

Call to Duty, a Story of Courage by Ernie Bies September 28, 2016

Johnny Carrère had a prominent role in the 1944 WWII movie entitled “Target Berlin” which documented the first Canadian built Lancaster Bomber. In reality, the lives of the entire Carrère family of Cochrane Ontario were filled with enough tales of courage, adventure and tragedy to warrant a feature length movie about their exploits. The family story begins in the Toulouse region, which is now part of the south of France. This region has been a destination for more than 2000 years with traders and invaders drawn to its temperate climate. The town was once a Roman outpost and is known as “The Pink City” because of its terracotta influenced architecture. A few miles south, in the small village of Arreau in the High Pyrenees, Ernest Dominique Carrère was born on Nov. 25, 1881. Twenty six years later he listened with great interest to stories told by his cousin who had returned from Canada. The promise of new opportunities and abundant work in the new land soon had Dominique and his cousin aboard a ship bound for Canada. As experienced carpenters, the cousins had no trouble finding work in the CPR shops in Montreal reporting to Victor Eloy who had come from Belgium a few years earlier. They found that their wages of \$2.00 a day did not go far in the city and they searched for new opportunities. The shop was abuzz with reports about the exciting developments taking place in New Ontario as the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway (TNO) was being pushed northward from North Bay. Dominique and his cousin ventured north and easily found carpentry work in Englehart, staying for a year. August found them in Nellie Lake where they helped build the section house and the water tank, but the lure of the far north still beckoned.



**Dominique Carrère**

The junction of the National Transcontinental and the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railways had just been designated as the site of a new town that would soon be named Cochrane and building lots and farms were to be offered for sale. Dominique and a friend walked from Nellie Lake to the new site of Cochrane to investigate and returned with visions of the future driving them. Continuing to work for the railroad, they built the Wicklow Station (later Nahma) five miles south of the proposed townsite. Next, they worked on the section houses in Cochrane itself, again working with Victor Eloy. They attended an auction in November 1908 where building lots in the townsite were sold to the public and made plans for the future.

Dominique Carrère continued to save his money. Late the next year he and two other French men and his boss Victor Eloy bought four adjacent lots about three miles north of town in Glackmayer Township. One cold winter day Dominique set out to find his corner posts and examine his 150 acre farm but he got lost in the bush. Had a search party not saved him from freezing around midnight that night, the Courageous Carrère’s of Cochrane story would have ended before it began. After recovering from his ordeal he and his friends returned to France for a six month vacation. During his stay at home Dominique was smitten by the lovely Jeanne Patack-Croutzet and convinced her to return to Canada with him. Dominique and Jeanne returned via Montreal where they were married in June 1910. They lived in Cochrane while Dominique built his settler’s cabin and started clearing the land. Baby Jean Pierre Henri (Johnny) joined the family on January 25, 1911 and the family moved to the farm in June. Dominique had bought lumber and was preparing to build their permanent house. The extended dry period that spring and the growing piles of dry timber slash that were building up on the local farms and in

the town site caused great concern but work went on. In mid July disaster struck. The Great Porcupine Fire, that was to destroy half a million acres of forest and take 70 lives, was heading their way. The entire town of Cochrane went up in flames in a matter of hours. The Carrère family found themselves surrounded by the raging inferno. Jeanne, her brother and baby Johnny took refuge in an open field and covered themselves with wet blankets while Dominique went to help an elderly neighbour. Finding him unconscious he dragged him into a freshly dug cellar where their only protection from the flames was a few blankets soaked in a tub of water. When the fire passed by his brother in law found them in their improvised shelter. They dragged the still unconscious man to the open field and went looking for Jeanne and the baby. Dominique was surprised to find the baby unharmed in the arms of his mother although she appeared lifeless. With no water to revive her he could only sit beside her on the still smouldering ground and pray. Suddenly she opened her eyes and came to. Miraculously, both she and the old man recovered from their ordeal. The story of the Courageous Carrère's of Cochrane had almost ended a second time with the Great Porcupine Fire of 1911.

The now homeless family relied on limited donations from a relief committee and soon fashioned a rough shelter to live in while Dominique managed to find work in town. He also worked at the mill in Iroquois Falls. Before long he was able to buy horses, cows, pigs and hens and build a nice house for his growing family.

Jeanne and Dominique were blessed with two more boys as Pierre Joseph joined the family in 1912 and Charles (Charlie) Urbain on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1914.

With the outbreak of war in 1914, Dominique put the farm on hold and answered the French call to arms, bringing his young family with him to stay with relatives in Toulouse. He joined the infantry and spent four years in the trenches although managing some trips back to Toulouse. Another son, Edmond Joffre Paul, was added to the growing Carrère clan in 1915. The new baby was probably named after Joseph Joffre, the Commander of the French army during WW1. Dominique survived the trenches, although he was severely gassed, and the family returned to their farm in Cochrane in 1919 only to find that it had been totally destroyed by the second Cochrane fire in 1916.

Undeterred, the industrious Dominique, aided by a strong wife and four growing boys, took advantage of the fire cleared land and in twenty years could boast of a prosperous farm. One hundred and twenty five acres were under cultivation, with 15 acres in grain and 110 acres in hay. He also had four milking cows, four other cattle, a brood sow, three horses, 300 laying chickens and 500 baby chicks.

Johnny Carrère completed his schooling in Cochrane and went on to Rigaud College and the Oka Agricultural Institute earning a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture degree. He then worked as an accountant for a lumber company in Monteith while saving money to buy his own farm, unfortunately, the Second World War intervened.

Rejected by the RCAF in 1939 because, at the age of 28, he was considered too old for air crew, he followed in his father's footsteps. Along with his brother Charles, he enlisted in the French Army at Montreal and was soon bound for the conflict. Joining 110 other volunteers from

Canada and the U.S, Johnny and Charles docked at Le Havre in February 1940, where the returning patriots were surprised to find that no one was expecting them. When he finally made contact with the French forces he was assigned to the 101<sup>st</sup> Air Battalion and Johnny kept a “shinbone” diary of this adventure hidden in his sock which provided the following details.

The Carrère brothers were sent to assist in the defence of Toulouse, where their relatives still lived. Now a Sergeant, John Carrère was later assigned to a 25 millimeter Anti Aircraft (AA) gun crew of 18. On June 13, 1940 they were positioned on the north bank of the Loire River where they fired at two German planes, 10,000 feet up and hidden by clouds. These were the only two shots John and his crew fired in the Battle of France. The entire crew had one automatic rifle, no helmets or gas masks and no armour for their Anti Aircraft gun. On June 15 they had to pack up their gun and retreat as they were bombed by German and Italian planes. They requisitioned a civilian truck and worked their way through hordes of refugees. John cried when he saw women carrying children and getting no help from the officers who sped by in half-empty cars, threatening civilians with their revolvers if they got too close. John’s crew crossed a bridge that was being defended by a lone machine gun and a guard of twenty veterans from the last war. Armed with 50 year old muskets, they had barricaded the road with an overturned threshing machine in a futile effort to stop the advancing German tanks. John and his men were able to siphon fuel from abandoned vehicles, some that were barely damaged, on their 350 mile retreat through Vichy to Toulouse. Carrère felt that the worst obstacle in the defence of France was cynicism. He was discouraged with the laissez faire attitude of the local French citizens and their unwillingness to resist the invading Nazis. No one was prepared and no one thought conditions would get as bad as they turned out to be. Even in Toulouse the neighbours questioned why he had given up his job in Canada to come to France to fight for four and a half cents a day. Initially, the civilians were happy and had plenty of food but by May they were down to bully beef and hardtack. The soldiers showed open disrespect for the officers and many spoke fluent German and were clearly spies. John and Charles Carrère, now reunited in Toulouse, witnessed the anger of the civilians when France and Germany signed an Armistice on June 22, 1940. The people felt that their soldiers had fought like cowards. These soldiers were afraid to show their faces to the angry people and now wanted to start the war in earnest but it was too late. The Carrère brothers enlisted the aid of a tobacco bootlegger who helped them escape through Spain and Portugal and they were home in Canada in August of 1940.

Anxious for a second crack at Hitler, John reapplied to the RCAF in North Bay, this time with success and he was accepted on June 21, 1941.

He then underwent 10 months of intense training beginning with Air Observers School at Crumlin, near London Ontario, followed by Bombing and Gunnery School and finally Air Navigator School. He passed the courses with flying colors and was deployed to England where he was assigned to a RAF Lancaster bomber crew as a navigator. He stood only 5 feet 2 inches tall but he had the heart of a warrior. The photo on the right shows Cpl. Stanley Dethridge in front of a Lancaster bomber (BC) that was used for training in the London/St. Thomas Ontario area.



Johnny's regular team-mates were fellow Pilot Officer Steve Boczar, Sergeant Ross Webb and Flight Sergeant Reg Burgar. They had a string of successful bombing runs starting on February 2, 1943 over Cologne. Two or three sorties weekly saw them rain bombs on Turin, Wilhemshaven, Lorient, Nuremburg, Essen, Stuttgart, Dusseldorf, Pilsen and even Berlin. John received his officer's commission on May 18, 1943 shortly after his 20<sup>th</sup> mission. Johnny and his crew had a favorite plane that was named B for Bambi. One night, another crew took it out and did not return.

Fearing that Germany could bomb the aircraft plants in England, Britain had taken action by asking Canada if they could manufacture the Lancaster Bombers at home. Canada readily agreed and created a Crown Corporation, expropriating an existing aircraft plant at Malton, near Toronto and the Victory Aircraft Plant was born. The plant later morphed into AVRO which gained world renown in the aircraft manufacturing field.

The KB700 was the first of 430 Canadian built Lancasters, rolling off the line on August 1, 1943.



Johnny was chosen for the crew that would pilot the KB700 back to England. The entire crew was made up of Squadron Leader Reg Lane, Pilot Officer Johnny Carrère (navigator), Sergeant Ross Webb, Flight Sergeant Reg Burgar (mid-upper gunner), Pilot Officer Steve Boczar (second pilot), Flight Sergeant R. W. (Bill) Wright (bomb aimer) and Sergeant Mike Baczinski (flight

engineer).

While waiting for the plane to be completed, the crew was received by the Governor General in Ottawa on July 12, 1943. They also participated in speaking tours to promote the exploits of the RCAF in the Battle of Europe.

The KB700 was christened "the Ruhr Express" and was the subject of a National Film Board



documentary which detailed the development of the Canadian Lancaster program and the daily progress of the construction of the first plane. The seventeen minute film was called “Target Berlin” and John Carrère and his crew were shown near the 8 minute mark as they worked with the designers and builders and finally took possession of the giant bird. An extended version of the movie, with additional footage of hometown hero Johnny Carrere, was shown to an appreciative audience at Cochrane’s Empire Theatre shortly after its release.

On August 6, 1943, they flew the newest Lancaster to Gander Newfoundland on the first leg of their journey and then crossed the Atlantic in 9 hours and 30 minutes. They were accompanied by their new mascot, a two month old Canadian born poodle named Bambi. The new mascot had been named after their favourite aircraft that was lost in action with another crew earlier that year. On their return to England, Pilot Officers Steve Poczar and Jean Carrère learned they had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC).



Left to right: Squadron Leader Reg Lane DSO, DFC (pilot), Pilot Officer Johnny Carrere (navigator), Sergeant Ross Webb (WOP/AG), Flight Sergeant Reg Burgar (mid-upper gunner) with 'Bambi', Pilot Officer Steve Boczar (second pilot), Flight Sergeant R Wright DFM (bomb aimer) and Sergeant Mike Baczinski (flight engineer).

Johnny with Bambi on right.



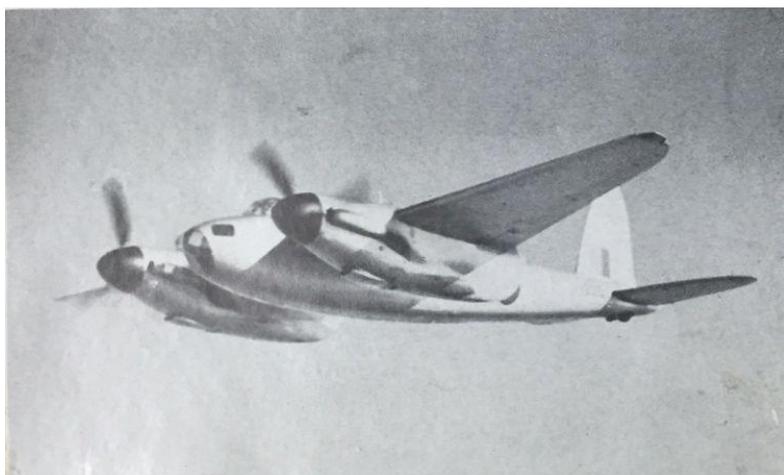
The Ruhr Express flew 49 successful bombing missions without mishap and was destined for a



tour of Canadian cities. On the 50<sup>th</sup> mission on January 2, 1945 its luck finally ran out. It crashed on landing in England and was destroyed by fire. Luckily the crew escaped without injury.

Overall, Johnny had an extraordinary run of 97 sorties in 1943 and 1944. He completed a tour of 29 heavy bombing runs then joined the Pathfinder Force and carried out a further 68 sorties, no less than 57 being marker runs. The Pathfinder Force was tasked with locating the targets for the heavy

bombers that followed. They flew a smaller plane called a Mosquito but had to dodge the same



anti aircraft barrages as they laid down flares on the target areas to increase bombing accuracy. He rose to the rank of Flight Lieutenant and on March 15, 1945 a Bar was added to his DFC. The Royal Canadian Air Force commendations noted:

*“Many of the sorties in which this officer has participated have involved long flights in adverse weather and it has been frequently due to his skilful and accurate navigation that targets have been located and bombed successfully. His keenness for operations has been unsurpassed and his determination and courage have set an example to the squadron.”*

*“Since the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross, Flight Lieutenant Carrere has participated in a large number of operational sorties. Throughout he has shown himself a highly skilled and most reliable navigator. His cool courage, tenacity of purpose and concentration on the task in hand in the most arduous circumstances have been most commendable.”*

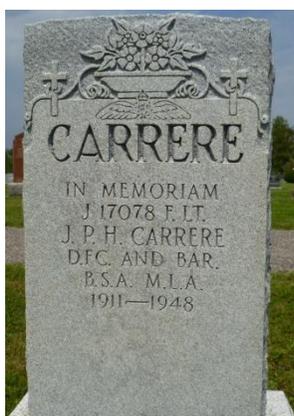


He was repatriated on January 22, 1945 and assigned to Greenwood N.S. as a Navigational Officer until his retirement on June 22, 1945. He was not idle for long becoming President of the Legion in Cochrane and he was courted by the Ontario Progressive Conservative party to join their ranks. At the election of officers in Toronto on Dec. 4, some long standing prejudices surfaced as “a few uneducated boors” booed when Kelso Roberts nominated Flt. Lt. John Carrère, DFC and Bar, speaking in English and then added a few words in French. One delegate even took to the floor to voice his objection “...to anyone speaking French to Ontario Progressive Conservatives.” Saner heads prevailed and John was elected to the position of sixth Vice President of the Ontario Progressive Conservative Association with an overwhelming majority.

John was a rising star in the Ontario PC party and was chosen to oppose Liberal incumbent Joseph Habel in the Cochrane North riding in the June 7, 1948 election. John won the election handily with 3,656 votes, followed by 2,452 for Albert Stephenson (CCF); 2,202 for Joseph Habel (Liberal) and 1,424 for Gilles Lefebvre (UE). He was considered to be a strong candidate for a cabinet position as his star was burning very brightly.



On October 5, before taking his seat in the Ontario legislature, tragedy struck. He had just returned from a weekend convention in Ottawa and had returned to the family farm. Driving into town at about 8 o'clock in the morning, John was probably immersed in thought about the opening of Parliament in a few days. He was not aware of the special Ontario Northland train approaching the level crossing about a quarter of a mile north of town, and, blinded by the glare of the morning sun, he drove directly into its path. His vision was also obscured by shrubbery along the crossing. The northbound train carried his car 85 feet down the track before it could stop and the train crew extricated the badly injured MLA from his demolished automobile. They transported him to the Lady Minto Hospital where doctors J.A. Moore of Cochrane and James B. McLinton of Timmins, worked feverishly to try to save his life. He was in serious condition with injuries to his chest and leg. Two specialists were summoned from Toronto but the injuries were too severe and John Carrère, who had survived 97 missions over enemy territory, died on October 6, 1948.



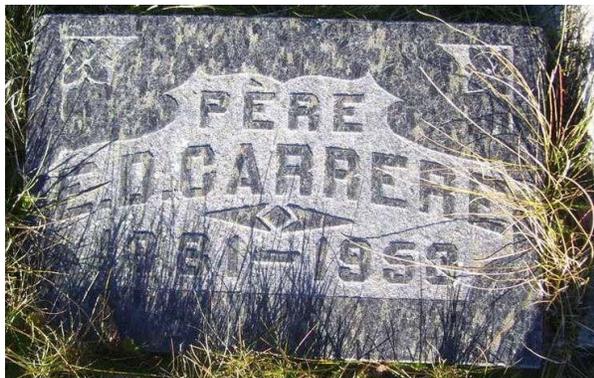
All businesses in Cochrane were shut down as the town of 3,000 paid tribute to one of their finest citizens on Saturday, October, 9, 1948. Hundreds filed past his coffin and Rev. A. Cournoyer conducted an hour long service attended by several cabinet ministers. Premier George Drew was prevented from attending by bad weather.

A few weeks later the date June 8, 1949 was set for a by-election to replace John Carrère in the Ontario Legislature. At a meeting held in Kapuskasing on April 7, 1949 several candidates were nominated. One of them was Joffre Carrère, Johnny's brother, but he was eliminated on the first ballot. The ultimate winner was Marcel Leger, a former teacher from Hearst Ontario. The Liberals did not field a candidate for the June

election and it came down to a battle between Marcel Leger of the PCs and Roy Kenney of the CCF. On Election Day the PCs persevered and Marcel Leger was victorious with 6,132 votes to 3,140 for Mr. Kenney.

In October of 1952, former Ontario Premier George Drew, now leader of the Federal Conservative party, was campaigning in Northern Ontario. At a dinner in Cochrane, where Dominique Carrère was a special guest, Drew spoke highly of Johnny Carrère's exploits and lost potential.

Dominique passed away while visiting family in Montreal in 1953 and was



buried in Cochrane. Jeanne later moved to Montreal where she passed away in 1965.



Joffre Carrère also served in the Air Force as a mechanic but did not see overseas service. He spent his final years in Laval, passing in 1989.



Pierre Carrère lived

in North Bay and Sudbury where he worked as an electrician and lived to a ripe old age of 85, passing in 1997.

Charles Urbain Carrère had a much more tragic life. He had served in the French Air Force from May 1936 to November 1937 and he was with Johnny in France in 1939 and 1940. They came back to Canada in August of 1940 and Charles enlisted in the army in 1942. Small of stature, like his brother Johnny, he stood five feet two inches and weighed 120 pounds. He trained in Canada and served as an instructor in the tank school at Camp Borden. He also served in England in the Armoured Corps attaining the rank of Sergeant after seeing action in France and Holland.



After a shell exploded near him on the battlefield in August 1944, he suffered from ongoing pain in his right ear. This developed into a classic case of shell shock as he suffered from delusions of persecution, confusion, anxiety and depression. Charles fell through the administrative cracks when he suffered a blackout on the street while recuperating in London England in the summer of 1945 and was treated for a nervous disorder in a local hospital. Somehow this was not reported to his unit who declared him AWOL and discontinued the \$40 monthly allowance that he was sending to his mother. Charles was shipped home in July 1945 and assessed at Westminster Hospital in London Ontario. Deemed unfit for service and for employment, he was discharged from the army and sent home to Cochrane on September 22. He took his own life four days later. Initially, the military did not assist with the funeral arrangements or offer a word of sympathy. The local Legion provided support to the family with the funeral. Johnny Carrère wrote a scathing letter to the army on October 1, 1945 saying that Charles was obviously ill from the time he came home and requested that they reinstate his back pay and cover the funeral expenses. On January 26, 1946 the Army agreed that Charles' death was related to military service. He was accorded full military honours and his back pay and the funeral expenses were



fully reimbursed. Although he did not achieve the war hero status of his older brother, Charles did serve both France and Canada with courage and dignity. He was awarded the France-Germany Star, the Defence Medal, the War Medal, the Canadian Volunteer Service (CVSM) Medal and Clasp and the Memorial Bar. The name Charles Urbain Carrère is proudly displayed on page 502 of the Second World War Book of Remembrance on Parliament Hill in Ottawa.

With Dominique's death in 1953 the stirring saga of the Courageous Carrère's of Cochrane came to a close but the family will never be forgotten for their contributions to the settlement of Cochrane and to both Great Wars. Fittingly, Dominique, Johnny and Charles are all buried close to each other in the Roman Catholic Cemetery in Cochrane, Ontario.

An editorial in the Timmins Daily Press dated October 7, 1948 entitled "A Great Loss" pays tribute to Johnny but could well represent the feelings of the north for the entire Carrère family. Highlights from that editorial are: *"Johnny Carrère is dead, and his death brought a tide of sorrow throughout this North Country where he was known and respected.....a young man with a future....one of the most promising of younger figures in Ontario politics. ...In war he did not hesitate to put his life between his country and the enemy.....typical of the Northland which bred him....He is now gone from the scene, but the memory of Johnny Carrère, gallant soldier, and gallant citizen, will live long in this country of the north."*

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