

The First to Die Second of Two Articles 1940-1941

By Mike Fix and Rich Forliano

In the summer of 1940 the fate of the free world was in balance. The combined Axis powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan had taken over most of continental Europe and huge sections of Asia. France had surrendered to Hitler and most of the European continent was under the control of Nazi Germany. A young American flier named Douglas Van Buskirk from Bronxville had volunteered for the Canadian Royal Air Force and the next year would be sent to England to battle the hated Luftwaffe, the Nazi air force whose civilian bombing raids were attempting to force Britain to surrender.

In May of 1940 Winston Churchill became Prime Minister of Britain, the same Churchill who learned his legendary skills as an orator from Bourke Cochrane, a former Eastchester teacher and famous Irish born American politician. Douglas Van Buskirk training in Canada must have either heard on the radio or read in the newspapers Churchill's response to the English people when faced with the prospect of surrender:

"The British Empire and the French Republic, linked together in their cause and in their need, will defend to the death their native soil, aiding each other like good comrades to the utmost of their strength. Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail."

Churchill's using the pace and cadence that he learned from Bourke Cochran encouraged the English people to fight to the end:

"We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; **we shall never surrender.**

In the same speech Churchill encouraged America to join in the struggle:

"And even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, **the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.**"

Even in the late fall of 1941 the United States of America still gripped in the vice of isolationism had not yet joined the struggle. But Douglas Van Buskirk, the first American to enlist in the Royal Air Force, would not wait for the United States to declare war. Douglas had been sent to England to become part of the effort to break Germany with night bombing raids. A week before he left for England Douglas had married Lilia Ahearn of Ottawa, Canada.

On November 7, 1941 Douglas was part of a large night bombing expedition of Germany. On that night his Stirling bomber and his seven man crew were reported missing. Thirty six other bombers and fifteen fighters were also reported down. This raid was considered one of the costliest of the war for the Royal Force.

On November 12, the *New York Times* reported that according to a telegram received by his parents from British officials in Canada that his son was among the aviators who failed to return from last Friday's raid on Germany. His father, Harold, said that his son might be a captive in Germany. Sadly that was not the case. His wife and family were unsure of Doug's fate for almost three months.

Douglas Van Buskirk, a month before Pearl Harbor, was the first person from the town of Eastchester to die. His widow, Lilia, soon after he was pronounced dead, volunteered for the Canadian auxiliary air force.

Sadly Douglas Byrd Van Buskirk, age 20, would not be the last to die from the town of Eastchester, including the villages of Bronxville and Tuckahoe.

If you want to learn about the stories of all those who made the ultimate sacrifice, visit the Leroy Gregory post where you can see the stories of the extraordinary number of people who died in defense of America in foreign wars.