"I regret to inform you..."
Next-of-kin Notification and Official Condolences – The Case of Flight Lieutenant George J. Chequer, RCAF

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During the Second World War public memorialization and private bereavement complemented one another in lamenting the loss of over 42,000 Canadians on active service. The visible symbols of the nation’s wartime grief included casualty lists and obituaries published in newspapers, religious services conducted to ease the grief of surviving relatives and friends, and various public commemorative ceremonies. Less frequently seen in public is the official and private correspondence received by Canadian families upon the deaths of their loved ones on active service.

It is not the existence of such correspondence that is little known. The poignant image of a shattered parent taking delivery of a dreaded telegram announcing the death, wounding, capture, or unknown whereabouts of a son, or sometimes a daughter, is well established. What is less-well understood is the varied nature and volume of the correspondence that notified and then attempted to console the bereaved families. These letters and sympathy cards emanated from public or governmental sources, including the deceased’s unit commanding officer, unit chaplain, casualty officers from the service or branch in question, top-ranking service officers, government officials, cabinet ministers, and even Buckingham Palace. Most were personalized form letters. The sympathy cards were, of course, mass produced and disseminated as a matter of routine. Other private correspondence would arrive from friends of the deceased, usually men having served in the same unit and parents of other servicemen having lost their lives or been captured in the same action.

These documents powerfully convey the mood of these troubled times. The wording, variety, and even physical nature of this correspondence evoke at once individual tragedy and, more broadly, the sad regularity of death among so many young Canadians in so short a time. While officialdom showed every single loss of life to matter, insistence that none of the lives were expended in vain permeates most official and private expressions of grief.

The Minister of National Defence for Air, Charles Power, whose own son was wounded and captured by the Japanese at Hong Kong in December 1941, recorded in his memoirs that Canadians expected as much information as possible on the fate of their family members posted as 'missing' following air operations. He took a personal interest in casualty notification to the next-of-kin and the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) made a considerable institutional effort in communicating with families suffering the loss of a loved one. "It was inconceivable to the average parent of an R.C.A.F. airman," he wrote, "that the Minister of National Defence for Air should not know exactly where and how the boy was and what his status was." He went on:

If he was missing or otherwise a casualty, we were expected to have the full details of the action in which the boy was involved. We were obliged to give more attention to these matters than was
necessary in either Britain or the United States. In Canada no sooner was the notification sent to next of kin than inquiries began to arrive at our headquarters as to the circumstances and details; when lads were missing, we received persistent inquiries as to the prospects of good or bad news. I was very sympathetic to these inquiries and did my best to obtain further information; the Casualty Branch was instructed to put forth its best efforts to satisfy the demands made upon it.²

In July 1941, Power travelled to London to discuss with the Air Ministry and the Royal Air Force (RAF) a range of issues involving Canada's growing air force strength overseas and Ottawa's desire to "Canadianize" its commitment as much as possible. Among the topics broached was the need to facilitate the information flow regarding casualties suffered by members of the RCAF serving in RAF squadrons. On this particular matter, though not on all topics, the British authorities seemed entirely forthcoming and both services moved quickly to co-operate in next-of-kin notification.³

As the war progressed, and especially as the strategic bomber offensive against Germany expanded, RCAF casualty officers grew ever busier. In January 1943, the RAF's Bomber Command formed No. 6 Group, comprised entirely of Canadian bomber squadrons. Until sustained Canadian ground operations began following the invasion of Sicily in July 1943, the RCAF's bomber forces suffered most of Canada's combat fatalities. Moreover, thousands of Canadian aircrew served with RAF squadrons, nightly involved in air operations over enemy targets in Europe. From November 1943 to March 1944 in particular, Bomber Command undertook a series of punishing raids against Berlin. On the night of 30/31 January 1944, Bomber Command launched a massive attack against the German capital. It was the third such raid in four nights. Among the 534 bombers dispatched were 440 Lancasters, including the Lancaster Mark IIs of 514 Squadron, 3 Group, RAF. Despite the reported success of this devastating bombardment, the raiders did not escape unscathed. Thirty-two Lancasters and one Halifax bomber were lost, resulting in Allied casualties of 193 airmen killed and 53 taken prisoner.⁴ The only loss recorded by 514 Squadron as a result of this raid was Lancaster DS735, "A" for Apple, piloted by a 22-year-old Canadian, Acting Flight Lieutenant George Joseph Chequer of Ottawa. The Lancaster was shot down by anti-aircraft fire near Magdeburg.

Chequer obtained his wings and a commission in December 1942 upon his graduation from No. 3 Service Flying Training School, Calgary. He and his parents saw one another for the last time that month. He arrived in Britain in January 1943.

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before it had reached its target area. Chequer and another crewman, Flight Sergeant J.L. O'Brien, an Australian, were killed. Six others bailed out, of whom five became prisoners of war, and another, Sergeant R. Montgomery, a Scot, was drowned after landing in a lake. (There was one extra crewman aboard for training.) This was Chequer’s ninth mission (and seventh to Berlin) since his first operational sortie on 16 December 1943.5

George Joseph Chequer joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in August 1940, serving as groundcrew in Calgary before remustering to aircrew in April 1942. He graduated as a pilot from the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) in December 1942, and was posted to 514 Squadron when it was formed in September 1943. The squadron was based in Waterbeach, Cambridgeshire and flew its first operational mission on 3 November 1943.6

Chequer was unmarried and, like many Canadians, had a number of relatives residing in Britain, including some in London, which was convenient when he took his leaves. He wrote home to his parents on average twice a month, occasionally asking for cigarettes, commenting on the dampness of British accommodations, or telling them how he longed for a posting to warmer climes. On 26 September, he wrote his parents that his crew, two Australians, three Englishmen, and a Scot were a "very good bunch". Three weeks later he sent his parents a group snapshot of the men with whom he risked his life and remarked that they spent their leave time together.7

What follows is the ‘paper trail’ detailing the manner in which Chequer’s parents and his sister, Eileen, learned of his death and attempted to cope with it. The documents require little commentary and include telegrams, letters from various authorities and individuals, and the formal expressions of sympathy the families of all casualties received. All the material is drawn from the archival and photographic collection of the Canadian War Museum.8 Text occasionally has been added to offer further information or chronological coherence. While no two Canadian families’ correspondence files would ever be exactly the same, enough similarities exist between them to make the Chequer case a reasonably representative sample of RCAF casualty reporting.

Chequer wrote to his parents on 3 December 1943.9

...I can hardly realize I have been over here practically a year. I have just come back from leave. I spent it in London and had quite a good time. The folks are well and the only complaint is that they have not heard from you for quite some time...

I just received two more packages of cigarettes, 300 in each one, but have not had the lot of 1000 yet, but I guess it is on the way. I have not received the other two parcels but I suppose they are following me around. I have been moved a couple of times just recently and the mail takes a while to catch up...

I am sorry that I can hardly send anything in the way of gifts, so all I can do is tell you to have the run of my bank account. So by all means have a good time. I would like you to cash a cheque for about $75.00 and get anything you want for the three of you...

Everything is fine and dandy here, having a good time. So Cheerio for now.

Love,

George
The last known letter from him is dated 28 December 1943 and describes his Christmas celebrations at RAF Beachwater.¹⁰

Many thanks for the many fine Xmas things...the sheepskin vest is really swell, fits perfectly and is very warm. The chocolates were a treat. I suppose it was quite a job getting them. I have also received the carton of 1000 cigarettes, thanks a lot Dad. The cake also went down very well, we ha[ve] some quite good feeds when everyone gets their parcels together...Things are going quite well, nothing serious happening to date. I hope you had a good Xmas season. did you get a turkey after all? I suppose that turkeys were hard to get. I am glad to hear that tea is going to be unrationed again. I bet Dad will go on a tea binge and drink about 10 pots. Well I must close for now. so cheerio and all the best.

Love,

George
On 1 February, George West, the chaplain of 514 Squadron, sent a handwritten note to Mr. and Mrs. Chequer.

...I understand the uncertainty and anxiety which you must feel. I was waiting up for the crews that night, and it was a great grief to all of us when your son's plane failed to return...[It is not unreasonable to hope that they may have escaped disaster by bailing out and became prisoners of war. But of course, there is no certainty about this, and it is not until official information comes through via the Red Cross that your terrible suspense will be ended...I know that whatever has happened to him...you can be sure that his chief thought was less for his own safety than for loyalty and devotion to duty. We here are deeply grateful for the help and sacrifices that you of the Dominions are making in the war and greatly appreciate the generous spirit which has inspired men like your son...[I like so many other brave men he has willingly hazarded his life for a great cause and we may be proud and thankful for his example..."
On 20 April 1944, Squadron Leader W.R. Gunn, RCAF Casualties Officer, whose name appeared at the bottom of so many letters bearing grim news to Canadians, wrote George Chequer Sr., father of George Joseph, informing him of ways to contact the next-of-kin of other members of his son’s crew. Communication between families suffering losses at the same time was a common practice. Many experiencing the pain of sudden bereavement sought solace in others who shared their grief. But Mr. Chequer had already received a note dated 23 March from Sergeant H. Ewart Gulliford, Royal Army Ordnance Corps, father of Flight Sergeant R.L. Gulliford, RAF, who had bailed out safely from the doomed Lancaster and been taken prisoner. Gulliford had received the good news about his son being a prisoner and hoped that Mr. Chequer had heard the same about his own son. Chequer replied on 3 April, informing him of George Joseph’s death. Gulliford wrote back with a moving letter of 5 May. “I am truly sorry”, he wrote, “that after going through the long agony of suspense, you should get the terrible news of your son’s decease.”

“I was not aware that any of the crew were dead until I had a letter from the parent of another boy, and I felt that by writing to you I had opened all your sorrows again. Will you please accept my very deepest sympathy in your loss?

“The adjutant of your son’s squadron described him as ‘very experienced and seasoned’. I saw a photograph of the crew and your son appeared to be a very nice fellow...

“I was notified by the Air Ministry on March 11 that [my son] was a prisoner of war in German hands, and we have received a card and letter from him. I will endeavour to find out from him any information he can give regarding your son and will pass it on at once.”

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Once George Joseph Chequer was officially listed as missing, his family received condolences from a variety of sources. Closure was difficult to obtain and family members continued to receive correspondence related to their son’s death for years to come.
To Mr. and Mrs. George Chequer

I have learned with deep regret that Flight Lieutenant George Joseph Chequer, R.C.A., has been reported missing.

The Government and people of Canada join me in expressing the hope that more favourable news will be forthcoming in the near future.

Charles P. Power
Minister of National Defence for Air

Buckingham Palace

This commemorates the gratitude of the Government and people of Canada for the life of a brave man freely given in the service of his Country.

Flight Lieutenant George Joseph Chequer, R.C.A.
His name will ever be held in proud remembrance.

January 30, 1944
Charles P. Power
Minister of National Defence for Air

These formal cards from minister and monarch express official gratitude for an irreplaceable loss.

George R.I.
In addition to service medals, the next-of-kin of all Canadian war dead received a Memorial Cross, often referred to as the Silver Cross. Ottawa also awarded families a Memorial Bar to be attached to the ribbons of medals awarded deceased servicemen.
George Joseph Chequer’s crew, probably September 1943. Chequer is seated centre, front row.

Mrs. Hennie Carey, the mother of another crew member of the downed Lancaster who had already lost her husband and a son-in-law during the war, replied to a note Mr. Chequer had written her at about the same time he was in contact with Sergeant Gulliford. Like Gulliford, with whom she was also in touch, Mrs. Carey was at first under the impression that all crewmen had parachuted to safety. “I never knew your son”, she wrote on 26 May, “but feel we all do as Jackie [her son] could not express his gratitude to his pilot enough when on leave. he always said ‘we crew put our lives in dear George’s hands’, which only proved to be true...I have your dear son to thank for my son’s and the rest of the crew’s being P.O.W.s”14

In January 1945, the air force returned to Mr. Chequer his son’s birth certificate and school records – documents George submitted to the RCAF upon enlisting. Moreover, at Mr. Chequer’s request, in February 1947 the RCAF sent him his son’s flying log book.15 While no record of it can be found in the Chequer file at the Canadian War Museum, George Joseph’s personal effects almost certainly were returned to his family as would any monies to which the dead airman would have been entitled. Any packages of cigarettes or food addressed to Chequer arriving at 514 Squadron following his death would have been opened and distributed among his squadron mates as was customary in cases such as these.

In September 1948, the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) informed Mr. Chequer that George Joseph’s body had been exhumed from its location near the crash site and removed to the British Military Cemetery located in the British Occupation Zone in Berlin. Chequer and his Australian mid-upper gunner, J.L. O’Brien, were buried side-by-side as was common practice when interring aircrew who had perished together. A total of 527 Canadian airmen were buried in that cemetery. Unfortunately, due to the onset of one of the Cold War’s earliest crises, the Soviet blockade of Berlin, the IWGC was forced to admit to Mr. Chequer that “we know of no means whereby you could obtain permission to visit the cemetery at the present time.”16 It is not known when, or if, Mr. Chequer ever saw his son’s gravesite, although his sister Eileen visited in 1958.17

Photo sent to the Chequer family in 1949 by RCAF.
The healing process took years, and often was never completed, for literally hundreds of thousands of Canadians who lost spouses, relatives, lovers, friends, neighbours, and colleagues during the war. As one struggle ended, theirs only began. It is hoped that by showcasing some of the official correspondence stimulated by a single Canadian airman’s death, some light will have been shed on the process of next-of-kin notification in Canada during the Second World War.

Notes

I am indebted to Carol Reid of the Canadian War Museum Archives for bringing the Chequer file to my attention.


2. Norman Ward, ed., *A Party Politician: The Memoirs of Chubby Power* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1966), p.231. There is room for much research into the processes and procedures by which information was conveyed to the families of Canadian casualties and the manner in which next-of-kin responded to the news itself as well as the nature of its transmission.


7. CWM58A1 21.18 19910181-043.

8. CWM Archives, 58A 1 21.18 and 58A 1 21.19. One previously published similar exchange can be found in Terry Copp with Richard Nielsen, *No Price Too High* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1996), pp.195-196. However, space limitations allowed these authors to present only a fragmentary review of such correspondence accompanied by two partial illustrations of the documents concerned.


10. CWM Archives 58A 1 21.18 19910181-043.

11. CWM Archives 58A 1 21.18 19910181-043.


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