



# ON THE FRONT COVER

DONALD EASTON

By John Sullivan\*

**A**s lawyers, we like to tell “war stories.” We usually mean some courtroom drama, or perhaps a deal that went sideways.

At 89 years of age, Don Easton has lots of war stories, gathered over a remarkable life and career. With 61 years at the bar, he has plenty of lawyer “war stories” from his time as a solicitor working at the heart of our province’s business community. He also has some other war stories, of the literal kind.

Don is a rare breed—a Vancouverite who was actually born and raised here. He was born February 9, 1923, at Vancouver General Hospital, and grew up in Kitsilano. His youth and teenage years were spent during the Great Depression, but this does not seem to have affected Don’s sunny disposition.

Don graduated from Kitsilano High School in 1942, when Canada was in the depths of World War II. He wasn’t sure whether he should go to university, get a job or join the Forces. He and a friend had a brief discussion that it would be exciting to learn to fly, and as a result they both went that afternoon to the recruiting station and volunteered for the Royal Canadian Air Force (“RCAF”). It was a spur of the moment decision, of which he informed his parents after the fact. I imagine Don’s announcement to his parents that evening made for an animated discussion around the Easton dinner table.



DON AT TIME OF ENLISTMENT, 1942

Lady Luck has played a big role in Don’s life. Initially, she frowned on Don. While training to be an RCAF pilot on the prairies in late 1942, he

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came down with scarlet fever, causing temporary vision impairment. As a result, Don had the choice of waiting six months to see if his vision would improve enough to become a pilot, or changing plans to become an air force gunner. Don was disappointed. Never one for inactivity, however, Don chose to become a gunner.

The year 1943 found Don on board the *Queen Mary*, heading for Great Britain. This was a hazardous voyage, as German U-boats were prowling the ocean, torpedoing Allied ships. Happily, the *Queen Mary* was very fast and made it to Scotland without incident. Don remembers fondly the fact that the American servicemen had to work during the passage and sleep on the decks, while the Canadians had no official duties and slept in staterooms.

On his arrival in Britain, Don was assigned to RCAF Squadron 432. He joined the crew of a Halifax bomber,<sup>1</sup> which was named *Leaside Lulu* in honour of an idealized girl from Toronto's Leaside neighbourhood. Don was the rear gunner, seated at the back of the plane. Along with the rest of the *Leaside Lulu* crew, Don flew in 38 bombing raids over Nazi-occupied Europe in 1943–1944, many of which were night raids.

On one particular night raid, the *Leaside Lulu* crew had to fly in a different bomber (not the beloved *Lulu*) with a non-crew member—a “new guy”—taking the position of mid-under gunner. As mid-under gunner, the new guy had the important job of identifying planes flying beneath them as either friend or foe, and responding accordingly. While flying over Belgium, a plane was spotted below. The new guy announced through the intercom that it was a fellow Halifax—an Allied plane. All seemed fine. But a few moments later, all hell broke loose. There was gunfire followed by an incredibly loud noise as shell ripped through metal. Don's plane lurched to the left.

Don looked out his window to see what was going on. He saw a large hole through their starboard wing. He also saw an airplane—the shooter—pulling away from beneath them. Like all RCAF air crew, Don had been trained to identify aircraft, and he immediately saw that this was not an Allied plane. He shouted into the intercom: “That's no Halifax—it's a Focke-Wulf 190!”<sup>2</sup>

Due to the new guy's error, the German Focke-Wulf had been able to approach Don's plane from below without any evasive action being taken. The German technique in these circumstances was to fire several shots through the midriff of the plane, splitting it in two—a fact of which Don was only too aware. Miraculously, however, no more shots were fired. The Focke-Wulf flew away and Don's plane made it back to England, landing safe and



DON WITH LEASIDE LULU,  
SUMMER 1944

sound. Don believes the German gun must have jammed. In any event, Lady Luck was certainly with Don that evening. Neither he nor any other crew member was injured, despite the fact the Focke-Wulf had them dead in its sights, at close range. However, Don tells me they each shared some choice words with the new guy, who never flew with the *Leaside Lulu* crew again.

A particular morning raid in June 1944 stands out in Don's memory. The crew had been allowed to frequent the nearby town of York, including the local pub, which was a great gossip centre. However, for several days prior to this raid, Don and the rest of Squadron 432 were ordered confined to their base. This was surprising, as they had not been terribly bad or rowdy in town (at least, no more than usual). On the evening of June 5 they were given their mission, which was to conduct a low-level raid on German gun fortifications on the French coast. Don and his squadron took off early in the morning of June 6, unaware of the significance of what they were about to do.

As they crossed the English Channel, Don realized this raid was anything but routine—he looked down and saw hundreds of V-shaped wakes, as far as the eye could see, as countless Allied ships steamed toward the French coast. Don recognized the significance immediately: the long-awaited liberation of Europe was about to begin. This was D-Day.

Don's plane flew over the fleet and performed the important task of bombing the German beach defences. This low-level raid was particularly dangerous. There was not only the risk of German anti-aircraft fire, which was plentiful; the plane had to fly so low that it was also at risk from the explosions of other Allied bombs. Nonetheless, Lady Luck continued to smile on Don and *Leaside Lulu* that day, as he and his crew lived through one of the signal events of the 20th century. Tragically, many other young Canadians were not so lucky on June 6, 1944.

In the end, the *Leaside Lulu* crew set a squadron record for taking the most hits without losing a single member. Lucky indeed.

Don says the war was a lot of hard work and, of course, there was tremendous sorrow. However, there were some lighter moments. Don had one week off out of every seven, and would take a bottle of whisky with him as he left the base. He liked to travel on those weeks off, to London or, more often, Edinburgh. Under gentle cross-examination, Don admitted that he frequented the bars and dance halls of London and Edinburgh, and that it was not so difficult for a young Canadian in an RCAF officer's uniform to find girls interested in a dance or two.<sup>3</sup>

Don returned to Canada safe and sound, entering UBC law school in 1947. The law school was in its infancy, having been founded just after the war. Don says the classes were conducted, quite literally, in "shacks". George Curtis reigned supreme as dean and was, according to Don, a great teacher

and mentor. Fellow students included future Chief Justice Allan McEachern and future senior counsel and politician Harry Rankin.

Don articulated with J. Gould and was called to the bar in 1950. He remained with Gould's firm, which became Gould, Thorpe & Easton. For the first decade he focused on litigation. However, finding litigation to be unproductive, he turned to solicitor's work in the early 1960s. Over the years he

developed a very busy practice in the fields of corporate/commercial law, tax law, and wills and trusts. He particularly enjoyed the fact that his practice enabled him to travel extensively—to London, Zurich, New York, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tokyo and many other destinations. This was the “golden age” of air travel, and Don tells me that people would quite literally mingle around a bar, sipping cocktails, while flying. A markedly different experience from what we get on WestJet and Air Canada now.

In 1959 Don bought a Cadillac from an energetic young salesman named Jimmy Pattison. The two hit it off. Very shortly thereafter, Don and Pattison crossed paths again. Don acted for an employee against Pattison's dealership, the famous “Bow Mac”. Don achieved a good result for the employee, at Bow Mac's expense. Pattison knew talent when he saw it and decided to use Don as his lawyer.

Thus began a solicitor-client relationship that would span several decades. Don advised and assisted Pattison with numerous acquisitions and other deals, ultimately serving on Pattison's board of directors. Through these efforts, Don played a role in the development of one of our province's premier enterprises.

As one might expect, working with Pattison was demanding. For several years, Don kept a suitcase in the trunk of his car, packed with clothing and toiletries, in case he got a call from Pattison requiring him to fly to a meeting in some other city that same day. This was not an infrequent occurrence.

Don remained at Gould, Thorpe & Easton until Gould went to the bench in 1965. Art Harper, Q.C., then asked Don to join his firm, which at that time bore the unwieldy name of Harper, Gilmour, Grey, DeVooght, Levis, Van Der Hoop, MacKinnon & Pyper. Don happily agreed, and the firm name was soon shortened to Harper Grey Easton, or “HGE”—a name it would hold for several decades.



DON WITH HIS TWIN NIECES UPON HIS RETURN TO VANCOUVER, NOVEMBER 1944

At HGE, Don worked with future Justices Thackray, Neilsen, Gerow, Hinkson, Butler and Willcock, along with many other distinguished counsel, including the indomitable Harvey Grey, Q.C.

I would not want to give the impression that Don's life is all about work and the war. There is far more to Don than that (and indeed, like so many veterans, you have to pry the World War II stories out of him). Despite the demands of the law, Don has a rich family life. That said, one very important aspect of his family life was a close call—very nearly botched by reason of his commitment to the law.

In the mid-1970s Don was single and working well beyond full-time hours for Pattison and other clients. A mutual friend, lawyer Eddie Ormheim, introduced Don to Elaine Wigman. They shared a very pleasant dinner, and Don thought Elaine was super. However, he had to leave town on an extended business trip almost immediately thereafter, which commanded his full attention. As a result, Don's follow-through with Elaine left much to be desired. In fact, Don admits his follow-through was pretty well non-existent for over a month.

Once more, Lady Luck intervened on Don's behalf. Eddie Ormheim put his advocacy skills to work to convince Elaine to give him another chance. She graciously did. They had a second dinner, which I am told was even better than the first. This time, Don followed through properly. He and Elaine were wed in 1978. They remain happily married to this day.

Don loves sports, especially skiing and golf. Decades spent as a ski enthusiast have given him an interesting perspective on the development of skiing in our province.

Don learned to ski on Grouse Mountain in the 1930s. Skiing was different in those days—there was a lot more cardio involved. The way one got to the top of the run, Don tells me, was to take the streetcar to the top of Lonsdale Avenue and then hike straight up Grouse Mountain, skis in hand. This was the original "Grouse Grind".

Years later, in the early 1960s, Don was invited to ski Whistler Mountain with Franz Wilhelmsen and a group of ski enthusiasts, as part of Wilhelmsen's efforts to promote Whistler as the venue for the 1968 Winter Olympics. There were no runs or lifts on Whistler at that time—it would formally open as a resort several years later.

Don was transported to the top of Whistler by helicopter, which must have been a pleasant change from his "Grouse Grind" days. Don skied the bowls and fell in love with Whistler. He describes it as a day of skiing great powder with no one else on the slopes. How times have changed.

Don maintains a keen interest in the law and continues to attend at Harper Grey on a regular basis. Much of his focus now relates to assisting

charitable endeavours, such as the Shriners, of which he is a member. He likes to share his legal experiences with younger generations, both in the firm and by speaking to the Kitsilano High School law class. Don has an adult son with a doctorate in genetics from the University of Liverpool. His love of travel continues—he and Elaine enjoy no fewer than four trips a year, most of which are cruises. Once more, Lady Luck is on Don's side. He is 89 years young, healthy, active and happy.

#### ENDNOTES

1. The Handley Page Halifax, better known simply as the "Halifax", was a large, multi-engine bomber used extensively by the RCAF and RAF in World War II.
2. I understand that there may have been a few other words put into that sentence for effect, of a nature such that they need not be repeated in this magazine.
3. Don was by this point an RCAF flying officer.



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