

The incredible story of airman Jack Watts' wartime survival (with video)



[Andrew Duffy](#), The Citizen

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On his 22nd birthday, Pilot Officer Jack Watts was supposed to be celebrating in Cairo with some members of South African's Women's Auxiliary Airforce.

But, not for the first time, duty called.



Jack Watts was among the most active Canadian flyers during the Second World War, flying more than 100 missions.

So instead of enjoying some rest and relaxation, Watts was in the nose of a Halifax Bomber as it took aim at the Libyan port of Tobruk, a key link in the German supply chain that fed Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps. It was Nov. 10, 1942, and the Allies had Rommel on the run.

Watts's birthday mission would prove the most dramatic of his long, storied war. The Hamilton-born Watts took part in 106 sorties as a navigator and bomber — among the most of any Canadian flyer in the Second World War.

He would earn a chestful of medals for his service and become part of the exclusive club of RCAF airmen to receive a Distinguished Service Order, Distinguished Flying Cross and Bar.

Watts was shot down three times. Once he was rescued from a life raft in the North Sea. Another time, his plane crashed while landing at an emergency airstrip on the English coast. He returned to the air after each near-death experience.



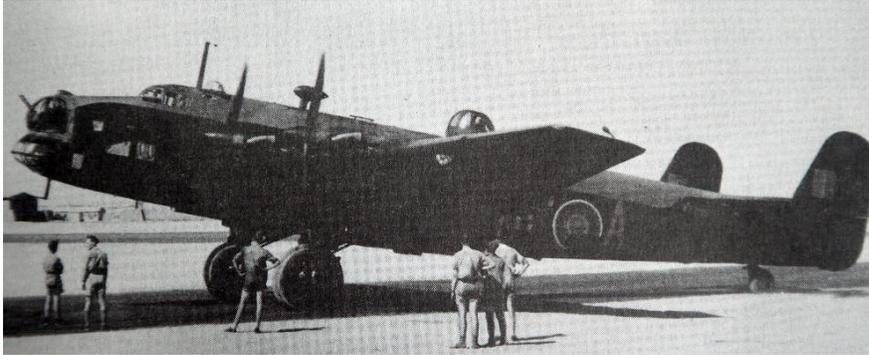
"I felt that I had no right to be alive," explains Watts, 94, now a tenant in a seniors' apartment at the Perley and Rideau Veterans' Health Centre.

Jack Watts is a sprightly 94-year-old who happily lives with his wife of 70 years, Norma, at the Perley and Rideau Veteran's residence. Together, the pair still like to dance.

"So many of my buddies had given their lives in doing the job that I felt I had an obligation to go back and do what I could."

Watts's dedication put him in harm's way on his birthday in 1942. As the navigation and bombing leader of 10 Squadron, assigned to support the Allies' desert campaign, he was concerned about the tendency among some crews to delay their approach to a target until another plane attacked. The first bomber often absorbed the heaviest flak. Other pilots were dropping their bombs short of the target to avoid German batteries.

Watts says he joined the crew of the lead Halifax to ensure the job was done right. The plane flew straight and level toward its target in Tobruk, and as searchlights and flak filled the air, Watts triggered the release of its payload.



The Halifax type of plane flown during the war by Jack Watts. (Courtesy of the Watts family)

On his stomach in the nose of the plane, he watched the bombs fall toward the city's docks when an explosion rocked the airplane. The Halifax shuddered. Smoke filled the fuselage. The bomb doors jammed. There was another explosion inside the plane and the instrument panel lit up with warning lights.

One port engine burst into flames and the pilot called for the crew to bail out. Watts ushered three crew members out the escape hatch then rushed up the cockpit steps to check on the pilot, always the last to bail out.

The Halifax was heading out to sea with both port engines now aflame. Watts tried to help the pilot wrestle the plane into a turn so that it would head back toward land, but it was no good. The control cables had been severed.

Watts led the pilot toward the escape hatch and readied to bail. "As I got down," he remembers, "the left wing just blew off. The wing just departed."

The Halifax plunged into a death spiral and Watts dropped into the sky. (The pilot and tail gunner died in the crash; three other crew members became German POWs.)

Watts hadn't put his parachute harness on properly — he had failed to put his "Mae West" life vest on underneath it — and the straps cut hard into his buttocks when the chute opened. It was his first time under a canopy and he was still grappling with its risers when he slammed into the dark water of the Mediterranean Sea.

Watts jettisoned his harness and struggled to regain the surface. He wrestled out of his clothing and began to swim toward the fires that still burned in the distant harbour of Tobruk.

It was midnight and he was kilometres from the German-occupied shore.

The fires in Tobruk didn't last long, and in the resulting blackness, Watts panicked for a moment. He could see only sky and water and had no idea which way to swim. Then he remembered every navigator's best friend: the North Star could direct him south to Tobruk.

Watts turned onto his back, and aligned his feet with the North Star and his head with his destination, then set off again. Every so often, he'd float on his back to check his heading.

"I kept going," he remembers. "I swam side stroke, breaststroke, backstroke, dog paddle. I might have invented some."

Three times, Watts says, he awoke underwater. Each time, as his mouth filled with sea water, he'd panic and fight his way back to the surface.

Finally, after five hours, Watts scraped against the rocks and sand of a beach. He dragged himself onto shore and collapsed in a cleft between some tall rocks. Hours later, he awoke with the sun on his face.

He opened his eyes to an entirely new set of troubles. Naked, without any food or water, he was on a beach in a German-occupied city with barbed wire and mines further complicating his escape. For three days, he stayed put and watched the movement of German soldiers in a nearby guard tower and bunker.

At dawn on the fourth day, Watts decided he had to act or die of thirst: "I thought, 'I can't last much longer: I have to do something definite.'"



Jack Watts, putting his hand over his medals, was among the most active Canadian flyers during the Second World War, flying more than 100 missions. Julie Oliver / Ottawa Citizen

So he crawled toward a single-storey cement blockhouse where he'd seen some washing out on a line. As he approached, there was no sign of life: It seemed abandoned.

The bunker's front door was ajar and Watts slipped inside. The first person he saw was Erwin Rommel, staring hard at him from a huge wall portrait. There was no one else around. Figuring that the Germans had to be out on patrol, Watts rifled the office for water, food and clothing. He found parts of a German summer uniform, a pistol, a bayonet and some tin cans.

He hammered the bayonet into one can and it gushed tomato juice. Watts savoured the balm on his parched throat, then tucked some other tins into a knapsack and headed for the door: clothed, armed and provisioned.

He couldn't believe his luck, which only seemed to improve when he spied an open bottle of Chianti. Telling himself that he needed a bit of fortification for what lay ahead, Watts downed the bottle's contents in a few slugs.

It was a mistake: The red wine hit him like a sledgehammer. Watts collapsed across a desk and passed out under Rommel's gaze. Some time later, he awoke to the sound of a truck motor outside the bunker. Forlorn, Watts resigned himself to his fate as boots pounded up the stairs and the door was kicked open.

He saw the flash of a British MP's arm band. "You're British! You're British!" he cried, leaping off the desk as the MP struggled to unholster his gun.

Watts ran past the startled MP into the sunshine where he was stopped by a sergeant with a lowered rifle. The MPs didn't know what to make of this bloodied, dishevelled, deeply tanned English-speaking soldier in a German uniform.

Watts retold his story in a machine-gun narrative that quickly convinced the MPs he was on their side of the war.

It turned out that Watts's escape from Tobruk could not have been better timed: The Germans had just abandoned the city ahead of the British Eighth Army's advance.

Two months later, after a hospital stay and some leave in Cairo, Watts was back with his squadron and headed once again for the air war in Europe.

He would fly another 70 missions, many of them with the RAF's Pathfinder Force, an elite squadron that marked targets for other bombers.

"To me, every flight was a challenge: the weather, finding the target, bombing it, getting home. All of it."

aduffy@ottawacitizen.com

The Watts File

Born: Nov. 10, 1920, in Hamilton, Ont.

Early years: Watts was a good student and an accomplished athlete but left school after his father died of a heart attack in 1938. He went to work in a cotton mill, then for a rubber tire company.

Enlistment: He joined the RCAF as an aircrew trainee on July 1, 1940. “You take your share,” he says of the reason he enlisted.

Awards: Watts earned a Distinguished Flying Cross for his “courageous and highly skilled” navigation during a daring nighttime raid on the German battleship Tirpitz, which was moored in a fiord near Trondheim, Norway, in April 1942. Watts’s plane came under attack from a night fighter and he coolly guided his captain down into a bomb run — and the resulting flak barrage — to escape his pursuer. This month, he was awarded the French National Order of the Legion of Honour.

Family: He met his wife, Norma, a corporal in the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force, while stationed in England. They married on Oct. 24, 1944, and celebrated their 70th anniversary this year. They have three children, five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

Career: Watts rose to the rank of Brigadier-General and served in military and diplomatic posts in France, India and Ghana.

Retirement: Retired in 1975 to a home on a lake north of Kingston, then moved to Kemptville in the mid-1990s.