70 years ago, Murray Dowey backstopped the RCAF Flyers to Winter Olympic hockey glory

GORD HOLDER, POSTMEDIA

More from Gord Holder, Postmedia

Published on: February 16, 2018 | Last Updated: February 16, 2018 9:04 PM EST

The last man added to the roster, at the last possible moment, and the last line of defence for an upstart crew that defended Canada's Olympic hockey honour in 1948 is now the last surviving member of the RCAF Flyers.

Murray Dowey says he keeps his gold-medal past low-profile these days in the his Toronto seniors residence.

"A couple of people have asked me, but I haven't made it known that I played in the Olympics," said Dowey, who's now 92. "That's just not my nature."

Well, OK, but hockey- and Olympic-loving Canadians, currently caught up in the excitement of Pyeongchang and another Games sans the "pros," shouldn't allow Dowey and his Flyers teammates to fade into the mists of time without a proper salute.

The saga began with a strict International Olympic Committee ruling on "amateurism" that no player who had received any form of compensation to play hockey would be eligible for the 1948 Winter Games. Infuriated, the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association announced Canada would not send a team to St. Moritz, Switzerland,
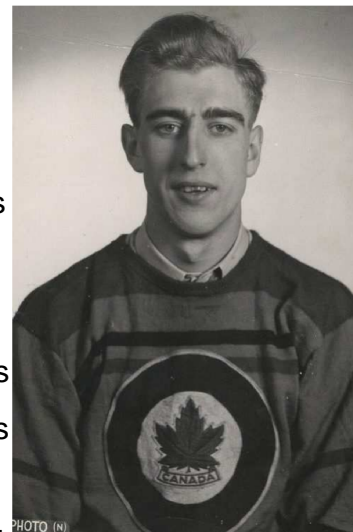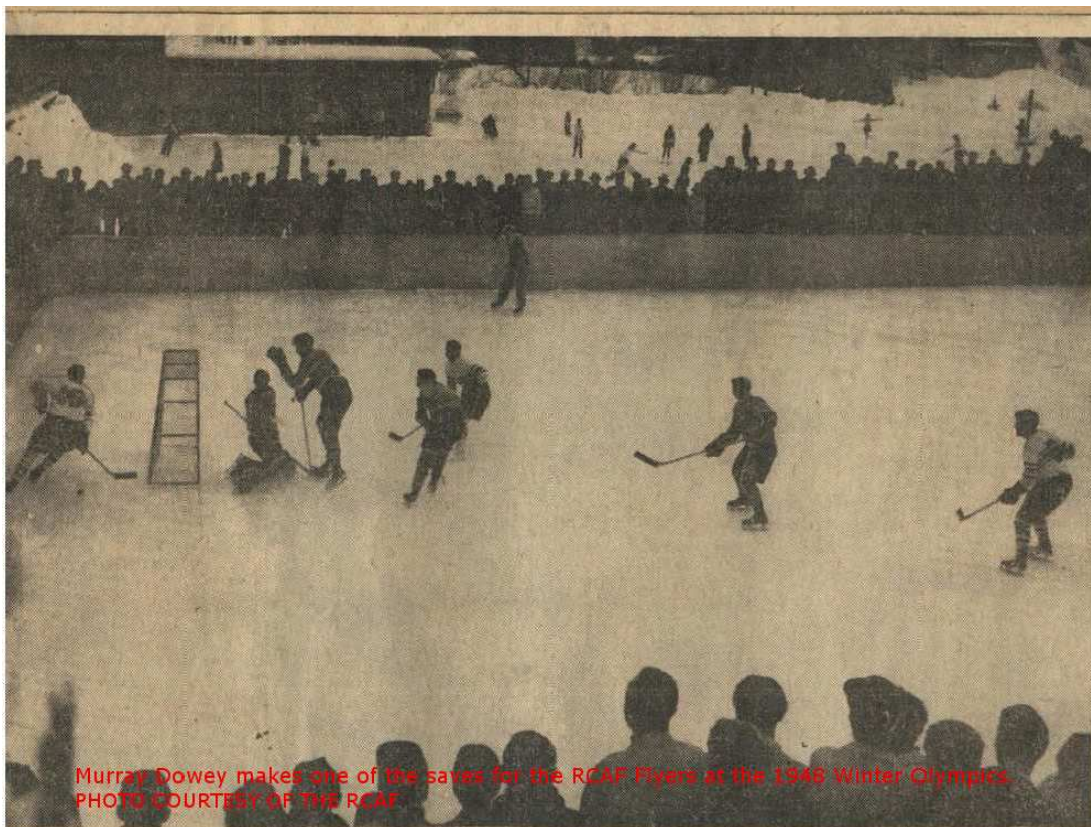
at all.

Dr. Sandy Watson, a Royal Canadian Air Force squadron leader and medical officer, thought little of that idea, so he successfully pitched superiors on forming an RCAF Olympic hockey squad.

Tryouts took place in Ottawa, with players coming and going daily, but the assembled force still got pummelled in exhibition contests. Media coverage was harsh, as was public reaction.

Even pre-Olympic physical examinations got the better of them, with a suspicious chest X-ray forcing No. 1 goaltender Dick Ball from the roster mere days before the Flyers shipped off to Europe.

That was when Dowey entered the picture.

A former soldier in the army, he was, by that time, a Toronto Transit Commission clerk and typist. He had been a teammate of recent team additions Wally Halder and George Mara on the Barker's Biscuits squad in the Canadian Food Products Division of the Toronto Mercantile League.

Murray Dowey makes one of the saves for the RCAF Flyers at the 1948 Winter Olympics.
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE RCAF

Halder and Mara touted Dowey to team officials, including Watson and coach Frank Boucher. Watson phoned the would-be recruit late one night and assured Dowey leave from his TTC position would be arranged.

And so, the next day, Dowey was on a train to Ottawa. He arrived too late for practice, but, well, he was apparently the new No. 1 goalie, so off he went with them to New York, again by train. Shortly, Dowey and his new teammates were on a ship bound for London.

Only when practices and exhibition contests began in final preparation for the St. Moritz Winter Games did the Flyers find out what they had in net.

Soon the rest of the hockey world did, too.

During eight Olympic round-robin games on outdoor ice in St. Moritz, Dowey allowed one goal each to Sweden and Italy and three to the United States. He sandwiched shutout victories against Britain, Poland, Austria and Switzerland around a crucial 0-0 tie with Czechoslovakia.

He was dubbed "Fast Hands" because of his habit of catching the puck with his trapper as often as possible. That was routine stuff in Canada, but a revelation to others.

"Actually, of my sports, I'm a far better baseball player than I was a hockey player. I was a pitcher. I pitched hardball and I pitched softball," Dowey said. "I think one of the times I was with (Barker's Biscuits), somebody just came with a trapper thing.

"Of course, over in Europe, the goalkeepers never caught the puck the way that we did. They never used the trapper. They just more or less blocked the puck with their hands and let it drop in front of them. That was, I think, the intriguing part.

"They used to come watch the practices, and there'd be hundreds of people there coming just to see me; at least, they told me that, to see me catching the puck."

Dowey played all but two minutes of the Olympic round robin, the result of a minor penalty for throwing the puck ahead during the contest against Sweden. (Rules in effect at that time forced Boucher to decide between leaving the net vacant or temporarily installing one of 10 available skaters, so defenceman André Laperrière ended up filling in until his roommate gained parole from the penalty box.)

The gold-medal-clinching win was a 3-0 decision against the Swiss. That allowed the Flyers to match Czechoslovakia's record of record of seven victories and a tie, but the Canadians'

had the advantage under the quaint tie-breaking formula of goals-for-divided-by-goals-against: in their case 69 and five (13.8 quotient) to Czechoslovakia's 80 and 18 (4.44).

The RCAF Flyers celebrate their Gold Medal win over Switzerland on the outdoor rink at St. Moritz in 1948.   OTTWP

As a bonus, the Flyers witnessed history in Czechoslovakia on Feb. 25.

"In fact, we were there the day the reds took over, really, so we had trouble getting out," Dowey said. "They were afraid of the (Czechoslovakian) pilot going and not coming back."

The Flyers got out, though, and their tour continued, although Dowey couldn't stay for the duration. According to him, Barker's Biscuits wanted their star netminder back for the Mercantile League playoffs, so he headed back to Toronto and his TTC job, leaving Olympic reserve Ross King to guard the nets in Europe.

Dowey also missed the Flyers' post-tour victory parade in Ottawa, although he did attend a Rideau Hall ceremony to receive a commemorative ring from the Governor General, the Viscount Alexander. "My dad was Irish and my mother was English, and I know my dad was

quite pleased with that, that the Governor General, he happened to be Irish, and he gave me the ring."

There's a team photo of the Flyers in Dowey's new place, but no other mementoes followed in the move from his previous apartment six months ago. The ring presented by the Governor General is in the hands of Dowey's oldest son, Kevin Dowey. Younger son Murray B. Dowey — the Olympian's middle name is Albert — has the gold medal.

For many years, that medal remained in a bank safety deposit box. Dowey said he never really had any use for it until about a decade ago, six decades past his Olympic spotlight moment, but then it became a real subject of conversation, particularly among the members of his Toronto-area church, who often took it for weekends of picture-taking and such.

In 2015, a documentary film about the Flyers was released, and last fall there was a book, both titled Against All Odds. Dowey was interviewed extensively for those productions.

He became the last surviving RCAF Flyer upon the deaths of Roy Forbes in Kelowna, B.C., last April and Ted Hibberd in Ottawa in May.

Dowey doesn't watch much hockey on television these days, partly because, in his opinion, the Maple Leafs haven't been very interesting until recently, but he does marvel at the increased speed of today's game.

"These guys skate a lot faster, I think, than fellows in our era. That's the big thing I have noticed," he said. "Guys in our era, you didn't have to be a real fast skater.

"At least I never thought they were."

These are pics of the front and back of the gold medal received by the Canadians. Hubert Brooks Private Collection, http://www.hubertbrooks.com OTTWP

The 1948 RCAF Flyers included, in back, from left: Andre Laperriere, Hubert Brooks, Andy Gilpin, Ted Hibberd (behind Hibberd is A. Sydney Dawes, president of the Canadian Olympic Association), Pete Leichnitz, Irving Taylor, Wally Halder, George Mara, Murray Dowey, trainer George McFaul, coach Frank Boucher, Dr. Sandy Watson (manager) and George Dudley (general manager, CAHA). In front, are: Roy Forbes, Orval Gravelle, Reg Schroeter, Ab Renaud, Pat Guzzo, Louis Lecompte and Frank Dunster. Goalie Ross King is not in the photo. OTTWP

THE 1948 RCAF FLYERS ROSTER

Here is the full roster of the RCAF Flyers, the Ottawa-based team that won seven games and tied another on its way to winning hockey gold for Canada in the 1948 Winter Olympic Games at St. Moritz, Switzerland.

Players

Hubert Brooks

Murray Dowey

Frank Dunster

Roy Forbes

Andy Gilpin

Jean Gravelle

Patsy Guzzo

Wally Halder

Ted Hibberd

Ross King

André Laperrière

John Lecompte

Pete Leichnitz

George Mara

Ab Renaud

Reg Schroeter

Irving Taylor

Coach

Frank Boucher

Manager

Sandy Watson

Trainer

George McFaul, Ottawa

THE 1948 WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES HOCKEY TOURNAMENT
GAME BY GAME

Jan. 30: Switzerland 5, United States 4; **Canada 3, Sweden 1**; Poland 7, Austria 5; Czechoslovakia 22, Italy 3.

Jan. 31: United States 23, Poland 4; Czechoslovakia 6, Sweden 3; Switzerland 16, Italy 0; Britain 5, Austria 4.

Feb. 1: **Canada 3, Britain 0**; United States 31, Italy 1; Switzerland 11, Austria 2; Czechoslovakia 13, Poland 1.

Feb. 2: Sweden 7, Austria 1; **Canada 15, Poland 0**; Czechoslovakia 11, Britain 4.

Feb. 3: **Canada 21, Italy 1**; United States 5, Sweden 2.

Feb. 4: Czechoslovakia 17, Austria 3; Poland 13, Italy 7; Switzerland 12, Britain 3.

Feb. 5: Austria 16, Italy 5; Britain 7, Poland 2; Switzerland 8, Sweden 2; **Canada 12, United States 3**.

Feb. 6: Switzerland 14, Poland 0; **Canada 0, Czechoslovakia 0**; Sweden 4, Britain 3; United States 13, Austria 2.

Feb. 7: United States 4, Britain 3; Czechoslovakia 7, Switzerland 1; **Canada 12. Austria 0**; Sweden 23, Italy 0.

Feb. 8: Britain 14, Italy 7; Czechoslovakia 4, United States 3; Canada 3, Switzerland 0; Sweden 13, Poland 2.

Medallists: gold – Canada (7-0-1 round-robin record); silver – Czechslovakia (7-0-1, based on quotient of goals for divided by goals against); bronze – Sweden (4-4-0).

Note: A dispute originating in the United States resulted in two teams from that country travelling to Switzerland. The dispute was resolved with a squad from the Amateur Hockey Association being allowed to play in the tournament, which also counted as the world championship, but it was ruled ineligible for Olympic medals.

•