Revised & Corrected
by A/V/M Howsam

INTERVIEW WITH AIR VICE MARSHAL G. R. HOWSAM, JUNE 2, 1972, ABOUT HIS EARLY LIFE

R. All you have to do is just answer questions. There may be occasions when you will want to elaborate on something, so when I hold up my hand, not necessarily stop, but I'm suggesting - it may be stop, it may be that you are getting away from my direct line of questioning. Now, let's start from the very beginning - you were born, when?

H. On 29th January, 1895, not far from the town of Port Perry, situated on Lake Scugog, Ontario, about forty-odd miles from Toronto. Whitby, near Oshawa, is the county town.

R. Your father was what - a farmer?

H. Not primarily. He was in business - we had a farm as well.

R. And you'd be born on the farm?

H. Yes.

R. And what was your father's business?

H. He had a grist mill, and also a threshing mill. When I was 12 years old he had an accident and lost his right hand and arm between the elbow and the wrist. The business now suffered with too much hired help. My parents idea had been that the children would be away from the town, where there was little for us to do. On the farm we had something useful to do when we were able to do things.

R. How many brothers and sister did you have?

H. No sisters: four younger brothers. The farm had a lovely trout stream that wound its way across the back-forty acres in a wide, sheltered, well-wooded valley. About half of the back-forty was original forest.

The stream was fed by a number of deep springs flowing out of the

valley hillsides, and was the chief source of the Nonquong River which emptied into Lake Scugog a little distance North of Port Perry. Both the stream and the wood were to us a glorious private playground where we could ride our horses, and often search for our cattle. My brothers and I spent much of our spare time - week-ends etc., building dams. Some dam-sites were rebuilt beaver dams. The Spring floods sometimes washed our dams away. We rebuilt them. The dams gave us nearby swimming holes in summer, and provided deep ice-free water for the protection of the trout in winter.

That went on all through our youth - our secret projects. It is one of the things I've always valued highly.

R. That I can well imagine. Does anybody still live on the farm, any member of the family?

H. Not now, no. My second brother, Charles, owned it until he died several years ago. I had no opportunity of going back . . . . The trout farm is there, very much prized and worth a lot of money now.

R. What about the family background - were they U.E.L., or immigrants from Europe, or . . . ?

H. They came from the U.K. My grandfather on my father's side came from Northumberland, and my grandmother from Blair-Atholl in Scotland.

R. That's both on your father's side?

H. Yes. On my mother's side, they were North of England, Cumberland.

R. They would probably come out to Canada, then, in the mid-nineteenth century - around there.

H. My mother's family were one generation earlier in Canada. They

came about General Brock's time. My father's family came in about 1830. That would be after Brock.

R. What was your mother's maiden name?

H. Cutting - C U T T I N G. Not the Cuttens of Chicago.

R. Now you would go to school - where?

H. First to a public school called Utica, a few miles out of Port Perry. The farm was nearer to Utica. Then high school in Port Perry later on. There was a five year gap in between public school and high school. I'll tell you about that later - or you can have it right now.

R. Let's have it now.

H. All right. After my father lost his arm the business wasn't going very well. Both the mills and the farm. Dad was not able to do many things after he lost his arm. We now had two foremen (mill and farm) and by the time the workmen were paid there wasn't much money left. After the first year I made up my mind that sort of plan was useless.

R. After the first year of . . . ?

H. Of hiring the double foremen. For example, one had to go home every evening, about seven miles, and he was never there on time in the morning. My brother and I had to do the early morning work. The foreman walked in later. By the end of the year we had had it and decided that he had to go. My father was faced with firing him. My brother and I also decided, we were going to operate the farm. At that time we had several business problems to solve. All hinged on each other, and would cost money. First, much of our farm machinery was getting old, and required extensive repair, or the purchase of

a complete renewal. New modern machinery had a marked advantage, in that it would easily handle double the output of our present acreage, without increasing our labour costs. Also a good adjacent farm had recently become available for sale.

My brother Charles and I were strongly in favour of purchasing the adjacent farm, plus the new modern machinery. Fortunately, our present used machinery had a sizeable "turn-in" value.

Dad was concerned that we youngsters would undertake too much heavy work. We stoutly maintained that we would hire as necessary. Skilled local manpower was readily available - chiefly small land-owners - who welcomed the opportunity to earn additional cash. And there was no income tax then. The idea of income tax was unthinkable.

Finally, Dad weighed all the factors, and agreed. In any case, he would be home in the week-ends to advise us, and we could reach him by telephone during the week. By the fourth year we had paid off all our debts, and by the fifth, our ledger-ink continued to be a pleasing deep black. I was now able to return to school.

R. Well, how old would you be at that time? - you and your brother.

H. When we bought the adjacent farm, thirteen. Charles was two years younger. Eighteen when I returned to school.

R. You mentioned your father coming home.

H. Yes, he was away during the week on business a good bit of the time. He did quite a lot of travelling to Toronto, Brantford, London, Sarnia, Goderich, Ontario, and to Port Huron, and Mt. Clemens, Michigan.

R. So you'd start back at high school when you'd be about eighteen or thereabouts?

H. Yes. I received my matriculation in just under three years. Our final year was speeded up due to the war.

R. Can you remember any particular thing in the period when you are still at school, let's say up to a time when you are eighteen, which may have interested you in the air force?

H. I remember very clearly the first flight at Kitty Hawk in 1903 - December 1903. I was eight years old and from that time I was bursting with curiosity. All the kids were. We'd vie with each other in cutting out planes and everything else. Then, a few years later - probably about the time of the early flight in Nova Scotia . . . .

R. McCurdy?

H. Yes, about that time, a woman by the name of Ruth Law came to the Toronto Exhibition with a Pusher aeroplane. She sat way out in front. When we heard she was coming, we got to the Exhibition. My father and mother took us boys to see Ruth Law fly. And she flew the Pusher about two or three hundred feet high, right in front of the grandstand.

R. Yes. Look, I'm trying to figure out - I can see a natural interest in a young boy in flying, just as a young boy might want to be an engineer on a train or perhaps the youngsters today might think in terms of astronauts, but again considering your later life you seem to have had a particular interest. Well now, would you have made model planes, would you have seen . . . ? Is there anything particular besides your general interest in . . . ?

H. I doubt that we had the opportunity. I don't remember model planes then. There was little of that nature at the time of McCurdy and Law.

There were all sorts of silly ideas in the press. For example, about a death-ray, and how it would be able to bring the planes down by - well, demagnetizing the magneto. All the British aircraft engines at that time were equipped with magnetos. I remember my mother was greatly concerned about it. She read these things too. But, I felt if our enemies have a death-ray, why we will probably find it also, and we'll turn it back on them.

R. Did you ever attempt, which I rather doubt, to build a glider or anything of that nature on the farm?

H. We didn't have the material, nor did we have that kind of knowledge. That knowledge, including drawings, came about early in War I. We didn't built a glider. We had read and discussed the Greek Myth of Daedalus and Icarus. How the wax wings melted when they came too close to the sun. We found it was just the reverse. That it became much colder as we climbed higher.

R. By the time you were eighteen and graduating from high school -

H. I didn't graduate at eighteen . . .

R. I'm sorry. You went back when you were eighteen.

H. Yes, as mentioned, I had nearly five years of work in between public and high school.

R. That's right. You went back when you were eighteen and you graduated in a few years.

H. Just under three years.

R. So you'd be twenty and by that time the war would be on.

H. Yes. I enlisted in the 116th South Ontario Battalion, which Pearkes ultimately commanded. But that was well before Pearkes was in the 116th.

R. Well I'll be darned.

H. And I served in it until . . .

R. Well, wait. In 1914, then, when war breaks out, on August 4th or 5th . . .

H. I was already in high school in my second year.

R. Now, have you any militia experience?

H. Only the High School Cadet Corps. All cadets in High School were permitted to attend the Militia Summer Camp, which would count as Militia experience. But I had much to do during the summer months on the farm, and then we had our private projects including the trout dams.

R. Do you remember the circumstances under which you heard about the outbreak of war and how it affected you?

H. Yes, I do very well. I made an early boob. The Toronto press featured the blowing up of one of our ships by a mine. I was concerned about this. I couldn't understand how a mine could do this job, and I queried it. I soon found out that there were a lot of mines in the world, in addition to gold mines in the ground and in rainbows.

R. You'd be still in high school, though, when the news of war broke out.

H. Yes.

R. What was the reaction, not only of yourself, but of the other companions?

H. Our cadet instructor immediately turned up in a South African war uniform smothered in medals.

R. His war uniform?

H. Yes, and before that he hadn't done so, and I'm afraid we youths were a bit amused by all his trappings, but we soon accepted it. There was a very strong feeling that the war would be over by Christmas - there didn't seem to be any question about it, it would be over by Christmas . . . .

R. And that the British would win?

H. No question about it. We had Kitchener's photograph all over the place - the King and Kitchener.

R. Well - I suppose I shouldn't ask you what made you enlist. This seemed to be the natural desire of a great many people at the time.

H. Col. Sam Hughes was the member of Parliament from Lindsay - that wasn't our county, but next door. We used to play hockey against Lindsay High School. He came and spoke to our school as Minister of Militia. Later he became General and Sir Sam Hughes, but at that time he was a Colonel. He offered a few of us a commission immediately. We would be sent to R.M.C. for a brief course - or some school of that nature, I think it was R.M.C. I don't think I took the lead in what followed, after all a commission looked very good to have - but the others said "No", and I went along with them. Why not start in at the bottom as a buck private and advance on our merits? So we thanked him - said we'd let him know. But instead of that we enlisted. I think we liked our local recruiting officer, his name was Vickery and he was a school teacher. He was a very persuasive fellow and suggested that it would be better to go into the ranks and then make it ourselves.

R. Well now, do you remember the day when you joined, and I take it that you joined up as a private in the 116th?

H. That's right. About March.

R. 1915?

H. No, 1916. The 116th didn't leave Ontario until early June '16. I was in the 116th until May '16 and then I foolishly got the mumps.

R. Well now, hold it. What I am trying to get here is when you joined the 116th.

H. Early March, 1916.

R. 1916. Now that unit would remain in Canada . . .

H. No, it would go overseas right away. The sister battalion, the 182nd, was being formed and those who couldn't go with the 116th were transferred to the 182nd. I think it was early June 1916, they left to go overseas. And, as mentioned, those who couldn't accompany them were immediately shifted over to the 182nd. That broke our hearts and I started to work to get into the Flying Corps.

R. I see. But you would be one of the ones who went from the 116th to the 182nd.?

H. That's right.

R. And you would still be in Canada?

H. That's right.

R. And stationed whereabouts in Canada?

H. First of all at Whitby, then at Niagara-on-the-Lake, and finally back to Oshawa for the winter. Then I got down to serious work to enter the R.F.C. . . . I think it was in December '16.

R. Before you get into that I want to get an idea of what you did with the 116th and 182nd. You were a military private all during that time?

H. No, I became an N.C.O. - first of all a lance corporal, then a corporal and an acting sergeant. I ran foul of my sergeant-major and I got bounced back to an acting corporal.

R. What happened there?

H. Oh, well, I learned it doesn't pay to disagree with the sergeant-major. Actually, to finish that off, it was the only rank that I never thought I dared hold on the way up. I held every other rank from buck private to an Air Vice Marshal. I never felt I could be a good sergeant-major, so I jumped it.

R. During this time when you were in the army, did you become a specialist of any type - were you a signaller, were you a sniper, a machine-gunner . . . ?

H. No, I was a scout. We had a Scout Section, and I taught it. When I got that far I became an acting sergeant. I remained the senior N.C.O. in the Scout section.

R. That would mean that your eyesight and your shooting, your marksmanship would have to be pretty good.

H. My eyesight was always excellent. It's still excellent. I'm a fairly good shot, but I wasn't an expert shot. In air fighting I aimed to get in close, so I couldn't miss my target. Drive your aircraft right up to the other fellow until he was as big as a house. I could always fly more closely than the enemy. The shooting then was quickly decisive.

R. Well - now we'll have to be careful here because I want to get the stages - by the spring of 1916, I think, you decided that you prefer the air force to the army. Is that correct?

H. Shortly after the 116th had gone overseas I remember I found myself in a new battalion, new officers, new everything - and found myself wondering why. I knew by that time that I wanted to get into the Flying Corps.

R. You're talking about the opportunity, well now, what - how shall I put this because I'm sort of groping in the dark - at that time there was (just give me a yes or no on this) no such thing as the R.C.A.F. - that wasn't formed?

H. No.

R. I believe I'm also correct in thinking that there was no Royal Flying Corps training school in Canada.

H. None whatever.

R. And yet by that time also there would have been Canadians overseas leaving the army to get into the Royal Flying Corps.

H. Yes, and undoubtedly that factor was at the back of my mind in getting out of the army in Canada. By that time, the Royal Flying Corps realized that it required many additional personnel. Further, our army battalions in Europe and in England were reluctant to train their personnel up to a certain stage and then lose them to the Flying Corps. So the Royal Flying Corps decided to send a mission to Canada in the autumn of '16. They first set up an office in Ottawa, and I was interviewed in Ottawa in about December 1916, or early January, '17. I'd written to them when they first set up

their office.

R. Now you say that with a smile - how did you find this out?

H. Oh, my friends found it out for me. We had a very good member of Parliament. I had a glorious time getting out of the battalion. My Battalion colonel said, 'Definitely no', but my Member of Parliament was also a colonel in the Militia and I had worked hard for him at his election in 1911. We had a "surrey with a fringe on top" and some snappy hackney stepping horses, and I got out all the dear elderly ladies to vote. At sixteen I could handle my hackneys very well. So later, when the chips were down, I called on my colonel M.P. in Ottawa, who helped me a great deal, also the Principal of the high school and one of the teachers helped me. The Member of Parliament came down to Oshawa and saw the Battalion colonel, and quietly told him to put up. That was it.

R. You had written to the Royal Flying Corps office in Ottawa, presumably they would have expressed an interest in you.

H. Yes, I had written to them.

R. Yes. And then you'd have to get permission from your colonel to to to the interview . . .

H. Heavens no, I simply got a forty-eight hour pass, got the late night train between Toronto and Ottawa, going through Oshawa. I climbed aboard - I couldn't get a berth because there was none available - spent a full day in Ottawa, took the night train back again, and was on the morning parade on time. It was nobody's business but my own.

R. Well now, who did you see in Ottawa? Where was their office? What were they like?

H. They were very courteous. I was in uniform and they asked me no questions about whether I would leave or not . . . . Nothing at all. I told them I would have to get permission from my battalion and I would let them know when permission was granted.

R. Well, let's take it from the time you walk into the office, wherever the office happened to be.

H. I didn't know where it was when I got into Ottawa. It was my first time. The office was just off Rideau Street not far from the Chateau Laurier Hotel.

R. Well now, you would go to their office on Rideau Street and, presumably, there'd be - what? - two or three English . . . .

H. A Major and a Captain. I've got their names somewhere. The R.F.C. office moved to Toronto in the early spring of '17.

R. What kind of questions would they ask you?

H. They asked me about my school, and what I was doing in the army and just about that. Then would I take a medical exam - that was the most important thing of all. In fact, if you couldn't pass the medical exam . . I think that you were finished right there. Then they interviewed me very carefully, after that, in their own way. What are your sports? What games do you play? Are you keen on the games you have played? Do you know anything about riding? And sailing? Do you ride a horse bareback. If you could ride well, or sail a boat well, they were interested in you. And also your school record. They wanted a recommendation from your school principal, your headmaster. I remember one question they asked me, which I boggled a bit - they asked me if the Colonel, who was a Member of Parliament,

was a personal friend of mine. I said, 'I think he's a personal friend of my father, but I wouldn't call him a personal friend of mine.' 'But does he know you?', and I said, 'Darn it, I worked for him and he was elected. But I don't think he knows me very well personally.' After all, he knew of me, because of my father, but I couldn't say that he knew me well. He had a lot of constituents and I would just be one of them. I think they wanted me to be able to say that he was a friend of mine. Really, he was a friend of my father. He was always kind to me, but I couldn't say that he was a personal friend.

R. Well these two people who interviewed you, by the way - were they pilots?

H. My guess is not active pilots, no. I don't recall that they were pilots. They may have been washed out pilots.

R. Did you have the opportunity to question them?

H. No. Really, I didn't think of it.

R. Presumably when you were interested in the Royal Flying Corps, you were interested in flying, not in navigating or this or that or the other thing.

H. That was my first choice, but you had to be aware if you couldn't fly that you might be a gunner, or naviagtor or something of that kind, or if you were smart enough, an administrator. They explained all that to us. But goodness me, the idea of not flying? If you could ride a horse well! And I thought I could fly.

R. I suppose this was partly the idea of these questions with respect to riding and sailing and what not - in other words, are you a

healthy, sportsloving young man. If you can sail and navigate, if you can ride a horse well, with a sense of balance - all of this.

H. There's no question about it. To fly well still needs a sense of balance. If you have a sense of balance it's a very good thing. Either in sailing or riding. I like both, but I had more experience in riding than in sailing.

R. Well now, after the interview you would return to the unit. Now what was the next word that you heard with respect to . . . ?

H. Well, the next step was up to me to get my release and my Battalion Colonel said no, as I told you, and the Adjutant said, 'No, if we let you go . . . the answer is no, go to work!' Well, I then contacted my headmaster for advice, and then my Member of Parliament by letter, (and I didn't remind him that I had worked for him but he knew) and I got a reply from him to meet him at the hotel in Oshawa over the next weekend. I met him there, and then he came to see my Colonel. By Monday morning, I knew - and the Bn. Col. knew, and as I just said, that was it.

R. What would happen at that point? Would you get your discharge, or would you get transferred?

H. I got my discharge - walked straight across the drill square, and got into the train for Toronto.

R. The Royal Flying Corps office would be there in Toronto?

H. Yes, they had moved their main office to Toronto. I wanted to enlist in the R.F.C. as quickly as I could. My papers were in order and they said, 'We're glad to see you, now. We thought you were lost.' I said, I was trying to convince my angry Colonel.

R. What about your mother and father, what did they think of this transfer?

H. My mother wasn't too keen and my father - he understood - although he wasn't keen. I don't think that really mothers were keen about flying. Our casualty rates by that time in the Flying Corps were very severe, we lost many during the early flying training - a tremendous number were killed or maimed.

R. Well now, after going to the office in Toronto, you report in to the Royal Flying Corps and they would recruit you there - is that correct?

H. Yes, promptly.

R. Well now, having enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps in Toronto what is the next step from that point?

H. We were sent to the R.F.C. School of Military Aeronautics in the Toronto University. We were now Flying Cadets, and wore the distinctive white band round our wedge-shaped caps.

The Canadian School of Military Aeronautics (S. of M.A.) was now expanding by leaps and bounds. The first class (or course) had been quartered in Burwash Hall at the North East corner of the Campus. My angry 182nd Bn. Colonel had prevented me from being on that first course much to my keen regret.

Our Course (No. 2) was quartered in the East Residence across the Varsity football field from Burwash Hall. Two weeks later Course No. 3 took over the South Residence, and about the middle of May, as we were leaving the S. of M.A. to go to our Elementary Flying School, (Mohawk), Courses 4 and 5 were taking over the North Residence

from the departing University students.

A surprising occurrence took place shortly after our first parade at S. of M.A. The C.O. (Acting Major Beck) and the adjutant attended this parade. The adjutant moved us about in a few simple movements on the Drill Square. We embryo Flying Cadets were then called out, one at a time, to take charge of the class, and to put it through the same movements of drill.

The next day, to my astonishment, I was called to the C.O.'s office, and told that I was to be the Class Non-Commissioned Cadet, and as such was to occupy the former Dean's comfortable quarters in the East Residence.

Fortunately, our Course turned out to be both interesting and congenial. Never a dull moment. Several were American citizens, one with some flying experience and another in auto racing. One very young Canadian, Alan McLeod, was to win the Victoria Cross. Another the Distinguished Flying Cross, and another (or more) to be awarded the Military Cross. And many to be wounded several times, and too many the R.I.P. Cross.

From the beginning, McLeod was outstanding. At eighteen he was a large, overgrown youth much like a playful Labrador puppy. Always out of step on the parade square, invariably late for Class fall-in and Roll call, and much too frequently absent at 10.30 p.m. curfew and Lights-out. Son of a well-to-do doctor from Stonewall, Manitoba, his manner and personality were most courteous and likeable. But discipline and punctuality were unknown mysteries to him.

For example, his lateness at Lights-out became both humourous and

embarrassing. When late, he would roll up to the front door of the East Residence in a taxi between midnight and 2 a.m. No sneaking in. His big puppy feet would stumble up the stairs, followed by the taxi driver, both lugging great hampers of fried chicken and other delicacies. In ten seconds flat, he would be surrounded by a flock of hungry youngsters. And the next morning Howsam and McLeod would be up before the adjutant. My only defence was weak. The noise incident had already taken place by the time I got there and since I was hungry, I joined them. Strangely I didn't lose my N.C.O. stripes.

R. Good Lord! McLeod, what was his first name again?

H. Alan.

One Sunday afternoon an amazing incident took place, (just before our Class - now the senior Course - graduated from S. of M.A.), which nearly took away my Flight-Cadet Stripes. A number of Flight Cadets had wolf-whistled at two attractive young ladies, who were crossing the University grounds, following a mass inspection of all the Courses in training at the S. of M.A. by the Commanding General of the R. F. C. in Canada, General Hoare. The public had been invited to attend. A rumour spread that it was the Graduating Class who were the "whistlers".

One of the two ladies who received the wolf-whistle was the wife of our C.O. Major Beck. So, if it were the Graduating Class, where was Howsam? Why hadn't he maintained order and decorum.

The next morning I was up before our C.O. Fortunately for me, the Sunday Inspection parade had been dismissed by the Adjutant himself.

None of the Courses had been instructed by the Adjutant to march back to their separate quarters in the usual practice. Also there was no evidence that Course 2 were the chief culprits - obviously there were far too many whistlers.

Best of all, some of my civilian friends, who had viewed the General's parade, were waiting for me in their car. Also, we had left the University grounds at once following the parade's dismissal. The whistling incident had taken place about fifteen minutes later. By that time I was well on my way to a Sunday afternoon tea party. There was a trace of humour at the corner of Beck's mouth when he said 'Case dismissed'. I saluted, and looked him squarely in the eye before marching out of his office. Darn it, it might have been fun to plead, Guilty.

R. Well now, this class that you had of thirty - would these be mostly like yourself who had come from the army, or some from the army and some from civilian life?

H. Mostly civilian life. Only a few had army experience.

Our Class D.F.C. winner was the Hon. George B. Foster, M.B.E., D.F.C., Q.C. He lives in Montreal and is a very distinguished Canadian. He did outstanding work in both War One and War Two. In War Two he was the founding father of our present Royal Canadian Air Cadet Movement. His fine leadership in War Two was exemplary and priceless. He was always Bunny Foster to us.

R. And that was the total number in the school? In other words, you'd have a class of thirty, then another class of thirty . . . .

H. As mentioned, there was one class ahead of us, that I missed due to my reluctant colonel, plus Courses 2, 3, 4 and 5. The number under training continued to increase rapidly. Then we went to the Elementary Flying School at Mohawk, near Belleville. Some very distinguished Canadian instructors were there including the great man, the fellow who danced - not Fred Astaire - so beautifully - the name will come to me. Vernon Castle. He was killed later in the R.F.C. in Texas. He'd been in the Flying Corps in England and France and had brought back from France a magnificent German police dog which our army had captured. Vernon Castle brought the dog to Canada. He had a Stutz roadster and the police dog rode the right front fender of the Stutz. The envy and joy of all the cadets. His wife, Irene, was a beautiful girl - the first girl I ever saw with bobbed hair. She often drove the car, wearing a uniform which she had modelled after the Flying Corps uniform with a double-breasted tunic, and short skirt. They were the internationally known dancing couple, Vernon and Irene Castle.

R. Well, I think we'll end it there.