

**St. Croix Courier, August 15, 2008**  
**Author: Liam Clarke**

## **“The Murder that Prompted a Hanging”**

**Subject:**

- **Sgt. Thomas R. Hutchings**
- **Bernice Connors**
- **Pennfield Ridge Air Station**
- **St. Andrews/County Goal**
- **Capital Punishment**
- **Royal Air Force in Canada during World War Two**
- **Charlotte County during World War Two**
- **1940s Murder**

# The murder that prompted a hanging

By LIAM CLARKE  
Summer Student,  
Charlotte County Archives, 2007

"Sgt. Tom Roland Hutchings, an Armourer of the Royal Air Force now stationed at the Pennfield Operational Training Unit was charged with the murder of Bernice Connors," announced the first page of the June 11, 1942 *Saint Croix Courier*. It further detailed that Miss Connors had been brutally murdered between the hours of 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. on the night of Saturday, June 7. Her battered body was found a quarter of a mile away from where she had been attending the weekly dance at the Blacks Harbour Community Hall with the accused, Tom Hutchings. Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Connors of the Connors Bros. Sardine Factory considered Mr. Hutchings an excellent suitor for their daughter; then just a teenager. Miss Connors had left the dance at the intermission with Mr. Hutchings, innocently unaware that she would never be seen alive again. Although Bernice did not return home that night, her parents assumed that she had gone to a friend's house or was staying with a relative, as this was a usual practice for her.

After growing concerns of her whereabouts, she was reported missing on Sunday evening. Chief Denis P. Guptill received the call at 6:45 p.m. He was a very well-liked man who had gained the respect of every policeman in eastern Canada for his work.

Guptill, accompanied by Duncan Dunn, from the St. George dispatch of the RCMP, set off in search of the girl after one of her shoes had been found on the side of Deadman's Harbour Road. The town of Blacks Harbour

organized a search party to aid the police in finding the young girl. Mr. Guptill was walking along the road when he found the second shoe and noticed a foot sticking out of a moss pile. The police began to uncover the girl's bruised body, which unveiled the brutality of a murder. Miss Connors was practically unclothed and had been beaten to death with a rock. Fearful that she may have survived the attack, the killer also had cut her throat to make sure that she was dead.

The police had a crime – and now were looking for a killer. As Hutchings was the last to see Bernice Connors alive, he was an immediate suspect. Although the evidence given to the court was circumstantial, it proved enough to condemn Hutchings.

During the trial held at St. Andrews, on Sept. 29, 1942, one of the chief witnesses was Gerald Humphries, of the RAF, who related that during an interval at the dance he had walked down Deadman's Harbour Road with his date. He declared that he had heard a noise from the side of the road and saw a man in an RAF uniform and a woman in the grass. However, he could not identify the man as Hutchings. Mr. Humphries returned to the site an hour later with another RAF member and saw the man and the woman still there. When he spoke to the man he received an unintelligible reply in an "English accent."

W.T. Protheroe, another R.A.F member, said he saw Hutchings return to the dance with blood on his face and uniform. Protheroe asked him if he had been fighting. The blood was thick in parts, and he took Hutchings' handkerchief and tried to wipe the blood off. He stated that,



Charlotte County Archives Photo  
Hutchings' mug shot at the Charlotte County Gaol.

"Hutchings appeared to be dazed."

Further evidence was presented by David S. Christie, RAF, who asked Hutchings if he had been in a fight. Hutchings replied, "Yes, and the blood must have come off the other fellow."

A medical witness stated that Bernice's face was swollen, with blood smears all over it. There was a cut on the skull and an even bigger one under the chin. The body showed

signs of intercourse and the girl's clothing was missing. All evidence pointed to Hutchings as the murderer. After four hours of deliberations, the jury returned with a guilty verdict with a recommendation of mercy on Oct. 5, 1942. Hutchings was then taken back to his cell in the St. Andrews Gaol.

It was later revealed that Hutchings would be hanged for his crime after word was received from the Provincial Attorney-General's Department at Ottawa that, "The law will take its course in the capital case of Tom Ronald Hutchings."

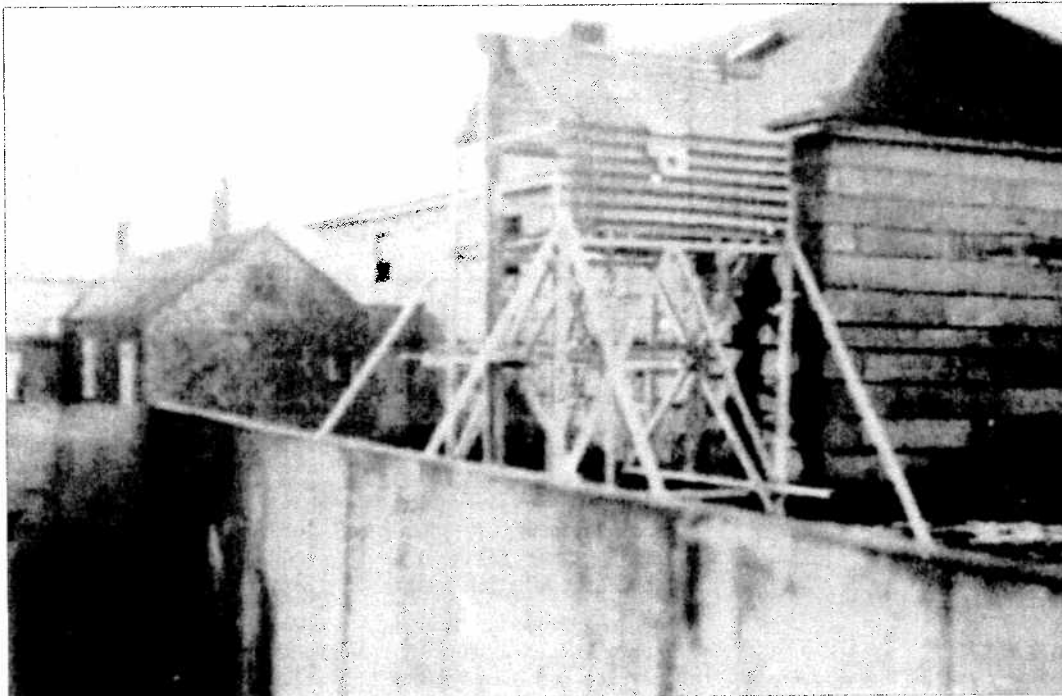
Hutchings, who was confined to his cell in the Gaol, was reported to show little emotion, was sleeping well, and eating regularly.

On Dec. 16 1942, Tom Ronald Hutchings walked unaided to the gallows that had been erected around the back of the Gaol in St. Andrews. He wore his RAF tunic and slacks and made no last statement. The execution was kept very private with only a few on hand to witness it. Camille Blanchaud, who was the official hangman for the Province of Quebec, sprung the trap door at 1:50 a.m. Hutchings was pronounced dead at 2:02 a.m. The hanging took 12 minutes and was the first execution in Charlotte County since 1879.

Mr. Hutchings was buried in St. Andrews Rural Cemetery after a quiet funeral took place in the Charlotte County Courthouse, where he had been first found guilty a short time ago.

*Liam Clarke was a Summer Student, Charlotte County Archives, 2007.*

*The Archives is supported by Heritage Branch, Province of New Brunswick.*



Charlotte County Archives Photo

The gallows used for the execution of Tom Hutchings. Note the awning used to protect the privacy of the event; it was taken from a shop in St. Andrews and reads "gift shop" across the top.