

# GERALD (GERRY) W. A. BELL, "Canada's first Black airman"



Gerald (Gerry) W. A. Bell

Gerald (Gerry) W. A. Bell, the son of Ernest Bell of St. Catharines, Ontario and Florence Bell (nee Morton) was born in Hamilton, Ontario on 17 February 1909. From 1928 to 1930 he studied medicine at the University of Western Ontario. In 1929 he received his private and commercial pilot ratings as well as an Air Engineers Certificate. In 1931 he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. A rising sprinter, Bell competed with Jessie Owens in 1933 in international competition. They met again in Berlin, Germany at the 1936 Olympics where Bell was a track and field trainer. In Hamilton, Ontario Bell was an instructor for barnstorming, aviation, and bush flyers. When the war broke out in 1939, Bell relocated to Yorkshire, England where for the next four years he trained the pilots of the 6th Bomber group. He tested new aircraft, trained pilots, and joined 424 Squadron as an air gunner on flying operations against the enemy. Following the war, Bell served at bases across Canada and with No. 3 Wing in Germany before retiring in 1961 as a Warrant Officer. After 25 years of military service Bell began a 12-year career as a quality control officer at de Havilland and later at Spar Aerospace. In retirement Bell helped restore one of only two flying Avro Lancaster Bombers now housed permanently at the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum in Hamilton.

## William (Bill) Hokan



Bill Hokan of St. Catharines, Ontario, joined the military in 1951 and served with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry for 20 years. During that time Bill served in Canada, Korea, and Germany. With the Kingsway Legion Bill's achievements include serving as sergeant-at-arms, Cadet and Band Liaison Officer, Executive and 1st Vice-President as well as starting the Blind Shuffleboard League. Bill also received a Certificate of Merit in 1986, Life Membership in 1992 and the Meritorious Service Medal in 1996. In 1961 Bill won the Golden Glove Championship and was an accomplished side drummer playing with Military Bands. Bill's sister, Private Phyllis Jean Nicholson served with the Canadian Army Medical Corp.

Left: William Hokan

Right: Phyllis Jean Nicholson, Canadian Army Medical Corp



## CONTEMPORARY SERVICE

### Stephen Thomas, MB, CD



Sergeant Stephen Thomas, MB, CD was born in Scarborough, Ontario and attended Birchmount Collegiate. In 2000, while attending high school and participating in a militia "Co-op" Course, he joined the 7th Toronto regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, a reserve unit, and achieved the rank of Master Bombardier. In 2003/04, he completed his first tour in Afghanistan, in Kabul. Subsequently, in 2005, he transferred to The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada, a reserve infantry regiment also based in Toronto, Ontario later becoming a member of the regiment's parachute company. Thomas' second deployment to Afghanistan occurred between July 2006 and March 2007, as part of Task force 3-06. At this time, he was based in Kandahar and operated through the NSE as force protection. Then Master Corporal Stephen Thomas was awarded the Medal of Bravery for action in Afghanistan described below:

*"On October 3, 2006, in Kandahar, Afghanistan, ... Master Corporal Stephen Thomas, then corporal, saved the lives of their fellow soldiers and local Afghan civilians by unloading ammunition from a disabled burning vehicle during a suicide bomber attack. Despite having to cross through flames, they repeatedly returned to the vehicle to retrieve mission-essential cargo and high-explosive ammunition that posed a deadly threat to those nearby."*

The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada Regimental Museum and Archives  
<https://qormuseum.org/soldiers-of-the-queens-own/thomas-stephen-louis/>

### Major Edward Cassell Smith (Ret'd)

Ed Smith was born and raised in St. Catharines, Ontario. He joined the Canadian Forces in his early 20s having graduated from basic training in June 1986, at CF Base Chilliwack. Smith served Canada in many regions of the world. For 8 years (2003-2010) Smith was the Officer in Charge of a bi-national training exercise (CANCAMEX) that took place in the African nation of Cameroon. The 25-year veteran also served in Bosnia and as a UN peacekeeper in South Sudan. Smith retired at the rank of Major in 2011 after 25 years of service.



Then Captain Edward Smith is presented with the Order of Military Merit at Rideau Hall by Governor General Michaëlle Jean

## Dedicated to Wilma Morrison

After a visit to Niagara Military Museum to discuss developing a Black military history exhibit, the collaborative effort began with Wilma Morrison and Pastor Lois Dix, Nathaniel Dett Chapel. The Museum did not know at the time that this would be Wilma's last project in her lifelong journey to preserve Black history in our community.

Wilma Morrison saved the British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Nathaniel Dett Memorial Chapel from the wrecking ball. The structure verifies that Blacks have been in the Niagara region for over 200 years and contributed to the building of this community.

Morrison also established the Norval Johnson Heritage Library. Morrison was the recipient of an honorary doctorate from Brock University, the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Medal and the Order of Ontario, among many other rewards and recognitions.

Born in London, Ontario, Morrison relocated to Niagara Falls in 1955 after her marriage to Lorne Morrison. The 91-year-old historian and educator passed away on 23 April 2020 after contracting the COVID-19 virus.

