doing loops and rolls in a 104 with unlimited gas and will have no interest in the body that I left behind”.

He is survived by his son William Stewart, wife Christine, and grandchildren Livia and Julien; daughter Sarah Jackson, husband Mike, and grandchildren Emily, Josh, Hannah, and great-grandson Nolan; daughter Jennifer Fraser, husband Blair, and grandsons Ryann and Cameron; son Samuel Peter Stewart; sister Ferne McCombe; brother Currie Stewart and wife Karen; sister-in-law (of late brother Peter) Lorraine of Dalhousie, NB; sister-in-law (of late brother Charlie) Margaret; ex-wife and constant supporter Annabelle Thiebaut; great friend and fellow astronomer Martial Thiebaut; loving friend Jodi Bolger; old flame Katharine Mott; and many loving nieces and nephews.

He was predeceased by his brothers Charlie and Peter, and brother-in-law Jim McCombe. He was a good man who did his best, more than most, and left a better world for us all. He will be greatly missed by all who knew and loved him.

Cremation has taken place, and his remains will be laid to rest with those of his parents and brother in Dalhousie, N.B. No formal service is planned. Family and friends will gather to celebrate him and his life sometime in the summer 2014.

Per Ardua Ad Astra. (Through Adversity To The Stars.)



[NFB Golden Hawks Short](#) – [Jeremy Hansen on the Hawk One](#) – [W.C. Stewart Sabre Interview](#)