

October

Lawrence Station

The Crash of American Airlines Flagship Erie

On the evening of Sunday, October 30, 1941, Viola Howe was busy putting the finishing touches on a Halloween costume for her five year old son Kenneth. The next day the local school in Lawrence Station would have their annual Halloween party.



The Viola and Thompson Howe Family

(front)– Viola & Thompson, (rear) Mary, Kenneth and Keith

Shortly after 10:00 pm, Viola was startled by the overhead roar of a powerful engine. She quickly assumed that one or more aircraft from the RCAF Fingal No. 4 Bombing and Gunnery School must be on night maneuvers.

In horror, Viola watched as the aircraft circled again and came straight for her house. The aircraft pulled up at the last minute sparing Viola and her three sleeping children on the upper story of the white farm house. Her husband, Thompson, was doing late chores in the nearby barn and was also spared.

Struggling to gain altitude, the plane circled one last time to the right. Suddenly the beleaguered aircraft dropped almost straight down crashing headlong into a field of oats a short distance from the house! The plane exploded into flames upon impact burning the spectacle into Viola's mind for the rest of her life.

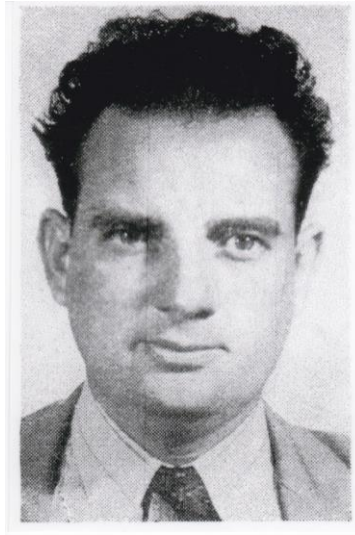


Thompson Howe raced down the farm laneway in the family's Ford automobile, desperate to reach the fiery wreckage and assist any survivors. But as he drew closer, the grim reality set in—the aircraft had erupted into flames upon impact, making rescue impossible.

The pilot, first officer, and stewardess, along with seventeen passengers, perished in what would be American Airlines Flagship Erie's final flight.



David E Cooper
Captain



Richard Owen
First Officer



Mary Blackley
Stewardess



Flight 1 was a regularly scheduled multi-stop journey from New York's LaGuardia Airport to Chicago Municipal Airport. Tragically, during its leg between Buffalo and Detroit, the Douglas DC-3-277B crashed less than half a mile east of the hamlet of Lawrence Station in Southwold.

Volunteer firemen from Shedden, alongside the Howes' neighbors, rallied in an effort to battle the blaze. But the inferno, fed by aviation fuel, defied their attempts—consuming the wreckage in a harrowing testament to the power and fragility of flight.



When the flames finally subsided, five local funeral homes stepped forward to recover the victims. In the days that followed, post-mortems were conducted at funeral homes in Shedden, St. Thomas and Dutton. The remains were respectfully returned to grieving families across the United States.

At the time, the crash of American Airlines Flagship Erie near Lawrence Station marked the deadliest aviation disaster in Canadian history.

An intensive investigation ensued. Aviation experts from American Airlines, Canada, and the United States joined forces with Provincial Police and personnel from the nearby RCAF No. 4 Bombing and Gunnery School in Fingal to comb the crash site and surrounding properties beneath the flight path. Specialists from the Royal Canadian Air Force Technical Training School in St. Thomas carefully examined the wreckage of the Douglas DC-3, searching for answers hidden within the twisted metal.



Two official inquiries—one in St. Thomas, Ontario, and another in New York—were convened to investigate the crash of American Airlines Flagship Erie. Witnesses and aviation professionals were interviewed in hopes of uncovering answers. Yet, despite thorough efforts, no definitive cause was ever determined.

Just six weeks after the Lawrence Station disaster, the Empire of Japan launched its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, propelling the United States into World War II. As global attention shifted to the unfolding conflict, the tragedy near Southwold faded from collective memory—except among the grieving families and the close-knit local community.

Decades later, in 2014, renewed interest emerged with the posthumous publication of *Final Descent: The Loss of the Flagship Erie*, meticulously researched and written by Robert D. Schweyer of Jarvis, Ontario. Though Schweyer passed away before its release, his book remains the definitive account of the accident and its far-reaching impact.



On September 9, 2018, the crash site was formally memorialized. A plaque was dedicated to the victims, with Kenneth Howe representing his family and the sons of pilot Captain David Cooper attending alongside descendants of several passengers. The solemn ceremony honored lives lost and stories long buried.

In 2021, a further tribute marked the 80th anniversary of the crash—continuing efforts to keep the tragedy from fading into obscurity.

Then, in April 2023, art became remembrance. The stage play **Lawrence Station: The Crash of American Airlines Flagship Erie**, written by playwright Len Cuthbert and produced by Fridge Door Live Theatre Company, premiered at the Southwold Keystone Complex in Shedden, Ontario. Across three performances, nearly 600 theatre-goers experienced the poignant story. Families of the victims, some traveling from as far away as Austin, Texas, gathered with locals. Ken Howe again represented the Howe family, as the Southwold community rallied to honor its history—and its healing.



The crash of Flagship Erie remains one of the most profound tragedies in Southwold's 175-year history. The community's enduring strength and resilience in the face of this disaster stand as a powerful testament to its spirit and unity.

Sixty years before the tragic events of 9/11 spotlighted the compassion of Gander, Newfoundland; another small community quietly rose to the occasion. Southwold had its own "Come From Away" moment—and it stood tall, with grace and grit.



References:

Elgin Heritage Archives

Viola Howe Family Scrapbooks, courtesy Ken Howe, Shedden

Final Descent: The Loss of the Flagship Erie by Robert D. Schweyer

Lawrence Station: The Crash of American Airlines Flagship Erie, by Len Cuthbert

Wikipedia

Note: There are summaries of two videos to follow the opening summary statement. See next page.

Preface to Video:

Lawrence Station: The Crash of American Airlines Flagship Erie - *Historical Characters and Locations (April 2023)*

This video production was created as a companion piece to the 2023 stage presentation Lawrence Station: The Crash of American Airlines Flagship Erie, written by playwright Len Cuthbert and produced by Fridge Door Live Theatre Company.

Designed to enrich the theatre experience, the video provides historical context for patrons—highlighting the real-life characters, events, and locations central to the Southwold Township tragedy of October 1941.

The project was a heartfelt effort led entirely by volunteers from the Southwold community. No remuneration was received by anyone involved in the production.
