

Renowned RCAF pilot who penned famous poem to receive tribute

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Abstract: Photos.600 words with 150 in optional trim John Gillespie Magee, the ill-fated RCAF pilot-poet who composed the famous Second World War ode to aviation titled High Flight, is to be the focus of a special commemoration in Britain next month on the 70th anniversary of his tragic death in a mid-air collision in December 1941.

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Full Text: Note: .EDS: Photos.600 words with 150 in optional trim John Gillespie Magee, the ill-fated RCAF pilot-poet who composed the famous Second World War ode to aviation titled High Flight, is to be the focus of a special commemoration in Britain next month on the 70th anniversary of his tragic death in a mid-air collision in December 1941. In Flanders Fields, the First World War poem penned by Canadian field surgeon Lt.-Col. John McCrae, remains this country's literary standard for Remembrance Day. But air force personnel around the world have a deep fondness for Magee's High Flight - best known for its opening and closing lines: "Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth ... Put out my hand and touched the Face of God." "The poem is like a salute to all airmen," event organizer David Harrigan, an official with Aviation Heritage Lincolnshire, told Postmedia News on Thursday. "It's recognized all over the world and quoted so often. We like to say that it doesn't really have a nationality." Magee was an American citizen who earned his wings in Canada after enlisting in this country more than a year before the official U.S. entry into the war. Ironically, Magee would die on Dec. 11, 1941 - just four days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor led the U.S. to join Britain, Canada and other Allied nations in the fight against the Axis powers. Born the son of Anglican missionaries in China in 1922, Magee received a privileged education in the 1930s and - while still a teenager - was an aspiring poet by the time war broke out in 1939. Though awarded a scholarship to Yale University in 1940, Magee instead left the U.S. and signed up for pilot training in Canada at age 18. He attended RCAF flight schools throughout Ontario - Toronto, Trenton, St. Catharines and Ottawa - before receiving his wings in June 1941. He was sent overseas and initially posted to an airbase in Wales, where he is believed to have written High Flight. Magee, who had earned the rank of RCAF Pilot Officer and was stationed at RAF Digby at the time of his death, was killed when the Spitfire he was piloting on a training run collided in thick clouds over Lincolnshire with a plane from a nearby RAF base. Just 19 when he died, Magee's gravestone at a Commonwealth war cemetery in Britain is etched with the final words from High Flight, which remains the official poem of both the Royal Canadian Air Force and Britain's Royal Air Force. Harrigan said the two-day Magee tribute on Dec. 10-11 will be attended by top officials from the RAF, military attaches from the Canadian High Commission and U.S. Embassy in London, and Magee's closest surviving relative, his brother Hugh. A highlight, he noted, will be the reciting of High Flight during a memorial service at the famed Lincolnshire Cathedral before an expected audience of 350 people. "This thing has just gone huge," he said. Shortly before his death, Magee had written his new poem on the back of a letter he sent to his parents. It was later printed in a church newsletter in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere in the U.S., quickly gaining popularity for its joyful, evocative description of flying an aircraft. The pilot's original, hand-written version of High Flight is held today by the U.S. Library of Congress. U.S. President Ronald Reagan quoted from the poem in paying tribute to the astronauts lost in the 1986 Challenger space-shuttle disaster. And the words were recited again in September, sadly, in the aftermath of the deadly crash at a vintage air-racing event in Nevada. rboswell@postmedia.com SIDEBAR: The 1941 poem High Flight by RCAF Pilot Officer John Gillespie

Magee Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings; Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds, - and done a hundred things You have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there, I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung My eager craft through footless halls of air.... Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace. Where never lark, or even eagle flew - And, while with silent lifting mind I have trod The high untrespassed sanctity of space, - Put out my hand, and touched the face of God. Credit: Randy Boswell; Postmedia News

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