

# Historica Canada Education Portal

## George "Buzz" Beurling

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the "Buzz" Beurling biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Discover the life of this Second World War Canadian Ace fighter pilot and the controversy surrounding his death.

### Aims

The story of George "Buzz" Beurling, brings insight to several Second World War themes. In a variety of activities, students will explore Canada's participation in the war effort, life on the front, war propaganda, and adjusting to civilian life.

### Background

There has always been a question about George 'Buzz' Beurling's death. He survived the Second World War as one of Canada's most controversial pilots - a fighter pilot who had become an Ace in the air battles for Malta with 28 kills. So why would a pilot of such immense experience be killed in peacetime as he took off from a Rome Airport to fight for the new state?

The rumour has always been that the British Secret Service may have murdered George Beurling because of what a dangerous fighter pilot he was. The British Foreign Service was certainly not pro-Israeli in 1947, and when the Norman Aircraft that Beurling was flying *burst* into flames, it was thought to be all part of the British blockade of Israel. But we will probably never know for sure.

There are many things about George Beurling we do know. His childhood in the streets of Montréal was anything but typical. His family was fiercely religious devout members of the Plymouth Brethren who immersed themselves in daily bible readings and strict prayer meetings. We also know that the armed forces establishment generally despised him, as he was not very good at taking orders.

In fact, George Beurling was rejected from serving with the RCAF and worked his way across the Atlantic in a freighter to apply to the Royal Air Force. When he discovered he'd need his passport, which he'd left in Montréal, he worked his way back and forth again – through submarine infested waters, so he could fly and fight.

In the defense of Malta, George Beurling – known as Screwball to his comrades – became the number one ace. When he was brought back to Canada as part of the war propaganda machine they thought Screwball was not an appropriate name, so they changed it to "Buzz."

Buzz Beurling became a legend. He soon became part of the folklore of armed forces and of the nation. He was brought up to be a strict Christian and he always flew with his Bible. He fought his way to becoming Canada's greatest Ace of the Second World War. He died at age 26.

## **Activities**

**Time Allowance:** 1 - 4 hours

**Procedures:**

The story of George Beurling, known as 'Buzz Beurling' by Canadians and 'Screwball' by his fellow RAF members, brings insight to the following Second World War themes:

- Why Canadians chose to participate in the war effort
- Life on the frontlines
- Propaganda and sensationalism
- Adjusting to civilian and family life after the war

Before watching the video:

Here are some terms your students will need to understand. Work out some definitions for these terms before you begin the video. When the term is used in the video, pause to confirm and add to your definitions.

dog fight | aviation | war of attrition | RCAF | RAF | deflection  
shooting | The Dog | Dominion Day

*Why Canadians chose to participate in the war effort*

1. Familiarize students with 'word association' exercises before this lesson. While watching the first section of the video, have the students jot down words (not phrases) they associate with Buzz Beurling's motivation for joining the war effort. Then, have students imagine they are Buzz Beurling and have them write a journal entry or letter home using the words from the word association list and expressing some of the

emotions Beurling might have felt.

2. Create a script and perform three to five tableaux that tell the story of Buzz Beurling's life. Each tableaux should be accompanied by a written script.

3. Map out the journey and places visited by Beurling that are highlighted during the video: his childhood in Verdun, Québec; location of RCAF and RAF bases; trip as deck hand to Glasgow; the air battle at Malta, etc.

4. "Join the Fight!" (Comprehension)

Like many young Canadians, Beurling tried to enlist immediately after war was declared in September 1939. Revive that early enthusiasm for the war by transforming your classroom into a recruitment centre. Choose 2-4 students to be recruiters and assign them the task of enticing the healthy and weeding out those who would have been considered "undesirable." Assign the bulk of the class roles as potential recruits. Categories should include:

- ideal recruits
- conscientious objectors
- "unhealthy" labourers
- people needed in Canada (farmers, industrial labour force)
- "untrustworthy elements," such as people with German, Italian or Japanese surnames

Encourage them to explain their situation. Are they fighting for Canada? Are they looking for adventure? Are they running from something? Why would someone who was treated with suspicion still want to sign up? Encourage some students to be the crowd, egging on the young men to

fulfill their patriotic duty. You could also consider having the students role-play within the appropriate gender roles of the time: the men expected to sign up, the women expected to bully them if they don't!

*Life on the frontlines: camaraderie, food shortages, disease, injuries, and death*

5. The conditions in Malta during the siege were almost unbearable. Pilots like Beurling were flying missions while living on minimal rations, suffering terrible dysentery, and witnessing the horrors of war inflicted on the civilian population. Many soldiers preferred to stay silent about the harsh conditions. Tell the students that they are each pretending to be Buzz Beurling, stationed in Malta, and have them each write a letter home to his parents. Tell them they have to decide what to tell their families and what to leave out. Will they be honest? Are they afraid of making their families too worried? Is it best to just focus on the pleasant memories of home, rather than the terrible conditions here?

*Propaganda and sensationalism*

6. Find some current events that have been sensationalized by the media. Analyze and discuss these looking particularly at the methods used to sensationalize the event. In groups, create the front page of a newspaper or create a poster sensationalizing Buzz Beurling.

7. Beurling's return to Canada in 1942 coincided with the launch of a War bonds campaign and the government milked his popularity for all it was worth. After teaching the class about the need for War Bonds, have the class prepare War Bond posters featuring Buzz Beurling.

8. How would the Beurling family react to the media's portrayal of Buzz?

Imagine that you are Beurling's mother, father, or brother; write an editorial letter where you react to a vicious portrayal of Buzz as a murderer. You can explore some examples of editorials to grasp the techniques used in writing a newspaper editorial.

9. The Canadian government was shameless in their exploitation of Beurling despite his discomfort with the fame. Challenge your students to show the same initiative by exaggerating the heroic nature of a contemporary Canadian of their choice. Divide the class into groups of three to four students, have them choose a Canadian, and write up how they would use propaganda to represent that figure. Consider the way the Canadian government controlled Beurling's image:

- changed his nickname from "Screwball" to "Buzz"
- forced him to become an officer
- had the Prime Minister meet him at the airport
- sent him across the nation making appearances
- said that he had the eyes of a "cold-blooded killer" and called him a "killing machine," much to his dismay

Encourage your students to choose current Canadian pop-culture figures, decide how they could be used to send a specific message, and twist their image to send that message.

### *Adjusting to civilian and family life*

10. In pairs, construct and present an interview with a person of significance in Beurling's life: his brother, Vivian, his father, a fan, or a person who did not like Beurling. This assignment can be further developed by researching relevant people in Beurling's life and then writing or acting out a monologue based on their biographies. As well,

students can research the role of an interviewer for the CBC in 1944. Then set up a mock interview between Beurling or the person researched and the CBC interviewer.

#### 11. "You Can't Come Home Again"

Like many veterans, Buzz Beurling had great difficulty adjusting to civilian life after the experiencing the war. To demonstrate this, have students do a Think-Pair-Share and write what they believe are the five most important characteristics of a "good citizen." After sharing their answers, have them then choose the five most important characteristics of a "good soldier." After they discuss any contradictions in values, have each student prepare a half-page reflection describing why it would be difficult for veterans to return to civilian life.

#### *More Lesson Strategies*

#### 12. Buzz Beurling Debate (Evaluation)

Divide the class into two groups to debate the question, "Is Buzz Beurling a Canadian hero?" Both the pro and the con groups will be expected to define characteristics of a 'hero' and explain how Beurling's achievements and personality do or do not suit their definition.

#### 13. The End Justifies the Means?

The Canadian Government exploited Buzz Beurling but turned their backs on him when he became too difficult to handle. He was never able to recover from the stress of being a hero, an officer, and a puppet of the propagandists. The government, however, could justify their treatment of Beurling by arguing that it helped win the war. Have your students

practice forming and defending the following argument:

"The Canadian Government should not be criticized for exploiting Buzz Beurling because anything that helped win the war was necessary."

Have students agree or disagree with this statement in proper sentence form, explaining why they have taken that stand.

## **Resources**

[George Beurling Worksheet](#)

[Second World War – The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[George Beurling - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Berger, Monty and Street, Brian. *Invasions without Tears: The story of Canada's top-scoring spitfire wing in Europe during the Second World*



*War*. Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1994.

Cosgrove, Edmund. *Canada's Fighting Pilots*. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1965.

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Ellis, Frank H. *Canada Flying Heritage*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1954.

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Halliday, Hugh. *The Tumbling Sky*. Stittsville: Canada's Wing, 1978.

Johnson, J. E. Johnnie. *Wing Leader*. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1956.

Lavender, Emerson. *The Evaders : True Stories of Downed Canadian Airmen and their Helpers in World War Two*. Toronto : McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992.

*This source does not provide information on Beurling, however, it is a good resource for comparing biographies or for understanding more about the airforce.*

McCaffery Dan. *Air Aces: The Stories of Twelve Canadians*. Toronto: Lorimer, 1990.

Milberry, Larry and Hugh A. Halliday. *The Royal Canadian Air Force at War 1939-1945*. Toronto: Canav Books, 1990, pp. 375-76.

Molson, K. M. *Pioneering in Canadian Air Transport*. Winnipeg: James

Richardson & Sons, 1974.

Nolan, Brian. *Hero: The Buzz Beurling Story*. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Ltd., 1981.

Squires, S. Gordon. "Buzz Beurling: The Missing Months." *C. A. H. S.* [Canada] 1991. 29(1): 29-31.

[Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame](#)