

## LIFE &amp; TIMES

SAM LIEBERMAN (1922 — 2012)

# 'In his own way, he was a legend'

*Helped lead two major reforms during distinguished legal career*

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*Edmonton Journal*

The Second World War era airplane propeller and the stuffed trophy fish that hung on the wall of Justice Sarnuel Lieberman's Edmonton courthouse office spoke to a lifetime of experiences outside of his distinguished judicial career.

Mixed with an assortment of photographs that captured his adventures, as well as moments with his family, the collection offered visitors a glimpse into his interesting life. "You could look at his wall for about an hour and be enthralled," recalled Allan Wachowich, the former chief justice of the Alberta Court of Queen's Bench.

Lieberman died on Sept. 19 at the age of 90.

He leaves a legal legacy that included 31 years on the bench, 21 of them as a justice with the Alberta Court of Appeal, the province's highest court.

In that time, Lieberman helped lead two major reforms. He was the first chairman of the Legal Aid Society of Alberta, helping establish legal assistance for people facing criminal trials. He also pushed to establish the Alberta Board of Review for people found to be criminally insane. It was a groundbreaking effort, one copied by other provinces across Canada. Until the review board was established, hundreds of people were kept indefinitely in mental institutions.

Lieberman became the first chairman of that board, a position he held for nine years. "That was an area I where I feel I made a contribution," Lieberman recalled in an interview with the Journal in 2007.

Those who worked with Lieberman said he had good reason to be proud.

Lawyer Kent Davidson, managing partner of Miller Thomson's Edmonton office, recalled the 85th birthday party that his office threw for

Lieberman, who joined the law firm after he retired from the bench in 1997. All the mast-head partners of Edmonton's major firms came to the party, along with senior members of the bench and bar.

Lieberman was born in Edmonton in 1922 and grew up in his family's Glenora home.

In 1940, after completing his first year at the University of Alberta, he joined the war effort, enlisting in the Royal Canadian Air Force. "My Jewish background came into play," Lieberman told the Journal in 2005 about his decision to enlist. "I said, 'What the hell, I better do something.' I felt an obligation not only as a Canadian but also as a person of the Jewish faith to fight an evil empire."

By the time he returned home to Edmonton in 1945, Lieberman had flown a wide range of missions. As a member of the RAF Squadron No. 280, he flew Ansons on air-sea rescue missions over the North Sea and piloted bombers over the Atlantic Ocean with another coastal command.

In July 1943, he was posted to the RAF's No. 8 squadron in Aden, where he flew convoy escorts over water bodies that included the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. It was there that he ended up being assigned to lead a famine relief mission for the tribespeople of the Wadi Hadhramaut, an area now part of northern Yemen. He kept mementos of that two-month airlift in a scrapbook, which included a congratulatory letter from Air Vice Marshal F.H. McNamara, V.C. The airlift prevented 100,000 people from starving.

Lieberman returned to Edmonton in March 1945 with the rank of squadron leader, and retained his passion for flying — hence the propeller on the wall of his courthouse office.

He returned to the U of A and graduated from law school in 1945. He joined his father Moe



GREG SOUTHAM/EDMONTON JOURNAL FILES  
Retired Justice Sam Lieberman in 2005 with a model of a Wellington bomber, one of the planes he flew during Second World War.

Lieberman's law firm and specialized in insurance law. He married his wife, Nancy, in 1950 after they met at a service club convention in Winnipeg.

Wachowich, who started his law career a few years after Lieberman, said the pair discovered they both had family ties to the same small community in Ukraine. They bonded over that fact, although they still had to face each other in court regularly, since both specialized in insurance law.

Lieberman's career on the bench began in 1966, when he was named to the northern Alberta District Court. Four years later, he was appointed as a justice of the Alberta Court of Queen's Bench. In 1976, he was promoted to the Alberta Court of Appeal and the Court of Appeal of the Northwest Territories.

Lieberman was an outstanding lawyer who was appointed on his legal merits, Wachowich



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Justice Sam Lieberman flew a wide range of missions during the Second World War.

said, but he also was a ground-breaker because he was the first judge of Jewish faith to be appointed in Alberta.

"His attitude was, 'I want to uphold the law and make sure the law is upheld,'" Wachowich said. "In his own way, he was a legend."

Wachowich remembered appearing before Lieberman when he was still a lawyer in a case tied to a multi-car pileup on the Jasper Highway.

"What I admired about him was how, among 13 cars, he was able to assess liability in a way that made sense, which is a difficult thing to do when you have 11 lawyers, 13 cars and a whole bunch of injuries," Wachowich said.

Outside of work, Lieberman loved to golf and to fish, Wachowich said, and particularly enjoyed fishing trips in the Northwest Territories and the Rockies.

He held posts with a vast range of community organizations, ranging from the CNIB and the Edmonton Symphony to the Kiwanis Club and B'nai Brith. He also served on the board of the Edmonton Eskimos in the 1960s and became part of a group known as the Nervous Nine, who put up their own money to save the

football franchise from going bankrupt.

Always a gentleman, he was recognized with several honours, including the Alberta Order of Excellence in 2006.

"I feel very fortunate in having participated in the profession and the judiciary," Lieberman told the Journal in 2007. "It's given me insight into many areas of society that I would never have been able to understand, people from all aspects and all strata of society that I would never have come into contact with. It has also given me an opportunity to make a contribution, however small, to our way of life."

"If I had to do it all over again, I'd do the same thing."

In addition to his wife, Lieberman is survived by his son David, his daughters JoAnn and Audrey, and two grandsons.

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