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# *At the Crossroads of Time*

The Story of  
Operational Training Unit 31, RCAF No. 7 Squadron,  
and RCAF Tiger Force  
at Debert, NS



Department of National Defence photograph DNS -29021  
Aerial view of Hangars at Debert, N.S.

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**Gerry Madigan**  
**1/8/2016**

Update: 22/11/2017 11:44 AM

1<sup>st</sup> edition

“At the Crossroads of Time” is dedicated to the men and women who lived and died at Debert during the Second World War. This is ultimately their story of their lives and times forged in the closing of the Great Depressions and that was steeled by war. Their sacrifices paved the way towards a better world that we live in today. It is a story respectfully remembered and one well worth telling.

*Verso to title page*

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Madigan, Gerry (Gerard Daniel J.), author

At the crossroads of time: the story of Operational Training Unit 31,  
RCAF No. 7 Squadron, and RCAF Tiger Force Debert Airfield during the  
Second World War / Gerry Madigan.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-9959203-0-9 (PDF)

1. Airports--Nova Scotia--Debert--History--20th century. 2. Canada.  
Royal Canadian Air Force--History--World War, 1939-1945. 3. World  
War, 1939-1945--Aerial operations, Canadian. 4. Debert (N.S.)--History,  
Military--20th century. I. Title.

FC2349.D39M33 2017

971.6'1204

C2017-901532-X

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## Acknowledgements

“At the Crossroads of Time” began as a series of papers for refereed journals. It was a make work project to ease my way into retirement following a career in the Canadian Armed Forces. It was an interest that expanded my knowledge and love for Debert following a memorable posting there in the 1990’s. The papers were never published though, and eventually they evolved into this book.

I am truly thankful for the unexpected and extraordinary opportunity that this turned out to be. Many people encouraged me along the way through sharing their own works, stories, pictures, archives, and insights. I am deeply indebted to all for their most generous help and assistance.

The foundation of the story comes from the historical records and archives out of the vaults of the Department of National Defence. I am deeply indebted to Major Mathias Joost of the Directorate of History and Heritage for sharing those records and for opening what turned out to be, a vista of Canadian wartime experience, rich in history and photographs.

No less important was the assistance of Mark Peapell, President of the Atlantic Canada Aviation Museum who shared his archives and who helped with the identification of aircraft and facilities. Mark also shared his Pukka Gen archives, a newsletter from Debert that was a true record of the lives of the people who served there.

The historical archives were the bones of the work, but the flesh came from other sources that included individual and family records. These proved to be the lifeblood of the tale. I am particularly grateful to Mike Allen and Graham Tall for the use of their files in this respect.

Mike’s father Ernest Allen was amongst the first to train at Debert. Ernest Allen’s story was written in the first account as “An **RCAF Pilot’s Story 1939-1945 from the memoirs of Ernest E Allen**, 1996”. Sadly, Ernest recorded the events of the death of his dear friend Pilot Officer Beech O’Hanley who was amongst the first to die at Debert. Also, lost in that tragic event was Sergeant Leonard Hornsey (RAF).

Graham Tall so generously shared Leonard’s story from his book “Mr. Woolley and the War Years” as well as the touching letters from Leonard Hornsey’s parents on the loss of their beloved son.

The Debert Municipal Airport, Chis Charland, Aircraft Research, National Air Force Museum of Canada, Trenton Ontario, Chris Larsen Air Historian, Greenwood Nova Scotia, Chris Larsen (no relation), Historian Pennfield Parish Military Historical Society, Pennfield New Brunswick, and Mary Mackay of the Guardian Newspaper PEI also contributed and helped with identification, sources, and leads.

The book was also brought to life through the nuances of personal stories, recollections, family papers or books, from the reminiscences of those who lived through events.

Notable assistance was lent by Robert and Gina Walsh, of Cross Roads Country Harbour, Norma Cooke, Isaacs Harbour, Jane Dort, Cross Roads Country Harbour, Beulah (Fenton) Myers Country Harbour Mines, Wilmer Hodgson Country Harbour Mines, Mrs. Mickey (Fenton) Harpell –Halifax NS, Mary and Brian Richard, Larry’s River, Leslie Ryter Halfway Cove, and finally Claire McKeen and Graham Kirk of Glenelg NS.

Then there was also to be an unexpected pleasure. I am deeply indebted to my daughter Janice Murphy who arranged a visit for me to Churchill’s war rooms on one family visit to Ireland the summer of 2014. It was a surprise Father’s Day gift to me. We spent a delightful day in London and visiting this and other museums in June of that year. The insights gained provided depth into the strategic vista of the day to day problems facing Churchill, Canada, and our Allies.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the help and patience of my editor and most ardent fan, my wife Melodie. This work would not have been completed without her time, dedication, and guidance for which I am truly grateful.

This book is dedicated to the men and women who lived and died at Debert during the Second World War. This is ultimately the story of their lives and times. Their sacrifices paved the way towards a better world in which we live today. It is certainly a story well worth remembering and telling.

## Foreword

June 6, 1944 was a day of destiny, the beginning of the end if you will. It was the day that launched thousands of allied servicemen in the quest for the liberation of Europe. June 6, 1944 was D-Day, the day anticipated and, one diligently and grimly trained for.

The generation that followed this often looks back at that event through the filter of history. Seventy years on we have no clear idea of the tension or fear that filled the homes of many service families that day as their sons and daughters were sent into the maws of death and destruction.

It was the fear of the unknown in the task of the liberation of the free world, conducted by a generation of men and women who ultimately persevered and won. Some would say that this was the greatest generation. But the outcome was never a certainty.

The war in Europe finally ended the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1945. But the war still wasn't over. It had only come to one climax. In August 1945 and later that September the end would finally come with the unconditional surrender of Japan. But on the sixth of June 1944, the desired end, victory, was still a far way off. It remained both a distant and future prospect.

Many families awoke to the news on June 6<sup>th</sup> that the Allies had launched the invasion on Fortress Europe. They read about it in the newspapers or heard about it on the radio. They clung to these sources for the most recent bulletins and updates as the day progressed. It was a day at the end of which, many families lost a loved one in the undertaking.

Prime Minister Mackenzie King made his own D-Day announcement on radio, stating he and his cabinet received word early that morning revealing that all elements of Canadian Forces, Army, Navy and Air Force were now involved in the invasion, whose operations commenced that morning around 0300 hrs.

King said the invasion was “the opening of what we hope and believe will be the decisive phase of the war against Germany.” He warned that the fighting will be “heavy, bitter and costly”. He ended “Let the hearts of all in Canada today be filled with silent prayer for the success of our own and allied forces and for the early liberation of the people of Europe.”<sup>1</sup>

Canadians and the free world clung to their radios for news of their sons and daughters. The wait must have been interminable. Day turned to night. Many families stood by their

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<sup>1</sup> CBC radio digital archives, medium radio, CBC War Recordings, Broadcast Date June 6, 1944, William Lyon Mackenzie King, **Mackenzie King on D-Day: ‘We have every reason for confidence’**, Duration: 2:38  
Source: <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/d-day-we-have-every-reason-for-confidence>  
Accessed: 23 Sep 2016

radios anxiously awaiting news from the front. Normal radio programming gave over to the events of the day by updating the public with the latest bulletins.

“Fibber McGee and Molly”, a popular weekly comedy program, was keenly followed by both Canadian and American audiences. “Fibber and Molly” would not fly the test of public probity by today’s standards of political correctness. But the audiences loved its formulaic verbal pratfalls, humour and insults peppered about the airwaves each week.

Fibber and Molly’s program, was one regularly scheduled on D-Day, but the performers and sponsor put it all aside on 6 Jun 1944. Fibber and Molly’s program was aired but the pratfall comedy was deferred. Their program was given over to keeping the public apprised of the latest war news. Fibber and Molly’s program was solemnly devoted to the music and martial themes of all the armed services then involved in this great adventure.

They began their program with thoughts and prayers and those of the show’s sponsor, the Johnson Wax Company for the safety and welfare of the audiences’ loved ones. Fibber and Molly hoped and prayed for the day when all their sons and daughters would come home safely to them. Then the program began playing the Coast Guard March. It went on for well over a half an hour highlighting the marches of each service involved in the day’s battle.

There were no funny skits, no running gags, nor insults 6 June 1944. The whole program was one of anticipation, anticipation for news while grimly waiting for the latest bulletin. That bulletin came toward the end of the program. The music faded out as an announcer phased in at about the 25-minute mark in the program.

The transition to the news bulletin was as smooth as silk. Those in the studio were probably unaware of the segue to the latest news bulletin just arrived from Swedish correspondents in Germany. They gave a very concise and precise update on the day’s activities on the front from the enemy’s perspective. It painted the picture of the fighting and where the Allies had landed. But more importantly it stated that the Allies had landed and now were firmly lodged in France!

Following this short bulletin, the news segued back into the regular program, which had coincidentally moved into the solemn singing of the “Army Hymn”, sung by the King’s Men. The program concluded shortly thereafter.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fibber McGee and Molly, WWII Broadcasts, Home Front of Wistful Vista, Broadcast Date June 6, 1944, radio, duration, 30 min (approx.)

Source: <http://www.fibbermcgeeandmolly.com/wwii-broadcasts-homefront-of-wistful-vista.html>

Accessed: 23 Sep 2016

The world was at a crossroads, one of destiny, 6 June 1944. One road led to victory, the other, the one not worth thinking about, defeat, darkness and the moral abyss. The fate of nations rested on the skill and determination of those who made sacrifices on D-Day. It was a determined effort that made possible the pursuit and ultimately vanquishing of the oppressor some months later in 1945. Like many things in life, it was a very close-run affair.

The war in fact was an amalgam of so many crossroads. These were all weaved together toward final outcomes guiding decisions or precipitating actions on oh so many different levels. We tend to view history from a top down or silo perspective of following the chain of consequences and actions dominated by governments and great leaders.

Winning war was never so clean nor so simple. We should remember that this and other wars were fought by men and women whose personal actions had consequences. It was a considerable effort that involved all. The crossroads of personal lives and decisions had consequences that elevated and precipitated events too. The amalgam of destinies had considerable impacts to the final outcome.

A crossroad is a place where roads intersect, or a point at which vital decisions are made, or some junction at the centre of activity. All three are appropriate and germane to the discussion of the story of the Debert airfield in Nova Scotia during the Second World War.<sup>3</sup>

This story attempts to illustrate that the many activities at Debert during the war were not linear. History was an ebb and flow of events. History involved the community at Debert and placed it at the centre where events transacted or intertwined. All paint the picture of the time, of what occurred, of what sacrifices were made in so many Canadian communities, both great and small.

This is a humble attempt to mark the passing of great events at Debert Nova Scotia during the Second World War as the record of the ebb and flow of a great enterprise in one small rural community. It was something shared by many other small Canadian communities. It was all crucial to the Allied victory!

That is something surely worth remembering; such a great effort should not be forgotten nor lost in the mist of time. We should also remember the days that led to victory and what it took to get there, for after all, they were at the crossroads of our destiny.

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<sup>3</sup> L. Urdang, Ed. And S.B. Flexner, M.E., **The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, College Edition**, Random House New York, 1968.

## Introduction

### *...The Day the Yellow Wings Came to Town*

Canada declared war on Germany on 10 September 1939. Some mark this the day as the day that the Great Depression ended. The declaration of war profoundly impacted many towns and people including Debert, Nova Scotia.

The tenth of September marked the starting point of significant change and circumstance for many Canadians. It was to become a time of high adventure and drama. In fact, for many it was the defining moment of their lives.

Great Britain declared war on Germany one week earlier than Canada. Canada's own and separate declaration was anticipated, but Canada waited a suitable time for appearances sake. Canada would demonstrate its sovereignty and independence in the matter through this delay. Canada made time for debate and to conduct a parliamentary vote to do so. Canada and other Commonwealth nations eventually followed Great Britain's lead and quickly mobilized once war was declared.

In the meantime, Canadians anxiously awaited their government's decision. Many flocked to recruiting centres to join up to do "their bit." An influx of humanity soon arrived from near and far in the hurry to join up. People moved about in common cause and purpose. Strangers from all parts of Canada, even different parts of the world, were brought together for the fight and the trials and tribulations ahead.

The movement within Canada's population was unprecedented. The great mobilization brought together men and woman of differing backgrounds and circumstances as they volunteered and recruited for military service. The sudden presence of uniformed men and women was the simple reminder to all, that Canada, was indeed at war.

But there was more to it than joining up. A wide variety of different things happened too. The scope varied. People weren't just joining up, many moved to jobs that needed filling! "Doing their bit" was both for the government and people was the death knell of what was the Great Depression.

The country's mobilization towards war meant full employment across the Canadian economy. The war proved to be a boom! Also, an influx of people from all walks of life, locked in a common purpose, poised to break Canadian insularity.

New faces and strangers soon gathered in the staid communities and establishments across Canada. The newcomers posed a significant challenge. Community traditions and cycle of life, that had remained unchanged like the rising and the setting of the sun for generations, were about to be tested. But this influx also fueled prosperity!

The war brought both prosperity and nuisance that placed pressure on Canadian communities for space and resources. The growth of the Canadian military, the sudden

rise of recruitment, and the concomitant demand for facilities and space required to grow and train, was most challenging. But still many communities rose to meet that challenge. Many greatly benefitted in seen and unseen ways.

Canadians today have forgotten what happened on the home front. We are wrapped in the concept that Canada was untouched by the ravages of the Second World War.

Sadly, the history of Canada and its war effort at home is often marginalized. It is regarded as unimportant or inconsequential. The home front's history is largely pushed to the sidelines. The emphasis of our history and the broader picture of the Second World War seems devoted to what happened overseas and not necessarily here at home.

The lack of historical emphasis and context often implies that events simply did not happen in Canada. The history of the Second War is seldom taught in our schools from a Canadian perspective. So, it is very easy for our population to conclude that "nothing happened here during the war."

The truth is, there is a legacy that is often unseen or hidden from view. It may be found in abandoned forests, fields and waterways in around many Canadian communities that tells of a great enterprise, if you look closely enough.



Archives Gerry Madigan Debert River August 2012

A legacy has been lost because the tools, building and engines of war are misunderstood or unrecognized. The detritus and remnants of the Second World War widely abound that tells the tale of Canada's great contribution that is largely marginalized in our collective memory as a country. We sustained our Allies during the darkest hours throughout the Second World War.

The legacy of sustainment is easily found in many communities around Nova Scotia if you know where and what to look for. This is especially true in and around Debert, Nova Scotia.

### *...A walk along the Flight Line*

An airfield was constructed at Debert, Nova Scotia during the Second World War. It was used as part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. It happened that Vintage Wings of Canada came there for a visit one August day in 2012. Too many residents, the airfield has always been there! No thoughts were given to its meaning, purpose or origin.

The Debert airfield was the home of Operational Unit 31, followed by RCAF Squadron No.7, and then finally the Tiger Force of 63 Group during the Second World War. Debert was just one place amongst the many training establishments where many newly minted airmen from the "Yellow Wings" came for final polishing and training before operational duty.

Vintage Wings of Canada hosted a display of flyable training aircraft, once used on similar airfields across Canada. Perhaps the display would remind all there of the reason for the airfield built in Debert.

Many veterans too returned for a nostalgic visit to see the Yellow Wings some 70 years later. Some were part of the training plan. It was a hot day. The air was filled with the excitement of families and children pressing to get a closer look. Reporters eagerly jostled and hurried in and around the crowd, trying to get the story. The war birds and the Vintage Wing crews put on quite the show that all enjoyed.

Pictures were taken, and interviews were made. In the hurly burly of getting the news to bed, the reporters concentrated on the Vintage Wing crew, the excitement, the setting, and the young people in the glow of the venerable "Yellow Wings".

The press and public missed a far greater opportunity though. Veterans were there amongst them. They were the ones who lived the history of the airfield and the Yellow Wings. At the edge of the swirling throng was heard "Is it the way you remember it Dad?"

An older gentleman, stood back, far on the edge of the crowd overlooking the airfield and the flight line. His eyes seemed to wander beyond the airfield to the old administration area in the far distance on the other side of the airfield.

In his mind's eye, he may have seen other things. He likely remembered where the hangars, the administration buildings, the living quarters, once were. He probably remembered the hustle and bustle of an airfield at war. They once existed here, just beyond the boundaries of the old fence over there behind the airfield.

He probably envisaged the uniformed men and aircraft moving about with a purpose. You can still see the evidence of that in the roads, foundations, fire hydrants, and parade squares of a sprawling enterprise now long abandoned in and around the forests and fields of Debert.



Archives Gerry Madigan Debert Airfield August 2012 Tiger Moth on Display

In fact, there is little to be imagined. It is all there on the ground for all to see, the minutiae and detritus of the airfield, the remnants of an Army training centre. All of them are clearly visible and are easily found.

Debert was the hub of a vast military training area that fed the battle fields of war. For some it would be their last remaining days in Canada. Many fell and would not return home at war's end.



Archives Gerry Madigan Debert aerial view 21 April 2013

For the old, the veterans in the crowd, Vintage Wings of Canada inspired a time of solemn remembrance, reflection of the past, lives lived, loves lost, and an intimate sharing of that experience with their families.

Unknowingly the BCATP and government programs laid some of the seeds

of Canada's future prosperity. The program helped develop the leaders of tomorrow. But it was a costly venture too. Some 17,330 Canadian airmen paid the ultimate sacrifice for their country in doing so. It may have been the reason for the gentleman to pause and reflect before replying to his dutiful daughter.



Archives Gerry Madigan Debert Airfield August 2012 Harvard on display

Debert's story should be remembered as it tells of one of Canada's great contributions to the Commonwealth and our Allies in those trying times.

This short history of the Debert airfield at war is a compelling Canadian tale of what happened the day "the Yellow Wings Came to Town".

It might be the answer to the question "Is it the way you remember it Dad?"

## 1 - Debert Sketches in Time

### *...Debert*

Debert's history includes a time as a major military training centre during the Second World War. The physical history of Debert alone is of interest in of itself. Its social history, particularly that of the Great Depression, is a microcosm of the Canadian experience shared by many in both rural and urban Canada.

Debert, a small village located in west central Nova Scotia, lies along a rail corridor and the Trans-Canada Highway today. It is just slightly west of Truro, the hub of Nova Scotia. Here at Truro, the rail and road traffic split at junctures that leads traffic off toward Cape Breton further east or Halifax and parts further south.

Debert lies in a unique and varied ecological and geological environment. The area favoured human settlement and was first settled by Canada's indigenous people. They occupied the area at the end of the last glaciation some 12,000 years ago upon the retreat of the ice shield. The indigenous peoples thrived on its hunting and fishing grounds.

Farms now abound Cobequid Bay where richer soils in the low land areas are agriculturally productive. The upper reaches of Debert are forested with varied soil types supporting blueberry and forestry activity.

The Debert River passes through the heart of all this and through the small village of Debert to wetland areas beyond, home to migrating waterfowl. Here and there are also hints of past mining activity suggesting a measure of prosperity of days now long gone.

The nature of Debert's geography has always lent it to be at the heart of several crossroads of sorts. The river was a passage way for indigenous commerce and trade between Prince Edward Island, through Nova Scotia to New Brunswick.

The area has always been a natural conduit and highway for trade. Archeological digs in the 1960's and 1970's documented the rich history of those who first lived here. Over time, the area became a natural migration and trading route for others as well.

Debert was latterly settled by Acadian families in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The Acadians colonized in and around the fertile areas of the shoreline of Cobequid bay and the Bay of Fundy.

The Bourque and 11 other families settled at the mouth of the Debert River. The river and the area surrounding was renamed in honour of Martin and Maire (Potet) Bourque that became known as duBorque. The name was subsequently anglicized by later English settlers to Debert.

Debert's fortunes have thus always been resource based. Hunting, fishing, mining and farming changed the face and tone of Debert. But those opportunities invariably ran their course.

Debert's rich history has always been cyclical. There were both booms and busts. Debert's economic engine in modern times now is its industrial park, a major storage and distribution centre for many large maritime and corporate businesses.

This industrial area lies on land once used during the Second World War as an army camp and an airfield. Strangely, Debert's prosperity seems to have been predicated on "location, location, location."

Debert's economic driver prior to the Second World War was the rail link that ran from the Atlantic Coast through to Canada's industrial heartland and the prairies, the west coast and beyond. A ribbon of steel ran through Debert. It was central to its survival and prosperity.

Rail spanned the country that brought an influx of men and materiel to the Maritimes. The opposite flow shipped from the dockyards of Halifax or the industrial area of Cape Breton, made its way onward to the heartland of Canada. It was a vital link during the war. The rail line still exists today.

Beyond the rail line, tremendous change came to Debert following the Great Depression. The Second World War brought tremendous opportunity to the Maritimes. The war impacted many Maritime communities.

War brought both opportunity and consequence. Debert was no different than many other Canadian communities in that regard. The war profoundly changed its fortunes. Its landscape would soon be transformed.

### *...The Great Depression in Rural Nova Scotia*

The Great Depression was a decade of utter misery for many that began the fall of 1929 and only ended ten years later in 1939. The Great Depression was an event of precipitous consequences. It brought great suffering and destitution to many communities and to the people who lived through it. Debert suffered through the Great Depression much like the rest of Canada.

Donald Davidson, a long-time resident, remembered Debert during the 1930's. Its population numbered no more than 500-600 people at any one time. They survived on mixed farming and lumbering. The village blessed with a permanent lumber mill and factory, was located near the local train station that provided some employment and prosperity.

The village was large by the standards of the day. Debert as a focal point and economic centre supported three stores, a post office, a barber shop, a two-room school, a community hall, and a blacksmith shop at the outset of the war.<sup>4</sup> Mr. Donaldson's memory was very clear, Debert was a prosperous village in its day.

Debert's prosperity though, must be tempered by the events of the Great Depression. The Depression had a tremendous impact throughout Canada. Debert like other communities, both large or small, rural or urban, was deeply touched by this catastrophic event.

The force of the depression meant that many Canadian families were rendered deeply impoverished, sometimes overnight. A significant part of our population suffered from the lack of meaningful employment and economic opportunities on a horrific scale.

The Depression deeply affected the psyche of an entire generation. A family could have a job one day and easily be on the dole and destitute the next. The Depression was total devastation that laid to waste hope by loss of employment found in the closures of local factories or businesses. Canada's economy steadily declined and became moribund.

The depression was an uneasy time, a time of fear, a time of desperation and of great worry. An air of pestilence prevailed that would not dissipate until the country's economy was once again back on track. To those who lived through the dirty thirties that recovery seemed a long way off.

Year after year, Canada's population languished interminably under the weight of desperation from the government's parsimony and lack of opportunity. Ironically change finally came with government spending during the war. Until that spending happened, the decade of the 1930's was a dark place of want and despair that became firmly entrenched in the collective memory of many Canadian families.

The Great Depression was such a vivid memory to a generation that lived through it. It was my father and mother's generation. The Depression for them was often remembered as a most traumatic and darkest period in Canada's history.

It was a collective low point because of a loss of hope. Many Canadians were so impoverished that they often lacked the necessities of life. Whole neighbourhoods and communities felt the pangs of hunger. Many lacked food and shelter, simply for want of a decent job.

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<sup>4</sup> Mr. William Langille, Chairman, Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs **Testimony - Debert Military History Society to Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs**, Halifax, Thursday, March 1, 2001, 9:00 A.M.

Source: <http://www.gov.ns.ca/legislature/hansard/comm/va/va010301.htm>

Accessed: 13 August 2010

pg. 6 personal recollections of. Don Davidson, a young businessman at that time, operating Davidson's Store. Mr. Davidson lived in Debert all his life. He grew up there when the war came as a teenager of 15 or 16 years of age

Gainful employment to pay for a family's daily bread was non-existent for a huge portion of Canada's population. The statistics of the day paint a dismal picture. More than half the wage earners in Canada pocketed some form of relief at the height of the Great Depression. A living wage was difficult to obtain. One in five Canadians was on the dole.

The poverty line was near \$1000 per year for a family of four in the day. This points to the desperation and plight of many for this benchmark did not reflect reality. Many desperate wage earners average income was often far less than \$1000 per year. In fact, it was closer to \$500 per year for most, if a job was had at all.<sup>5</sup> The Great Depression was forced upon an entire Canadian generation who shared a painful and communal experience nation-wide.

Scott Mackeen of Aspen Guysborough County remembered those times well. His experience gives us a sense of the grave times from the perspective of rural Nova Scotia.<sup>6</sup> Scott's father operated a small shingle mill at the time. The Mackeen family was very lucky and able to eke out a small living. But there was little cash left over for luxuries or common necessities.

What saved the Mackeen family from total destitution was the fact that Scott's father had \$100 in the bank at the beginning of the depression. That small sum plus a few small orders from the shingle mill, sustained the Mackeen family through the worst of it.

But money remained tight. Unlike many other Canadian families, the MacKeen family was most fortunate. They could at least supplement their larder from food that could be grown in the garden, from game harvested from the land each fall. For a young growing boy, coming home hungry from school was a reality. Yet succor was often found in the chicken coop by coopting a fresh raw egg to ease the pangs of hunger.

Refrigeration was basic or non-existent. The game harvested at the beginning of cold season each fall and winter, was hung in a barn or shed and allowed to hang freely to freeze over winter. An evening meal was had by hacking off a piece of deer or moose meat from the larder, then fried up on the old wood kitchen stove on a cast iron skillet.

People did not have much, but then, the lucky ones did not go hungry. For many in rural Nova Scotia this was a very real way of life. It was a testament to their ability to live off the land and to their ingenuity required for their survival.

Luxuries were few. There was no thought of waste or conspicuous consumption. People simply made do with what they had. Life was made better by the fruit of their own hands, labour, imagination, or ingenuity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression - 1929-1939* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2001), pg. 9

<sup>6</sup> Peggy Feltmate, **White Head Harbour, Guysborough County, NS - Its Stories, History and Families**, Toronto Canada, 2011 (fourth printing 2017), pg., 88, 92-93

<sup>7</sup> Donald F Ripley, **The Home Front – Wartime Life in Camp Aldershot, Nova Scotia**,

The Great Depression so shook Canadians' confidence to the core that they turned to look critically at the role that government would play in their future in its aftermath. Little succour was provided in the way of government relief or public works during the Depression. It was as if a generation was forgotten.

People and families were left to manage through their own devices. These were truly desperate days, the blackest period in Canadian history. The "government" appeared unmotivated or unwilling to act or provide any meaningful relief that eased its people's suffering.<sup>8</sup> The start of the Second World War soon changed all that. Debert and other rural communities in Canada saw a level of prosperity not seen in a generation.

The end of the Great Depression for Debert came earlier than most. The Royal Canadian Air Force purchased land for an aerodrome in the fall of 1938. This purchase predated and foretold the coming of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) and the war by approximately one year. This action may have been a fore-runner. It pointed toward the expansion of Canada's own air force, the pending war, and of possibly, a hint at prosperity that was to come.

The purchase of the land also hinted at the state of security and defence policy of the day. Canada and Great Britain had entered mutual security negotiations and considerations well before the Second World War.<sup>9</sup>

The purchase of the land for an aerodrome meant that Debert would eventually change. Prosperity seemed close at hand, but it was still only just over the horizon in 1938. Until the day prosperity arrived, the residue of the Great Depression continued to influence people's lives.

Until then, the fields and forests in and around Debert remained, as they always have been; quiet, pastoral and unhurried. It was the small changes in 1938 that portended the opening of the flood gates that would change the fortunes of a forgotten generation.

*...In Contrast, the Great Depression in the City*

The Government of Canada purchased land for an airfield at Debert, NS in 1938. Debert was on the cusp of change. They were part of the lucky few. That change was more than an investment in government spending. Change soon brought activity to Debert with the people building and conducting training there.

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**Lancelot Press**, Hantsport, Nova Scotia, 1991, pg. 140-141

<sup>8</sup> Ibid Berton, 9

<sup>9</sup> Air Force, **CFS / RCAF Station Debert Nova Scotia Canada**, [www.RCAF.com](http://www.RCAF.com),

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Source: <http://www.rcf.com/Stations/stationsDetail.php?CFS-RCAF-Station-Debert-66>

Accessed: 13 December 2010

Debert was about to face an invasion of so many from all walks of life including urban dwellers, people who had little experience of rural life. These people were not only seeking new opportunities, but also employment in civil and military service for their country. These urban dwellers too were moulded by the Great Depression, perhaps more so.

Vincent Madigan was a young boy of 13 years old, when war was declared on the 10<sup>th</sup> September 1939. He remembered the day as the one that ended the misery of the Great Depression. His family once had the life of privilege and prosperity in North Sydney but had moved to Montreal in 1929. There was promise in the hope of a bright future and new life with a new job there. Vincent was only 3 months old when the family moved for that better opportunity in the job promised his father, William, that year.

Everything went well, and the future looked good that the fall of 1929 for the Madigan family that is, until the Depression started. William lost his job and the family was immediately placed in dire straits. Vincent's memories of the Depression were not pleasant ones. The family lived on the dole and in deepest poverty. Two Christmases were particularly memorable that highlight the family's despair.

Vincent recalls one miserable Christmas with nothing for dinner one year. It was only through the generosity of a concerned neighbour that saved the day. He compassionately saw their plight and shared a rabbit stew with the Madigan family that Christmas day.

That stew became the foundation of their celebration and was also a heartfelt memory in the darkest days of the depression. Compassion was extended and was graciously accepted for which my father remained truly thankful to the end of his days.

Another Christmas was more Dickensian, very much more macabre, whose setting was straight out of David Copperfield. It happened that a local merchant, a potential benefactor, desired to help a family in need one Christmas. So, he approached the parish priest looking for a family to help. An appointment was made with Vince's mother Mae to ascertain how he could help.

The benefactor asked what the family needed most that Christmas. A notebook was dutifully opened, and notes penciled in what the children most urgently required. It amounted to socks, sweaters, boots, and other necessities needed for a growing family, nothing more. After the interview, the benefactor closed his book, looked Mae straight in the eye and said, "I'd like to help you but if I did that I would be penalizing myself."

The benefactor came to be known as "Mr. Penalizer". Some took great pleasure in recording the miseries of others much like Uriah Heep of David Copperfield.

But on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 1939, all those circumstances changed. Vincent was playing pick-up baseball in Montreal. He was one of the younger boys chosen to fill in the field, so the older lads could play a game that day.

It was common enough to see young and old coming together, filling in time, waiting for the next job, which were not plentiful. Time weighed heavily for the older unemployed lads. There was little else to do but play ball.

For the younger lads, it was a time to impress and to earn respect of the older boys. The ballfield was the field of honour. Activity through sports was a time to forget the misery of the Depression, a time to enjoy a rare moment of pleasure and comradery.

Vincent remembered it as a wonderful afternoon. The air filled with the sound of joy, the bravado of sport, the crack of the bat as the boys played on that afternoon. But there was an ominous air on the horizon.

Word came down that very afternoon that Canada had declared war on Germany. It was as if a wet blanket dampened their exuberance and smothered their youthful joy at play. Silence and a grim determination soon descended upon the group gathered there. The field was immediately cleared of the older players who left and proceeded en-masse and joined up at local recruiting centres.

The field was abandoned and left to the younger boys. Vincent remembered it surreally. It happened all so fast. An ominous silence pervaded the field of play. A sense of profound loss descended upon him, one that was soon to be felt by many Canadian families during the war. It was the loss of innocence and of peaceful times.

So, it came to be that a mass migration of Canada's young began as they headed towards recruiting centres leading to a mass migration to all places near and far. There was a ground swell to join up. It was an indication of how quickly Canada mobilized for war.

But at the highest levels of government, there remained great concern for how deeply Canada would become involved. But at the time, the declaration of war also meant the end of the Great Depression. It was not clear then though. But the impact saw full employment soon across the land, and with that the end of the Depression. Prosperity came, something not felt in a generation!

## 2 - Building an Enterprise

### *...The British Commonwealth Training Plan Starts Up!*

Canada's commitment to war in September 1939 was of great concern to Prime Minister Mackenzie King. King set expectations and limits to Canada's participation from the onset. King, like many Canadians, had little desire or thirst for the role of "active" service for the armed forces. The open sores of the Great War were still far too fresh for many who had lived through it and remembered its lingering horrors all too well.

King wished to limit Canadian participation as far as possible.<sup>10</sup> It matched the public's desire at least at the very beginning of the war. Canadians wanted to be supportive yet without full engagement in all aspects of war. The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) was designed as the sop to that end.



Archives National Defence Canada, Directorate of History and Heritage. PL-5267, 8 October 1941 R.A.F. Station Debert N.S., Hudson Bomber being prepared for flight. 3/4 STBD front # AM 745

The plan was cast as Canada's major contribution that would contribute materially but limit its military participation. Canada became the "aerodrome of democracy", responsible for the training of Allied aircrews in safety on Canadian soil.<sup>11</sup>

On 17 December 1939, three and a half months after the declaration of Canadian hostilities, Mackenzie King signed the BCATP act into being. Coincidentally, the 17th was also Mackenzie

King's birthday.<sup>12</sup> King's desire for limited participation came to naught though. Canadian armed forces eventually became engaged in total war as the war progressed.

Canadian industry was soon converted to war production and exports. Tremendous government spending was invested and the effort that had to be protected. It eventually set Canada down a path leading to greater participation and to total war in the long run. There was no point in building or shipping war materiel if it was all to be sunk to lay waste on the bottom of the ocean floor.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression - 1929-1939* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2001), pg., 499

<sup>11</sup> F.J. Hatch, *Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983), 1-2

<sup>12</sup> Ibid Hatch, pg.1

King's plans for the BCATP were ambitious in 1939. The facilities simply did not exist and had to be created, virtually built from the ground up. Mackenzie King's declaration of 17 December increased the Canadian defence establishment that set-in motion commitments toward a growing contribution to the war effort. The act that brought the BCATP into being, set Canada's economy firmly on a war footing.

Mobilization of Canada's economy happened under extremely tight deadlines. In fact, there was a flurry of activity involving the Army, Navy and Air Force. The confluence of these activities brought Canada ever closer to total war in 1939 despite the prevailing opinion for a limited war.

The Army quickly mobilized. And it was quick too! The Strait of Canso Defence Area for example in Nova Scotia was quickly mobilized for area defence and protection from U-boat operations. The Pictou Highlanders was placed on active service there in September 1939.<sup>13</sup>

It followed that the first major elements of the Canadian Army were trained, dispatched and convoyed to Great Britain 16 December 1940 on a 27,000-ton motor vessel Capetown (sic) Castle. The elements of the army were also accompanied by some senior staff of the RCAF.

Air Vice Marshal (AVM) LS Breadner and entourage were aboard Capetown Castle.<sup>14</sup> AVM Breadner presence aboard is significant to this story. He played a key role on matters that led to operations at Debert, NS.

All these elements were protected by the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force. It was the necessity of protecting convoys and vital areas on Canadian soil and elsewhere that once started, it was very difficult to roll the clock back to a neutral position. The process simply expanded our involvement as Canada became ever more engaged in the war.

But it was only early days at the start date of the BCATP commencing 17 December 1939 onward. The BCATP plan had to be implemented by 29 April 1940. The effort to

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<sup>13</sup> Canada, National Defence, Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, **S&T Services, Accommodation for Troops, Strait of Canso Area, 321.009 (D265) Correspondence, Reports, Returns, Requests, Etc. RE ACCN for Troops in Strait of Canso Area, D/15 Sep 1939 / 16 Mar 1940, Correspondence on file: 1, Accommodation Arrangements for Pictou Highlanders, H.200- -4 15 Sep 1939, pg. 2/ 97,**

<sup>14</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Historical Reports, **CMHQ Report 1 – Major (Colonel) C.P. Stacey letter dated 31 December 1940, Historical Officer CMHQ, 1986, pg.1-3/11**

get there was enormous.<sup>15</sup> Nine hundred and eighty-nine million dollars were set aside to commence monthly training of 850 pilots, 510 air observers - navigators and 870 wireless operator/air gunners. In total, the annual training target was to produce 29,000 qualified aircrew.<sup>16</sup>

The BCATP infrastructure and aerodrome building program was simply the most ambitious part of the plan to be implemented. The program required detailed organization, thought, and planning.

The infrastructure construction project alone could have easily strained the allocation of scarce resources and overwhelmed Canada's production capacity. But it was all achieved though through standardization through optimization of all resources and production capacity.

Standardization was the key. Almost all the training establishments were built on the same pattern that achieved efficiencies, which helped save time, money, and effort.<sup>17</sup> Contractors rapidly constructed facilities because of standardization, pre-fabrication and simplified construction techniques. These elements further reduced the requirement for skilled labour.

Aerodromes were often completed with all buildings, including hangars, barracks, workshops, and hard surfaced runways within an incredibly short period of a mere eight weeks. Imagine eight weeks from shovel in the ground to planes on the tarmac!<sup>18</sup>

Yet there were problems despite the effort. The build up was neither perfect nor was it ever smooth. There were hard realities that had to be faced and worked through even after a project was deemed completed.

### *...Facing Reality*

Canada with only 235 RCAF pilots on strength in August 1939, was a relatively small and an insignificant air force. But this small number was the seed upon which Canada's pledge built the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) signed in December 1939.<sup>19</sup>

King attached great importance to the BCATP as Canada's greatest singular contribution to the war effort.<sup>20</sup> The aim of his plan had to be achieved if greater involvement in the war was to be avoided!

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid Hatch, 33

<sup>16</sup> Ibid Hatch, 16

<sup>17</sup> Ibid Hatch, 64

<sup>18</sup> Ibid Hatch, 64

<sup>19</sup> F.J. Hatch, **Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945**, Department of National Defence Directorate of History, Monograph Series No. 1. © Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983, 1983, pg. 5

<sup>20</sup>ibid Hatch, pg. 1-2

The BCATP became an important obligation and priority to King and the country. In the end, it was a decidedly successful program that saw 130,000 personnel trained as pilots, navigators, flight engineers along with sundry flight and ground crew.<sup>21</sup>

The reality of December 1939 was that its outcome was truly in doubt. The “Plan” was to commence only a few short months away. The start date was set for April 1940. Much had to be done and accomplished in the meantime at the height of the Canadian winter!

A great enterprise grew from very humble beginnings that December. The whole enterprise and organization was essentially built from the ground up. Stating intent in December 1939 was all well and fine. However, the looming reality stretched the bounds of reason and practicality.

It took no less than thirty-three thousand air force personnel and an additional six thousand civilians personnel to make the plan fully functional. This mass of humanity created its own set of problems that had to be resolved. They required administrative infrastructure, sundry buildings, airfields, classrooms, impedimenta, and other paraphernalia in which to properly conduct training.<sup>22</sup> None of that even existed December 1939 in any quantity whatsoever.

The problems were exacerbated by the fact the RCAF had no administrative structure of its own. The RCAF relied on the cooperation of the Army to provide many of its pre-war requirements.

The scope of the plan soon demanded that the RCAF hire its own, separate, and independent support structure. This was the necessary first step to getting on with the execution of the plan. In quick time, the RCAF engaged administrative, pay, medical, dental support, and most importantly, its own construction and engineering requirements.

The looming start date of 29 April 1940 meant that the first winter was spent preparing and excavating new airfields for spring construction. The task of building the airfields was left to the Department of Munitions and Supply who contracted construction to private building firms.

Canadian contractors achieved the impossible! Work once started, was often completed within eight weeks after the sites were cleared and made ready by heavy machinery. It took the mobilization of all labour and full employment within Canada to expedite the plan. That was the expedient necessity if the aerodromes were ever to be built in time. Suddenly from all parts across Canada, there was work for all!

A standard building and construction pattern helped reduce work and aided progress to achieving the plan. Prefabricated buildings and other materials shipped directly from Canadian factories and mills were easily assembled on site. The construction of all

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<sup>21</sup>ibid Hatch, 1983, pg. 1-2

<sup>22</sup> ibid Hatch, 1983, pg. 33

buildings, hangars, barracks and workshops, and hard surfaced runways thus were expedited and completed in this fashion.<sup>23</sup> Further runway construction was simplified. It was based on the standard pattern of one hundred feet (30 m) wide and twenty-five hundred feet (750 m) long, laid out in triangular form.<sup>24</sup>



Madigan Personal Archives - Debart Airfield – 2013

It is no wonder that these facilities were functional within the incredibly short space of eight weeks. It was a testament to Canadian ingenuity, skill, tenacity, and sheer determination.

The quick construction of facilities ensured the BCATP commenced its training by 29 April 1940. It was a small beginning. Eventually all the schools were fully operational by April 1942.<sup>25</sup>

Among the many airfields constructed in the hurried frenzy was one that would

eventually become the home to Operational Unit 31 and successors, No. 7 Squadron RCAF and Tiger Force. That airfield was located at Debart, Nova Scotia.

### *Debart Selected as an Operational Training Site*

There soon came a steady flow of recruits through the system who were eventually trained at Debart and other locations. The BCATP eventually trained some 130000 aircrew and other sundry crew. The problem now was where to place them!

The steady flow from recruitment placed great strains on Canada's resources.<sup>26</sup> There was an urgent need to house and feed the growing horde. Many young men and women

<sup>23</sup> Alistair Mackenzie, P.Eng., **HISTORY: A Herculean Task**, Canadian Consulting Engineer - Magazine for professional engineers in construction  
Source: <http://www.canadianconsultingengineer.com/features/history-a-herculean-task/>  
Accessed: 29 October 2015

<sup>24</sup> *ibid* Hatch, 1983, pg. 64

<sup>25</sup> *ibid* Hatch, 1983, pg. 33

<sup>26</sup> *ibid* Hatch, 1983, pg. 1-2

had to be managed from the boon of initial recruiting through to final training. They had to be placed somewhere!

The construction plan had many imbedded complex issues that often came under the purview of the Aerodrome Committee of the RCAF. The Aerodrome Committee decided where the schools and air fields would be located and when they would be occupied.

Several relevant factors were taken into consideration in making a final decision but neither “full” completion nor crew comfort were part of those deliberations. The prime aim was the build where training and operations were the objects that followed. The considerations for aircrew and creature comforts came later.

Where a BCATP school or aerodrome was built, was amongst the key decisions of the Aerodrome Committee. Situational geography was important. The key decisions in this case were location and economy of effort. Sites within five miles of the American border were out of bounds as well as those in mountainous terrain. Sites nearer urban centres were preferred for economic benefits and later potential civilian conversion post war.

School ranges of approximately one hundred square miles were required. Sites near built-up areas were negated from selection. This reduced the risk and potential hazards to civil life and property. It was a wise criterion.

The requirements of bombing and gunnery schools demanded large safe training areas. Navigation schools were chosen near locations where trainees would get the most practical experience over a wide variety and types of terrain both on land and over large bodies of water.<sup>27</sup>

Debert met many of these conditions. It was an ideal location. It was also near but not too close to major centres and logistic points. Debert lies off the Bay of Fundy and was close enough by air to the Northumberland Straits. It was near enough to Halifax, and located near a major rail junction in Central Nova Scotia at Truro.

More importantly, Debert was also a site selected by the Army to be a major training centre. Here at least was an opportunity for King’s government to achieve savings and economy of scale in the construction of shared facilities thereby reducing costs in infrastructure.

But there were other factors in the selection of Debert as a potential BCATP site. The decision to select Debert was simplified because of prior events and decisions. A little-known fact was that Debert had already been selected as a training site in earlier deliberations with the RAF. Debert’s site selection predated 1939 and the coming of the BCATP.

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid* Hatch, pg. 41

The Royal Air Force (RAF) had designs on Canada as a possible training area in the late 1930's. The RAF anticipated the event of war. Canada was considered a safe-haven, especially for pilot training. Negotiations for a shared program began in 1936.

But these early negotiations, well before the start of the Second World War, led the RCAF to purchase land in Debert in anticipation of the RAF's needs. This purchase ostensibly for the potential construction of an aerodrome happened in the fall of 1938.

Regrettably the RAF negotiations fell through, but the land had already been procured. That purchase most likely influenced the Aerodrome Committee's final selection at the start of the war. The choice of Debert was an obvious one; the money had already been spent, the land already purchased.



National Defence Canada, Directorate of History and Heritage, DNS -29021  
Aerial view of Naval Establishments at CFS Debert, N.S.

The 1938 land purchase was likely a forerunner that foretold the expansion of Canada's own air force that also hinted at the security and defence policy considerations of the day. It was most illuminating of the early negotiations between Canada and Great Britain that highlights the security considerations pre-dating the war.<sup>28</sup>

But the reasons to forgo an agreement between Canada and Great Britain in 1938 are as familiar today as they were then. Negotiations lapsed, and nothing was agreed upon simply because of money, contributions, control, resources, and Canadian content.<sup>29</sup>

Still, the prior purchase of land for an airfield in 1938 eased the way to building an airfield there at Debert. It was one less thing in the growing pantheon of decisions that meant Debert played a significant role in the coming war. Debert was at the crossroads of decisions, behind which the consequences would impact many young lives.

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<sup>28</sup> Air Force, **CFS / RCAF Station Debert Nova Scotia Canada**, [www.RCAF.com](http://www.RCAF.com), Copyright © AEROWAREdesigns 2010  
Source: <http://www.rcf.com/Stations/stationsDetail.php?CFS-RCAF-Station-Debert-66>  
Accessed: 13 December 2010

<sup>29</sup> *ibid* Hatch, 1983 pg. 7-15

### 3 – Monumental Changes

#### *...A Great Transformation*

Debert soon welcomed many young Canadians to this small rural town to begin their military training there. This little town, in central Nova Scotia, in the 1930's never numbered more than 500-600 people, now was suddenly and dramatically transformed by the arrival of so many military trainees.<sup>30</sup> Debert truly changed as prosperity came the day the military arrived in town!

The flood gates of public spending opened the doors to prosperity to many small rural communities across Canada. It was the government spending on national defence that broke the back of the Great Depression. Prosperity gained momentum throughout the Second World War. Public spending changed the face of Canada.

The influence of proliferate and targeted public spending was one “lesson learned” for many in government and in public service at the time. The impacts of social and economic change that came with public spending were clearly evident. It was a lesson not lost on the government of the day.

It was an influence that was also well observed by all Canadians at the time. It was deeply felt on a personal level. Canadians suddenly found employment and for many, were no longer destitute.

Public spending and concomitant investments favoured a continuance of such fiscal policies and direction well after the war. Canadian investments not only paved the road to victory; but they also paved the way ahead for Canada's post war future. Fiscal policy became a government policy instrument.

It was evident too many Canadians, that September 10, 1939, the day Canada declared war on Nazi Germany, also ended our government's fiscal parsimony and the Great Depression. The purse strings were suddenly opened wide! Government spending was broadly felt across all of Canada, especially in Nova Scotia.

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<sup>30</sup> Mr. William Langille, Chairman, Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs **Testimony - Debert Military History Society to Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs**, 6 Halifax, Thursday, March 1, 2001, 9:00 A.M., <http://www.gov.ns.ca/legislature/hansard/comm/va/va010301.htm>

Accessed 13 August 2010. Part of this testimony is derived from the personal recollections of Don Davidson, a young businessman at that time, operating Davidson's Store. Mr. Davidson lived in Debert all his life. He grew up there when the war came as a teenager of 15 or 16 years of age

Construction of Army and Air Force bases began in Debert in August 1940, whose facilities were literally carved out of the woods. A great construction boom ensued once that land was cleared. Engineers hired local woodsmen to clear the forests and then, were followed by the builders. The work proceeded almost non-stop as Debert's landscape was transformed from peace to war!

Debert's transformation consumed some 28 million board feet of lumber in its construction. Concrete was poured, roads were built, and runways were paved. The pastoral setting of peaceful farmland, fields and forests was suddenly transformed into training facilities as accommodations and other infrastructure were built.<sup>31</sup>

The Army project at Debert alone was massive. It was the first project "completed" because it was both vital and urgent. Approximately 13,150 Army personnel had to be accommodated in quarters by Christmas 1940. Failure meant that the men would be billeted under canvas, in the snow. In a nut shell, some 512 buildings, with a fully equipped 500 bed hospital, two fire halls, four dental clinics, a supply depot, a 100 cell detention barracks, quarters and messes for all ranks were quickly erected to meet the Army's urgent need.

It was not simply a matter of construction, these facilities had to be supported by collateral infrastructure such as adequate water, sewage, septic and electrical systems if they were to be habitable at all! By the end of 1940 a mere 24 buildings remained under construction and uncompleted for the army.<sup>32</sup> The Army project amounted to the construction of a small town completed in very short order.

The Army's project success spared great pain and discomfort for the men there the winter of 1940. The Army could now quarter its men in hard and warm shelters, that avoided undue suffering under canvass in the harshness of Nova Scotia's winter weather. It was to the credit of civilian workers that the Army's facilities were so quickly constructed.<sup>33</sup>

The construction took an army of sorts too! Some 5400 men were employed in the construction of the army camp and the nearby airfield that began in 1939-1940. But this small army had to be provisioned, housed and fed as well. So Debert grew in size to accommodate them too!

Despite the success of the Army project, much remained unfinished and incomplete. The work on the airfield was quite another matter that had to be dealt with. Work on the airfield was necessarily deferred because of the army's project and was not fully completed until 1941.

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<sup>31</sup> G.H. Sallans, "Wilderness One Week, and a Home for Troops the Next – The Birth of Debert", *The Vancouver*, September 15, 1941  
<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=JDNIAAAAIBAJ&sjid=OokNAAAIBAJ&pg=1267,3797474&dq=debert+nova+scotia+1941&hl=en>, accessed 23 January 2011

<sup>32</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, DHH File 360.003(D5) undated letter.

<sup>33</sup> "Wilderness One Week..."

However, some small progress was made over the winter in preparation for the next construction season. Further clearing of woodlands and fields continued fast apace over 1940/1941.

The airfield's construction began in earnest the spring of 1941. Work was directed to the completion and final construction of Debert's aerodrome, buildings, hangars, barracks, workshops, complete with hard surfaced runways. This work progressed well because of standardization. The aerodrome was ready to receive its first unit that summer of 1941.<sup>34</sup>

The aerodrome's first occupant was Operational Training Unit 31 (O.T.U. 31) . However, the state of construction at both the airfield and the army camp concomitant with proliferate government spending soon became the subject of a major political inquiry.

Regardless, Debert had prospered with the influx of an additional 1082 permanent and training staff that were accommodated on this aerodrome. The air force staff was incremental to the Army's staff of 13,500 men who were already situated at nearby Camp Debert.<sup>35</sup>

It was a tremendous boon to the town and local economy. But that spending eventually had to be accounted for. Questions on "value for money" were raised. The time was ripe for public inquiry and scrutiny.

### *...Government Spending and Debert*

Debert changed in a big way. Its population increased with the arrival of the military and associate government spending. Approximately 15,000 servicemen descended on this small town of 600 by 1940. Their mere presence produced many economic opportunities that was a huge financial windfall by today's standards. The Army was followed by the anticipated arrival of the BCATP. Soldiers and airmen were paid and they did like to spend their money!

An investment in infrastructure set in motion a boom as the government built the facilities. We can see that effect in the evolution and build-up of the BCATP. The BCATP program encompassed the build of 56 flying establishments and 13 ground/support establishments.<sup>36</sup> Debert was one of the 56 assigned as air training establishments.

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<sup>34</sup> F.J. Hatch, **Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945**, Department of National Defence Directorate of History, Monograph Series No. 1, © Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983, Pg. 64

<sup>35</sup> Bert Meerveld & Yvonne Holmes Mott, "Art Presswell: Ingersoll's Singing Soldier", unpublished manuscript, 4, available at [www.Ocl.Net/Pdf/Art\\_Publication.Pdf](http://www.Ocl.Net/Pdf/Art_Publication.Pdf), accessed 19 April 2012

<sup>36</sup> Hatch, 203, Appendix C.

Over two billion dollars (\$2.2B) were spent on the BCATP throughout the war. What was spent in and around Debert is easily estimated. Debert represented a mere 1.87% of the facilities built under the BCATP as a share of the air training costs associated with the plan. Taking this percentage and applying that to the total costs gives the reader a sense of the derivative spending in Debert.

The component costs can be estimated as well. Most facilities were built on a common and standard pattern. It is only a rough estimate of course, but it does provide at least an indication to what was spent locally. This indirect measure of the impact to the local economy is given in Table 1.

Table 1 - Derivative Costs of Debert Airfield (1939 to 1945)

Estimate of Sundry Costs National/Local Spending - Debert Airfield					
Category	Costs/Contribution	% Fly Schools	% Grd Estab	% Debert	GDP Calculator
Total Cost	\$ 2,231,129,039.26	\$ 1,810,771,394.18	\$ 420,357,645.08	\$ 39,841,589.99	\$ 540,517,557.43

Source: F.J. Hatch, Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945, Department Of National Defence Directorate Of History, Monograph Series No. 1, © Minister of Supply and Services Canada , 1983

Debert’s share of the BCATP costs was approximately \$39.8 million. It was a huge investment for its time. It may sound like a bargain but in terms of 2012 dollars that expenditure amounted to \$540 million in current dollars (Table 1).<sup>37</sup> It was such a tremendous investment and windfall for such a small town!

O.T.U. 31 and its successor units also spent money locally. Approximately \$6.8 million was spent by O.T.U. 31 over its three year lifespan in the Debert area. This spending pattern continued with RCAF No.7 Squadron that subsequently replaced O.T.U. 31. Both entities spent an average of \$1.6 million per year on personnel, and Operations and Maintenance (O&M) that boosted the local economy. The Army’s presence also represented a sizeable economic opportunity too!<sup>38</sup>

But the largesse and the apparent inefficiency of spending had become of great concern to some. Eventually the Army was made to account for all its wartime investments to 1943. The scrutiny of wartime spending at Debert came under a parliamentary review headed by John Diefenbaker Conservative MP then in opposition.

Diefenbaker’s introspection and questions prompted the government to report on its spending. This was necessary to deflect some of the acrimonious criticisms particularly on the state of the construction effort. Debert was notable amongst the pack for its disreputable situation and its exorbitant costs!

<sup>37</sup> Canada, Bank of Canada, GDP Deflator, Bank of Canada Calculator, <http://www.bankofcanada.ca/rates/related/inflation-calculator/>, accessed 27 June 2012

<sup>38</sup> Langille. 6

Colonel J.L. Ralston, Minister of National Defence eventually reported that \$1.8 billion was spent in defence of Canada to 1943. It was a tremendous sum for nation that here-to-fore did little or nothing on such a large scale.

The specific details are found in Table 2:

Table 2 - Summation of Army and other Government Spending 1939-1943

<u>Category</u>	<u>\$</u>	<u>% Total</u>
<b>Total War Related Expenditures (All Canada 1939-1943)</b>	<b>1,859,141,355.81</b>	
Army Spending by Military District	1,468,149,469.37	79%
Navy Ship Building by Province	138,377,000	7%
Navy Building Construction	36,668,000	2%
Transport Canada Departmental Expenses	10,052,197	1%
Transport Canada in Support of Air Operations	79,009,827.44	4%
Transport Canada in Support of Navy Operations	653,636	0%
Canadian National Railroad Capital Expenditures 1939-1942	116,212,431	6%
Works Department to 31 March 1942	10,018,795	1%

Ralston was responsible for overseeing the spending of these funds. His ministerial oversight crossed many departmental boundaries including that of the Air Force. The Army represented the lion's share of spending amounting to \$1.4 billion (79%) of the total of \$1.8 billion then allocated to 1943.

Gross amounts were broken down further by province and military district. The government of the day allocated \$70.9 million to No.6 Military District, NS. This represented 4.8% of the government's total spending to 1943 (Table 3). Regardless the government spent a sizeable sum in Nova Scotia that was in part, disproportionate to its population base. However, it was very proportionate to its military importance of the day.

Table 3– Summation of Defence Related Expenditure by Province -1939-43 (Ralston)

Category	\$	Ottawa	Ont	Que	NS	BC	Other
<b>Total War Related Expenditures (All Canada 1939-1943)</b>	<b>\$ 1,861,578,353.37</b>						
Army Spending by Military District	\$ 1,468,149,469.37	1,051,506,087	156,447,745.00	41,129,214.37	70,939,213.00	53,473,248.00	94,653,962.00
Navy Ship Building by Province	\$ 138,377,000.00	0	42,325,000.00	38,085,000.00	29,997,000.00	25,875,000.00	2,095,000.00
Navy Building Construction	\$ 36,668,000.00	0	1,480,000.00	1,154,000.00	29,997,000.00	3,693,000.00	344,000.00
Transport Canada Departmental Expenses	\$ 10,052,197.00	0	4,356,817.00	1,921,351.00	58,046.00	863,945.00	2,952,038.00
Transport Canada in Support of Air Operations	\$ 1,193,267	1,193,267	14,280,924.00	5,828,552.00	4,431,876.00	17,923,033.00	37,789,173.00
Transport Canada in Support of Navy Operations	\$ 653,636.00	0	180,326.00	107,273.00	184,328.00	181,909.00	400.00
Canadian National Railroad Capital Expenditures 1939-1942	\$ 116,212,431.00	0	27,496,823.00	45,610,790.00	13,750,802.00	5,086,432.00	24,267,584.00
Works Department to 31 March 1942	\$ 10,018,795.00	6,831,988	706,345.00	468,408.00	642,642.00	1,254,905.00	114,507.00
<b>Provincial Subtotals \$ 1939-1943:</b>		<b>1,059,531,342.00</b>	<b>247,273,980.00</b>	<b>134,304,588.37</b>	<b>150,000,907.00</b>	<b>108,350,872.00</b>	<b>162,116,664.00</b>
<b>Provincial % Share Spending (all)</b>		<b>56.9%</b>	<b>13.3%</b>	<b>7.2%</b>	<b>8.1%</b>	<b>5.8%</b>	<b>8.7%</b>
<b>Provincial Subtotals \$ 1939-1943 Less Ottawa &amp; Overseas:</b>	\$ 802,047,011.37		247,273,980.00	134,304,588.37	150,000,907.00	108,350,872.00	162,116,664.00
<b>Provincial % Share Spent in Canada Less Ottawa &amp; Overseas</b>	<b>43.1%</b>		<b>30.8%</b>	<b>16.7%</b>	<b>18.7%</b>	<b>13.5%</b>	<b>20.2%</b>

Diefenbaker's criticisms put the government on the defensive. Government spending was consequently placed at the forefront in the court of public opinion. The public needed to know and had to be satisfied that taxpayers' dollars were well-spent.

But at the local level the largesse of government spending certainly had a noticeable impact at Debert. The village grew immensely. The town now supported 10 restaurants; two drug stores with lunch counters; two meat markets; an additional grocery store.

There were also other notable changes; a hotel with telephones and running water; two barber shops; a telephone office; a bank; three taxi services; a laundry service; a bus line service to Truro; and a charter service to meet a growing demand for services that never existed prior to the arrival of the military and contractor presence.<sup>39</sup> The great build was the great opportunity!

But putting it altogether was problematic. There were difficulties given the haste and hurried construction. Questions were about to be raised and Diefenbaker used these to political advantage in his quest for an accounting of the results.

### *...Diefenbaker's Inquiry*

Government spending has always been the subject of public scrutiny. It was not surprising then that Colonel J.L. Ralston, Minister of National Defence was constantly harried by questions concerning it. Ralston was finally obliged to do so because of a persistent public onslaught led by John G. Diefenbaker.

Ralston finally reported that Canada had spent \$1.8 billion in the prosecution of the war to 1943. It was a tremendous level of government expenditure; most of which was spent on defence. Such spending had never heretofore occurred on such a scale even during the Great Depression.

Canada invested very little on defence prior to the Second World War. It was not surprising then that it was ill-prepared for war. The government had to act quickly to remediate that deficiency and develop plans, while investing in the forces that addressed the immediate threats of the day.

Once war was declared, Canada was placed on a war economy totally directed to the war effort. Mistakes were likely made in this rapid build-up.

Sacrifices were expected and made by all in getting on with it. But it wasn't all bad. There were bright spots too. By all accounts of those who lived through the tough times of the Great Depression, they found it ironic that the war suddenly brought full employment to Canada.

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<sup>39</sup> Langille, 6-7

It was if a great weight was lifted from the shoulders of all Canadians. Prosperity, virtually unseen for a decade, came quite suddenly. Canadians were lifted from gloom, destitution and despair, to find a new measure of wealth, prosperity, and comfort through the opportunities that came with the war.

There was an attitude to get it done, and be damned with cost or efficiency, at least at the very beginning of the war. National security was at stake!

The mistakes and missteps in the beginning could easily be overlooked or forgiven in the short term. The government could not anticipate all its needs given the state of its non-existent or rudimentary military preparations. It had no choice but to spend through the problems to get up to speed when the country was at war!

But an air of forgiveness could only be sustained so long despite the bumps along the way. The government couldn't simply throw money at a problem for ever. To some, government seemed to throw public funds about willy nilly. Perhaps it was acceptable in the early days of the war given the poor state of Canadian preparations. But by 1943, the time had come for a political reckoning and for a parliamentary accounting.

Questions were raised on "How was the money spent?" "Was it in the public's interest?" and "Who was accountable for this spending?" These questions were difficult to avoid given the depth and breadth of the government's spending and the looming long term obligations of public debt now on the government's books.

Parliamentary questions also came at an unfortunate time too. Questions and complaints were also raised by Canadian servicemen. Their complaints brought matters to a head and to the forefront. There were notable difficulties and hardships raised by those serving at the newly built facilities, bases, or airfields. Debert, NS became a lightning rod for the focus of this discontent.

The intense parliamentary scrutiny may have started with the questions on "value for money" but the servicemen's complaints represented a political opportunity for the party in opposition that drew the Progressive Conservative party to investigate.

Beyond the servicemen's complaints though, many parliamentarians were indeed concerned with the apparent lack of oversight and the management of many Canadian defence construction projects. The fact was that many projects were incomplete. Training had already begun in many places. Much was left undone! It was in the aftermath appearances or declarations of "project completion" that created the political opportunity.

John George Diefenbaker, a future Prime Minister of Canada, came to Debert to highlight the issues. Mr. Diefenbaker said of Debert "if ever there was a camp chosen anywhere in Canada which is little short of disgraceful from the point of view of the men required to live in that Camp, it is Debert."

Diefenbaker was unable to reconcile that, of all the possible locations in Nova Scotia for a camp, that Debert was ever selected in the first place. Diefenbaker visited the camp in the spring of 1942. He found it "inundated" with water. Diefenbaker left incredulous, and to his chagrin, \$239,000 was immediately spent on drainage to remediate the site as it was unfit for use.<sup>40</sup>

Diefenbaker's concern was warranted. His observations supported by the opinions of many trainees then living under dreadful conditions at the time, left little choice but to conclude unfavourably. The facilities were indeed under construction and unfinished. Living conditions were beyond Spartan.<sup>41</sup>

Robert Wilson Harris remembered his arrival at the opening of the airfield. He said "R.C.A.F. Debert was under construction. The drill hall, barracks and mess hall had already been built and large earth-movers were busily dumping a hill into a bog to build the airfield. .... There was mud everywhere and yawning gulfs where sewers and drains were being installed."<sup>42</sup>

The initial batch of BCATP students trained under appalling conditions. The facilities were there, while victory declared in the construction. Yet the facts on the ground painted a dismal and different picture. The buildings were rudimentary, barely liveable. The facility was marginal, barely able to support the training process.<sup>43</sup>

Still Colonel J.L. Ralston, then Minister of National Defence, attempted to dust off Diefenbaker's remarks as simply, "exaggerated!"<sup>44</sup> Ralston defended the costs but he was hard pressed to defend the true state of affairs at Debert.

In all fairness to Ralston, the facilities were constructed from scratch. Ralston defended Debert as a choice because of its closeness to railroads, its central location, and its proximity to the RAF airfield.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Anonymous, "Debert Described as an Efficient Camp, Ralston Says NS Development Best in Dominion Is Said Effectual, Answers Diefenbaker Who Says Choice of Site Is Little Short of a Disgrace", *The Montreal Gazette*, 1 June 1943, 6

<sup>41</sup> Sergeant R. W. Harris, "Memories of Debert, N.S.", undated written account in Debert Military Museum Archives, Debert, N.S., <http://www.debertmilitarymuseum.org/harris.htm>, accessed 5 October 2010

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, Sergeant R. W. Harris, **Memories of Debert, N.S.**, undated

<sup>43</sup> Spencer Dunmore and William Carter, Ph.D., *Reap the Whirlwind – The Untold Story of 6 Group, Canada's Bomber Force of Second World War*, McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1991, Pg. 43

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, Anon. "Debert Described as an Efficient Camp...", 1943

<sup>45</sup> F.J. Hatch, **Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945**, Department of National Defence Directorate of History, Monograph Series No. 1, © Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983, Pg. 41

Yet Diefenbaker's criticisms rightly placed the government of the day on the defensive. Diefenbaker's scrutiny ultimately led to a public accounting of wartime spending to 1943. Costs were now at the forefront of the public's interest.

### *...Some Insights*

Conservative Member John George Diefenbaker's inquiry is an insight to the crossroads of decisions of the day. Diefenbaker was deeply concerned because of the ongoing difficulties, the hurried state of the construction, and the costs incurred thereto. But it was the complaints of many serving personnel that really brought matters to a head.

The thrust of Diefenbaker's inquiry was the lack of government oversight. Where were the necessary checks and balances to safeguard government spending thus ensuring "value for money"?

Debert was nothing but forest and farmland before 1939. Defence construction only began in earnest in August 1940. The Army and Air Force facilities were literally carved out of the woods by a small army of 5400 labourers.

That workforce too had to be provisioned, housed and fed along with elements of the army which also occupied the same site then under construction. It all cost money.

Money appeared to have been spent in haste, but given the circumstances, it was the necessary expedient given the deadlines to accommodate the tsunami of humanity that soon descended upon Debert!

The number of people involved and the logistics was staggering. It meant housing people with a facility under construction while simultaneously conducting training and billeting service personnel. It was an extremely complex and expensive project. The work had to be prioritized, which meant, some things were left undone to be completed much later.

The Army was the most important project and the most urgent due for completion. Building Camp Debert was a massive effort because; first and foremost, was the need to house approximately 13,150 personnel no later than Christmas 1940. There was little choice but to get the job done!

Most importantly, 512 and other sundry buildings were erected in quick time. The Army would have faced a miserable winter under canvas in the cold and snow if the civilian contractors failed in this task. There was no doubt how an inquiry into this eventuality would have turned out if left undone!

Only 24 buildings remained as “under construction” for the army by the time they finally occupied the Camp at the end of 1940.<sup>46</sup> What was constructed was just enough, and to the credit of all, the army was quartered in barracks and not under canvass that winter.

But it was the air force project that languished, the one which would later become the lightning rod for inquiry. Work only progressed on the Debert aerodrome's buildings, hangars, barracks and workshops, and associated hard surfaced runways much later in the spring of 1941. The work progressed well and the aerodrome was deemed ready to receive its first unit later that summer.<sup>47</sup>

There was bound to be difficulties given the hurried construction and the priorities. It may have seemed to be uncoordinated. The situation was hindered by the unfinished state of many projects. Much was left undone when training began.

It was chaotic. The true picture though was the testament of management in the setting of priorities while moving the projects forward. Activities were moved and advanced as needs be. But it was the state of “project completion” that was a cause of concern.

It was achieved was at the expense of taxpayers' money. The question of “Could it have been done more cheaply or efficiently?” haunted the government throughout the war.

What happened at Debert gives one a sense of the pace of construction, the urgency, and the prosperity that it begat. Only now did the government face the true consequences of indecision because of deferred defence spending prior to the war.

Many needed labours were under-taken in a short time frame under ever changing deadlines or shifting priorities. There is no adequate description that adequately portrays the magnitude or scope of the effort taken or that was required. It was simply gargantuan, expensive, and necessary, given the circumstances!

When viewed from this perspective, we can see that in the dynamic of war and uncertainty, there were consequences resulting from the lack of adequate or timely investment, planning, and forethought in advance of the war. It is a dynamic that seems to be played time and again despite the many lessons of the Second World War.

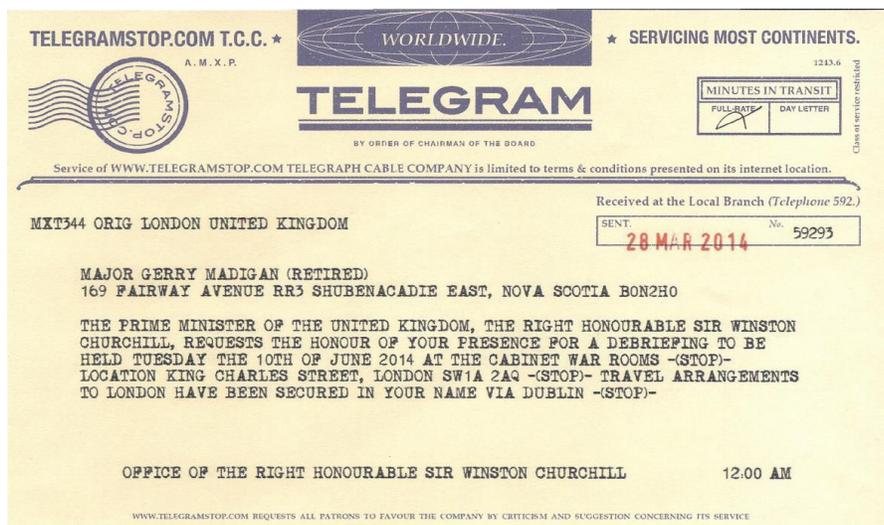
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<sup>46</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, DHH File 360.003(D5) undated letter.

<sup>47</sup> F.J. Hatch, **Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945**, Department of National Defence Directorate of History, Monograph Series No. 1, © Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983, pg. 64

#### 4. Aside - Receiving a Telegram

March, 28 2014 was an unusual day. An intriguing telegram from none other than Sir Winston Churchill was received with an open invitation to visit his war room in June of that year. Odd, so it seemed, Churchill lay deceased for oh so many years. How could this be?



In the body of the letter lay the telegram's true origin. A day trip was being arranged for me as a Father's Day- birthday present. It came on the heels of a planned visit to Ireland in June that year. A day trip to London was organized for me there by my daughter Janice.

Janice's present was truly propitious, apart from what proved to be a most enjoyable day, with my lovely daughter. For one, this message reminds us that "telegrams" were once the principal means of communication; especially so during the Second World War.

Tele-communications conveyed decisions and news of events. But more importantly, this particular telegram led to the place where those key decisions and directions of the Second World War were often made. It was at the crossroads, where key public policy

and war decisions were made. These were ones that affected the fates of nations and of people.

A once secret place was now open to the public. It is a place that casts some great insights to the management and personalities of the war, and yes some of which came to play and impacted on operations and lives at Debert, NS too!

Arriving at Sir Winston Churchill's war room on the appointed day in June 2014, provided a true sense of the scale of things in the management and conduct of the war. Some see Sir Winston as a giant of a man. We tend to associate the things and events surrounding him to be on that scale too. Not so!

The war room was not gigantic. In fact, it was a most compact place, very vulnerable, and located in the very heart of London. One well-placed Luftwaffe bomb could have easily upset and changed the course of history had they known its location.

A wonderful time was spent breathing in the War Room's history. There were four rooms of special interest. The first was Churchill's bedroom and office. The second, was the Chief of staff office, third was the map room, and finally, the fourth, the small but very secretive room, Churchill's communications centre.

The entrance to the communications centre was non-descript. The room itself was the size of a small bathroom. The cover story was that this secretive room was Churchill's private privy; allegedly fitted in luxury with a single commode for the Prime Minister's personal use.

In fact, the room was the location of Churchill's secure telephone. It was the place from whence he spoke and communicated with President Roosevelt and other world leaders throughout the war.

Churchill's war rooms were left untouched and as they were upon the cessation of hostilities in 1945. They remained closed and hidden from public view for a good long time. The rooms are in effect a time capsule of the Second World War.

It is only when you stand before the map room that you get a true sense of the scale and importance of the enterprise. You can easily follow pin pricks on the map, in the very room that tracked the progress of all the great battles, of the many naval operations and of the convoys that fed the enterprise all over the oceans and seas throughout the war.

What focuses the viewer's attention lays just beyond the map room is the Chiefs of Staff Conference Room. This is where, the key decisions were discussed, argued, and made.



Gerry Madigan, Churchill's War Room, June 2014

All in all, these four rooms are in a very small, confined area. Space was at a premium.

In its confines, one can easily appreciate the staff working shoulder to shoulder, with the air pressed heavy, of rank smells, of smoke and perspiration, where bodies worked tirelessly.

Human beings

toiled there for days on end not knowing whether it was night or day. They toiled under appalling conditions. There was no plumbing in the place. The staff were forced to use chemical toilets, and that included Sir Winston as well. Such were the times, but there was a job to do. And it was an important job. The staff simply made do and got on with it.

“Getting on with it” was truly the theme of the day. There was no time for niceties or deep reflection. Their very existence was on the line. Decisions were made, orders issued, and orders followed. It was simply a matter of getting on with it regardless of the difficulties. Difficulties were simply endured, deferred, or sorted out later.

One of the key decisions made during the war concerned the movement of a backlog of aircraft from Canada to Great Britain. A decision in this regard was made in London, in Churchill's war rooms. It was to be a key decision at the crossroads of airpower, regarding its management and the future direction of the air war that consequently led to the selection of future leadership.

The key decision led to the eventual creation of an air ferry service under military command resulting in a specific requirement for training to be conducted at Debert, Nova Scotia.

There was rancorous infighting amongst all the armed services. There was fallout with consequences on so many levels. Decisions and arguments in and around this issue were soon to have a great impact on the life and times of those at Debert, NS and elsewhere in Canada. And it all likely started by receiving a telegram!

## 5. Moving a Backlog

Great Britain and the Commonwealth stood alone in the last days of summer in 1940. It was commonly perceived that defeat would follow France's earlier demise. It didn't happen that way. The English Channel, the Royal Navy, Royal Air Force and sacrifice of the British Army kept Germany at bay.

The strategic balance was not in the Great Britain's favour. The Battle of the Atlantic was in full force. Britain hung on by a mere thread. Defeat appeared imminent.

The thin red line, "Air Power", was in very short supply. The trip wire in the English Channel, the navy, was heavily tasked. The merchant navy, the North Atlantic lifeline, was heavily mauled. The Army, the shield, was battered and virtually unarmed having lost most of its arms following its retreat from France at Dunkirk.

Great Britain had great need for all types of defence stores. The only access, which was crucial to survival and for pursuing the war, was from across the Atlantic. The industry, stores, and warehouses of Canada and, soon the United States, were set in high gear manufacturing materiel and supplies for the war effort.

In the early days, Canada was Great Britain's main supplier of war materiel, and its prime conduit, bread basket and industrial base. The United States remained officially "neutral" until 7 December 1941 as its citizens wished to avoid any direct confrontation or bloodshed with Germany.<sup>48</sup> The Great War to them was a recent reminder of the cost of foreign entanglements.

The magnitude of the materiel requirements posed both logistical and political problems for Canada and Great Britain until December 1941. The government of the United States wished to help but was constrained by public opinion. Until the time the United States entered the war, sales of war materiel was essentially a cash and carry enterprise. Extraordinary means were taken when exporting this materiel through Canada in order to respect that neutrality.

Britain's thin red line "Air Power" was soon bolstered by aircraft orders from the United States though. It fell to Canada to transport these aircraft orders and deliver them in theatre in a timely fashion. Canada became a vital conduit and junction point for these and other stores delivered from American factories.

There were only two means of transporting aircraft. The first was by air. It meant flying factory shipments to Britain directly in a continuous air bridge over the Atlantic. The second was by sea. Many aircraft types were transported by ship but that was considered the far greater risk. Ships were sunk in the Atlantic by the score. So it largely fell to the air bridge to move these vital stores.

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<sup>48</sup> John Keegan, **The Second World War**, Penguin Books, 2005 (first published 1990) pg. 538-540

The logistics of transporting Great Britain's war materiel over the Atlantic proved a daunting challenge. Shipping space was at a premium. The task became ever more daunting because of the order of magnitude of the purchased aircraft. Great Britain alone ordered 26,000 airframes of all types from the United States. There simply wasn't enough maritime shipping capacity to expedite them in timely fashion to Great Britain alone by sea.

The limitations of space on trans-Atlantic shipping as a factor likely led to the establishment of a unique organization to do so.<sup>49</sup> The Atlantic Ferry Organization (ATFERO) was eventually organized to meet the growing demand to move essential aircraft orders that was charged specifically to move the backlog of undelivered aircraft.

But before AFTERO even existed, a contract to move aircraft orders was first placed by Lord Beaverbrook in 1940. A contract was given to the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), that was signed on 16 August 1940. It too had a similar end to move vital aircraft orders overseas.

The key signatories to the contract were Royal Bank President Morris W. Wilson, President of the Canadian Pacific Railway and Sir Edwin Beatty who oversaw the general operations of this first contract.<sup>50</sup> The contract was subsequently cancelled by the Ministry of Aircraft Production. The Ministry decided it was necessary to assume full control of the operation. So the Atlantic Ferry organization (ATFERO) was restructured in May 1941 to do so.<sup>51</sup>

The difficulties and challenges to moving aircraft overseas proved enormous. AFTERO grew from minimal resources, initially organized around three groups. These groups were built around 35 first pilots and 11 second pilots. The small pool was supposed to move some 26,000 aircraft of various types.<sup>52</sup> The problem in doing so became patently obvious. The supply of pilots was insufficient and the number of backlogged aircraft grew. There simply wasn't the capacity to deliver them expeditiously! Ways and means had to be sought that eased that burden and that augmented pilot availability.

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<sup>49</sup> The Juno Beach Centre, **Ferrying Aircrafts Overseas**, 2017

Source: <http://www.junobeach.org/canada-in-wwii/articles/ferrying-aircrafts-overseas/>

Accessed: 3 March 2017

"The logistics for the transportation of so many planes rapidly became a major undertaking."

<sup>50</sup> Time Magazine, **World War: IN THE AIR: One-Way Airline**, Monday, Oct. 20, 1941

Source: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,851303,00.html>

Accessed: 14 February 2011

<sup>51</sup> Ibid Juno Centre Ferrying Aircraft, 2017

<sup>52</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg. 1

The day to day running of the operation was left to the ministrations of an experienced pilot and manager, Punch Dickins to sort it all out and move the backlog.<sup>53</sup> Dicken's knew that AFTERO was still way too small to do the job effectively. It was soon very evident that additional crews were required but the problem was, where to get them?

AFTERO's pilot pool and current capacity were unable to deliver or even reduce the growing backlog. Matters were also hindered in the delay of returning pilots and staff to Canada once a delivery was made.

A system of returning pilots quickly to Canada was eventually worked out sometime between 1940 and 1942. It took time to create and implement an efficient return loop feeding returning pilots back to Canada through Trans Canada Airlines. The loop did not get into high gear until a few converted Lancaster bombers were finally purchased in 1943. It was only 1944 that the loop carried passengers and freight in any quantity at all.<sup>54</sup> An effective loop system simply did not exist in 1940.

In the meantime, AFTERO delivery problems loomed greatly in 1940-1941. It was simply a problem of not having enough trained crew. There continued to be a critical shortage of pilots and navigators that grew. The weight of undelivered aircraft threaten to crush the system beyond repair. It was a simple problem of labour economics and distribution.

The serious problem of pilot and navigator shortages stared Dickins and AFTERO squarely in the face by December 1940. The fact was evident in AFTERO's backlog of 674 Hudson undelivered aircraft to Great Britain sitting on Canadian soil.

Looking ahead to 1941, AFTERO and Ferry Command perceived an even worsening and dilatory forecast. Added to that were coming demands in new inventory types. These new types included 91 PBV Catalina, 58 B-24 Liberators and 20 Flying Fortress. There was also an unknown quantity of Marauders, Baltimore and Boston aircraft in the pipeline. All these types had to be contended with. All would have to be moved eventually!

It was very evident that the ferrying of aircraft was a more complex problem than was first thought. The increased number of aircraft types, the volumes, the complexity and size of the operation, severely stressed AFTERO's handling capacity.

One solution was to hire more civilian pilots. But that solution was met with increasing complaint and opposition from the commercial airlines who were already supplying the system. They too were overtasked. They faced burgeoning domestic demand and an expanding commercial system to operate. Civilian hire from commercial aviation was

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<sup>53</sup> George Lothian, **Flight Deck – Memoirs of an Airline Pilot**, McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1979, pg. 74-75

<sup>54</sup> Ibid [Juno Beach Centre](#), **Ferrying Aircrafts Overseas**, 2017

thus viewed as poaching. Civilian hire was also an inordinately more expensive option as well.<sup>55</sup>

AFTERO's problems were exacerbated because most of its staff were only there on loan as secondment and on a short term. Civilian commercial pilots were seconded to AFTERO for a limited three month tour. They were supposed to be replaced by others on a rotational basis. However this system proved ponderous, impractical, and inefficient.

Matters were finally brought to a head when the airlines demanded the return of their pilots.<sup>56</sup> The pressures with the looming backlog strained domestic capacity beyond its means. Another solution had to be found to assist AFTERO's burgeoning needs and fast.

A solution was finally proposed that operational training units be tasked to train additional crews to ferry aircraft to the Great Britain. An assemblage of additional training was given to select crews to provide the necessary flying practice to that end.<sup>57</sup> This course of action was agreed to.

So, operational training units like Debert, Nova Scotia and elsewhere were soon reorganized to fill the gap. They now had dual functions. They would not only be responsible for operational training, but also were to conduct a short conversion course for AFTERO's needs. It was a romantic vision of training, the warrior riding his chariot directly into battle. The hope was that the concurrent training would go a long way to alleviating AFTERO's growing backlog!

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg.1 and Montreal Gazette, **High cost of ferry command pilots leads to switch to RAF pilots**, 19 September 1941

Source:

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=enYtAAAIBAJ&sjid=i5gFAAAAIBAJ&pg=2646,3345415&dq=ferry+command&hl=en>

Accessed: 30 January 2011

<sup>56</sup> Ibid George Lothian, 1979, pg. 88

<sup>57</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg.3

## 6 - Internecine Battles

### *...Politics at the Crossroads*

Winston Churchill has been inextricably linked to the Second World War as an iconic figure and heroic leader. Churchill was far from perfect though. He was also very human and had his faults.

A common misconception was that Churchill was in firm control right from the very beginning of the war. He was not! But he was the man who ascended to power at the right place, and the right time.

Churchill, a leading figure in British politics and public life, was a phenomenon. His political career spanned the Boer to the Cold War. In that time, Churchill amassed great experience in all the highs and lows of a very public life. Churchill was most often perceived as a man in control.

Churchill was not Britain's leader at the outset of the Second World War. He had a limited role in its management from September 1939 to May 1940. There was never any degree of certainty that he would ever assume a position of power and might.

Churchill was brought back from near political oblivion and exile to serve in Britain's wartime Government as First Lord of the Admiralty at the beginning of the Second World War. It was also a position that he held during the Great War, before falling out of political favour.

Churchill was always an active and involved minister. It was his force of character that brought him back from political exile to serve in his country in its most dire hour of need. Perhaps too, it was destiny, which often placed Churchill at the crossroads of positions or key events. It may have been that it was destiny that eventually led him to be Britain's wartime Prime Minister and subsequently, his own Minister of Defence during the *critical* years of the Second World War.

Winston Churchill replaced Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister on 10 May 1940.<sup>58</sup> Churchill said, "I assumed the office of Minister of Defence, without, attempting to define its scope and powers. Thus on the night of the tenth of May, at the outset of this mighty battle, I acquired the chief power in the State, which henceforth I wielded in ever growing measure for five years and three months of world war, at the end of which time, all our enemies having surrendered unconditionally or about to do so. At last I had the authority to give direction over the whole scene."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Second World War – The Gathering Storm*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948, pg. 666-667

<sup>59</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 1948, pg. 666-667

A change of leadership at this time, not only changed Churchill's fortunes but also, of those who served under his command and leadership throughout the war. The 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1940 was the defining moment of the crossroads of change that subsequently impacted many lives from that point on.

Up until that day Churchill had very little control over events or anything for that matter save those within his own sphere of influence as First Lord of the Admiralty.<sup>60</sup> Churchill had strong opinions on the naval threats that faced the country at the time. Most notably he perceived the U-boat as one threat already mastered.

Churchill said, "The submarine should be quite controllable in the outer seas and certainly in the Mediterranean. There will be losses, but nothing to affect the scale of events." Churchill foresaw nothing of major importance or of consequence in the first year of the war.<sup>61</sup>

His mood was indicative of the general assessment of the situation at the time. That assessment though may have per forced certain directions, which drove in turn; selections, decisions and priorities in the early management and conduct of the war. The U-boat was an important consideration, but it was not necessarily the predominate nor penultimate threat.

The U-boat threat would be dealt with in time. But it was a train of thought that may have contextually set the naval considerations and framework for Britain's early decisions and priorities.

This train of thought came back to bite Churchill found in this statement "I had accepted too readily when out of office the Admiralty view of the extent to which the submarine had been mastered."<sup>62</sup> Churchill was not totally sanguine concerning the U-boat's capabilities. Churchill when appointed First Lord of the Admiralty immediately ordered a threat assessment of the U-boats potential during the war's opening days.

The U-boat threat was soon evident. The war at sea commenced 3 September 1939 with the sinking of the Athena. Some 112 souls were lost. In addition some 122 thousand tons of vital shipping was also lost, which brought matters to a head.

On 4 September 1939 Churchill's first minute as First Lord of The Admiralty directed to the Director of Naval Intelligence, requested an assessment of the probable scale of the U-Boat menace for the immediate future regarding:

1. a statement of U-Boat forces actual and prospective over the next few months,

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<sup>60</sup> Anon. **Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty Entering Admiralty House, September 1939**, winstonisback.com, 2017

Source: <http://winstonisback.com/WinstonIsBackHomePage/4Big.html>

Accessed: 6 March 2017

<sup>61</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 1948, pg. 416

<sup>62</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 1948, pg. 416

2. distinguishing between ocean going and small-size U-boats, and
3. an estimate of their respective radius of action and miles in each case.

Churchill was at once informed that the enemy had 60 U-boats but that 100 more would be ready by early 1940.<sup>63</sup>

Churchill acted pro-actively on this advice. He set in motion the:

1. establishment of the convoy system,
2. arming of all merchant ships, and
3. counter attack of U-boats in the opening days of the war.<sup>64</sup>

He observed and reported to Parliament the following losses and results in the fall of 1939. His report by week for the 1<sup>st</sup> month of the war noted the following Merchant shipping and U-boat losses:

**British Merchant Shipping losses by enemy action, September 1939**

Period	Date	By Submarine (Gross Tons/ships)	Other Causes (Gross Tons/ships)	
1 <sup>st</sup> week	3-9 Sep	64,595 (11)		
2 <sup>nd</sup> week	10-16 Sep	53,569 (11)	11,437 (2) mine	
3 <sup>rd</sup> week	17-23 Sep	12,750 (3)		
4 <sup>th</sup> week	24-30 Sep	4,646 (1)	5,051 (1) Surface raider	
	Total:	135,552 (26)	16,488 (3)	
	All	152,040 (29)		

Churchill observed that for the losses above, six to seven U-boats were also sunk on the other side of the balance sheet representing 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the U-boat forces opposing them.<sup>65</sup> Churchill was brutally honest and candid with his peers. He assessed the real U-boat threat to be later toward 1941, which then was still some 18 – 24 months away.<sup>66</sup> The U-boat threat was contained and could be deferred until later.

Churchill's speech in 1939, did not foresee events that would drastically change his optimistic assessment. Churchill talked about threats in the future, that was still two years out, to 1941.

Many great demands were soon set on Britain's limited resources. All would become important, urgent, and increasingly pressing. All would demand immediate attention. Sorting out priorities became a most challenging task.

<sup>63</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 1948, pg. 423

<sup>64</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 1948, pg. 435-436

<sup>65</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 1948, pg. 435-437

<sup>66</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 1948, pg. 438

Order had to be brought to chaos in sorting out priorities. Much weight was given to reigning service doctrines in that matter. Service doctrines simplified choice. They helped direct and guide priorities to that which promised the most bang for the buck. It was a matter of choice for the highest return on investment and for ending the war soonest.

Individual services tended to protect rice bowls with little thought of mutual cooperation, support, or working as a part of a combined arms team. That train of thought would only come later in the war. For the moment, inter-service rivalry and individual service doctrines were “de rigueur”. These components greatly affected the ordering of all priorities including air power. It was a very highly charged, emotional, and a very competitive environment.

Churchill made a decision concerning air power in 1941 that had lasting consequences. It was a key decision in the allocation of resources and the leadership of the Royal Air Force. His decision greatly impacted the leadership of Coastal Command.

Arguments were made regarding the proper application of air power. Concerns were raised regarding proper allocation, assignment, and employment of air assets. It was argued that the failure to place the weight of resources towards the direct prosecution of the war on Germany was both a misapplication and a misappropriation of scarce resources.

It all boiled down to a simple military doctrinal axiom; that which does not directly support the selection and maintenance of the aim, the defeat of Germany, was not a priority. But axioms and reality seldom agree.

The situation was never that clear. A clear-cut decision also required the consideration of other threats. But doctrinal issues drew battle lines that created separate camps from which arguments and bitter rivalries grew.

The penultimate aim of the defeat of Germany created a schism and inter-service rivalry as well! Coastal Command was soon relegated to the status of poor second cousin in the allocation and priorities of air assets.

Coastal Command’s needs were intertwined in the struggle in the allocation of scarce airpower resources.<sup>67</sup> Trouble brewed and boiled between Bomber and Coastal Command. It centred on resources and the application of the correct strategy. The diversion of resources away from bombing Germany was argued as a failure that did not support the main aim.

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<sup>67</sup>Dean C. Ruffili, **Operational Research and the Royal Canadian Air Force Eastern Air Command's Search for Efficiency in Airborne Anti-Submarine Warfare, 1942-1945**, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2001 (thesis), pg. 10

Source: <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk3/ftp05/MQ65204.pdf>

Accessed: 1 February 2014

Bomber Command's position was quite clear in the statement the "... main failure lay in not providing Bomber Command with the wherewithal to carry out this declared intention; it was not the fault of Air Chief Marshal Harris. From the earliest days of the war there was a continual diversion of bomber strength, with aircraft and crews sent to North Africa and Italy, to *Coastal Command* (for emphasis) and to the Far East."<sup>68</sup>

Despite troubles associated with supply and losses of mercantile shipping in the Atlantic and elsewhere, strategic bombing was given "the priority." Churchill's selection of "Strategic Bombing" as the priority was not surprising given his background and the fact that he was also Minister of Defence. The final allocation and resolution lay in his hands.

... "Decisions, decisions"

Churchill listened to arguments concerning a share of vital long-range aircraft from Coastal Command and the Royal Navy (RN) on the one hand, and Bomber Command, on the other. Merchant shipping was being sunk in the Atlantic by the score.

The Royal Navy and Coastal Command made a case for long range aircraft on maritime patrol to cover the mid-Atlantic gap. The Royal Air Force countered and maintained its position for strategic bombing that brought the war directly to the enemy. Strategic bombing was the ace up Bomber Command's sleeve. It was the option that appealed most to Churchill's aggressive nature.

Winston Churchill favoured Bomber Command for, on the face of the facts available to him in early 1941 (Figure 1 see results 1939-1941), there was little physical evidence supporting either the RN or Coastal Command's case. He had to take a position based on the facts at hand that "bombing the U-boat construction facilities and bases in France and Germany was the more effective pursuit".<sup>69</sup>

Churchill's decision in support of Bomber Command had many ramifications. But significantly, the resulting decision left the vital convoy link without adequate air protection, when events suggested that protection was most urgently required.

It's amazing that the decision favouring Bomber Command undercut the safety and security of his vital supply line from North America. It all rested upon the safety and security of the convoy system.

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<sup>68</sup> David L. Bashow, **Soldiers blue: how bomber command and area bombing helped win the Second World War**, Canadian Defence Academy Press by 17 Wing Winnipeg Publishing Office, 2011, pg. 76

<sup>69</sup>William S. Hanable, Research Studies Series, Case Studies in The Use of Land-Based Aerial Forces in Maritime Operations, 1939-1990, Air Force History & Museums Program, Washington, D.C. September 1998, pg. 19

Supply of all goods and materiel was Britain's Achille's tendon. It was this vital supply line without which Britain could not possibly prosecute the war with any great effect. The U-boat was Churchill's most dreaded fear during the war. He eventually dealt with the issue by declaring the Battle of the Atlantic.<sup>70</sup>

Churchill was not only concerned with the number of ships lost but also with the tonnage of cargo that failed to reach its final destination. His lost supplies all rested on the bottom of the Atlantic. Churchill was concerned with the tempo and devastation of the destruction. In his estimate, these huge convoy losses were generated by no more than a mere 12 -15 U-Boats on patrol at any one time until 1942.<sup>71</sup>

A change of perspective came with Churchill's declaration of the Battle of the Atlantic. The declaration drew his staff's attention to the vital task at hand, safeguarding Britain from starvation and defeat. The declaration of "The Battle of the Atlantic" was a siren call to arms much like his declaration of the Battle of Britain.<sup>72</sup>

Despite its declaration, strategic bombing remained "the priority". Churchill and the Commonwealth devoted time, resources, and its best men toward achieving that end.

Churchill's selection and maintenance of the "Strategic Bombing" priority was not surprising in the least despite what was happening in the Atlantic. Churchill was an intimate of air force doctrine, whose background and experience may have influenced him on the matter.

Post World War I, Churchill was the minister responsible for combining the ministries of War and Air as one. He was selected by then Prime Minister David Lloyd George because of his flexibility of mind and because he was open to the employment of air power.<sup>73</sup>

Churchill was also for a time, Minister of Munitions during the Great War between 1917 and 1918. It was here that Churchill gained much experience on the economics of warfare. This portfolio was also likely a foundation and education for his future views on the management of war, aircraft production and its employment in particular.<sup>74</sup> Churchill was well aware of the value of air power and the need for air superiority.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Winston S Churchill, **The Grand Alliance**, Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1950, pg. 122-123

<sup>71</sup> Winston S Churchill, **The Hinge of Fate**, Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1950, pg. 110 -111

<sup>72</sup> Ibid Churchill, **The Grand Alliance**, pg. 122-123

<sup>73</sup> Phillip S. Meilinger, **Trenchard and "Morale Bombing": The Evolution of Royal Air Force Doctrine before Second World War**, The Journal of Military History, Vol.60, No.2., April 1996, pg. 251

<sup>74</sup> Ibid Churchill, **Hinge of Fate**, pg. 62-63

<sup>75</sup> ibid Churchill, **The Grand Alliance**, 1950, pg. 122-123

Churchill was also a contemporary of Hugh Trenchard the “father of RAF strategic airpower doctrine”. Trenchard identified enemy morale as the key target in RAF doctrine. The RAF institutionalized his theory in a series of doctrinal manuals, which became the guideline and basis for action employed by Arthur Harris, Churchill’s then Commander of Bomber Command.<sup>76</sup>

It is likely then that Churchill’s intimate familiarity with RAF strategic doctrine and his firm desire for offensive action, were likely key factors to weighing the arguments that ultimately favoured his decision regarding Bomber Command in 1941.<sup>77</sup>

Churchill’s decision was not just a gut reaction. There was hard doctrinal evidence in support of the RAF case. Unfortunately, there was either no or inconclusive evidence for the RN and Coastal Command case at the time.

The decision that allocated long range assets to the RAF before Coastal Command and the needs of the Royal Navy seemed reasonable in light of the results achieved to date. Strategic bombing appeared to offer the best return on investment to Great Britain and her Allies at the time.

The gathering of evidence was often difficult. Moreover, the evidence was in large part intangible. This was most likely one reason why the Royal Navy and Coastal Command lost their case for a fair share of the air resources.

The empirical evidence between 1939 and 1941 suggests that it was naval, not air action that achieved results against the U-boats. There was little evidence supporting Coastal Command’s role in the destruction of U-boats during that period. It was easy for any observer to conclude that air power applied to the U-boat problem was ineffectual and as such, was a misuse of vital and scarce resources. (Figure 1)<sup>78</sup>.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid Melinger, 1996 pg. 269

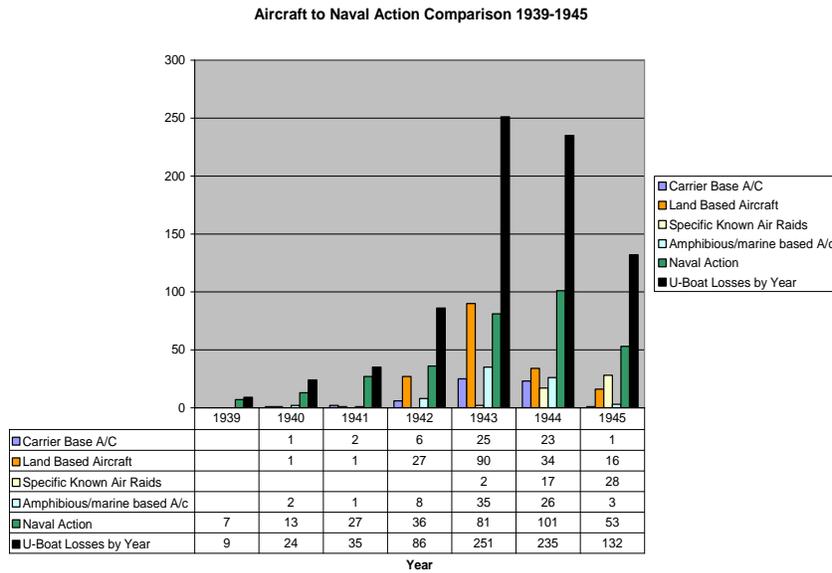
<sup>77</sup> Ibid Melinger, 1996 pg. 253

<sup>78</sup> U-Boat.Net 1995-2011, **U-Boat Fates – U-Boat Losses 1939-45**, 10 June 2011, Accessed: 10 June 2011

Source: <http://www.uboat.net/fates/losses/cause.htm>

Author’s note. The data presented here was manually transcribed was a compilation of data from a review of each U-boat record of loss from 1939-1945. Some variances may be due to a difference in categorization and grouping by different observers. Consequently, any resulting error is strictly my own.

Figure 1



It was only later, in 1942, that airpower in total and, land based aircraft in particular, produced results in quantity that even matched naval action results in the early days of the war (Figure 1).

The point often lost in the discussion though, was land based aircraft and their attacks played an unseen but vital role. The destruction of a U-Boat was the direct object, but the true value of land based aircraft lay elsewhere. It was in the unseen intangible of their mere presence while on patrol.

That value did not have the consequence of direct destruction. The more important consequence and benefit was the indirect result of patrolling aircraft. Patrolling aircraft kept the U-Boat submerged. This may have been the more important service.

Land based and maritime air power created the situation for merchant ships to keep ahead of the submerged U-boats and escape unmolested. It was so as long as patrolling aircraft remained overhead. Patrolling aircraft kept U-boats at bay.

The trouble was in maintaining such an air umbrella with the aircraft available to Coastal Command. They had to be available in sufficient quantity with requisite flying time on station to do so. It generated a requirement for long range aircraft that placed Coastal Command in direct competition with Bomber Command for a share of long range assets.

The suppression of U-boat and therefore curtailing operability was likely the more important and vital strategic tangible achieved. Patrolling land based aircraft contributed by limiting U-boat operations thus saving lives and materiel. But maintaining an air umbrella was the unseen, unrecorded, and an unknown result until the enemy's archives became available for analysis after the war.

The employment of land based aircraft was probably viewed as the more costly option when compared to strategic bombing in terms of fuel, crew requirements, and aircraft. In the end land based and maritime air power simply did not play to air force doctrine of hitting at enemy morale or centre of gravity. It played out at a time when the force of personality and public opinion demanded evidence and results too!

Bomber Command had first crack at those resources. That decision would guide others that followed. Coastal Command had to work within a set framework of priorities. The consequences extended well through Coastal Command to its own internal assignment and allocation of priorities and resources. Consequently, it all bore down, drilled through, and was felt by Operational Training Units both within Britain and on Canada's East Coast.

Coastal Command was now on the bottom end of priorities. The larger need was simply concluded as elsewhere. Sadly the perforce of that decision would come to bear in the U-boat battle that loomed later in the war.<sup>79</sup> But the decisions favouring Bomber Command had a broader impact on the very leadership of Coastal Command. It came at a time as the Battle of the Atlantic was building to a crescendo!

### *...Behind the Scenes - Leadership at the crossroads*

A major change in the Royal Air Force (RAF) command structure occurred April 1941. Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Bowhill was relieved as Commander Coastal Command and transferred to a newly created position in Canada.

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<sup>79</sup> Dean C. Ruffili, **Operational Research and the Royal Canadian Air Force Eastern Air Command's Search for Efficiency in Airborne Anti-Submarine Warfare, 1942-1945**, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2001 (thesis), pg. 45-48

Source: <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk3/ftp05/MQ65204.pdf>

Accessed: 1 February 2014



Photograph [CH 14503](#) from the collections of the [Imperial War Museums](#), 1943-45, (Russell, Royal Air Force official photographer). *This artistic work [created by the Great Britain Government](#) is in the [public domain](#)*

There was an air of optimism surrounding Bowhill's new posting. The public face and spin was somewhat different to the reality and events that transpired behind the scenes.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Time Magazine, **World War: IN THE AIR: One-Way Airline**, Monday, Oct. 20, 1941

Source: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,851303,00.html>

Accessed: 14 February 2011

Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Bowhill, then Commander in Chief of Coastal Command, was problematic to the management of the RAF. Bowhill fought tenaciously for a fair share of resources for his fighting arm.

Bowhill demanded new and more capable aircraft. His arguments and demands disrupted the apple cart. His presence threatened to stem the flow of aircraft, developments, and equipment away from Bomber Command.

Bowhill as Chief of Coastal Command was also a threat to the “orthodoxy” of the day. He directly challenged the RAF’s and Churchill’s position regarding the doctrine of strategic bombing.<sup>81</sup>

Bowhill was an important proponent of “naval airpower” and an early naval airpower theorist. Furthermore, Bowhill’s theories had considerable support and backing from the Royal Navy, a position that did not sit well within the RAF.

Uncharacteristically Bowhill was a forward thinking commander who was sensitive and sympathetic to the needs of the Royal Navy. Bowhill held regular meetings with the Royal Navy, whose sole purpose was the direct coordination of a joint effort in the prosecution of maritime warfare.<sup>82</sup> Put quite simply, Bowhill was not seen as a company man.

Bowhill pointed the way towards a true combined operations approach. It was an approach that was truly needed. Bowhill’s leadership hinted at what was needed to remove and breakdown barriers hindering success, which was the true rot of inter-service rivalry. The removal of these barriers and the team approach were key to winning the war.

Bowhill’s performance was continually attacked from behind the scenes. Churchill and the RAF cast a disparaging view on Coastal Command’s results. This barrage casted a pall on Bowhill’s overall performance. He was not publicly blamed for Coastal Command’s poor performance during the first years of the war though.

Bowhill’s true misfortune was being in command at the time when he was held accountable for the desultory results. He was blamed for the lack of achievement, which was unfounded. Coastal Command’s results and failings rest squarely with the failure of the system in adjusting the priorities and to allocate Coastal Command its fair share.

The lowest priorities were given to Bowhill and Coastal Command found in the castoff aircraft reallocated from Bomber Command. They were not allocated the modern resources necessary for the task at hand because of an adherence to orthodoxy and the doctrine of strategic bombing.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Christina J.M. Goulter. **A Forgotten Offensive: Royal Air Force Coastal Command's Anti-Shipping Campaign.** London: Frank Cass, 1995, pg.115, pg. 121-122

<sup>82</sup> Ibid Goulter, 1995, pg. 125

<sup>83</sup> Ibid Goulter, 1995, pg. 126-128

Paradoxically the Royal Navy too was unsatisfied with the current state of affairs and the results achieved to date in maritime anti-shipping warfare. Their dissatisfaction was not a personal attack on Bowhill. In fact their criticism and conclusions were supportive and indicative of the materiel failings that Coastal Command faced and which Bowhill had to contend.

The Royal Navy's support eventually led to a commitment that would see the expansion and modernization of Coastal Command's resources by some 15 squadrons in 1941. This represented a diversion of approximately 100 squadrons (15%) of planned strength that was heretical to the leadership of Bomber Command.<sup>84</sup>

Bowhill was a threat! He was attacked on a number of fronts for his personal and his Command's shortcomings. But the shortcomings of his Command were largely beyond his control if left unaided and improperly resourced. He fought a brave battle with what was at hand and allocated to him as obsolete equipment.<sup>85</sup>

Bowhill was an adaptive leader and was not hind bound to theories. He evolved his tactics that improved the odds of contacting U-boats, which proved to be spot on. The changes he proposed, were eventually the winning combination in the prosecution of the U-boat war still to come.<sup>86</sup> But Bowhill was not there to see it nor reap the glory.

It was statistics and Bowhill's unwillingness to change his reporting strategy that proved to be his final undoing. Bowhill was a formidable leader, an honest broker, who was unwilling to honey coat or shade results.<sup>87</sup> He was unwilling to change and so fell out of favour with Churchill.

Also, Bowhill's persistent demands for a fair share of the very best of equipment for his Command too proved to be a thorn in Churchill's side.<sup>88</sup> But Bowhill's reputation was a formidable one. It proved to be the roadblock to his removal that would have to be tactfully staged and managed carefully.

### *...Bowhill an Atypical RAF Officer*

Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Bowhill was not your typical Royal Air Force Officer. Indeed he was never the "company man". He had a unique and interesting career and background that began in the Royal Navy. He was a Master Mariner, certified to command any ship, of any size, anywhere, either in sail or steam.

Bowhill served during World War I where he was drafted by the Royal Navy for service and work on a biplane! Bowhill learnt to fly and taught himself the dangerous art of

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid Goulter, 1995, pg. 125

<sup>85</sup> Ibid Goulter, 1995, pg. 120

<sup>86</sup> Ibid Goulter, 1995, pg. 120 & 128

<sup>87</sup> Ibid Goulter, 1995, pg. 128

<sup>88</sup> Ibid Goulter, 1995, pg. 120

taking off from the deck of a merchantman. He was first to conduct a “carrier” attack on the German Navy.<sup>89</sup>

Later knighted, Sir Frederick remained in service between the wars. He was the reigning naval airpower theorist and became chief of Coastal Command in September 1939.

Bowhill had on paper, a force of sorts at the beginning of the war. It was never the far-ranging reconnaissance aircraft and bombers required though. His prime job was to protect British shipping, to catch submarines, to spot German naval units with what he had at hand.<sup>90</sup>

It was clear that Bowhill had a monumental task in protecting British merchant shipping and sea lanes. But Bowhill did not have any of the necessary air assets needed to protect this vital lifeline in strength. Bowhill was equipped with a small force of light single engine aircraft to do that job.

Bowhill made a bold move early on in the war and attacked submarines by pure bluff. He banked on a well-founded fear that submariners would submerge at the very presence of aircraft. He sent his small force out in almost anything he could buy, beg, borrow or steal.

His tiny force was composed mostly of light Tiger-Moth trainers, whose lethality was both dubious and laughable, but did an admirable job. Their mere presence on German submarine commanders was profound. Whenever U-boat commanders observed a speck in the sky, they quickly submerged and stole away. The Tiger-Moths were as effective as if they had been dive-bombers.<sup>91</sup>

Regrettably stealing away left no visible results to assess statistically. So Bowhill was unable to sustain his point in later arguments with Churchill, the Chiefs of Staff or Bomber Command. There was an absence of positive proof, and without such proof they simply would not, could not support him.

All these factors, either singly or in combination, were sufficient to lead to the conclusion and the decision for Bowhill’s eventual removal. Without positive proof his moral authority as commander of Coastal Command was finally eroded and confidence lost in his leadership.

The final nail in his coffin was the Air Production Ministry’s position in which they concluded that Bowhill’s needs could be easily resolved. They argued rather than new equipment, his aircraft problem was simply one of proper maintenance of current assets,

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<sup>89</sup> Time Magazine, **World War: IN THE AIR: One-Way Airline**, Monday, Oct. 20, 1941

Source: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,851303,00.html>

Accessed: 14 February 2011

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, **World War: In the Air: One-way Airline**, 1941

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, **World War: In the Air: One-way Airline**, 1941

and not the need for new equipment.<sup>92</sup> From that point on, it was simply a matter of time before he was removed from command.<sup>93</sup>

Bowhill's removal was imminent and was coincidental with a transfer of some operational training units to Canada. These units would become critical elements in addressing the looming challenges of his new role. The problem was Bowhill was no lightweight, and notwithstanding his command's disparaging results, it was hard to put the full blame squarely on Bowhill's shoulders. The question remained as "what to do with a man of his stature?"

Bowhill was finally removed from his position at Coastal Command and transferred to head Ferry Command in Canada. His new command encompassed resources from the RCAF, including training establishments then in development, notably at Debert and Greenwood, N.S. and Pennfield, NB.<sup>94</sup>

Interestingly there was a prior Canadian request for the inclusion of some Operational Training Units from Great Britain earlier in 1939. These units came to play a role later in 1941. Operational Training Units (O.T.U.) were an integral part of the Royal Air Force (RAF) training system in 1938, designed specifically to conduct the final phase training in preparation for actual operational flying duties.

Britain's O.T.U.s were closely tied to their operational squadrons so there was little thought of ever moving them to Canada under the BCATP.<sup>95</sup> There was no apparent danger regarding them in 1938 nor were they a strain on resources then. That all changed once the war started though.

At the height of activity in 1940 and because of needs to ensure Britain's continued survival, a decision was made to move some of the training units to much safer ground. This reduced the strain on scarce resources and burden on the operational units. It also avoided the temptation of drawing the trainees into the fray before they were ready!

The decision to move the operational training units was precipitated because of a Canadian appeal made by Air Vice-Marshal (AVM) Breadner (RCAF) in December 1940. It was the second such appeal made by AVM Breadner that caused some movement on the matter. Breadner had once again requested the inclusion of units from Britain as part of the RAF contribution to the BCATP. It was a propitious request. It led to the movement of four O.T.U.s to Canada.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid Goulter, 1995, pg. 125

<sup>93</sup> Ibid Goulter, 1995, pg. 127-128

<sup>94</sup> Hugh A. Halliday, **Bridging the Ocean: Air Force, Part 20**, Legion Magazine, March 1, 2007

Source: <https://legionmagazine.com/en/2007/03/bridging-the-ocean/>

Accessed: 5 December 2014

<sup>95</sup> ibid Hatch, 1983, pg. 74

Breadner and others thought that the operational scope of these O.T.U.s would be strategically valuable assets. They also looked to the future where BCATP graduates were not only trained to fly operationally but also trained in the delivery of crucial aircraft by Ferry Command.<sup>96</sup>

The first transfer of an operational training unit occurred just at the completion of the Debert airfield. The movement of four operational training units was timed coincidentally with Bowhill's arrival in Canada. Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.) 31 virtually was established as Bowhill assumed his new command in Canada. It was indeed a propitious opportunity.

The Canadian request likely presented Churchill and the RAF the chance to gracefully remove Bowhill who was by now, indeed a thorn in their side. The simplest way to solve the problem of Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Bowhill, was to move him.

#### *...Air Chief Marshall Bowhill's Posting*

"Strategic Bombing" was the penultimate airpower doctrine of the Second World War, that was deeply entrenched in the psyche of Allied air forces. It proved to be a singular focus that was both laudable, yet, that was also inflexible. The doctrine guided the path of decisions but failed to consider the broader ramifications or needs of others in the conduct of the war.

"Strategic Bombing" had ramifications for Coastal Command. These ramifications lay in the fundamental strategic decisions, which aligned the priorities to the exclusion of other considerations.

Churchill truly believed in the power of his air arm. However, the antisubmarine role was still as yet an untested and unproven use of air power. Thus, the value of any investment of resources in such an unproven asset, was viewed as specious at best.

Bomber Command offered Britain the most promising return on investment and bang for the buck. "Strategic Bombing" took the war directly to the enemy. Thus, Bomber Command was favoured in the priorities and the allocation of a limited supply of vital aircraft arriving from Canada.<sup>97</sup>

The pressures and logistics in transporting of backlogged aircraft proved to be a daunting challenge. They were virtually useless sitting in Canada and therefore allocations were first directed toward the most urgent need, which was Bomber Command.

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<sup>96</sup> *ibid* Hatch, 1983, pg. 74

<sup>97</sup> John Keegan, **The Second World War**, Penguin Books, 2005 (first published 1990) pg. 538-540

The ferry operation and aircraft movement proved to be an onerous task. There was a standstill in a growing backlog from the shipment of purchased aircraft to Canada. The backlog simply overwhelmed the system's capacity to move them.

Aircraft could have been shipped by sea but the volume would have strained the Allies' marine shipping capacity. There were other vital goods and stores to ship apart from aircraft that had to be transported primarily in this manner.<sup>98</sup> Besides that, merchant shipping was sunk by the score in the Atlantic. There was no point in moving large masses of aircraft if it was all only to be sunk and lie on the ocean's floor. Something had to be done to move the backlog of aircraft from Canada.

The challenge of moving the backlog was first given to the Atlantic Ferry Organization (ATFERO). ATFERO was specifically created to meet that growing demand in moving the backlog of undelivered aircraft. The Atlantic Ferry Organization (ATFERO) was an precursor to the military organization eventually created for moving the backlog. But AFTERO, a civilian organization, was to be first up at bat.

The ATFERO organization had much to deal with. There was a growing displeasure at the state of the backlog. Demands from many sources meant that something had to be done, and quickly, to remedy the situation.<sup>99</sup> ATFERO required a leader, a worker and a shaker to right the system and to get things moving.

The air ferry service at the time was regarded as an inefficient operation, which was perceived to be a part of the problem. A civilian organization was subsequently replaced by a military organization. The job to sorting it all out finally fell to Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Bowhill.

Air Chief Marshall Bowhill, a highly-respected airman, already had a reputation for getting things done. Bowhill's new job in Canada was to have been a purely administrative one. But high hopes rode on Bowhill's skills, abilities, and reputation.

Bowhill was a renowned leader whose skills and experience, were considered vital to tilting a strategic balance. The collective hope was that Bowhill would soon move the backlog and put things to right. Bowhill's first job on arrival was to sort out the rough spots upon the assumption of the duties from AFTERO.

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<sup>98</sup> The Juno Beach Centre, **Ferrying Aircrafts Overseas**, 2017

Source: <http://www.junobeach.org/canada-in-wwii/articles/ferrying-aircrafts-overseas/>

Accessed: 3 March 2017

“The logistics for the transportation of so many planes rapidly became a major undertaking.”

<sup>99</sup> Ibid Juno Centre Ferrying Aircraft, 2017

Bowhill's task was simple; make the airbridge over the Atlantic to Britain a matter of routine in moving the backlog.<sup>100</sup> Bowhill looked to all available resources towards achieving that end.

Bowhill assumed his new appointment on 14 June 1941.<sup>101</sup> By August 1941, Ferry Command was created replacing AFTERO. Bowhill was now in command, and from this point on, all AFTERO's responsibilities were now Bowhill's responsibility.<sup>102</sup>

With Bowhill at its head, the change of command saw the ferry operation under military supervision and control.<sup>103</sup> The move from civilian to military control changed little though. Bowhill faced the same challenges as AFTERO in the matter of pilot and navigator shortages. It was simply Bowhill's problem now.

Displeasure and concern remained even after Bowhill's arrival. It mattered little that control had passed from civilian to military authority. The backlog had not moved simply because Bowhill showed up or the military was in control! The problem was more complex than a simple change of leadership. But Bowhill was up to dealing with the challenge.

Bowhill dealt with it by expanding a mandate in training at the BCATP. A new component was added for some trainees that allowed the system to train some pilots and navigators for the ferry operation. The urgency of his growing backlog demanded such action if results were to be achieved!

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<sup>100</sup> Time Magazine, **World War: IN THE AIR: One-Way Airline**, Monday, Oct. 20, 1941

Source: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,851303,00.html>

Accessed: 14 February 2011

<sup>101</sup> The Windsor Daily Star, **Heads British Plane, Ferries, Sir Frederick Bowhill Is Given Direction of New Unit**, 14 June 1941

Source:

[http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=ESE\\_AAAAIBAJ&sjid=s08MAAAAIBAJ&pg=6504.968819&hl=en](http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=ESE_AAAAIBAJ&sjid=s08MAAAAIBAJ&pg=6504.968819&hl=en)

Accessed: 5 February 2011

<sup>102</sup> Montreal Gazette, **RAF takes charge of plane ferrying – Atlantic Service Handed over by Ministry of Aircraft production**, 6 August 1941

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=gy0rAAAAIBAJ&sjid=tJgFAAAAIBAJ&pg=2825,917390&dq=ferry+command&hl=en>

Accessed: 30 January 2011

<sup>103</sup> Ibid [Juno Beach Centre](#), **Canada in WWII, Ferrying Aircrafts Overseas**, 2017

On another level, RCAF Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Lloyd Samuel Breadner, proposed that newly transferred units from Great Britain to Canada, be amongst the first to conduct such training.

Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.) 31 at Debert was one such unit selected to do so. O.T.U 31 had two functions, conduct operational training proper, and then offer a short conversion course for selected crew to aid in ferrying aircraft to Britain. Those outputs would greatly assist Bowhill toward moving his backlog.<sup>104</sup>

Time Magazine reflected on Bowhill's appointment four months later in an article in October 1941. Once the dust settled down Time wrote, "Sir Frederick left Britain and as head of R.A.F. Coastal Command on two days' notice, he arrived in Montreal twelve hours later, having flown the Atlantic, assumed the reins of his new responsibilities and immediately went to work." Time put on a brave face in the promise of Bowhill's skills.

The ferrying operation was viewed as the less spectacular role for Bowhill compared to his tenancy at Coastal Command. But Bowhill's new job was considered the more vital to Britain's defense by many. The promise of Bowhill's posting to Canada was the hope of movement of aircraft, delivered quickly and safely. There was no doubt that Bowhill would take all steps and means necessary to do so.<sup>105</sup>

That was the very public face and spin that was placed on Bowhill's posting to Canada. It was the spin put on it in the press. But there was much more to it behind the scenes. It was more than likely that Bowhill was posted to Canada for reasons other than moving a backlog!

### *...The Hard Facts – What was the truth?*

Truth is not always self-evident and is often masked out of necessity. The story behind Air Vice Marshall Bowhill's posting to Canada is a case in point. Bowhill was a team player. Once in Canada, far removed from events in Great Britain, he enthusiastically engaged all his efforts towards resolving the backlog problem with all his power, might, and energy. But the story behind his posting placed Coastal Command at a crossroads that could have easily led to misfortune and disaster too!

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<sup>104</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg.3

Breadner is not name directly in the DHH file but he was listed as CAS in other documents from 1940-1946

<sup>105</sup> Time Magazine, **World War: IN THE AIR: One-Way Airline**, Monday, Oct. 20, 1941

Source: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,851303,00.html>

Accessed: 14 February 2011

Bowhill's posting came at a critical juncture for Coastal Command in the ongoing battle of the Atlantic and U-boat war. His move was untimely. Coastal Command was at a crossroads in the Battle of the Atlantic. A change in leadership could have easily led to misfortune and disaster. Fortunately, it didn't happen that way, but the change of leadership had consequences nonetheless!

The public was weary from the privations and suffering that came with rationing and bombing from enemy action. Hunger and want were forced upon them by a vigilant U-Boat blockade of Britain's imports. They also suffered the onslaught of a German bombing campaign that added to their miseries.

Intuition, experience, and professional opinion so often plays an important role in the management of the war. Professional opinion was divided on what should be done though. The various and equally valid arguments amongst professional opinion may have obfuscated judgement.

Interestingly, professional judgement was based on empirical evidence available from 1939 and 1941. It was naval action, not air action, that achieved results. In fact, there was very little evidence supporting the role of air power in any significant level of destruction of U-boats during that period.

The measurable effects of maritime patrolling remained unknown until war's end. Suppression of U-boats and affecting their operability were the vital objects of patrolling aircraft. They were only intangible benefits. It wasn't the same as blowing the enemy out of the water!

It was the unknown and unrecognized result found in the air umbrella over convoys and maritime approaches that was of real material value though. But it was the lack of apparent results that most likely led to the conclusion of professional opinion that the means was the more costly and inefficient option.

In the end, the role of land based aircraft in Coastal Command simply did not play to air force doctrine of hitting the enemy, especially at a time when public opinion demanded so. Strategic Bombing became the underlying premise for the prosecution of the war against Germany in which strategic bombing aligned the priorities in aircraft and investments.

However, it was the presence of aircraft over the high seas that dissuaded U-boat activity and that limited its destructive power. Airpower proved to be more effective later in 1942.

A good number of U-boat sinking's between 1942 and 1945 resulted from air action, notably land based aircraft (Table 1).<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid U-Boat Net, 1995-2011  
(Author's Note to Table 1:

Table 1 – A Comparison of U-Boat Sinking by Air Attack Classification

Comparison of Air Action Class only						
Year	Land Based Aircraft	Amphibious/ marine based A/c	Carrier Base A/C	Specific Known Air Raids	Total	
1939	0	0	0	0	0	
1940	1	2	1	0	4	
1941	1	1	2	0	4	
1942	27	8	6	0	41	
1943	90	35	25	2	152	
1944	34	26	23	17	100	
1945	16	3	1	28	48	
Total Air Action	169	75	58	47	349	
% Total Destroyed Air Action	48%	21%	17%	13%	100%	
Total Destroyed	772					

Thus, the importance and value of land based aircraft only became apparent much later in the war, much too late for Bowhill.

The results regarding air attacks conducted by aircraft on U-boats are informative. Land based aircraft accounted for 349 of 772 (45%) of all U-Boat losses between 1939 and 1945 (Table 1). Land based aircraft along with carrier based and amphibious aircraft accounted for 69% of total U-boat losses attributable to aircraft during the war (Table 1). That result was not inconsequential!

In all fairness U-boats were destroyed by a wide variety of means including naval action, mines, carrier based aircraft, amphibious aircraft, or some unknown misadventure apart

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This data was adjusted to remove duplication of combined actions for which both the navy and air forced were simultaneously credited for a joint action. Adjustments were also made to exclude scuttling and SOS (in 1944) to highlight losses solely due to misadventure or accident while at sea. From 1939-1945.

This is as pure a picture as I can get it within my limited means. There may be slight differences between my data and U-boat net which is largely due to the categorization applied by different observers. It does not materially alter the big picture in the greater scheme of things. For example, U-boat net yielded 37 combined naval-air attacks. I found 27 carriers borne and 5 land-based or amphibian based attacks my number rises to 32. My data was manually transcribed from U-boat net records. Any errors or omissions are my own and not the results of others. G.D Madigan 2 Jun 2011.); and

Anon. The Battle of the Atlantic, Canadian Naval Review, Vol.1 #1 (Spring 2005), pg. 19 A contrast to this paper highlights the differences resulting from differing categorization, parsing of the data and possibly investigator bias. The big picture remains the same.

from land based aircraft. This gives a proper perspective on the value of all attack profiles employed toward the U-boat threat.

When the entire pooled data is reviewed to include all sources of destruction, naval units destroyed 41% of all U-boats, aircraft 28%, and the remainder from other causes, sources or misadventure. Air attack had the second highest rating amongst all the methods employed against the U-boat that achieved results.

Commented [GM1]:

Looking deeper (Table 2) land-based aircraft achieved proportionately higher results when compared with those of carrier or amphibious aircraft. Only unknown misadventure achieved a double digit result. But none of these methods was higher that of naval action or that of land based aircraft!

Table 2 – U-boat Losses by all Methods 1939-1945

<u>Actual</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Naval Action</u>	<u>Mines</u>	<u>Carrier Base A/C</u>	<u>Land Based Aircraft</u>	<u>Amphibious/ marine based A/c</u>	<u>Misadventure/Un known Accident/Other</u>	<u>Total Losses</u>
	1939	7	2					9
	1940	13	6	1	1	2	4	24
	1941	27	1	2	1	1	4	35
	1942	36	5	6	27	8	8	86
	1943	81	2	25	92	35	25	243
	1944	101	13	23	51	26	57	249
	1945	53	13	1	44	3	18	126
	Total	318	42	58	216	75	116	772
	% total destroyed	41%	5%	8%	28%	10%	15%	100%

What is easily lost in “statistics” and hindsight was the urgency of the situation and necessity in the moment. Necessity required the combined effort of all these methods. A combined approach was the necessary step that eventually saw the U-boat threat controlled, managed, dealt with, and finally eliminated. It was a position favoured by Bowhill.

The essential truth was U-boat operations at the height of the Battle of the Atlantic destroyed a great amount of Allied shipping, and was Churchill’s worst fear. What is often lost in the considerations of all the issues regarding aircraft allocation, was one

simple fact. It was all moot if materiel, food and other resources were sunk and lay wasted, and useless at the bottom of the Atlantic!

Bowhill lost his battle for a share of the resources with Churchill and the RAF Command structure and with it, his command. Bowhill was simply removed and posted to Canada. In short, Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Bowhill was bumped!

## 7 - Operational Unit 31 The Beginning

Operational Training Unit 31 (O.T.U. 31) was quickly thrown into the fray in 1941. Training began and was geared from the outset towards operations and ferrying for the Atlantic Ferry Organization (ATFERO).

The initial military establishment of Operational Training Unit 31 included 86 officers and 861 other ranks (OR). It was initially equipped with 32 Hudson's and 11 Anson's for operational training alone. The establishment was later augmented by an additional 12 Hudson bombers for the short conversion course required for the air ferry task.<sup>107</sup>

The ferry training was to be an extra bonus only for some, but not all of the newly trained pilots. In the end, a trained cadre was supposed to help alleviate the strain in clearing the system's backlog of deliverable aircraft overseas, at least in theory.

Operational training was eight weeks long. The initial training cycle was designed to produce as many as 10 crews every 4 weeks. Ideally that meant a new serial was added as an incoming class at the mid-point of each serial then under training. Thus the training program was geared to attaining optimal production targets.

The initial planned output was subsequently adjusted though and a new production output was expanded to 50 pilots per month. There was a minimum population of 25 pilots on station at any one time.<sup>108</sup> The production output also included training of wireless air gunners too.

Pilots were also given General Reconnaissance training where possible. It was only after regular training that some were finally selected and trained as second officers for the AFTERO ferry duty.

All candidates were required to achieve a standard level of flying proficiency. "Operational training" was a misnomer though. Their final training was conducted at the gaining units overseas.

In the short term, there continued to be a mismatch of expectations of outputs concerning the growing backlog to achievable delivery rates. The surge of the backlog of aircraft outstripped the capacity of the available staff even with the augmented output from the schools well into 1941.

Aircraft were simply not moving into theatre fast enough, which prompted many complaints from American Suppliers.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg. 2

<sup>108</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg. 2-3

<sup>109</sup> The Juno Beach Centre, **Ferrying Aircrafts Overseas**, 2017

Source: <http://www.junobeach.org/canada-in-wwii/articles/ferrying-aircrafts-overseas/>  
Accessed: 3 March 2017

Despite the increased numbers trained, shortages of qualified pilots and navigators persisted. These shortages placed an undue pressure on the training staff. It was a matter of utmost urgency and of operational necessity to train crews and deliver them expeditiously to AFTERO. The beast within the backlog had to be fed.

So, the pressures within the aircraft delivery backlog placed an unrealistic strain on aircrew training. Put quite simply, the BCATP had not reached its stride in 1940 as it was still in its infancy. It was still learning the ropes and working out the kinks when the ferry training burden was assumed.

Any appreciable training would not occur or start until the spring of 1941. It was a simple fact that many of the bases of the BCATP were incomplete and under construction. The full weight of the resources was neither immediately available to assist, nor were they able to redress the AFTERO shortfalls and staff imbalances efficiently. The system simply was not able to do so on the scale or in the timeframe required.<sup>110</sup>

Demands for pilots and navigators were not the only problems that had to be contended with. There were other variables that hindered movement of the backlog. One concerned the development of an effective air bridge over the Atlantic. There were many component parts to it and it had never been attempted on such a scale before. For example, there were few navigation aids. What aids that did exist, were primitive at best.<sup>111</sup>

Then there was the weather! The North Atlantic was notorious for bad weather. Pilots were largely on their own when assessing meteorological conditions. Appreciable delays at Gander while awaiting favourable weather conditions was a common occurrence.<sup>112</sup> Thus weather delays alone greatly exacerbated problems impeding movement in the delivery schedule, adding to the growing AFTERO backlog.

And finally, there was the routeing. Way stations and bases had to be developed to aid in the safe movement of aircraft. Many aircraft neither had the endurance nor the capability of flying non-stop over the Atlantic to Europe without rest or refueling.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> F.J. Hatch, **Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945**, Department of National Defence Directorate of History, Monograph Series No. 1, © Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983, pg. 74

<sup>111</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg. 3 cites lack of supplies, and Sergeant R. W. Harris, **Memories of Debert, N.S.**, undated

Written account in Debert Military Museum Archives

Source: <http://www.debertmilitarymuseum.org/harris.htm>

Accessed: 5 October 2010 Description of conditions, and

Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg.3 conditions that existed at the beginning 1941

<sup>112</sup> George Lothian, **Flight Deck – Memoirs of an Airline Pilot**, McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1979, pg. 78

<sup>113</sup> Mitchell Zuckoff, **Frozen in Time**, Harper/Perennial, 2014, 393 pg.

These problems placed additional stresses that generated unrealistic expectations on those conducting the training as well. It set high expectations and goals upon those under training.

The strategic situation demanded highly skilled, truly focused, and well-motivated crews. The pressures within the delivery pipeline and the pressing operational needs overseas, meant the movement of vital and critical aircraft was an operational necessity whose difficulties had to be overcome.<sup>114</sup>

The delusory situation on the ground demanded an experienced leader to sort it all out! The pressures within resulted in actions that in the end led for many, personal and service crossroads with consequences and in fate.

*...The reasons behind the move*

Debert was completed and ready for business by 1941. Its mandate was about to grow in scope that with the arrival of Operational Unit 31 in Canada from the Great Britain that also coincided with Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Bowhill's posting to Canada.

Operational Training Units (O.T.U.) were an integral part of the Royal Air Force (RAF) training system to 1938. They groomed trainees in the many varied aspects of operational flying for all the Royal Air Force's fighting capabilities.

Graduates of initial flight training were streamed through the operational training system to fighter, bomber, and maritime commands. They were subsequently posted to operational squadrons upon completion of this operational training phase.

The operational training system was designed to remove a huge burden from the front-line RAF operational squadrons. Surprisingly they were only officially designated Operational Training Units (O.T.U.) in April 1940.

But the war soon complicated that training in Britain. Britain was a dangerous place, and more over, training required safe havens that were, by 1940 becoming increasingly difficult to find.

Training in Britain was often conducted in or around actual areas of active combat operations. As such, trainees were exposed to possible enemy action. The training units had become an encumbrance. However, a fortuitous appeal made by Air Vice-Marshal Breadner (RCAF) in December 1940, eventually saw several units relocated to Canada.

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<sup>114</sup> Time Magazine, **World War: IN THE AIR: One-Way Airline**, Monday, Oct. 20, 1941

Source: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,851303,00.html>

Accessed: 14 February 2011

Air Vice-Marshal Breadner desired to move operational training units from Britain to Canada. He wanted them as part of the BCATP to augment Canadian resources. The RAF agreed and began with the movement of four of its O.T.U.s in May 1941.

Combat operations endured by Britain in 1940 were challenging enough without the worry of operational training too. But there were mixed feelings regarding the move. Crew replacement for combat losses proved a great strain. Some Coastal Command missions alone endured crippling casualty rates of 20%.

That loss rate was difficult to offset, especially while defending the country. Replacements were needed without delay one that would be imposed by the move of their O.T.U.'s and dispersion to Canada

On the other hand training production for Coastal Command was about 1.1 aircrew per squadron per month. The operational training units did their best to keep up with the pace of losses in feeding replacements through the system. But given the situation in Britain, that proved to be difficult to sustain. In the end, aircrew production was insufficient to meet all replacement needs much less that of Coastal Command.<sup>115</sup>

Great Britain was under constant attack. The raging Battle of Britain and the need for fighter pilot replacements exacerbated the situation further. The primary attention was on the management of the battle, not training per se.

It was the final straw. There were simply far too many training and operational demands, too few modern aircraft, too much competition, and too few replacements and even fewer training areas to do the job adequately. So, Air Vice-Marshal Breadner's appeal made sense and finally led to Coastal Command's subsequent decision to move operational training out of country. It was an easy choice.<sup>116</sup>

But behind the scenes, the situation in Britain in 1940 and early 1941, was also one of bitter struggle, internal turmoil and competition conducted at the highest echelons of power. These struggles had effects and ramifications extending down to the rank and file.

Coastal Command was directed to work other than its main role. There were urgent operational demands as the Battle of Britain raged about them. The struggle for survival meant Coastal Command was soon to be out of the anti-shipping role for many months following July 1940.

Coastal Command shifted its primary mission from convoy protection to operating alongside RAF Bomber Command at the height of the Battle of Britain. The protection of the Channel convoys fell to fighter command.

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<sup>115</sup> Goulter, Christina, *A Forgotten Offensive: Royal Air Force Coastal Command's Anti-Shipping Campaign 1940-1945*, London: Frank Cass, 1995, pg. 136 & 140

<sup>116</sup> Ibid Goulter, 1995, pg. 136-139

Coastal Command's prime mission changed but it was extremely busy nonetheless. It undertook many dangerous missions including bombing, attacking shipping in addition to mining waters, that were directed and focused in and around invasion ports.<sup>117</sup> Their efforts were directed to forestall or prevent a cross channel invasion by the enemy, nominally known as Operation Sea Lion.

Fighter Command, most likely was better suited to providing air cover in the narrow Channel. It now filled the gap and became responsible for convoy protection until Coastal Command's later return to its primary role in anti-shipping and anti-submarine role.

Given the operational tempo, Coastal Command's instructors and staff would have been tired, exhausted, and very testy to say the least at the end of what was a very demanding and trying year. But change, as they say, was as good as a rest. And that change soon came with the unit's posting to Canada!

Recent operational duty and experience within these O.T.U.s were strategically valuable to Canada. The unit transfers came at a time when the BCATP was building up. Coastal Command's recent experience was greatly needed.

Then there was also the hope of the adjunct to operational training in the selected BCATP graduates to move a growing backlog from Canadian soil to the Great Britain.<sup>118</sup> It was fortuitous that the key decision to train ferry crews was agreed to by the Air Ministry in the Great Britain that April 1941.

The movement of the elements of operational training units from Britain to Canada would be their answer to Air Vice-Marshal Breadner's earlier appeal. It was also the hope of redressing the backlog problem.<sup>119</sup>

The units selected to move to Canada included No. 1 School of Navigation, No. 7 & No. 10 Service flying Schools, and No. 2 School of General Reconnaissance. These units were quickly loaded, transhipped by sea, and moved to Canada in three echelons.<sup>120</sup>

The first echelon assembled in the U.K. on April 25th, 1941, sailed on May 2, arrived in Halifax on May 21st. The second echelon assembled May 9<sup>th</sup>, sailed 11 May 1941,

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<sup>117</sup> Hendrie, Andrew. *The Cinderella Service: RAF Coastal Command 1939–1945*. Pen & Sword Aviation. 2006. [ISBN 978-1-84415-346-6](#), pg. 69, and Hewitt, Nick. *Coastal Convoys 1939–1945: The Indestructible Highway*. Pen & Sword Maritime, London. [ISBN 978-1-84415-861-4](#), pg. 39-41

<sup>118</sup> F.J. Hatch, *Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983), pg. 74

<sup>119</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U.3 February 2011, pg. 8

<sup>120</sup> Ibid Goulter, 1995, pg. 139

arrived June 4<sup>th</sup>. The third echelon formed on May 23rd, sailed May 30th and landed on June 16th, 1941.<sup>121</sup>

All four O.T.U.s were safely transferred to Canada with all their equipment and staff. These units were subsequently re-numbered upon arrival in Canada. The unit arriving in the first echelon became the seed crop for Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.) 31, stationed at nearby Debert, NS.

There were high hopes for O.T.U. 31 and the airfield at Debert, N.S. It was expected that operational training would begin in earnest very soon after their arrival.<sup>122</sup> But nothing ever happened as planned. Training was very regrettably delayed until August of that year as the airfield was still in an unfinished state.<sup>123</sup>

### *...Getting on with the job!*

Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.) 31 became one busy unit soon after its arrival in Halifax May 1941. The incoming unit was to instruct and train on what was then, an unfamiliar airframe. The unit's aircraft were replaced with the Hudson Bomber. Neither of the two instructors included in the first echelon from Britain had ever flown the Hudson bomber.<sup>124</sup>

The Hudson bomber was chosen as the primary aircraft for training for very good reasons. It was the most ubiquitous aircraft in theatre in Great Britain at the time. Coincidentally, it was also the ubiquitous aircraft in backlog.

Presumably the Hudson was selected because of the dire need for any combat aircraft and that this aircraft was readily and commercially available. Secondly the aircraft type was very modifiable and adaptable to growing and changing needs.

Apart from aircraft selection, the mission and dispositions at Debert were soon in a constant state of administrative flux. Every change, addition, or deletion had to be reviewed and dealt with by the newly arrived staff.

All these changes added up to an administrative burden. The staff's burden was also exacerbated because the unit was broken up and dispersed on arrival. Experienced officers were selected as a seed crop for needs elsewhere, for other schools, both operational and training units.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg. 2

<sup>122</sup> ibid Hatch, 1983, pg. 74

<sup>123</sup> ibid Hatch, 1983, pg. 74 -75

<sup>124</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U, 3 February 2011, pg. 8-9

The first issue to be sorted out was the units mission and mandate. Operational training at Debert had two functions. First, it was to conduct operational training proper. Second, it was to conduct a short conversion course for the ferry program. These two functions were challenging enough notwithstanding the steep learning curve on the unfamiliar Hudson Bomber.

The tasks were conducted because the strategic situation demanded they be done. There were pressing operational needs. The movement of critical aircraft, backlogged on Canadian soil, was viewed as one of the most vital and urgent operational needs.<sup>125</sup>

The training objectives at Debert were made very clear to the staff:

1. Train selected BCATP graduates for the ferrying operation to move aircraft across the North Atlantic to the Great Britain,
2. Direct this effort to speeding up the delivery of crucial aircraft,
3. Make the training as realistic as possible,
4. Train over long distances, in marginal flying conditions,
5. Train out of the sight of land and under operational conditions, and
6. Select and train those pilots capable of a trans-Atlantic crossing to do so!

The decision to conduct the training on the Hudson airframe was ultimately the necessary one. Crews selected for the ferry operation had to be familiar with what was then, the most prolific aircraft in the inventory backlogged in the pipeline of shipments overseas.

Debert became part of the solution to provide the qualified pilots and navigators to do so. The Hudson bomber was part of this training simply because it was necessary. Hopefully it was the solution that assisted Bowhill to clearing the backlog in 1941.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Time Magazine, **World War: IN THE AIR: One-Way Airline**, Monday, Oct. 20, 1941

Source: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,851303,00.html>

Accessed: 14 February 2011

<sup>126</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg. 6



National Defence Canada, Directorate of History and Heritage, PL-5267  
8 October 1941 R.A.F. Station Debert N.S., Hudson Bomber being prepared for flight.  
3/4 STBD front # AM 745

Debert was well placed to meet these requirements and challenges. But doing so proved difficult and had consequences for those who eventually trained there!

### *...First Days*

Matters were compounded by the fact that the Debert airfield was far from ready for business when O.T.U. 31 in May 1941. The airfield and infrastructure were very rudimentary; and barracks, barely liveable at best. The airfield was neither ready for the full pressures of training. However, there was no choice in the matter but to proceed. It was simply a case of making do and getting on with the job!

In and amongst the hustle and bustle of getting established and aircrew training, construction continued fast apace all around the gathering horde. The shells of buildings were soon occupied simply because there was no choice but to inhabit them. Facilities lacked the creature comforts of heat and basic plumbing. Beyond the buildings and barracks, the airfield itself was a moonscape.

Robert Wilson Harris remembered his arrival just as the airfield opened. "R.C.A.F. Debert was under construction. The drill hall, barracks and mess hall had already been built and large earth-movers were busily dumping a hill into a bog to build the airfield. ....There was mud everywhere and yawning gulfs where sewers and drains were being installed."<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Sergeant R. W. Harris, **Memories of Debert, N.S.**, undated  
Written account in Debert Military Museum Archives

The initial batch of BCATP students began training under appalling conditions.<sup>128</sup> Conditions were chaotic. The trainers trained, while builders built. The facilities became fully habitable and functional over time. But that came only when the airfield was finally completed. It just wasn't so as its first candidates arrived there.

The inevitable happened. The first serial of twenty pilot trainees arrived at Debert late August 1941 to begin training on the Lockheed Hudson Bomber. Ernest E Allen, was one amongst the first group of 20 posted to Debert. Allen remembered his training vividly and that it began immediately, with no delay.<sup>129</sup>

Allen described his instructors as weary, tour expired RAF pilots, rested from operations. Most of the instructors had an operational tour in England under their belt but their experience was in the Avro Anson.

The Lockheed Hudson was not an Avro Anson. The Hudson was not only new to the students, it was also new and unfamiliar to the staff entrusted to train them. The Hudson was notoriously known as a difficult and unforgiving aircraft. According to Allen; "most instructors feared it because of its flying characteristics".<sup>130</sup>

What was supposed to be a rest from operations proved to be anything but a rest. The reality of training for these tour expired RAF instructors proved to be a great strain on them. They had to sort it all out; the training, the syllabus, routine administration, to managing flight services at Debert. Their skills, knowledge and experience were all tested.

The instructors were under extreme pressures of time. They had an unthankful job with high expectations, conducted under imposing deadlines. What was supposed to have been a respite and rest, a moment to re-charge the batteries, turned out to be triple duty found in sorting out the many training issues, at what was still an unfinished base. Added to the burden was the pressure stemming from a constantly changing mandate.

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Source: <http://www.debertmilitarymuseum.org/harris.htm>  
Accessed: 5 October 2010

<sup>128</sup> Spencer Dunmore and William Carter, Ph.D., *Reap the Whirlwind – The Untold Story of 6 Group, Canada's Bomber Force of Second World War*, McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1991, Pg. 43

<sup>129</sup> F.J. Hatch, *Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983), pg. 75

<sup>130</sup> Ernest E. Allen, **An RCAF Pilot's Story 1939-1945 from the memoirs of Ernest E Allen**, 1996, Part One - Pilot Training  
Source: <http://www.seawaymall.com/eallen/>  
Accessed: 13 August 2010

Just behind many of these newly minted instructors lay the most trying and varied year of their lives. They arrived in Canada to be relieved from the stresses of operations at Coastal Command in Britain. Now at Debert, they faced the new stress and danger of training students and all the problems therein too!<sup>131</sup> They were simply expected to perform miracles!

There was no doubt that the instructors were tired. The incredible strain of survival from past operations, coupled with the consecutive strain of training, wore them thin. The operational tempo of the previous year in the anti-shipping and counter-invasion roles in the unique battlespace of 1940 was stressful enough. The weight of it all contributed to their weariness.

The change of aircraft presented its own unique problems too. It was understandable that the instructors were leery. The Hudson bomber was unfamiliar as they had no prior experience with it. Their familiarity rested with the prominent but obsolete types used on operations like the Avro Anson.

The Hudson was not yet ubiquitous in Coastal Command as it was in Canada in 1940.<sup>132</sup> That was not surprising given that the backlog sitting here on Canadian soil was the Hudson Bomber!

Still, the instructors were a very highly motivated group. They were well aware of the urgency of the situation. They had to impart their knowledge and experience to their students with a certain degree of realism. There was no time for babysitting or holding hands.

Realism was the necessity for survival on an operational tour. Realism was vital. Training had to be conducted in very short order which wasted little time and effort. Their charges would soon face their own trials in the coming reality of war, and war was merciless.

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<sup>131</sup> [Goulter, Christina](#). *A Forgotten Offensive: Royal Air Force Coastal Command's Anti-Shipping Campaign, 1940-1945*. Frank & Cass. London. 1995. [ISBN 0-7146-4147-2](#), pg. 121-122

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid* Goulter, 1995, pg. 112 -113



National Defence Canada, Directorate of History and Heritage, PL5274, 8 October 1941, R.A.F. Station Debert N.S., Pilot Officer Allen

The training at Debert was often a case of “sink or swim”. It was not surprising that in the opinion of the students, that “training” seemed to be conducted in a perfunctory manner.

Allen and the pool of first candidates were simply given just three hours of dual training. Once completed, they were sent off on their own, solo. In this context they were required to successfully plan, fly, and execute a mission prescribed under the training plan.

Some insights of the training tempo come from the syllabus used by Operational Training Unit 34, Pennfield NB. They conducted operational training similar in scope and mission comparable to Debert. It gives a clear indication of training from the instructors’ perspective.

### ...The Training Syllabus

Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.) 34 like Debert, included the additional task of “ferry” training. Their syllabus was originally designed to qualify pilots and aircrew in a night and light bombing role. It was soon modified though. O.T.U. 34’s official history records that its training mandate was changed and directed to the antisubmarine role much like Debert.

The original training syllabus was drafted by W/C Hallam in May 1942. The syllabus was the one used by 6 Group RCAF and was the RAF standard . O.T.U. 34 used that syllabus as a guide.<sup>133</sup>

Flying Training Times for Crew				
Conversion Flight	Pilot	Navigator	W.A.G.	A.G.
Operations	30	35	35	35
Armament	35	35	35	35
	100	70	75	85

Sequence of Training in Conversion Flight

Ventura --- Day

<sup>133</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, File 74/13 No. 34 O.T.U. Penfield, NB. Pg. 4

Pennfield's training syllabus provides insight into Debert's program because of the similarity of role. Pennfield's training program was conducted over three phases with a grand-total of 100 flying hours for pilots under training.

The first phase was conversion training (30 hours). The second, was geared to operations (35 hours). And finally, the third phase was, armament training (35 hours). Training was well planned, designed to produce the desired outcomes in the shortest time and effort!

Notably, Navigators, Wireless Air Gunners (WAG) and Air gunners (AG) received less training time in the air. Their training was generally interspaced over the pilot's operations and armament training phases. There was usually a 35-hour training slot allotted there for that purpose.

Navigators and WAGs received 70 and 78 hours total training while AGs received 35 hours at the armament phase only.<sup>134</sup> Consequently, they were never trained as an operational crew.



From files Pennfield Parish Military Historical Society (with permission) – Poissant/Ryan/Bing/ Saumer 1943

Flying was only a small part of the training. Considerable time was also devoted to ground lectures whose subjects ranged widely. Instructional training included airmanship, army air support, bombing, gunnery, instructional fuselage, intelligence, meteorology, navigation, operations photography, signals and tactics. So, overall the training plan was anything but perfunctory. It was indeed, well organized and was conducted with purpose.

Students may have sensed that they were largely on their own, with seeming indifference. But they were being taught a valuable life lesson. They weren't about to be spooned fed nor have their hands held on operations. It was all up to them. Training was designed in such a way to hone those skills and independence while under pressure.

There were no instructors to rely on once on operations. Survival was based on the skills learned, applied, and remembered from training. They were truly meant to be on their own.

So training had to reflect at least a degree of risk and of realism if it was ever to be effectively employed in the field. Realism drove the lessons home. It seemed uncaring, but the war was uncaring. It was the accepted price.

The instructors' task and position therefore were unenviable given the they were required to train qualified crew and get aircraft into operations, both expeditiously and expediently!

<sup>134</sup> Ibid File 74/13 No. 34 O.T.U. Pennfield, NB. Pg. 4

Early training at Debert, Pennfield and other places was often conducted under adverse and extreme conditions. In the end, it was in this sense of urgency in which mistakes were made, and that would sadly, cost lives in training alone.

## 8. Operational Unit Getting Off to a Bad Start

Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.) 31 began training in earnest August 1941. Ernest Allen was amongst the very first there to do so. Trainees kept to tight schedules and soon were ready for final testing a short time later.

Two significant exercises were scheduled for Allen's serial toward the end of that training. These exercises occurred in October and were designed to assess their abilities, skills, and knowledge.

The first scheduled exercise was a simple task; prepare and conduct a local cross-country flight. It was a preparatory exercise designed to assess and segregate the candidates for the long-distance ferrying operation of flying over the "pond".



National Defence Canada, Directorate of History and Heritage PL-5271  
8 October 1941 R.A.F. Station Debert N.S., Pilot Officer E.E. Alien (sic) of Brantford (right) & Pilot Officer J.

It was a most demanding undertaking for the recently qualified pilots, set in the reality of the Hudson bomber. But Allen and his group were well groomed and prepared. They had achieved the required level of knowledge. It was now all about skill and training in all conditions including bad weather. It should have been a relatively easy exercise.

The group were left on their own to plan, fly, and execute a mission that was prescribed under the mandate of the training plan at a date and time of the school's choosing. All that was necessary now were the orders to do so.

The orders were issued the night prior to the start of the exercise. Sufficient preparatory time was given to develop the mission plans for the following morning. These plans were checked by the instructors the night prior to the exercise.

The next morning the crews arrived at the airfield at the set time. Allen and his peers found the airfield severely fogged in. Here they were, on their own, with not a flight instructor in sight.



National Defence Canada, Directorate of History and Heritage PL5270  
8 October 1941 R.A.F. Station Debent N.S., Pilot Officer  
G.L. Conner of London Eng. in Observers seat of Hudson.

The crews were concerned over what to do next. No qualified instructor was found anywhere to provide any guidance on the matter. Neither was there any senior staff available to cancel the initial order given the weather.

The crews concluded as the flight was authorized, and as, "orders were orders", they would press on and proceed on their own anyway.

The exercise was conducted as planned. They falsely assumed that, as in Allen's own words, "The instructors had been giving us the line that there would be a lot of bad weather flying when we got to

England, so this must be part of the training." <sup>135</sup>

The take-off was harrowing! Visibility at the airfield was virtually nil. They proceeded anyway. One aircraft crashed and another, almost hit the tower. It was an inglorious start to what proved to be a very difficult day. Allen got away safely but with difficulty.

Allen turned his aircraft onto the runway from the taxi-way, barely making out the runway. The centre line was not visible. Allen's approach was not only unique but was also dangerous.

Young Ernest Allen decided that he would simply line up on the edge of the runway, then keeping his aircraft straight on line on the runway's edge, he would watch "the line between grass and asphalt", and execute the take-off. Allen successfully and surprisingly survived his ordeal!

The weather finally cleared on the flight's return five hours later. But there was hell to pay. Unusually, the trainees were neither faulted for their stupidity in the attempt nor for the conduct of the exercise that day. The election to proceed as ordered was chalked up to inexperience and as simply following orders on their part. The instructors though were reprimanded and "... were severely criticized for not getting up in the morning to make the decision for us as to whether the weather was fit for flying." <sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ernest E. Allen, **An RCAF Pilot's Story 1939-1945 from the memoirs of Ernest E Allen**, 1996, Part One - Pilot Training

Source: <http://www.seawaymall.com/eallen/>

Accessed: 13 August 2010

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, Ernest E. Allen, 1996, Part One - Pilot Training



National Defence Canada, Directorate of History and Heritage PL-5272  
8 October 1941 R.A.F. Station Debert N.S., Sgt. WAG R.S. Sandelin, Cornwall, On. at radio of Hudson

But this incident clearly indicates the pressures within the system. An underlying philosophy of getting on at all costs, engendered an undue level of risk. Training was after all geared to be persevered under all conditions, including bad weather. Sadly the prevailing attitude to get on with the job, had its costs. Those costs soon became apparent in the final test.

Regardless the first serial was soon ready for its final test as it concluded the short eight-week program. A cross country “night exercise” was scheduled over a very long distance, on the early morning of 23 October 1941.

The flight plan was simple enough; fly 12 aircraft from Debert, Nova Scotia to Windsor, Ontario. It was the test assessing the final product to attest the readiness of the candidates at Debert. It was also to be used to segregate the few required for the aircraft ferry duty.

The twenty third proved to be a most difficult and a disastrous day resulting in Debert’s first casualties in training.

The exercise began simply. The Hudson bombers were configured and fully crewed as they would fly in the “Ferry” task. The Hudson bomber was still a relatively new aircraft and an unknown quantity. The Hudson demanded the undivided attention of the pilot in command.

The flight to Windsor, Ontario began as a procession. One aircraft after another lined up on the taxiway and moved in turn on to the active runway. Each would take a turn at taking off. Pilot Officer Beech O’Hanley was first in the lead aircraft that day.



8 October 1941 R.A.F. Station Debert N.S., Pilot Officer Gordon (left); Pilot Officer C.B. L’Hanley (sic) check maps before flight

Pilot Officer O’Hanley in Hudson Bomber AM896, in the early morning hours of 23 October, took off shortly after 1 a.m. The others awaited their turn looking on. It was a very dark morning.

O’Hanley launched down the runway, lifted off the runway, and climbed to about 2000 feet. Something was amiss. Quite suddenly, O’Hanley’s aircraft turned upside down, plunged straight into the ground, killing all aboard.<sup>137</sup>

The cause of AM896's crash was considered "obscure" by a court of inquiry held later on 25 October 1941. The court issued only one simple statement of fact. The aircraft simply flew into the ground and disintegrated.

The exercise to Windsor began with the tragic loss of Hudson AM896 and all crew aboard. The remainder of the flight was subsequently held back and the night exercise cancelled.

The day was not over. The exercise was then rescheduled for a re-start early next morning. The trainees would now conduct the prescribed exercise during daylight hours. The test was to be conducted without further deferral or delay before the results of any official inquiry into the causes of AM896's demise was known.

So, it all began over once again later that morning. All went well in the beginning and lasted for the better part of the day. The weather held until about fifty miles west of Montreal, then suddenly, the ceiling fell during the final leg to Windsor, Ontario.

The weather deteriorated rapidly and suddenly. Heavy rain pounded in. The flight had perfect visibility up to this point. But the deluge of heavy rain now left them with little forward visibility.

Every Hudson on that exercise relied on a Radio Direction Finder (RDF) compass tuned into a frequency at St. Hubert, Quebec. This was a key waypoint for navigation and was the shot to be used to align the correct course for the final leg to Windsor.

Regrettably nobody at Debert was notified of one key point; recently the transmitter at St. Hubert, had been relocated. The RDF was moved a little further west toward Dorval, Quebec. The change was made only one week prior to the exercise.<sup>138</sup>

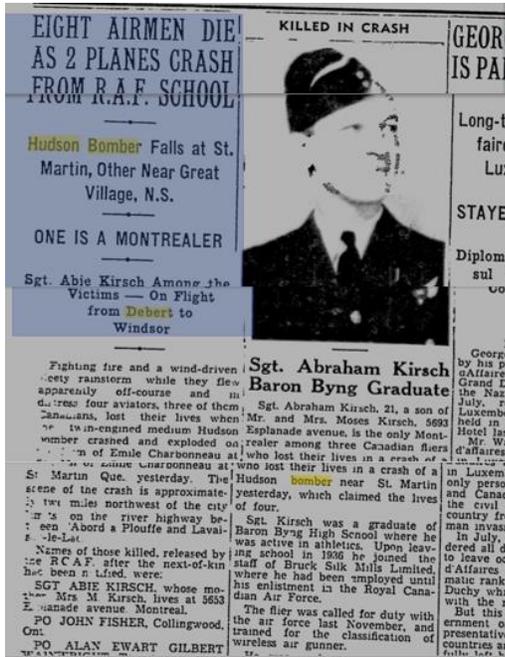
This flight of Hudson's was not only flying blind in bad weather but was also relying on a faulty navigation aid. Despite the weather and an incorrect RDF location, most eventually made it to Dorval but with great difficulty. For some, that arrival was a matter of sheer luck and determination.

Regrettably luck did not hold true for all. The weather and the location of the radio beacon, with some possible equipment failure along the way, contrived to make navigation or a safe arrival doubtful for others.

Hudson AM895 was in the crosshairs of fate that day. For the second time in as many hours, an aircraft from Debert was lost with tragic consequences. Hudson AM895 crashed and burned beyond recognition near Cartierville, Quebec.

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid Ernest E. Allen, 1996



Montreal Gazette, 24 October 1941

should be done to stop us from killing ourselves. By this time three of the aircraft and crews had been wiped out and a fourth crew had safely landed in the bush, three hundred miles east of Montreal<sup>139</sup>

There was more to it than what official records and newspapers reported. But for the surviving crews, their ordeal finally ended with their safe arrival at Dorval!

...Courts of Inquiry

Tragic events of 23 October 1941 placed the training program at Debert under scrutiny and at the crossroads of decisions. The training program was investigated on two levels;

Pilot Officer J.F Boyd was the captain of AM895. Boyd assisted by Pilot officer A.E.G Wainwright, his navigator, were RCAF trainees. The two other crew members included Wireless Air Gunners, Sergeant A. Kirsch (RCAF) and LAC A.J. Morris (RAF).<sup>139</sup>

Newspapers recorded the events that happened on 23 October 1941 concerning the aircraft lost from Debert.<sup>140</sup> It appeared that there were only two losses. There were no official reports suggesting there were others. But Ernest Allen recollected differently. His memoir paints a graphic picture of what transpired.

Allen recalls “All but two of the Debert aircraft either came into Dorval or tried to... two of them crash-landed while trying. A message was given to us ordering us to stay at Dorval until someone came up from Debert to decide what

<sup>139</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, Air Crash Card Record, 1300-AN895-1, 23-10-41, Time not recorded.  
<sup>140</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, Air Crash Card Record 1300-AME896, 23-10-41, Time 07:30, and Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, Air Crash Card Record, 1300-AN895-1(sic), 23-10-41, Time not recorded  
<sup>141</sup> Ibid Ernest E. Allen, 1996

one, a court of inquiry concerning each aircraft incident, and the other, a command investigation concerning Debert's competency.

Debert's losses were neither swept under the rug and ignored, nor were they easily forgotten. Two separate Courts of Inquiry were held to determine the causes in the demise of Hudson bombers AM896 and AM895 held consecutively and on the same day, 25 October 1941.

The Court of inquiry for AM896 and AM895 was comprised of the same four senior officers of the RAF. They were:

- President – Group Captain A.L. Paxton, DFC
- Member – Wing Commander W.A. Orr
- Member – Squadron Leader P.G. Baskerville
- Member - Squadron Leader W. Biddell, DFC

Given the time between the opening of the crash record on 23 October and the closure of the Court of Inquiry on 25 October 1941, little time was given to an actual determination of the cause(s) or true nature of the events leading to the demise of Beech O'Hanley and crew in Hudson AM896 one the one hand, or of Boyd and crew in Hudson AM895 on the other.<sup>142</sup>

Eyewitnesses observed the crash of AM896 at Great Village. NS, whose accounts were either ignored or discounted by the court of inquiry. Those on the ground at Great Village observed O'Hanley's aircraft to be in flames as it plunged in towards them.<sup>143</sup> Those accounts were deemed "unreliable".

A second Court of Inquiry investigated the demise of Pilot Officer J.F Boyd and his crew that followed in short order. AM895 crashed and burned at l'Abord a Plouffe near Cartierville, Quebec. The Court found that AM895 while on a final training flight, simply crashed and burned while attempting a forced landing at about noon on 23 October 1941. The Court's finding was a mere restatement of fact.

But in the case of AM895 at least, the Court ascertained both a probable primary and a secondary cause for this particular crash. The primary cause was "that the pilot being forced to fly a low altitude due to adverse weather conditions while attempting to approach the Dorval Aerodrome, failed to see the barn and crashed into it."

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<sup>142</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, Air Crash Card Record 1300-AME896, 23-10-41, Time 07:30,

<sup>143</sup> Montreal Gazette, Eight Airmen crash from R.A.F. School, 24 October 1941

Source:

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=CI AuAAAAI BAJ&sjid=3ZgFAAAA I BAJ&pg=6656,4284267&dq=HUDSON+BOMBER+DEBERT+1941&hl=en>

Accessed: 20 January 2011

The secondary cause determined “That the pilot stalled the aircraft commenced into a spin and crashed into the barn.” Surprisingly the court did not make any direct findings or censures concerning the incorrect Radio Detection Finder, There was a failure to advise the new location of the Radio Detection Finder from St Hubert to Dorval.

The new Radio Detection Finder location may have been a probable cause or at least a contributing factor to navigation error. The Court made simple statement of facts in both cases. The two Courts of Inquiry did not review the events in any great depth.

These simple investigations were flawed. The Court did not truly investigate all possible causes or factors as the finer details of the crash of AM895 may have warranted. It appeared that the separate Courts were designed to draw quick conclusions and close the matter expeditiously. The onus of failure was placed squarely on the crews for the loss of the aircraft and for their demise and fate.<sup>144</sup>

The Court’s recommendations on AM895 did hint at faults within the training system at the time that warranted further investigation but they were not pursued. The recommendations were:

- “That Pilots, Air Observers, and Wireless Operator Air Gunner course at 31 O.T.U. be extended to enable crews under training to be given ample experience in flying in adverse conditions under supervision,
- Before crews under training are sent on cross country flights without supervision, the Chief Flying Instructor is to satisfy himself that they are competent to cope with any weather conditions they are likely to meet.
- That instrument flying instruction to a minimum of ten hours should be given to pilots on the course prior to night flying instruction,
- In order that the above recommendations may be put into effect, that all I.E. aircraft be equipped with dual sets
- All aircraft should be provided with microphones and telephones to allow the use of inter-communication by the crew and also allow communication with the Department of Transport Radio Range Stations when necessary.”

The members of the Court failed to incorporate any pertinent information from eye witness accounts. For example, eye witnesses on the ground suggested AM895 too was on fire, while side slipping toward an outhouse when it crashed at l’Abord a Plouffe. Like O’Hanley’s Court of Inquiry at the Great Village crash, this piece of evidence was simply ignored. Two separate observances of fire should have suggested a review of mechanical, maintenance, and other procedures, but it didn’t.

Boyd’s Hudson Bomber settled on the small structure and simply ignited. A terrific heat burned the building to the ground and left AM895 unrecognizable. The conflagration

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<sup>144</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, Air Crash Card Record, 1300-AN895-1(sic), 23-10-41, Time not recorded

melted the aircraft beyond recognition, save a wing tip, which was left comparatively undamaged.<sup>145</sup> What went wrong?

*...Review of Losses Regarding AM896 and AM895*

The Courts of Inquiry regarding the crashes of AM896 and AM 895 were conducted expeditiously and in haste. There was an air to get the work of the court over and done with to get on with the job. The Court had an appearance of a mere formality, a necessary expedient in the time of war.

Time was at a premium that created haste preventing a full examination of causes. There is some doubt on the reasonableness of the Court of Inquiry's final conclusions. For example, the observation about the need for additional crew training by the Court of Inquiry, was it truly a reasonable conclusion?

Responsibility and blame for these tragedies were placed squarely on the shoulders of the young crews involved in these terrible accidents. But the evidence suggests otherwise that training or flying hours were necessarily where the problems lay.

Pilot Officer O'Hanley had a total of 275 flying hours; 29 on instrument, 22 at night, 9 hours solo and 33 hours dual on type.<sup>146</sup> Pilot Officer Boyd had a total of 295 flying hours; 29 on instrument, 9 at night, and 12 dual and 61 solo on type.<sup>147</sup>

Each pilot exceeded the minimum instrument flight requirements recommended by the Court's findings. It is doubtful then that flying on instruments or training were factors or the cause of the problems leading to these crashes.

Their demise points to "other" probable causes that were not fully investigated by the Court. There was no record or indication of the mechanical conditions of the aircraft. It was one possibility that should have been investigated as eyewitness accounts from two separate incidents within a very short time frame was suggestive.

It was only a matter of hours when two separate eyewitness accounts observed that both aircraft were on fire. Sadly little physical evidence remained in the case of AM895. Moreover, the Court more than likely did not have the expertise to investigate such a matter in detail.

The loss of these two aircraft was a very public affair and could not be covered up or hidden. Both crashes were witnessed by members of the public. Obituaries, reports and other notices were written up in the newspapers on the loss of these aircraft and aircrew.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, Montreal Gazette, 24 October 1941

<sup>146</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, Air Crash Card Record 1300-AME896, 23-10-41, Time 07:30,

<sup>147</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, Air Crash Card Record, 1300-AN895-1(sic), 23-10-41, Time not recorded

The loss of AM896 was laconically remarked as an aircraft lost with the deaths of four RAF lives at Great Village, NS on 23 October 1941. It was written in the local news. It was a mere three small paragraphs.<sup>148</sup>

Lists of Canadian war casualties were widely published in every newspaper. The public was cognizant of every announcement from all service sources, given they were reported with great frequency and regularity throughout the war.

Often though, the individual and a family's sorrow was lost in these long lists rendered in newspaper pages. The published list was a faceless number, buried in the printed page, found in column upon column of loss that was constantly reported as a steady stream found in every town paper at the time.

Sometimes special emphasis was given to the deceased in a home town newspaper. Reporting in the Montreal Gazette of 24 October 1941 was a sidebar article on the l'Abord a Plouffe crash near Cartierville, Quebec. The Gazette described the condition of the remains of the four victims of the crash.

The Montreal Gazette described the crash of AM895 as a funeral pyre. The Gazette went on to expound in detail that the bodies of Wainwright and Boyd were only identified by the non-inflammable objects found on their remains. Kirsch and Morris were identified conclusively by other means.<sup>149</sup>

Wireless Air Gunner, Sergeant A. Kirsch (RCAF) was a native of Montreal. The air crash occurred near his home town. His obituary and the graphic description of his demise, was published for all to read in the Montreal Gazette. The article may have served the public interest, but it was cold comfort to his family, friends, and loved ones who survived him and who chanced upon reading it that day.

The training flight of 23 October 1941 was a test of skills and of survival. It was far from a resounding success. If anything, it proved that pumping new material out of the system to bolster Bowhill's needs for the Atlantic ferry task was problematic and fraught with peril.

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<sup>148</sup> The Calgary Herald, **Four RAF Fliers killed in N.S.**, October 23, 1941

Source:

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=0yBkAAAAIABJ&sjid=SHsNAAAAIABJ&pg=5019,2458176&dq=rcaf+debert&hl=en>

Accessed: 13 January 2011

<sup>149</sup> Montreal Gazette, Air crash Inquest Held – Identity of 4 Victims Said Fully Verified, 24 October 1941

Source:

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=CI AuAAAAIABJ&sjid=3ZgFAAAA IABJ&pg=3631,4553895&dq=air+crash&hl=en>

Accessed: 28 January 2011

It's worth repeating Ernest Allen's account of the exercise; "*All but two of the Debert aircraft either came into Dorval or tried to, two of them crash-landed while trying. .... By this time three of the aircraft and crews had been wiped out and a fourth crew had safely landed in the bush, three hundred miles east of Montreal*"<sup>150</sup>

It was not a pretty picture. An organized exercise quickly turned into chaos and tragedy. It was neither a good day nor was it a good start. The training was realistic in one respect. The first serial's training casualty rate was close to actual operational losses at 25% of aircraft lost and a casualty rate near 33%. It was poor beginnings that illustrates just how near enough to reality and how dangerous training truly was!

### *... Visiting Flight (VF) Program*

The fatal training accidents of 23 October 1941 were of grave concern to those in command of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP). The official loss of two aircraft on the same day in addition to those damaged prompted a review.

The higher chain of command was at a crossroads. This serious loss rate impacted not only training but the ferry task. A separate and independent investigation was pursued. Its mission, to ascertain quality control and conditions of training at Debert.

A Visiting Flight (VF) Program was instituted at CFS Trenton early on under the BCATP. It was the independent evaluator of the training program. The VF program began in 1940, focusing on all its training programs. The VFs came to assess most training and operational training establishments in Canada over the course of the war. Debert was one of them.

The sole object of the VF Program was to review the quality of training conducted by a site visit to assess both the instructors and the students under training. This program provided independent oversight to the management and training provided within the BCATP. The VF assessments were rigorous, demanding, very thorough, and were greatly feared.

The mere presence of a VF representative instilled dread at many training units. VF assessments set the benchmark. Achieving a gold standard was the penultimate assessment, if any favourable assessment was to be had at all.

Training units hoped that they operated at a high standard, were efficient, and performed their function favourable to achieving that assessment. The problem was doing so within

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<sup>150</sup> Ernest E. Allen, **An RCAF Pilot's Story 1939-1945 from the memoirs of Ernest E Allen**, 1996, Part One - Pilot Training  
Source: <http://www.seawaymall.com/eallen/>  
Accessed: 13 August 2010

the limits of resources available, and within the time constraints under which the BCATP functioned.

The incidents at Debert had brought matters to a head. Two fatal crashes in less than a 24-hour period warranted an urgent review. It wasn't enough that the unit had already conducted their own Courts of Inquiry. They all occurred within their first few months of the units start up. These incidents demanded an independent investigation by the VF Program.

The training system could not sustain a high loss rate on a continuing basis. The wastage rate from 1941 to 1942 was high enough. The annual aircraft rate loss alone was 19% in 1941. A solitary casualty rate on the one exercise alone from Debert yielding 25% loss of personnel concomitant with a loss of 33% of aircraft was unsustainable!<sup>151</sup>

The British Air Ministry separately scrutinized all Operational Training Units in Canada. They were held to a standard proficiency required for all the training conducted. In late 1941, the Ministry generally found little differences between RAF and RCAF training.

Air Marshal A.G.R. Garrod, then its chief investigator, found the instructors to be of a high quality, the school personnel, enthusiastic, and staff, highly motivated in the conduct of training.

Garrod noted though, that despite that graduates were well trained and very capable, there was still much room for improvement. He cited needed improvements in signals, map-reading, and instrument flying.<sup>152</sup>

The evidence at hand, which was not all encompassing, suggested three probable causes or factors that warranted further investigation by the Court of Inquiry, the follow-on VF program, and later from Air Marshal Garrod's overall review of training. They were:

1. Mechanical Failure and Maintenance;
2. Navigation and Communication; and
3. Weather and all Weather Training.

These issues were not reviewed in any depth by any competent authority. A specific review of these three areas may have resulted in better oversight and a higher state of vigilance within the system.

Debert's training staff was assessed and rated as "proficient" as well as its candidates. All were assessed at the highest levels and rated as meeting the standards required of highly trained pilots and navigators.

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<sup>151</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U, 3 February 2011, pg. 12 Wastage Rates No. 31 O.T.U.

<sup>152</sup> Spenser Dunmore, Wings for Victory -The Remarkable Story of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan in Canada, McClelland & Stewart Inc., Toronto, Ontario, 1994, pg. 327

The assessment suggests that Debert's problems were not in the training nor the quality of the students that passed out of the system. They all met a very high standard indeed. It begs the question then "what was the problem that precipitated the catastrophes and events of 23 October 1941?"

*...Getting to the Heart of the Matter*

The first trail and evidence of an issue or problem stems from mechanical issues. It was an area that should have been investigated for problems or deficiencies.

There was evidence to that in the aircraft delivered from the schools to AFTERO for shipping. Independent observations and complaints of mechanical issues were raised by some AFTERO civilian pilots. They were ultimately responsible for delivering aircraft transferred to overseas. Their observations corroborates a problem in mechanical deficiencies. It was clearly evident from the aircraft received from the Operational Training units that there were mechanical issues requiring resolution. Just how serious were they?

Many AFTERO's civilian pilots were dismayed with the condition of the aircraft received from the Operational Training Units for delivery in the fall of 1941. It was quite likely though that the information was never passed back through the appropriate chain of command. Perhaps their professional observations should have been made known to the Court of Inquiry as evidence.

It was visually apparent to AFTERO pilots that the aircraft received from the operational training units were in a poor state of mechanical repair. The AFTERO pilots reported these aircraft had obviously seen a good deal of life. But what was observable to the eyes of civil pilots should have also been easily observable by the staff at O.T.U.31 and others.

AFTERO civilian pilots documented mud splashes lining the fuselage, the back of the wheels and dirt adhering in open spots. This was not surprising considering that many of the airfields were still under construction and were virtual mud plains.<sup>153</sup>

But what was of high concern to the civilian pilots was the state of the engines. Mud was one thing. Its appearance was superficial. But many airframes had oil streaks running back on the cowlings! That alone was cause for concern.

AFTERO pilots were greatly concerned with the condition of these aircraft that were handed to them "as is" for ferrying to Great Britain. Their concern was warranted. This was to be a first attempt at the transatlantic crossing for many AFTERO pilots and

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<sup>153</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U, 3 February 2011, pg. 3 see 28/7/41, f.208, D.D. 1/6/41

charges. The AFTERO pilots rightly and loudly complained! Surprisingly their complaints were promptly dealt with and sorted out.

All documented concerns were addressed and aircraft finally given a good working over, with a full maintenance review to boot, that resolved all mechanical difficulties. Not surprisingly in the process, some additional problems were also found and rectified too. Most notably, controls were replaced in some aircraft that should have provided a clue in the cause of PO O'Hanley's crash at Great Village.

The AFTERO pilots were now assured that the aircraft to be ferried were in good repair, in working order, and now safe for the trans-Atlantic transit.<sup>154</sup> It begs the question then in what state and condition were these airframes before they were finally delivered to AFTERO? Such obvious conditions should have easily been apparent to the maintenance staff then at Debert too!

Neither AFTERO's observations nor links to the observed deficiencies can be traced back directly, to the events that transpired on 23 October 1941. It was never stated where these aircraft came from or associated with maintenance shortfalls at Debert. Still there was a possibility that the documented aircraft may have originated there.<sup>155</sup> Two separate personal memoirs recount similar events suggesting that they were though.

The AFTERO and Debert pilots were coincidentally quartered at the Mont Royal Hotel at about that time. Both groups reported in separate memoirs on the raucous atmosphere of a party held at the hotel. These recollections mirrored very similar and separate observations from those in attendance there!<sup>156</sup>

Regardless of the strikingly similar accounts, memories are faulty and the dates may not have exactly coincided given the distance of separate recollections in time. Still, the striking similarity of the accounts, does suggest it was probable that the documented aircraft transported from Debert were the ones received by AFTERO at Dorval that Fall of 1941.

Whether these aircraft were from Debert or not was irrelevant. What was relative was the fact that the condition of any aircraft received for possible trans-shipment from the training units in such condition was appalling. These aircraft were neither in a prime nor pristine state for ferrying. If they were not in prime condition for ferrying, how were they ever in prime condition for training?

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<sup>154</sup> George Lothian, **Flight Deck – Memoirs of an Airline Pilot**, McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1979, pg. 76-77

<sup>155</sup> Ibid George Lothian, 1979, pg. 74

<sup>156</sup> Ernest E. Allen, **An RCAF Pilot's Story 1939-1945 from the memoirs of Ernest E Allen**, 1996, Part One - Pilot Training

Source: <http://www.seawaymall.com/eallen/>

Accessed: 13 August 2010

Some answers to the question may lie in the fact that both AM896 and AM895 were reported to be afire by eyewitnesses on the ground. Both aircraft plunged into the ground killing all aboard both at Great Village Nova Scotia and at l'Abord a Plouffe near Cartierville, Quebec, and on the very same day.<sup>157</sup>

Both aircraft were observed to be either out of control or on fire. O'Hanley's AM896 was observed to be inverted before plunging into the ground. All things considered, these observations suggest that the Court would have been wise to thoroughly investigate mechanical issues a little bit further.

Two of five of the Courts recommendations concerned communication and navigation aids. The crew were responsible for warning the pilot or navigator of any impending problems observed by them while in flight. It is unclear how insufficient internal communication amongst the crew played any role regarding navigation.

External communication certainly played a key role! What should have been apparent and clear to the Court of Inquiry were the obvious communication problems on the ground. There was a failure to communicate to the crews of the proper location of a key navigation aid that all were required to use while en-route.

A great part of the problem for Pilot Officer Boyd's AM895 may have been due to the failure to advise him of a relocated radio beacon. There was a gross failure of communication in this regard. No one bothered to inform anyone in authority of such an important change or the consequences of this change to navigation in detail.

All the candidates in the first serial calculated their pre-flight and navigation plans from a false point. Boyd was essentially lost! This may have greatly contributed to his loss of situational awareness.

Navigators work to known or fixed points. One may assume then that AM895 was certainly plotting towards a beacon. The beacon was not where it was supposed to be. Boyd's navigation was out by a wide margin.

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<sup>157</sup>a. Ibid Ernest E. Allen, 1996,

b. Montreal Gazette, Eight Airmen crash from R.A.F. School, 24 October 1941

Source:

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=CIaUAAAIBAJ&sjid=3ZgFAAAAIBAJ&pg=6656.4284267&dq=HUDSON+BOMBER+DEBERT+1941&hl=en>

Accessed: 20 January 2011

c. Montreal Gazette, Air crash Inquest Held – Identity of 4 Victims Said Fully Verified, 24 October 1941

Source:

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=CIaUAAAIBAJ&sjid=3ZgFAAAAIBAJ&pg=3631.4553895&dq=air+crash&hl=en>

Accessed: 28 January 2011

Pilot Officer Boyd relied on standard communications and bulletins for his planning and on those documents and aids for accuracy in his calculation of an accurate bearing! The failure to relay the correct information of the radio beacon's true position should have been a concern to all. It was not expressed as a concern by any Court or other inquiry at all.

Boyd in AM895 may have been trying to sort out where he was in relation to where he was supposed to be. The weather rapidly degraded that added to his degree of difficulty in sorting it all out. There were no visual cues from the ground, He was unable to find or locate the correct airport.

Boyd and his crew met their demise by crashing and burning in the field near Cartierville, Quebec perhaps because some other unknown mechanical failure had arisen coincidental with the addition of coming to grips with the navigation problem. It was very likely that Pilot Officer Boyd was overwhelmed by it all.

It is easy to conclude then that the work of the Court of Inquiry was perfunctory and limited. Not all avenues were fully investigated. But that view is our perspective of looking back at history and events through clarity of the rear view mirror. Matters or events are never so clear as they happen.

There may have been systemic issues at play that were largely beyond the control of the instructors that manifested at inopportune times throughout the war. One systemic problem was the matter of "time". Time limited the ability to do things right. Time was the huge constraint felt in so many ways.

## 9. Crossroads of “Time”

Time was a dynamic problem that impacts all during war, for there never was enough of it. Time limits the ability to do things correctly. Time, the huge constraint, was felt in so many ways during the Second World War.

Its impact was first felt as an administrative burden at Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.) 31. In fact, its newly arrived staff and instructors had to get themselves organized quickly in May 1941 soon after their arrival in Canada.

The unit was kept busy. It had to sort out aircraft dispositions, training areas, command responsibilities, and most importantly, its aim and mission. It was in constant flux as its aim and mission seemed to be constantly changing.<sup>158</sup>

It was especially so regarding the unit’s establishment. Issues concerning its establishment had to be rectified quickly. It happened that the crunch of time bore down between the advance party’s first arrival in 21 May 1941 and the commencement of the first conversion courses 1 August 1941.

All staff would have been involved in some resolution regarding training and sundry issues in one administrative capacity or another. Resolving the start-up issues meant that they were all kept extremely busy, under stress, and heavily tasked.

O.T.U. 31 was initially designated as a Ferry Command Despatch Reception and Training Unit. It was suggested by the powers that be that Debert should have several different types of aircraft on the Unit’s establishment. The additional airframes were necessary for training on the varied types of aircraft then backlogged in the ferry system.

In addition to its requisite number of Hudson Bombers, O.T.U. 31 was to be augmented with one B-17, two B-24, and four more Hudson Bombers. There was a later addendum that included a few Lockheed 37s and B26s added to the mix as well. It was an eclectic selection, everything was on the table to help clear the ferry backlog.

Issues constantly changed, reviewed, or updated as the unit was being established. The feasibility of the plan was finally assessed and some key decisions made. The complexity of the work load, placed far too many demanding burdens on the staff. The primary task after all was “training”.

But in the end a decision was finally made. The unit was finally fitted with 15 dual Hudson Bombers and the unit concentrated its training solely on that type.

This was the viable solution that addressed in the long run the ferry requirement. The decision to train on the one type got the ball rolling because the dominant aircraft

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<sup>158</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U, 3 February 2011, pg. 6-7

transferred out of Canada at the time was the Hudson bomber. That decision now allowed the instructors to concentrate on the detailed preparation for a single training program based on one primary airframe. This eased their administrative burden considerably.<sup>159</sup>

The long and the short of it was, training on the Hudson Bomber was the right decision in the end. Concentrating on the Hudson Bomber meant that their efforts could be focused to the production of crews geared to the task of moving the most prolific airframe found in the backlogged inventory.<sup>160</sup> The decision to train solely on the one airframe was truly the only logical course of action.

Instructors at Debert still found their situation to be anything but restful.<sup>161</sup> There was a most daunting task. They had two hats, one that was vital, training and, the other that aided Air Chief Marshal Bowhill and Ferry Command, deliver aircraft overseas. Both were critical to a strategic theatre of war. Failure here, meant failure there. Failure ultimately meant, certain defeat. There was little time for debate or for other matters.

Air crashes were simply accepted as wastage. In the end, time killed O'Hanley, Boyd and their crews on 23 October 1941 as much as mechanical or other failures. Time was an exacting price paid by both sides during the war. Time was the expedient of getting on with the job. Time cost lives.

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011 pg. 6

<sup>160</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011 pg. 6

<sup>161</sup> Ernest E. Allen, **An RCAF Pilot's Story 1939-1945 from the memoirs of Ernest E Allen**, 1996, Part One - Pilot Training

Source: <http://www.seawaymall.com/eallen/>

Accessed: 13 August 2010

## 10. A Funny Thing Happened -1942

The Second World War wasn't all doom and gloom. Many memorable things happened at Debert during the war. Some were humorous, others; tragic. Fate often contrived to create circumstances that ensured there was never a dull moment.

Two incidents occurred separately in 1942. Both are to a certain degree humorous, yet just as easily have ended tragically. One was swept under the carpet. It was an air crash near Parrsboro NS.<sup>162</sup> The second, a training accident at Debert involving RCAF Officer Johnnie Goodkey in April of the same year.<sup>163</sup>

The first story occurred at a place known as the Parrsboro aboiteau in the winter of 1942 that involved a crash of a Hudson Bomber. The Hudson was on a simple training mission out of Debert.

The exercise began as a simple touch and go training exercise. At one point, two inexperienced fliers were blinded and became lost in a sudden snow squall. The pilots lost situational awareness in the swirling snow and visible contact with the airfield while circling around in a holding pattern waiting for the weather to clear.

The crew followed standard operating procedures and circled above what they thought was the airfield. But as they waited for a clearing in the squall, the aircraft flew further and further away in an ever-widening arc. They held a steady pattern hoping for a clearing. Unbeknownst to them, they finally ended up near Parrsboro.

The squall eventually did clear and our pilots quickly found out that they were nowhere near an airfield. They were unable to make radio contact. The young pilots lost, without radio contact, were unable to navigate back to base.

Just as suddenly their luck changed for the better. There was a break in the squall and they perceived what was thought to be a familiar landmark located near Debert. They were wrong.

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<sup>162</sup> Taylor Redmond, **From the sky to under the carpet**, Special to the Truro Daily News, December 21st, 2010

Source: <http://www.trurodaily.com/News/Local/2010-12-21/article-2061360/-From-the-sky-to-under-the-carpet/1>

Accessed: 22 December 2010

<sup>163</sup> Ex Air Gunners, **Short Bursts – To Reunite AGs and WAGs for Fellowship and Remembrance**, March 2004 (letter to editor Ross and Evelyn Hamilton)

Source: <http://www.airmuseum.ca/mag/exag0403.html>

Accessed: 13 August 2010

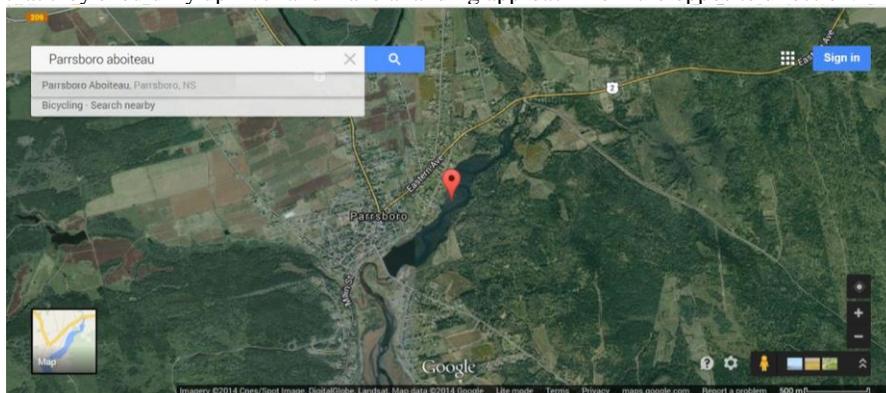
Unknowingly they circled about Parrsboro in poor visibility when the break in the weather occurred. The town people of Parrsboro noted that the aircraft was in obvious distress. Town officials contacted O.T.U. 31 to report their observation. Parrsboro requested assistance from Debert in hope of getting the lost aircraft back to its base.

This particular aircraft had been missing from Debert for a good long time. Based on the report from Parrsboro, Debert assumed that it must be their two lost young pilots. The authorities at Parrsboro requested a plane be sent up to direct the lost aircraft back to Debert. Instead of concern or cooperation, the request was met with a perfunctory "let the silly buggers find their own way home."

The Town of Parrsboro had a real problem on their hands. The local militia immediately went into action to assist the distressed pilots. They set gasoline brush fires alight around a frozen aboiteau, a man-made lake, to indicate where the pilots should land.

The Parrsboro Aboiteau was a marshy, man-made lake fed by the Farrell River. The Aboiteau empties into the Parrsboro Harbour. The Aboiteau was bounded by a rock "wall".

The residents of Parrsboro assumed that the pilots would perceive all the dangers indicated by the placement of the fires. The fires were alighted to indicate the approach and the proper direction in which the lost aircrew should make their landing. They were wrong in that assumption. The pilots could not deduct from the placement of those fires that they should fly up river and make a landing approach from the opposite direction.



Google Maps:

<https://www.google.ca/maps/place/Parrsboro+Aboiteau,+Parrsboro,+NS/@45.4066565,-64.3184549,3116m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m2!3m1!1s0x4b58e9b7d31347b7:0x4f3d863fb18f4f81>

Accessed: 5 November 2014

Regrettably the meaning of the good intentions was lost on the crew. They did just the opposite and flew down river instead.

Their landing profile was perfect, almost too good to be true though. The young pilots made a perfect landing on the ice. The immediate problem seemed to be over, but just as

suddenly, they realized the error of their ways. This was the short approach! They were about to hit the road and rock wall at the end of the Aboiteau. The bomber was powered to full throttles so as to gain air speed to fly over the obstacles.

They almost pulled it off except for that “wall”. The front landing wheel struck the concrete footing left over from a road construction in 1908 and broke off. The aircraft shook visibly but the crew managed somehow to lift the bomber up and over the road. It flew on for a bit between two power poles, most likely stalled, before making a crash-landing in the marsh on the other side of the road.

Surprisingly both pilots survived! They were only concussed by the experience. But they were lucid enough to obey standing orders! They had to remain with their downed aircraft regardless of circumstances. It was a firm order in the event of a crash, not to leave the downed aircraft either unattended or abandoned.

Regrettably they did not understand the urgency or precariousness of their situation. They were in imminent danger. The incoming tide would soon fill the marsh and inundate the downed aircraft. The Bay of Fundy, home of the highest tides in the world was about to flood the Parrsboro aboiteau to which it was connected! Their very lives were in peril.

The young airmen had to leave the plane immediately and were finally convinced by the RCMP to come up out of the marsh and out of danger. They were warmed up and checked over by the local doctor. Now they were about to be tossed into the fire for the infraction of disobeying standing orders.

Debert base was informed that their Hudson Bomber had crashed but that both pilots were safe. Both were in relatively good shape given the circumstances. The Base authorities set off immediately to the scene of the accident.

The crew was met with a slew of invective upon the base commander’s arrival. He raged about the loss of the valuable aircraft. Thousands of dollars had been wasted because of their actions.

The loss of a Hudson bomber was his prime concern, not the crew. The crew was easily replaceable. The damaged aircraft was a huge loss and set-back. Air crew were expendable. The Base Commander was on the verge of cashiering the careers of two budding airmen whose ignominious failure was pranging a precious aircraft.

The crash could have amounted to the inglorious end to two budding flying careers. The pilots were locked in by the circumstances of their failure. Little thought or deference was given to their level of experience, the inadequacy of navigational aids, the weather or other factors in this accident for that matter.

The Base Commander’s invective spelled out the consequences for their actions. They were now clearly in the crosshairs of military discipline!

Allison Smith, the town mayor at the time, rose to the occasion. He had heard it all and finally had enough. Smith came to the crew's rescue and verbally intervened. Allison Smith informed the commanding officer, in the strongest possible terms, of the military's stupidity. Smith said, "if you had sent a plane down as requested, to lead the pilots back to base, none of this would have happened."

Smith fumed that, "these are brave soldiers (who) made a successful landing and survived." Smith brooked no nonsense for the ineptitude of those there and whose responsibility was to lead. Smith laid down the gauntlet and placed the blame for this accident squarely at the feet of the base commander and his staff.

To rub salt in the wounded pride of the base commander, Mayor Smith informed all there that Parrsboro had just raised enough war bonds to buy a Hudson Bomber, "so consider that our bomber and go to hell."

Not much was said after that. We know nothing of the fate of these intrepid airmen. They may have been subsequently grounded or possibly cashiered and passed along elsewhere in the bowels of the training system. But we do know that the downed Hudson bomber was cut into pieces for parts, loaded on trucks, and removed to Debert. The incident was swept under the carpet, chalked up to profits and losses, and was quietly forgotten.<sup>164</sup>

The second and earlier incident was recorded by Ross Hamilton. It too was humorous and could have easily ended in tragedy. Once again it was the help of residents that averted such an end. In an undated account Hamilton recalled the epic story of his pilot RCAF Officer Johnnie Goodkey. This event is alleged to have happened in April 1942.

Debert was known as "Hudson's Bay" to aircrew who trained there adjacent to the Bay of Fundy. The analogy is allegorical reflecting the sad fate of a number of wrecked planes that ended up in its frigid waters. Many aircrew were lost in its depths and never returned, much like early explorers who were lost in the cold deeps of Canada's far north and Hudson Bay.

One night RCAF pilot, Johnnie Goodkey conducted a series of circuits, bumps, and touch and go. Suddenly both engines of his Hudson bomber faltered at about 500 feet soon after take-off. The aircraft continued forward for some considerable distance until the engines finally gave out. Johnnie and his RAF instructor managed a pancake landing in the Bay of Fundy, fortunately at low tide.

Both Goodkey and his instructor climbed out onto the fuselage hoping for rescue. They understood their plight and the urgency of the situation. Help was needed immediately. The tide had just changed and Goodkey observed the water rising fast.

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid Taylor Redmond, December 21st, 2010

The water was only up to their knees at the time of the crash as the tide was low. But now it was rising and rising fast! Regrettably, the RAF instructor couldn't swim. Fortunately, Goodkey could! But the odds of rescue were only slightly in their favour. They had crashed near a small island that appeared to be settled.

Johnnie Goodkey, an excellent swimmer, swam to the island to get help. But the odds of success in the cool conditions of April were slim indeed. The light on the nearby island was their only hope of help and rescue.

Goodkey made the best of it, stripped to his shorts and swam for it. The weather and the water to say the least, was frosty but Goodkey's good fortune held true. He made it!

Goodkey found the fisherman home and pressed him into action. Both headed back out to the flooding crash site in a boat where the RAF instructor awaited rescue. By this time the instructor was clinging for his life, holding onto the wrecked Hudson Bomber. Goodkey and the fisherman arrived just in the nick of time!

The poor instructor was standing on his tip-toes. His head was barely above water with the tide coming in full bore. He too was very lucky. He was rescued with minutes to spare; otherwise, he too would have drowned or succumbed to hypothermia.

Surprisingly, it was two days before Debert expressed any interest in their fate or noted them as "missing". It was only after a local phone call was made that it finally registered, the two-missing airman were located safe and sound! The airfield eventually sent the meat-wagon to pick them up.<sup>165</sup>

The authorities in the first instance probably deemed the crash to be un-survivable given the time of year and the fact that the crew was long overdue. They were in no hurry to retrieve bodies. Nature would do that for them eventually, releasing and returning the bodies in due course.

It was all remembered humorously, standing on a wing, the tide slowly creeping up the body. The funny thing though was they actually survived!

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid Ex Air Gunners, March 2004 (letter to editor Ross and Evelyn Hamilton)

## 11. Memories of Training 1943

Many young men with high aspirations joined the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War. Highest amongst those aspirations was a desire to become a fighter pilot. It was the brass ring, if you will, the big prize at the culmination of training in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP).

But not all recruits were meant to be fighter pilots. There were other needs and requirements. Other flying positions were necessary in winning the war. There was a special need for transport, coastal, bomber and other pilots, not just fighter pilots.

Those other pilot positions were considered less desirable. Perception influenced what was considered as the more important, manly, or warrior role, at least from the student's perspective. It didn't matter. There were all inherently dangerous. Some positions were avoided at all costs though.

Enrollees in the RCAF at the time had little desire for service in out of the way places or far away from the main action. All wanted to bring the fight to the enemy. The one place perceived to be the least desirable was flying operations in Coastal Command!<sup>166</sup>

Despite the personal drama, people who joined knew they simply had no choice where they would serve. They were all at the system's mercy. Sometimes it was simply the luck of the draw that placed aspirants on the crossroads of destiny leading to Bomber, Transport or Coastal Command. In the end, where they served was based on the greater good of the war.

Robert M. Webster, M.D. was one of many young aircrew candidates in the BCATP during the Second World War. He found his way to Debert to train there in 1943.

Many years later Webster returned to Debert in 1998 when he revisited his war time training post now the Debert Airport. It was a nostalgic visit. He came to the place where he earned his wings and where his life as a pilot and on the Hudson bomber began.

Webster served there from 5 September to 13 December 1943. He had just completed one part of his phase training at Summerside, PEI. The general scheme for his serial was a move to another unit for final training. Following that, they would be posted overseas to operations.

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<sup>166</sup> Anon. **Captains of the Clouds - the making of a BCATP Classic Movie**, Vintage Wings of Canada, 2013

Source:

<http://www.vintagewings.ca/VintageNews/Stories/tabid/116/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/203/Captains-of-the-Clouds--the-making-of-a-BCATP-Classic-Movie.aspx>

Accessed: 18 December 2014

Webster knew by this point he was long past the point of selection for fighter pilot training. His dilemma was “what next, what was preferable?” There were few options available other than Bomber, Transport or Coastal Command. He was now at a point where his fate was truly in his instructors’ hands. Webster faced the uncertainty with a degree of skepticism and wonder of what would happen next. He soon found out.

One day at Summerside, a training officer boomed, "I need volunteers to go to Debert." But no volunteers stepped forward. The instructor repeated, "I need volunteers to go to Debert!" Again no volunteers came forward. In desperation, he repeated once again, "I need volunteers to go to Debert" Still no volunteers!

The training officer began to say, "Well, then ...” and sensing what was about to happen and knowing that the request for volunteers who soon change to “voluntold”, Webster answered, "I'll go”.

Webster’s thoughts were “At least if I fly that plane (Hudson) like it is supposed to be flown, perhaps I'll make it." Webster’s announcement had the desired effect amongst his peers. The remaining slots were soon filled with willing volunteers.

Debert was not his choice posting, by any means. Such a posting often meant an undesirable track leading to Transport, Coastal or Ferry Command. Like all young men of his day, there was a strong desire for active service and doing their part in a meaningful way. Moving aircraft from point A to point B, or circling the ocean for hours at a time just was not seen in a heroic light. Webster soon discovered what that posting truly meant.

Webster and his peers arrived at Debert and soon dreaded their decision to volunteer. But by then, it was too late! On the very day of their arrival, all witnessed a Hudson bomber belly land. It was an urgent and desperate situation. Sirens sounded! People were seen running away from the plane, and fast! Then all heard a tremendous “Whoom”!

The Hudson blew up right in front of them, hurtled some 50 feet into the air, and then falling to the ground in pieces. Such was Webster’s welcome to Debert!<sup>167</sup> Training was not only going to be hazardous but it was also going to be damned dangerous too!

Webster’s class was most fortunate. They progressed and trained at #31 O.T.U. with no fatalities. There were only minor incidents during their course of instruction. Webster recounted two training missions of note that could have easily ended in disaster. He was a participant in both!

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<sup>167</sup> Robert M. Webster, M.D., **Personal Account Letter 15 December 1999**, Files of Airport Manager, Debert Airport, Colchester County, Nova Scotia, CANADA, undated, Accessed: Summer 2013

The first incident occurred 2 November 1943. Webster was tasked to drop a "Comforts" package on Bird Rocks somewhere in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. He did not know why he was selected. The mission appeared to be important enough and seemed to be of some significance. Top officials of the O.T.U. were aboard his aircraft overseeing his mission!

Webster flew as a passenger/2<sup>nd</sup> pilot. The Hudson bomber successfully navigated to Bird Rocks. The Hudson Bomber then circled the Island for the best approach to drop the package.

A trial run was made in preparation for the drop. The proceedings were witnessed by people on the ground, who were the light house keeper and his family. They pressed close near the cover of their home. The run was right on target and the comforts box dropped. It landed hard just at the edge of the island, then bounced, and continued on its way across the island with the lightkeeper and family looking on.

The box finally stopped. It bounced and tumbled across the island finally crashing into the Gulf! The lightkeeper was lucky to retrieve it as no parachute was used to slow its descent nor control its trajectory. The comforts box could have just as easily careened and smashed in pieces on contact, hitting those on the ground.

Webster's specific job on the day was to open the belly hatch, and then on command, push the box out. The box's approximate dimensions were 12x15x24 inches. He was then to take pictures and document the exercise. Once the box was dispatched Webster grabbed a camera and snapped pictures of the flailing box on its descent as it landed and as it careened toward the sea.

Webster later learned that the box was recovered, in surprisingly good shape! His mission was finally revealed. The box was a gift from the Sergeant's Mess to those living on Bird Rocks.<sup>168</sup>

His second mission came three weeks later on 29 November 1943. Webster describes it as "We were on an antisubmarine search patrol over the Atlantic flying from Halifax to Liverpool, NS." Webster finished the patrol and was on return to Debert but was low on fuel.

Webster said, "I elected to let one wing tank run dry so there would be more gas in the other tank should a go around be needed. When it went dry I was ready and switched immediately to the other tank but the engines faltered, of course, then fortunately picked up immediately.

I knew we were about the Stewiacke area but it was night and no lights were visible on the ground. My crew arrived at my shoulder in a fraction of a second it seemed when the engines faltered! We landed OK."<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid Webster, 1999

<sup>169</sup> Ibid Webster, 1999

Webster`s misstep over Stewiacke points to an experience shared by many in the system. It was the unexpected terror of equipment failure over the cold waters off Canada`s east coast. Webster`s account gives us some insight into that!

Webster was one of the lucky ones in distress who made it home. Others weren`t so lucky. Webster recounts “Early in October, 1943, at Debert, one of my Yarmouth, NS home town acquaintances in aircrew was in a Hudson that did not return after a night flight.”<sup>170</sup>

Many on exercise were lost in the Bay of Fundy and in the Atlantic off Canada`s east coast. Some bodies were recovered, but far too many were lost forever to the deeps and watery graves. These waters are a final resting place for many an aircrew that trained and served at operational and training units along Canada`s east coast. Training was a bloody dangerous enterprise!

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid Webster, 1999

## 12. No Absence 1943

Many anecdotes suggest German U-boats were very prevalent along Canada's east coast during the Second World War. Operational Training Unit 31 and others were pressed into the fray to defend against them.

U-boats appeared to be everywhere as they, traversed many points along the North and South Shores of Quebec, the coast of Newfoundland, Cape Breton, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. They were also observed from time to time.

Sept Iles, Quebec is one such example. Sept Iles protects seagulls from harm in a municipal ordinance that pre-dates the environmental movement by so many years. Local lore provides a reasoning.

It is alleged that a flock of seagulls were frightened as a U-boat that surfaced one night in the bay during the war. The gulls raised such a hue and cry and made such a raucous noise, which awakened and alerted the residents to the imminent danger. The noise from the gulls and the scurry of the citizens ashore is said to have driven a U-boat away. The gulls were protected by the town from that day forward.

Mr. Michael Campbell, a former high school teacher from Cape Breton taught at Our Lady's High in Sept Iles during the 1960's. Mr. Campbell once related a story to his class of a U-boat rounding Cape Breton. A U-boat allegedly moored for a night near his hometown of Glace Bay. The U-boat moored near enough off shore that its crew allegedly listened from a safe distance to the local music played at a local hall.

All these stories seem fanciful and some may say, too fantastic to be true. But there may be a kernel of truth to many of them. Some stories of U-boat sightings and encounters were actually recorded in the major newspapers of the day!

Then there are the factual accounts of U-boats present in the Gulf of St Lawrence. Some had specific missions to be there. One story of U-262 in 1943 gives us an idea of how close they actually came to shore.

U-262 actively patrolled within sight of Tignish PEI for four days in May 1943. U-262's hull was illuminated on several occasions as it was well within the range of the North Point light and the lights of Tignish Harbour.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Michael L. Hadley, **U-Boats Against Canada - German Submarines in Canadian Waters**, McGill-Queen's University Press, Paper (0773508015) 9780773508019, pg. 173  
Release date: 1990-07-01  
Source:  
[http://books.google.ca/books?id=LJJeZ91DyYcC&pg=PA170&lpg=PA170&dq=U-boat+operations+canada+1943&source=bl&ots=TuB5EKGzJH&sig=8FNzNNqn01NeCUGA75C4WRDzyN0&hl=en&ei=veOETbO\\_K\\_O10QGo1sHqCA&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&](http://books.google.ca/books?id=LJJeZ91DyYcC&pg=PA170&lpg=PA170&dq=U-boat+operations+canada+1943&source=bl&ots=TuB5EKGzJH&sig=8FNzNNqn01NeCUGA75C4WRDzyN0&hl=en&ei=veOETbO_K_O10QGo1sHqCA&sa=X&oi=book_result&)

U-262 had a specific mission to achieve. It was an unlikely mission given the intensity of anti-submarine action in the Gulf of St Lawrence the year before in 1942. That action dissuaded the Germans from pursuing any largescale operations in the Gulf of St Lawrence in 1943. So U-262's mission was indeed special.

U-262 was brought in close proximity to Canadian coastal waters in 1943. The Captain's observations while on patrol are telling that supports the anecdotal observations, evidence and stories recorded after the war.

U-262 was on a rescue mission for an organized prison break scheduled in 1943. German Prisoners of War were interred at Camp 70 near Ripples at Minto New Brunswick (NB). Prisoners received coded messages in their personal mail advising that a U-Boat would be waiting for them at North Cape, PEI in early May 1943. The prisoners were ordered to make an escape attempt. The mission was code named "Operation Elster (Magpie).<sup>172</sup>

Escapees were to make their way 250 kilometres to Cape Tormentine, NB. There they were to cross the Northumberland Strait, and thence, make their way to their final destination, North Cape, PEI. If all went well, they were to be rescued by the waiting U-262. The mass prison break was planned for April-May 1943.

This bizarre operation was all too surreal, but it happened nonetheless.. There were significant challenges concerning Canadian geography and the scope of the undertaking. But it would have been the supreme propaganda coup had it worked. This fantastic mission proceeded regardless of the consequences.

Two U-boats were tasked for the job. The first U-376, captained by Friederich-Karl Marks. was the primary boat. U-376 sailed on 6 April 1943. Each boat contained sealed orders aboard when they departed from La Pallice, France. These orders were to only be opened once directed by radio while at sea.

U-262 was the backup boat should U-376 meet with "misadventure", and would assume the mission upon receipt of a coded message if required to do so. U-262, captained by Heinz Franke, preceded U-376's departure on 27 March 1943. But U-262 soon returned

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[ct=result&resnum=7&ved=0CD4Q6AEwBjgU#v=onepage&q=U-boat%20operations%20canada%201943&f=false](http://www.powell-pressburger.org/Reviews/41_49P/49P_08.html)

Accessed: 19 March 2011

<sup>172</sup> Mary MacKay, **Tale of two subs**, The Guardian newspaper/Charlottetown/Prince Edward Island/Canada, 12 Aug 2002 (in **The Powell & Pressburger Pages**)

Source: [http://www.powell-pressburger.org/Reviews/41\\_49P/49P\\_08.html](http://www.powell-pressburger.org/Reviews/41_49P/49P_08.html)

Accessed: 19 March 2011

to port with technical difficulties. Repair was made to its defective air vent. U-262 set sail once again only on 7 April 1943.<sup>173</sup>

In the meantime U-376 was reportedly lost in the Bay of Biscay. German Headquarters lost contact with U-376 off the coast of France April 10, 1943. They assumed that U-376 and its crew of 47 were sunk and lost because of the loss of contact. U-376 was never found.

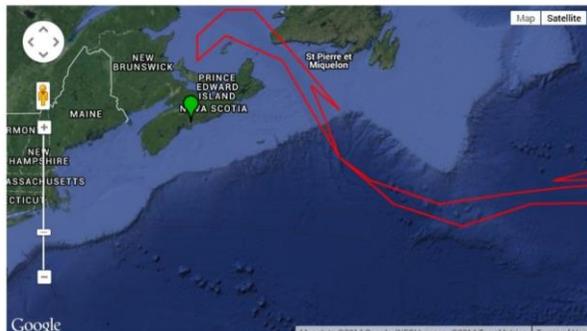
Once determined that U-376 was lost, U-262 was directed to open its sealed orders for “Operation Elster”, receiving the order on 15 April 1943 during one of Franke’s regular radio reporting cycles. U-262 made haste toward Canadian waters.<sup>174</sup>

Interestingly the Allies were well aware of the German plans. More importantly they regularly tracked German U-boat positions. U-262’s arrival was expected.

U-262 arrived in Canadian waters passing through the narrowest point of the Cabot Strait on 26/27 April 1943.<sup>175</sup> The approach through these waters was harrowing. Surface ice blocked their way. Franke gingerly picked his approach through to North Cape, PEI.

U-262 finally reached its assigned post at North Point Reef, PEI. The boat rested on the bottom in 30m of water, four miles off the Coast on 2 May 1943. It remained on station at latitude 46.57 longitude 63.15 for a nerve-wracking four days from 3 to 6 May 1943.<sup>176</sup>

Daily positions, sinkings and allied attacks during the patrol of U-262



Google maps:  
Source: [http://www.uboat.net/boats/patrols/patrol\\_4469.html](http://www.uboat.net/boats/patrols/patrol_4469.html)

Much to Franke’s surprise, whenever he raised his periscope, he observed a number of “Maryland” aircraft orbiting his position. He was deeply concerned and suspicious by the presence of these aircraft while on station awaiting the escapees.

Franke had no indications of potential aircraft threats in any of his sealed orders or briefings. He correctly

<sup>173</sup> Ibid Mary MacKay, 12 Aug 2002

<sup>174</sup> Ibid Mary MacKay, 12 Aug 2002

<sup>175</sup> Ibid Mary MacKay, 12 Aug 2002

<sup>176</sup> UBoat.net, U-262 Daily position Reports, April-May 1943

Source: <http://www.uboat.net/boats/patrols/details.php?boat=262&date=1943-05-11>

Accessed: 20 March 2011, and

Ibid Michael L. Hadley, 1990, pg. 174

assumed that U-262 was under a glide path of a training unit. Franke maintained a tense vigil while waiting for the escapees despite the aircraft and the threat of exposure overhead!<sup>177</sup>

Franke finally broke off the engagement according to orders after four days. No escapees were in sight. He moved off North –North-East toward the Magdellan Islands thence southeast once again through the Cabot Strait still wary of air attack. There were a number of tenuous aircraft and coast watcher sightings that may have marked U-262's outward bound journey.<sup>178</sup> But none of these resulted in any attack or contact by either RCN or RCAF vessels and aircraft.

Franke reported no air attacks on U-262 throughout this ordeal. But he did encounter naval action whilst on the patrol. U-262 attacked convoy HX 233. Franke was given leave to do so as long as it was outside the primary zone of his main mission.

HX 233 was a target of opportunity. It was on its way overseas and was well outside the prohibited zone. U-262 attacked then reported being fired upon with depth charges and charged at by the attached naval escorts.<sup>179</sup> U-262 was very lucky and managed to escape to pursue the primary mission.

U-262's attack on HX233 certainly alerted Canadian authorities to its presence. Eastern Air Command (EAC) increased efforts in the hunt for an enemy in and around U-262's transit path. An aerial attack was made on one suspicious target on 16 May 1943. But this attack occurred long after U-262 had transited the area.

The credit for this attack is often given to Anson training aircraft stationed at Charlottetown, PEI.<sup>180</sup> The attack was likely made by Hudson aircraft from O.T.U. 31 Debert, NS based on official reports of the day for that period.<sup>181</sup>

But other reports indicated that a Charlottetown-based Anson training aircraft out of General Reconnaissance Unit 31 also attacked and dropped two depth charges on a stationary submarine at periscope depth. This attack occurred somewhere between the eastern point of P.E.I. and the Magdalene Islands along U-262's exit line.

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid Michael L. Hadley, 1990, pg. 174

<sup>178</sup> Ibid Michael L. Hadley, 1990, pg. 174

<sup>179</sup> Mary MacKay, **Tale of two subs**, The Guardian newspaper/Charlottetown/Prince Edward Island/Canada, 12 Aug 2002 (in **The Powell & Pressburger Pages**)

Source: [http://www.powell-pressburger.org/Reviews/41\\_49P/49P\\_08.html](http://www.powell-pressburger.org/Reviews/41_49P/49P_08.html)

Accessed: 19 March 2011

<sup>180</sup> Ibid Michael L. Hadley, 1990, pg. 174

<sup>181</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Public Record Office(PRO) File 199/435 – RCAF Attacks on U-Boats, 7 June 1943

Given that U-262 did not record any air assaults, we must conclude that such an attack occurred either after U-262 made its escape or against some other target of opportunity. It is alleged that the Charlottetown attack produced some wreckage and oil slicks. It may well have been that there was another boat on station or in the area of the Gulf at the time.

There were 122 U-boats on patrol on 16 May 1943, the majority of which were concentrated in the mid-Atlantic Gap.<sup>182</sup> There were two other U-boats on patrol in addition to U262 who were near or in Canadian waters at the time. These were U-119 and U-161.

U-119 was on a position just off Halifax on 30 May 1943 (44.15N/63.15W). U-119 was in the mid-Atlantic Gap on 11 May 1943. U-161 was just off the US coast on 11 May at a position south east of Baltimore.

U-161 was in a position just off Yarmouth NS from 25 April to about 2 May 1943 holding a line from 40.39N/62.30W to 41.33N/64.54W. The timing of these approaches does not coincide with any Canadian combat reports at all.

Both boats may have been on O.T.U. 31's patrol line at some point during the period. No other records were found to support any other coastal incursions beyond that of U-262 in the Gulf. But then again, records were neither perfect nor were they complete.

Who else may have accompanied U-262 remains a mystery. So what was observed by the Hudson and Anson aircrews on the 11th and the 16<sup>th</sup> May remains a mystery too!

Franke's patrol track lends credence to how close U-boats approached the Atlantic Canadian coast line. A detailed search of available U-boat patrol records proved indeterminate. We may never know who was there, but we do know, the enemy was lurking about.

This period was marked by a high operational tempo for the U-boat fleet elsewhere and in the Atlantic. The period also marked a personal tragedy felt most deeply by Admiral Dönitz.

On 19 May 1943, U-954 was sighted on the surface in the mid-Atlantic Gap. U-954 was attacked by several units of the Royal Navy. HMS Sennen was first to sight U-954 on the surface.

U-954 was subsequently and vigorously pursued by a consort of four RN naval vessels. The submarine fought gallantly and fired torpedoes prior to crash diving. All torpedoes missed their mark. U-954 was eventually hunted down and sunk by HMS Sennen's hedgehog with all hands that day.

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<sup>182</sup> U-boat Net, <http://www.uboat.net/boats/patrols/search.php>. Accessed: 7 November 2014

Sadly Peter Dönitz, youngest son of Admiral Dönitz, serving as watch officer on U-954, was listed amongst the dead.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> U-boat Net: <http://www.uboat.net/allies/warships/ship/101.html>, Accessed: 7 November 2014

### 13. Antisubmarine Warfare Canada

Canada was a dangerous place to be. Sometimes the “operational” component of the war on Canadian shores was downplayed for a variety of reasons. Much was necessarily kept from public view. Consequently the war effort on Canadian soil was often considered inconsequential because it was downplayed.<sup>184</sup>

But very real missions were conducted at Debert and elsewhere on Canada’s east coast during the war. Debert’s prime operational mission was the anti-submarine patrol that was also a significant component of its air training.

Debert’s anti-submarine training was conducted just off shore, in a box south of Nova Scotia, between Halifax and Yarmouth. This box lay just off the continental shelf in an area of a vital approach to Canadian waters that had to be protected.

Anti-submarine patrolling was a mind-numbing duty involving long periods of intense concentration. Aircrew often flew on station with little or nothing to show for the effort. But at other times, that duty was punctuated by brief moments of exhilaration and sheer terror.

Debert’s patrols made very few contacts or air attacks on marauding U-boats. Only two attacks were ever officially recorded out of the numerous sorties flown. The large time on station for the most part, confirmed both the futility and the tediousness of the effort to its students. But it was an important duty and a necessary task nonetheless!

The air role was critical to Canada’s security at the time. The need for air support in the anti-submarine role became evident during 1942. The Royal Canadian Navy was heavily committed. There was a shortage of naval escorts, too few to meet all the demands and commitments required for the North Atlantic convoy system.<sup>185</sup>

It all came to a head when Canada felt the sting of war in its littoral waters. The first naval attack occurred in the Gulf of St Lawrence in 1942. It was the first such incursion on such a scale since the War of 1812.<sup>186</sup> The assault on Canadian territory began with the arrival of U-553 in the Gulf of St Lawrence who quickly sunk two ships in close order.

The presence of U-553 brought an air of immediacy highlighting the importance of the St Lawrence estuary and the strategic danger posed there in May 1942. Canada quickly

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<sup>184</sup> Roger Sarty, **the “Battle We Lost at Home” Revisited Official Military Histories and the Battle of the St. Lawrence**, Canadian Military History, Volume 12, Numbers 1& 2, Winter/Spring 2003, pg., pg. 41

<sup>185</sup> *ibid* Sarty, pg. 43

<sup>186</sup> Fabrice Mosseray, **The Battle of the St. Lawrence -A Little-Known Episode in the Battle of the Atlantic**, UBoat.Net 1995-2010, 29 Mar 2002.

Source: <http://uboat.net/articles/?article=29>

Accessed: 30 November 2010

mobilized all its military resources to contain what became a growing threat. The success of U-553 meant that others followed in its wake. The Gulf of St Lawrence had suddenly become a true theatre of war!<sup>187</sup>

Strangely enough, the German Navy had no operational plans for any incursion regarding the Gulf of St Lawrence. U-553's incursion was merely "accidental". U-553 only entered the Gulf as an expedient to make repairs before returning to its regular patrol in the Atlantic.

Up until that point, the Gulf of St Lawrence was considered a safe and a calm sector by Canadian authorities. However U-553 changed the balance that also altered the German Command's perception of the Gulf's strategic importance. U-553's success suggested that operations in the Gulf, struck at the Canadian heartland and morale.

The German Navy quickly realized the potential impact. They needed to capitalize on this success quickly and began to target Canadian in-land shipping with great success. The change struck fear in the hearts of Canadian authorities.

### *...Seeking assistance*

The pressing U-boat onslaught required the Royal Canadian Navy to seek assistance because of the many pressing and growing demands beyond the Gulf of St Lawrence. Help was urgently needed to address the U-boat threat there.

Eastern Air Command (EAC) of the RCAF eventually accepted the navy's request for a major share of the responsibility. The weapon of choice in the beginning was the Hudson Bomber although other air assets were also employed.<sup>188</sup>

Eastern Air Command (EAC) diverted some of its assets away from Atlantic convoy duties and began concentrating its activities in the Gulf of St Lawrence as a first step. EAC placed as many as 48 front-line anti-submarine bombers at the Navy's disposal. These assets provided air cover that safeguarded the Gulf and Canadian ocean approaches.<sup>189</sup>

Despite these early dispositions, EAC suffered critical shortfalls. These shortfalls were dealt with in part by extending an operational burden to the embryonic training establishments. It was a necessary expedient that soon bolstered EAC's effort. The augmentation by the training schools helped EAC manage the U-boat threat. The hope was that the U-boat would be contained off Canadian shores because of the presence of air assets.

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid, Mosseray, 29 Mar 2002

<sup>188</sup> ibid Sarty, pg. 43

<sup>189</sup> ibid Sarty, pg. 43

EAC had 307 aircraft on establishment at the beginning of the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. This pool was then augmented by 259 training aircraft in 1942. EAC's aircraft establishment eventually grew and rose to 483 aircraft, once again augmented by an additional 386 training aircraft in 1943.<sup>190</sup>

Coincidentally Debert had 44 Hudson Bombers on establishment at O.T.U 31 from May 1941 on. Four of Debert's Hudson Bombers were devoted exclusively to the anti-submarine role.<sup>191</sup>

All these disparate assets played a role in containing and managing the U-boat threat.<sup>192</sup> But it went far beyond the air assets. Other little known assets were also involved. The most notable were the observation towers of the bombing ranges that helped to augment coast watching.

The observation towers were incorporated as part of the coast watching network and tasked to observe for U-boat activities off their approaches. All these assets were expedients that ensured all means were thus taken securing all approaches to protecting vital shipping, vital areas and facilities. In the end it was a combination of all assets, in combination with the army, navy, and air force, that was necessary to do the job.<sup>193</sup>

But once the decision was made to mobilize the schools, the operational tempo rose considerably. O.T.U. 31 carried out regular anti-submarine and convoy patrols for Eastern Air Command for a greater part of the war thereafter.

Training aircraft at Debert, Greenwood, and elsewhere were fully bomb laden and armed. They were easily diverted to more profitable targets if and when required. Thus there was always an air of realism to the training even when proceeding to the ranges!

Such was the Canadian effort in the Gulf of St Lawrence that meant mobilizing everything. Everything included the operational training units, that were pressed into service to meet this looming threat. In the end the operational training units played an important part that contributed to air cover over the approaches in the Gulf of St Lawrence, Atlantic and elsewhere.

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<sup>190</sup> Canada, National Defence Headquarters, Directorate of History, **REPORT NO. 30 HISTORICAL SECTION (G.S.), ARMY HEADQUARTERS, Army Participation in Measures taken by the Three Services for the Security of the Gulf of St Lawrence and the Lower River during the Period of German Submarine Activity, 1942-45**, 18 Nov 49 republished July 1986, pg. 7

<sup>191</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg. 4 (D.D. 4/7/43), and pg. 5 (192-10-22/31 V.2 10/4/44 F.168)

<sup>192</sup>Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U, pg. 2

<sup>193</sup> Greenwood Military Aviation Museum, WWII Observation Tower, 18 Nov 2009, Page 5.1 Rev. 0

Source: <http://gmam.ca/tower.htm>

Accessed: 30 November 2010

### *...The Enemy Finds Natural Advantages Not Enough*

The prevailing conditions in the Gulf of St Lawrence estuary favoured the enemy. It was a perfect place to hide. The current state of Allied technology and estuarine conditions hid the U-boats from Canadian sensors. This disadvantage was offset by an increase in the number of Canadian units searching for the enemy.

The estuarine conditions of the Gulf of St Lawrence actually cloaked U-boats, making them virtually invisible when submerged. Estuarine waters shielded the U-boat from sonar-Asdic contact then employed by the navy.

The Asdic system of the day was limited because of the bathyscaphe effect, which occurred when saline, fresh, hot and cold water mixed and blended together. It was an environmental condition that was prevalent in estuarine environments and the Gulf of St Lawrence in particular.

The bathyscaphe effect masked submerged U-boats that was a virtual cloak of invisibility effectively creating an electronic distortion that hid U-boats from detection.<sup>194</sup> Air power was a means of putting more eyes toward accessing and targeting the enemy. Air power thus employed came to have an influence on German strategy.

The intensity of the action in the Gulf illustrates the impact of aerial surveillance. The experience of U-517 is telling. U-517 was on the receiving end of considerable Canadian attention. U-517 was severely damaged while on patrol in the fall of 1942, departing for its home base at Lorient on 5 October 1942 for repairs.

U-517 received a pummeling leaving a lasting impression on its crew, its commander, and the Commander of the German U-boat Headquarters. The commander of U-517 calculated that he was on the receiving end of at least 27 bombs and 118 depth charges dropped by aircraft during his sortie in the Gulf of St Lawrence. The ordnance was dropped near enough to his vessel causing him considerable discomfort.<sup>195</sup> The boat and crew were lucky to have made it out of their alive.

The collective experience of all U-boat commanders then operating in the Gulf of St Lawrence, also made a deep and lasting impression on Admiral Dönitz. Dönitz was impressed by both the number and intensity of the RCN and RCAF attacks.

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<sup>194</sup> Nathan M. Greenfield, **The Battle of the St Lawrence – The Second World War in Canada**, Harpers-Collins Publishers Ltd., 2004, pg. 60:

Bathyscaphe effect the blending of fresh and salt, cold and warm water in an Estuary system.

<sup>195</sup> A.R. Byers (Ed.), **The Canadians at War 1939-1945 Second Edition**, The Reader's Digest Association (Canada) Ltd, 1986, pg. 129

A deep impression was made even though not one of Dönitz's submarines was sunk by Canadian pilots or the RCN. It was the combined RCN and RCAF effort that led him to conclude the danger inherent in combined action of air and naval power. This combination especially in a confined area favoured his enemy. He concluded that these areas were to be avoided.

Admiral Dönitz was at the crossroads of a decision that would affect German naval policy for the time being. Admiral Dönitz refrained from pursuing any campaign in inland Canadian waters or in the Gulf of St Lawrence in 1943. His decision was made firm because of the dangers posed by the RCN and RCAF there.<sup>196</sup>

Dönitz recognized both his limitations and the tactical/technical advantages/disadvantages from his operations in 1942. He knew that his U-boats had no choice but to eventually surface in this confined area to re-charge their batteries. This would leave his boats exposed, open, and vulnerable to attack by both naval and air resources. It was only a matter of time before a loss was incurred. It proved too great a risk.

Dönitz's "last five U-boats in the theatre had encountered too much opposition and had sunk only five ships. Dönitz believed that such results could not justify a continued presence in Canada's inland waters.... Still; a victory of sorts had been won. Ever-improving defences had deterred the U-boats, although it would take a post-war examination of German war records to confirm how seriously."<sup>197</sup>

U-boats only returned to Canadian waters in 1944 with the introduction of the 'snorkel'. This device provided a tactical advantage that allowed U-boats to re-charge their batteries while submerged.<sup>198</sup>

Until then, the threat of air cover in combination with naval power contributed to safe guarding the Gulf from further U-boat threat. It was a combination in which the operational training units played their part too.

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<sup>196</sup>David Andrews, **The Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence**, Royal Canadian Legion Branch # 98 © 2008 All Rights Reserved, pg. 9

Source:

[www.kingstonlegion.com/.../Battle%20of%20the%20Gulf%20of%20St%20Lawrence.doc](http://www.kingstonlegion.com/.../Battle%20of%20the%20Gulf%20of%20St%20Lawrence.doc) and

<http://www.kingstonlegion.com/Poppy/Call%20to%20Remembrance.html>

Accessed: 2 October 2010

<sup>197</sup> Ibid David Andrews, 2008

<sup>198</sup> Fabrice Mosseray, 29 Mar 2002.

## 14. Antisubmarine Operations at Debert

U-boats in the Gulf of St Lawrence set the tone for RCAF commitments on the Atlantic shelf off Canada's east coast during the Second World War. The destruction of the U-boat or those operations that limited operability were both important and vital.

The commitment of the anti-submarine role most likely saved lives and vital materiel. But maintenance of an air umbrella over a convoy was a very costly affair when measured in time, materiel, and resources.

The essential truth was clear to all. U-boats destroyed a great deal of Allied shipping over the course of the war and was Churchill's worst fear.<sup>199</sup> A steady flow of materiel from Canada and the United States to active operations overseas was rendered moot if it all went to the bottom before ever reaching where it was most needed!

Convoy protection remained a most important and vital role no matter the cost. It saw the marshalling of all resources including the supernumerary resources represented by the training units who were devoted to that end (see appendix 1).

O.T.U. 31 was in fact one of the supernumerary resources available to Eastern Air Command (EAC). The assets at O.T.U.31 provided an additional capacity of 16% to EAC's sortie rate. They also augmented operational output by an additional 13% to EAC's flying hours.

In the end, O.T.U.31 was responsible for 11% of U-boat sightings and 5% of attacks. Its contribution was responsible for an additional 6% of EAC's assessed damage to the U-boats attacked. It was not chump change in the greater scheme of things (See Appendix 1 - Table 3).

The anti-submarine patrol was a tedious job marked by long intervals of time on station, with often nothing to show for the effort. It was a rare event when things happened in a rare contact. One such contact was made by a unit from Debert May 1943.

The fifteenth of May 1943 was a typical spring day in Nova Scotia. The forecast was fair weather with a slight breeze. It was basically a very good day for flying.<sup>200</sup> It was on this

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<sup>199</sup> Winston S Churchill, **The Grand Alliance**, Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1950, pg. 122-123

<sup>200</sup> Canada, National Archives of Canada, **3 Radio Detachment - Tusket, Nova Scotia, 1943 - Extracts from Daily Diary**, 15 May 43

Source: <http://67.69.104.76:84/Pinetreeline/rds/detail/rds3-2.html>

Updated: March 28, 2003

Accessed: 18 March 2014

day that Pilot Officer Homer of Operational Unit (O.T.U.) 31 at Debert and his crew in Hudson bomber 901/B3 embarked on what was to be, the adventure of a lifetime!

Pilot Officer (PO) S.F.C. Homer's mission was simple. His flight was a regularly scheduled, routine training patrol conducted in Hudson Bomber 901/B3. Homer and crew had no expectations of anything exciting on this routine patrol. They settled down in expectation of a regular, routine, boring, and uneventful day.<sup>201</sup>

The patrol proceeded without incident. PO Homer departed Debert and made for his assigned location, in a patrol grid box over the Scotia Shelf just south of Halifax. The weather was fine with light surface winds of 10 knots from 220 degrees. Cloud cover was 2/10ths at 1000 feet, with 20 mile visibility in all directions.<sup>202</sup>

Homer's patrol line was nothing new. It was one where he and others routinely conducted training. The patrol area was an added benefit to the protection of the vital convoys in the approaches off Halifax and environs. Homer's Hudson Bomber 901/B3 flew back and forth, back and forth, over this fixed box pattern in his assigned area.

Mile after mile, hour after hour, Homer plodded on over the grey Atlantic swells, which swept by under the wings of Hudson 901. Then suddenly his observer noted something quite odd in the distance.

There roughly at 42 degrees 8' north, 64 degrees 28' west was a suspicious contact, one nautical mile off the Hudson's position on a bearing of 197 degrees. It was a suspected U-Boat. The time was approximately 4:45PM (2045GMT).<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Dean C. Ruffili, **Operational Research and the Royal Canadian Air Force Eastern Air Command's Search for Efficiency in Airborne Anti-Submarine Warfare, 1942-1945**, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2001 (thesis), pg. 29

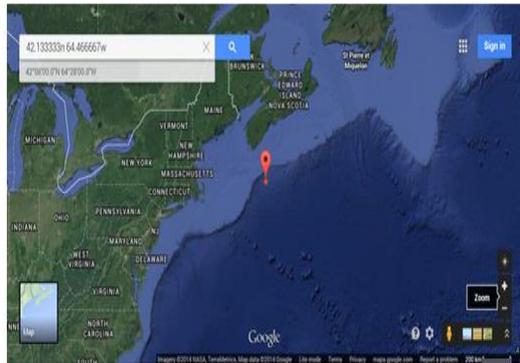
Source: <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk3/ftp05/MQ65204.pdf>

Accessed: 1 February 2014

<sup>202</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Public Record Office (PRO) file ADM 199/435 – **RCAF attacks on U-Boats**, 3 February 2011

<sup>203</sup> Ibid DHH (PRO) file ADM 199/435, 3 February 2011

## Homer's Map Position



Google maps

The crew sighted what they believed to be a periscope breaking the surface, barely visible to his observer. The U-boat was on a course of 060 degrees at a speed of 5 knots relative to Hudson 901.<sup>204</sup>

Homer's bomber was a real and present danger if this was a U-boat!

Homer maintained his course for 10 to 15 seconds, then descended rapidly from an assigned height of 3200 feet, and approached the suspected U-boat at a

height of only 100 feet. He attacked the target at a 15-degree angle astern and on the U-boat's starboard side.<sup>205</sup> Homer let loose with four 250 lb. MK VIII amatol depth charges just as the periscope passed under the nose of his aircraft.<sup>206</sup>

The amatol depth charges detonated at two separate depths of 25 and 40 feet respectively. After the release, Homer climbed again to 400 feet and awaited the explosions. These came but were observed to be 40 feet to port of the periscope feather. Homer missed!

Nothing further was seen. The U-boat appeared to have escaped. Homer circled for 5 to 10 minutes in the hope that it was at least damaged and would resurface. He remained on station waiting with that expectation and was prepared to re-engage the U-boat with his guns if it surfaced at anytime.<sup>207</sup>

Nothing happened. Homer employed baiting tactics by leaving the area for 10 minutes then returning. Homer returned and flew over the area for an additional 20 minutes. No further sightings were made. He left the area, finally departing around 5:23PM (2123 GMT).<sup>208</sup> His attack lasted a total of 79 minutes.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid DHH (PRO) file ADM 199/435, 3 February 2011

<sup>205</sup> Ibid DHH (PRO) file ADM 199/435, 3 February 2011

<sup>206</sup> Ibid DHH (PRO) file ADM 199/435, 3 February 2011

<sup>207</sup> Ibid DHH (PRO) file ADM 199/435, 3 February 2011

<sup>208</sup> Ibid DHH (PRO) file ADM 199/435, 3 February 2011

### *...Post Operative Analysis and Findings*

The official analysis of Homer's attack was instructive. The official report stated that Homer overshot the periscope. The depth charges fell too far to port to do any lethal damage.<sup>209</sup>

This attack was a dismal failure, but any criticism must be tempered by the fact that O.T.U. 31 was a training unit. The results of Homer's attack were consistent with expectations at the time! Command Air Staff remarked "from the crew's description of the attack it would appear "that this *inexperienced* crew carried out a very good attack".

The crew was indeed inexperienced especially as a team. They were simply thrown together and lacked coalescence as a functioning tactical unit. "Experience" would only come after additional advanced operational training and experience overseas. It was only at this point, once permanent crews were formed that they jelled and coalesced as a functioning team and fighting unit.<sup>210</sup>

The official analysis concluded that Homer's depth charges overshot the submarine by some 50 feet. The depth charges should have been released well before the periscope passed under the nose of the aircraft.<sup>211</sup> No matter, Homer and crew put the fear of God into one very lucky U-Boat crew on that day!

What Homer and his crew of Hudson 901 achieved was indeed phenomenal! It was an attestation to the quality of the training plan, as well as, intelligence, perseverance, determination, and skill of the crews under training! Sometimes the difference between success and failure was simply a matter of luck!

Homer's attack was one of two made by O.T.U. 31 during 1943. A second attack was subsequently made by Sgt Wallace and his crew in position 43 degrees 37' north by 64 degrees 3' west on 4 July 1943 some few months later.

Homer's attack was never mentioned in official historical summaries save a brief unattributed comment of "no. of attacks 2 of which one did any damage and the casualties suffered two missing." Wallace's attack rated a damaged while Homer's an undamaged. This was probably the reason why Homer's attack was not specifically mentioned in the official *summary* at war's end.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid DHH (PRO) file ADM 199/435, 3 February 2011

<sup>210</sup> Ernest E. Allen, **An RCAF Pilot's Story 1939-1945 from the memoirs of Ernest E Allen**, 1996, pg. 13 of 46

Source: <http://www.seawaymall.com/eallen/>

Accessed: 13 August 2010

<sup>211</sup> Ibid DHH (PRO) file ADM 199/435, 3 February 2011

<sup>212</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U, pg. 4-5, D.D. 14/7/43

Clearly though, all training and maritime patrols were consequential. Contacts were made, identified, and pursued. Attacks were executed. Some may argue that the results were sullen. But they were results nonetheless! Sadly the sullen results understated the true purpose of air patrols and of what was achieved in other ways!

The importance of these antisubmarine patrols, apart from the destruction of their targets, were the consequences of indirect results stemming from suppression and limiting operability. Sadly, the indirect results were more difficult to assess, were easily discounted, or were ignored at the time.

## 15. 119 Squadron (RCAF) Yarmouth Hunts U-754

Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.) 31 assisted Eastern Air Command (EAC) with an anti-submarine patrol on Canada's East Coast. It was a mere training unit but it also expended a considerable effort in doing so.

The value of such patrols was indeterminate. Many long hours were spent on patrol with little to show for the effort. The results were more often indirect not direct, and were rather obscure to boot. The true value of the anti-submarine patrol was not revealed until German archives became available for analysis after the war.

PO Homer's attack on a U-boat 15 May 1943 regrettably had no traceable information to a specific U-boat in May 1941 everywhere in the German archives. An investigation of a similar attack highlights the difficulties of attribution and tracing a link to a specific Allied action.

The combat records and war diaries from other Canadian operational units gives a far clearer indication. These sources paint a picture that highlights the pressures and intensity of operations experienced by O.T.U. 31 and others employed in the anti-submarine role.

They fill in the fine details of what was achieved by operational units, training units, and others in the conduct of this duty. They also paint the picture of the aftermath that led to conclusions and key decisions of the German Navy and Admiral Donitz. Their experience is worthy of inclusion here too because it is the story behind O.T.U. 31.

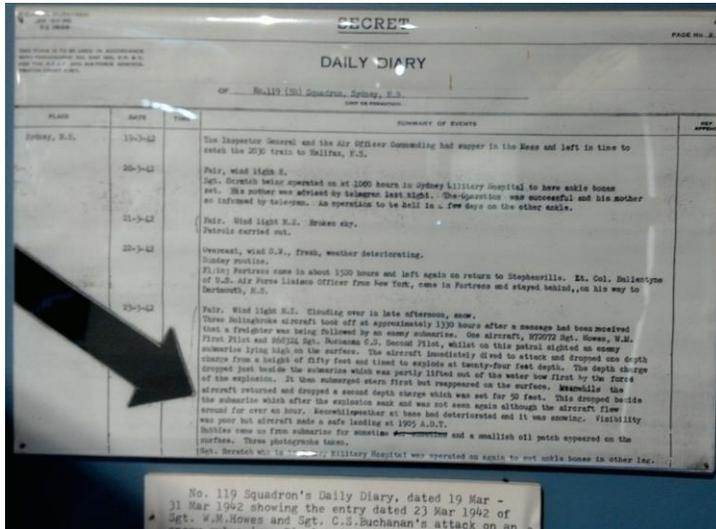
119 Squadron, RCAF operated out of Yarmouth, NS. 119 Squadron recorded a similar attack, which was investigated. And can be found in the unit's War Diary for 23 March 1942. That attack was made by Sgt Howe in a Bolingbroke. The unit account provides a very vivid and detailed picture of what they thought was a successful air attack. It happened just off Canada's east coast in areas where (O.T.U.) 31 and others operated.

It is worth noting 119 Squadron's attack occurred at the height of the "Happy Times", concurrent with O.T.U. 31's activities. The "Happy Times" marked the German Navy's most profitable and victorious period in which their operations yielded most lucrative results and were most successful.

The details behind 119 Squadron's initial entry for 23 March 1942 were sparse. It was much like Homer's official account of his attack.<sup>213</sup> The full details of the encounter with the U-boat that Sgt Howes attacked remained unknown until much later in the war.

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<sup>213</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Public Record Office (PRO) file ADM 199/435 – **RCAF attacks on U-Boats**, 3 February 2011



Daily Entry 23 March 1942- Madigan photograph of Diary entry in Main Hall Atlantic Canada Aviation Museum July 2016

Howes story began as a simple report of a U-boat shadowing a freighter in Canadian waters. Aircraft from 119 Squadron were despatched to deal with it. 119 Squadron launched three Bolingbroke aircraft in pursuit at 1330 hours ADT.

The Bolingbroke

piloted by Sgt WM Howes (R72072) and co-piloted by Sgt CS Buchanan (R68324) made contact with a target of opportunity. Howes and Buchanan attacked a surfaced U-boat. In fact two separate attacks were made on that U-boat which was quite unusual for a single aircraft.

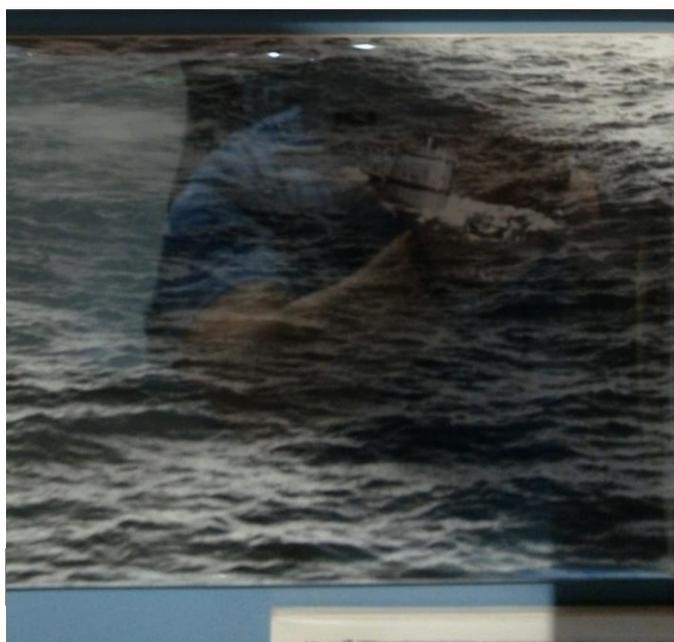
Like Homer, Sgt Howes identified the target and immediately engaged it by descending and discharging one of his four depth charges. He elected this tactic rather than releasing all four depth charges in salvo. Had he elected release in salvo, it would have left him with no other option but to disengage the target. A single depth charge was released at a height of 50 feet and set to explode at a depth setting of 24 feet to conserve his munitions for later use.

Howes' initial attack had little effect on the surfaced U-boat. He returned once more to re-engage the target with another round. The second attack was again launched from a height of 50 feet. This time his depth charge landed astride the U-boat's conning tower and had a visible impact. The U-boat's bow lifted out of the water, then immediately submerged, only to re-appear, bobbing like a cork before finally sinking from sight.

Sgt Howes and crew observed an oil slick. Bubbles percolated on the surface where the U-boat once was. Howes' Bolingbroke circled the location for over an hour hoping that the boat would re-surface. Had it re-surfaced, Howe was in position to re-engage and attack the target for the coup de grâce. It was not meant to be though. The weather deteriorated rapidly.

It began to snow. Howes' Bolingbroke was running low on fuel forcing Sgt Howes to leave the area with an undetermined result. Sgt Howes and crew landed safely back at Yarmouth in falling snow at 1905 hours ADT. Their patrol lasted approximately five hours and thirty-five minutes.

There was no conclusive evidence proving that Sgt Howes' attack was successful. But he did have proof in hand of an attack on a U-boat! Sgt Howes's observer managed to record three photographs of the surfaced U-boat. These photographs at least proved a U-boat was indeed there, and that a freighter was in peril!



Sixty-seven U-boats were at sea on Patrol on 23 March 1942.<sup>214</sup> German U-Boat operations ranged from Canadian shores, the mid and north Atlantic, the Arctic, to the Mediterranean. Allied naval resources were stretched thin. The U-boats on station strained the meagre resources required to protect merchant and other shipping.

This strain came at the time when there was little visible

evidence of the efficacy of land based aircraft in maritime surveillance or on anti-submarine patrol. The lack of evidence served to muddy the waters of airpower's effectiveness. 119 Squadron's attack and those from other units actually helped to turn the tide and staved off the U-boat threat.

119 Squadron's attack of 23 March was also a prelude to events that followed. U-553 soon entered the Gulf of St Lawrence. U-553's entry into the Gulf of St Lawrence marked the start of another campaign commencing 12 May 1942.

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<sup>214</sup> uboatnet.com, U-boats on Patrol this date, 23 March 1942  
Source: <http://www.uboa.net/boats/patrols/search.php>  
Accessed: 22 Jul 2016

But the Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence was still a long way off 23 March 1942. Regardless, U-boats operated very close to Canadian shores in the area of the continental shelf. U-754, the boat attacked, was just one of many U-boats operating there vying for 119 Squadron's attention that day!

On 23 March 1942, U-754 was operating in eastern Canadian waters in a position south of Newfoundland and east of Nova Scotia at 45.28, -56.13. It was *inside* the continental shelf. U-754 sunk one ship, the British Freighter Prudence, on 23 March 1942 that had sailed out of Halifax in convoy HX-181. Prudence was most likely the ship in distress that called for help.

Regrettably, the 8620-ton Prudence was sunk by U-754. U754's daily log recorded the event but did not note any subsequent air or naval attacks in its daily position reports on that day.

The clue to the identity of the U-boat was finally found in the record of an award of **Mention in Despatches (MiD)** to F/O Charles Stewart Buchanan of No.10 Squadron (Canada) – Award, effective 1 January 1944, published in the **London Gazette**, AFRO 113/44, 21 January 1944. The citation reads in part “As pilot of Bolingbroke 9066 of No.119 Squadron, he attacked U-754 east of Sydney, Nova Scotia on 23 March 1942”.

Surprisingly though, U-754 did not record any aerial attacks in its logs. There is a disparity between the German and MID records that casts some doubt on the veracity of the record, in spite of strong photographic evidence of a surfaced U-boat from Buchanan's aircraft. There was room for doubt that U-754 was not the U-boat in question.

But irrefutable proof was found in the position reports from both the Prudence and U-754. They were compared for 23 March 1942 and found to be the same daily position recorded as 45.28N, -56.13W.

We can now safely conclude therefore that the pictures taken by Buchanan in Bolingbroke 9066 of No.119 Squadron on 23 March 1942 were that of the surfaced U-754. The recorded positions are indisputable as they were specifically recorded as such by the opposing sides! U-754 escaped and made it back to Brest 29 April 1942.

U-754 did not linger long in port after its second patrol. It was replenished, returned to sea, and headed once again towards North American waters, departing Brest 19 Jun 1942.

This patrol was commanded by Kapitänleutnant Hans Oestermann. It was U754's last and fatal voyage to sea. All ended in disaster on 31 Jul 1942. U-754 was destroyed at the hands of Squadron Leader N.E. Small of No. 113 (BR) Squadron in a Hudson bomber.

U-754 was lost north of Boston, USA along with 43 souls. There were no survivors.

## 16. No 113 (BR) Squadron's pursuit of U-754

U-754 escaped destruction and disaster 23 March 1942. It survived an attack made by Sgt Howes and Buchanan and returned to its home port at Brest 29 April 1942.

Kapitänleutnant Hans Oestermann U-754's commander was at the helm of all three combat patrols. Hans Oestermann was born at Bremervörde on 19 May 1913. He joined the German Navy in 1933, and spent his early career as a first watch officer on destroyers. Oestermann transferred to U-boats in 1940 and began his training in July 1940, which was completed December 1940.

Oestermann's first command was U-151 which he assumed on 15 Jan 1941. Oestermann relinquished that command 21 July 1941. U-151 had no combat patrols. Oestermann was relatively new and inexperienced but was given command of a newer type VII six months later nonetheless. It was U-754.

U-754, a new and improved type VII(c) boat, was ordered 9 Oct 1939 shortly after the declaration of the Second World War. Its keel was laid 8 January 1940 and was launched 5 Jul 1941. U-754 was finally commissioned for active service 28 Aug 1941.

U-754 was built by Kriegsmarinewerft (KMW) at Wilhelmshaven. The Type VII U-boat was the mainstay and most ubiquitous U-boat in the German fleet. U-754's home port was Brest.

Kptlt. Hans Oestermann first patrol was a limited, local patrol in the Baltic sea around 30 Dec 1941. That patrol was basically a shake down cruise that ended 9 Feb 1942. His second patrol commenced one month later 7 March and concluded 29 April 1942. Oestermann headed in the direction of North America, to Canada's East Coast in particular.

U-754 notably recorded 135 days at sea on these three separate war patrols. U-754 was just off the east coast of Canada on 23 March 1942. U-754's object on 23 March 1942 was clear enough, the British Motor tanker, Prudence at 45° 28'N, -56° 13'W (German Naval grid reference- Grid BB 8631) which was sunk at 1531hrs. The Prudence's master was George Albert Dickson. Prudence was a straggler in convoy Hx-181.

Following the attack on the Prudence, U-754 surfaced in a dangerous area, in a that position was relatively known and thus, was greatly exposed. He was attacked by Sgt Howes and Sgt Buchanan in a Bolingbroke out of 119 Squadrons, RCAF but managed to escape.

Kptlt. Oestermann may have had no choice but to surface, most likely, as U-754 had reached the limits of its endurance. It was probably necessary in order to recharge his

batteries.<sup>215</sup> But it was just as likely that Oestermann was also making his daily position report, a mandatory requirement of Admiral Dönitz.

Despite evidence to the contrary, Oestermann did not report any attack by either naval or air forces while surfaced. He may have been reluctant to do so. It was sheer luck that U-754 returned safely to port from this patrol at all!

During its short time at sea, U-754 sunk a total of 13 ships amounting to 55,659 tons of shipping. One ship was reported as damaged amounting to another 490 tons. But Oestermann and the activities of U-754 would come to a sudden and definitive end.

No. 113 (BR) Squadron (RCAF) was a very distinguished squadron, based at Yarmouth NS, a neighbouring squadron to 119 Squadron (RCAF). The squadron fought bravely and most diligently during the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. No. 113 (BR) Squadron had many distinguished members including Pilot Officer R.S. Keetley and crew.

Pilot Officer R.S. Keetley was a deadly and persistent foe. For example, Keetley attacked U-165 on 9 September 1942. It escaped. Keetley subsequently launched a separate attack on U-517 later on September 16. Regrettably both vessels escaped destruction but they both noted the suffering blows from the intensity of Keetley's attacks.

Between September 24–25 No. 113 (BR) Squadron registered three more attacks on seven sightings on U-517 alone. U-517 kept eluding all its pursuers. Still it was spotted from time to time. U-517 was once again engaged and attacked on September 29 this time by Flying Officer M.J. Bélanger. Bélanger conducted three of the last four attacks on U-517. Bélanger was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for that effort.<sup>216</sup>

But No. 113 (BR) Squadron's most notable achievement came later, 31 July 1942. Squadron Leader N.E. Small of that squadron in Hudson 625 conducted a patrol in the vicinity of Sable Island. Small sighted the surfaced U-754. Small made three passes at U-754. His first pass dropped depth charges just as the submarine began to dive.

Small's second pass found U-754 just under the water in some apparent difficulty. It would seem that his depth charges had damaged the boat. On his third pass, Hudson 625 fired its front guns at the U-boat's conning tower.

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<sup>215</sup> Roger Sarty, **the "Battle We Lost at Home" Revisited Official Military Histories and the Battle of the St. Lawrence**, Canadian Military History, Volume 12, Numbers 1& 2, Winter/Spring 2003, pg. 43

<sup>216</sup> Gray, Larry (2007). *Canadians in the Battle of the Atlantic*. Edmonton, AB: Folklore Publishing. pp. 306–7. [ISBN 1-894864-66-2](#)

Squadron Leader Small observed the damaged boat for 55 minutes. To Small's surprise U-517 exploded before his eyes and that explosion finally settled the matter.<sup>217</sup> U-754 was sunk with all hands lost.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> *Attack on U-754 by Hudson 625 of 113 (BR) Squadron, July 31st, 1942". Canada in WWII. Juno Beach Centre. 2003–2014. Retrieved 2014-02-02.*

<sup>218</sup> "U-754". *uboat.net*. Retrieved 2014-02-03

## 17. Deep Impression – The Final Reckoning of 1942

The ubiquitous U-boat, found in so many theatres, swamped the Allies limited naval resources. The situation created gaps in their defence and air power was one expedient used to deal with them. Air power underscored the importance of addressing the U-boat threat in all aspects. Air power included the resources of both operational and training units.

Until 1941, the German Navy confined its activities largely in the approaches to the British Isles. It was inevitable though that they would eventually operate farther afield, deep in the Atlantic and closer to North American shores. This happened very quickly upon the occupation of France and the availability of new bases there.

The accidental entry of the U-boat in the Gulf of St Lawrence in 1942 was not an unexpected eventuality. It was expected. It was simply a question of “when”?

Canada made contingencies for this looming eventuality. These contingencies included military dispositions and preparations regarding maritime shipping traffic in the St. Lawrence River. One was the establishment of a naval base at Gaspé for a Gulf escort force.<sup>219</sup>

The St. Lawrence river traffic was a high value target concentrated in a confined area. But as nothing untoward happened in the Gulf of St Lawrence until 1942, little was done until events suggested otherwise. For “Nothing” after all was simply neither urgent, nor was it immediate.

Shipping traffic in the Gulf of St Lawrence was a matter of secondary importance in the greater scheme of things. The protection of ocean going carriage was the prime consideration of the Allied convoy system. Shipping in the St Lawrence estuary was unmolested while that of ocean going convoys to Great Britain were decimated! The military situation in the Gulf suggested that the risk be managed accordingly!

Canadian contingency plans were never an afterthought though. The Canadian Government actively considered its East and West Coast defences that predated the Second World War. Eastern Air Command was established on 15 September 1938 because of the Munich crisis in the event of a possible war. They had foreseen the potential of U-boat and naval threats there on the horizon.

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<sup>219</sup> Canada, National Defence Headquarters, Directorate of History, **REPORT NO. 30 HISTORICAL SECTION (G.S.), ARMY HEADQUARTERS, Army Participation in Measures taken by the Three Services for the Security of the Gulf of St Lawrence and the Lower River during the Period of German Submarine Activity, 1942-45**, 18 Nov 49 republished July 1986, pg. 2

So defence plans were developed that included bases and important defence works in Canada and the Gulf of St Lawrence. The real problem in all this was a question of balance. Resources were limited. Many competing demands presented themselves. There was only limited defence spending prior to 10 September 1939.

The many demands soon exceeded and overwhelmed capacity once the war started. Like many contingency plans, just enough was done, and a level of risk was accepted in what was left undone in the meantime. Risk was the accepted management strategy.

The Home War Establishment was eventually created, and tasked to coordinate it all. Subsequently, Canada's East and West Coast Commands were placed under its control. The Home War Establishment (HWE) became responsible for all defence contingencies with a strength of 14 active squadrons and No.110 (Army Cooperation) Squadron by the end of 1939.

Given our great coast line, Canada allotted only two squadrons for the maritime and anti-submarine role at the start of the war. This initial establishment fell short of the 16 squadrons really needed. In fact, 574 aircraft was the set baseline for the initial HWE defence plan. It was never attained at war's start.<sup>220</sup> It too was an accepted level of risk.

The required baseline was only achieved shortly after the Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence had commenced. It was largely achieved by press ganging supernumerary units into the fray.

### *...Into the Fray*

The U-boat threat in the Gulf of St Lawrence was addressed initially with the forces available after Canada's preliminary planning predating the war. The impacts in disparity of these resources and organizations was not felt until that first action in May 1942, at the time, the enemy finally entered the Gulf of St Lawrence.<sup>221</sup>

Still, their arrival was more by accident than by choice. The first enemy unit entered there because it was a seemingly quiet area to make quick repairs before heading back to their original patrol lines. But rather than returning, they soon found very lucrative and easy pickings.

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<sup>220</sup> The Juno Beach Centre, **Home Defence, The Creation of the Home War Establishment (HWE)**, 2003

Source: <http://www.junobeach.org/e/4/can-tac-air-hwe-e.htm>

Accessed: 20 January 2011

<sup>221</sup> Ibid, The Juno Beach Centre, **The Creation of the Home War Establishment (HWE)**, 2003

The conditions favoured the enemy who soon became ensconced in the St Lawrence estuary. Naval contact was difficult because of the bathyscaphe effect. The mixing of fresh and saline waters rendered the U-boat undetectable and thus stealthy.<sup>222</sup>

There were other factors aiding the enemy. The RCN was underequipped, lacked modern detection equipment on many of its ships; notably, HF/DF radio detection equipment. There was also a paucity of radar equipment that would have assisted in rendering the enemy visible for contact while surfaced.<sup>223</sup>

The air force was called upon to fill some of the gaps. But successful air attacks and contacts were weather dependent. Holes remained in coverage because of it as well as a paucity of available aircraft. What aircraft were available, also had limitations in capability, equipment, and modern aids.

Making successful visual contact on a surfaced U-boat from the air, all hinged on the powers of the observer; notably, the `Mark 1` eyeball. U-boats were notoriously difficult to spot. Finding one was often a matter of being in the right place at the right time.

But despite these advantages, U-boats remained very vulnerable when surfaced. Air power proved its true potential as U-boats were attacked relentlessly when found and surfaced. Air power kept the U-boat submerged, cowered, and dwelling in fear.

Surfacing was a simple matter of "time". U-boats were unable to remain submerged for any great length of time as it had to surface at some point to re-charge its batteries. It was a serious limitation of a U-boat. Consequently, they were forced to surface and, they were attacked!

### *...Making an impression*

Maritime airpower in the anti-submarine role, played out on Canada's east and in the Gulf of St Lawrence in 1942. It made a significant impression on Admiral Dönitz. It just wasn't seen so by Canadian authorities.

Admiral Dönitz was greatly impressed by the number of attacks made by both the RCN and RCAF. Dönitz was made very aware of the dangers they presented, notwithstanding the fact not one of his submarines was sunk, by either Canadian pilots or the RCN. Dönitz dared not to venture back into the Gulf until 1944.

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<sup>222</sup> Nathan M. Greenfield, 2004, pg. 60:

Bathyscaphe effect the blending of fresh and salt, cold and warm water in an Estuary system.

<sup>223</sup> Marc Milner, **Attack on Convoy SC-107**, Canadian History in Perspective, Navy Part 72, Legion Magazine November/December 2015, pg. 46

The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest running battle of the Second World War. The Battle cost on the one hand, 28,000 lives of 40,900 naval personnel who served in the U-boat service. Five thousand were taken prisoners of war. On the other side of the ledger 30,000 men of the allied merchant service also died in the Battle, including a great number of Allied naval personnel.”<sup>224</sup>

It was a tremendous butcher’s bill paid in life and treasure by both sides in the Battle of the Atlantic. It was a matter of winning or losing. The final outcome for either side would have changed the course of the war. It was the price paid in blood and treasure that tipped the balance to victory in the Allies favour. It was a close-run affair.

The Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence was a subcomponent of the Battle of the Atlantic. That Battle is often forgotten or easily overlooked in the annals of Canadian history. It is often cast as an unmitigated defeat that may be one reason why it is underplayed and given short shrift.<sup>225</sup>

But the reality of the matter was the “Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence” was not an unmitigated defeat. It may just have been an unknown Canadian military victory for reasons that aren’t always obvious.

The essence of the struggle was in the end, to deny the enemy any control over Canadian littoral waters. It wasn’t seen that way at the time though given that Canadian actions precipitated the closing the St Lawrence estuary to marine traffic. Much mercantile traffic was diverted overland by rail to alternate Canadian ports instead.

The cast as an “unmitigated defeat” was due to the significant shipping losses and casualties in the Gulf of St Lawrence stemming from the U-Boat incursions there in 1942. Those incursions dislocated many Canadian military plans, actions and initiatives. They impeded and delayed the construction of Gander/Goosebay airfield by at least six months. They also diverted huge military resources toward the U-Boat hunt.

But most importantly, it was the forced closure and restriction of merchant naval traffic in the River and the Gulf of St Lawrence in 1942 that were the obvious signs of failure and defeat. It was a black eye; a failure of Canadian military and government planning.

Success in the war was measured in terms of what was seen, that arose from concrete actions and results. The three effects of the German activities in the Gulf were evidence

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<sup>224</sup> Naval Historical Society of Australia, **British and German submarine statistics of World War II**, 2016

Source: <https://www.navyhistory.org.au/british-and-german-submarine-statistics-of-world-war-ii/>

Dated: 27 July 2016

<sup>225</sup> Roger Sarty, **the “Battle We Lost at Home” Revisited Official Military Histories and the Battle of the St. Lawrence**, Canadian Military History, Volume 12, Numbers 1& 2, Winter/Spring 2003, pg. 41-42

enough for the Battle to have been concluded as a singular German victory by Canadian authorities.

Canada's military actions seemed ineffective because immediate and apparent results did not support any other possible conclusions.<sup>226</sup> Results were measured in the ledgers as U-boat losses. In the Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence to the observer that appeared nil!

The enemy's archives cast a different light, offering a different perspective on the matter. But their perspective would come to light only after the war had ended!<sup>227</sup> This Battle was an unseen victory, one that was principally due to the combined arms of all Canada's armed services. In fact, all were involved in one way or another, the Royal Canadian Navy, Royal Canadian Air Force, and Canadian Army.

It was the combined effort in partnership with the RCN that was the key. Most importantly and still largely unrecognized was the fact that the German Navy did not return to Canadian internal waters in 1943 which was the unseen victory.

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<sup>226</sup> William S. Hanable, **Research Studies Series, Case Studies in The Use of Land-Based Aerial Forces in Maritime Operations, 1939-1990**, Air Force History & Museums Program, Washington, D.C. September 1998, pg. 14

<sup>227</sup> Anon. The Battle of the Atlantic, Canadian Naval Review, Vol.1 #1 (Spring 2005), pg. 19

## 18. With No Particular Place To Go

Life carried on. Many men and women had no idea what today or tomorrow would bring. Their lives during the war was often one of turmoil and anticipation, interspersed with danger and disaster. At other times, life was filled with immeasurable peace and joy even if only momentary. No day unfolded regularly. Each day was dealt with simply as it came, and life, was lived to the fullest!

Young and old alike, lived their lives in the attempt to attain some form of normalcy. The objects were simple; to enjoy the moment, to fill the day with fun and laughter, and play too! You just never knew when your end would come or how as your day unfolded.

There were constant reminders of one's mortality. It was seen in a steady flow of casualty lists and obituaries published daily in every newspaper of every town, village and city across the nation. These were the constant reminders of the trials and consequences of war.

Any diversion that brought happiness, a sense of normalcy or diversion from the realities of war was sought by all. That was especially true for those in uniform. Diversions made life bearable.

Surviving archives of base and station newsletters and papers are an insight here. Pukka Gen was Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.) 31's newsletter. It was published at infrequent intervals during the war. This newsletter provides a panorama of the life and times of the men and women at many operational and training units in Canada.

Pukka Gen cost a mere fifteen cents an issue. Paid advertising was used to help defray some of its publication costs. Those costs amounted to the tremendous sum of fifty cents a cover.

Pukka Gen wasn't the first publication attempted at Debert. It was preceded by Splinters first published two months after O.T.U. 31's arrival in Nova Scotia in 1941. The initial effort failed though. Subsequent efforts were made to revitalize and publish a formal newsletter that languished until 1942. A second attempt was made to resurrect the station magazine in what eventually became known as Pukka Gen.

Pukka Gen ran into some difficulty at its start up. It wasn't easy to get it up and running. The powers that be declared advertising revenues raised for the endeavour were illegal. The publication was stopped in its tracks by this directive.

Air Force Headquarters' (AFHQ) policy was firm, service magazines were no longer allowed to pursue advertisement revenue to help offset their costs. It would seem that Pukka Gen was doomed to failure too!

The publication would have languished and lost forever had it not been for a service organization that came to its rescue. They contributed cash to defray the measly \$150

required for publication of this much needed morale booster. But by the time the issue was finally resolved, Debert was about to be transferred to RCAF control. The last printing was Pukka Gen's swan song and a souvenir issue marking the occasion of the units stand down and handover to the RCAF.

Pukka Gen was published monthly for about eight issues before that happened. It provided welcome relief with news, commentary and humour of interest to the servicemen and women stationed at Debert.

The final souvenir issue was their impressions of the RAF stay in Debert. Their first impressions probably evolved over time. Debert's newly opened aerodrome was in a rather primitive state in 1941. Its pioneer inhabitants found very little to amuse them, and they began to look around for diversions.<sup>228</sup> Yet despite this poor beginning a good impression was made.

Group Captain Howard wrote in the final issue in 1944 that "Many will be leaving with pleasant memories of Canada and of the hospitality received from the Canadian people in Truro, from Canadians living in Debert and also whilst on leave in other parts of Canada.

I am sure all ranks would like to join me in thanking all the Canadian people who have offered us hospitality, and expressing to them the wish that we will all meet again in more peaceful times."<sup>229</sup>

Life and times were hard but it wasn't all bad as the CO's comments alluded too! Life was enjoyed to its fullest!

### *...Diversions mattered*

Diversions were important matter to the morale of a unit. There's nothing worse for a commanding officer than to have staff with time on their hands, with little to do, and minds unoccupied. Idleness and boredom often led to big trouble. You needed to keep the troops busy both on and off duty.

Diversions were important and could take many forms and guises. Printing a station news magazine was just one of them. But then again, throwing thousands of young people together, all in one spot, sharing much the same privations, and living similar experiences, created a very volatile mix.

Yes the students were there to study, to gain the skills to do a job; but then again, all work and no play makes Johnny a dull boy! An outlet beyond work and duty was very

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<sup>228</sup> LAC J. Ennis, Ed., **Pukka Gen**, Monthly Station News Magazine, published by permission of Group Captain L.W. Howard, DFC, Commanding Officer, RAF Debert, printed by Truro Printing & Publishing Co. Ltd., 30 June 1944

<sup>229</sup> Ibid Ennis, 30 June 1944

much needed if only as an outlet to release all that pent up energy. Some of that direction was the pursuit of amusement and female companionship.

The servicemen of the Second World War were no different from today's youth. Amusement was often directed along similar and familiar lines. It was really no different than "sex and drugs and rock and roll". It was all about living and maximizing a good time.

Young Evelyne Chisolm from Caledonia, NS recently graduated from high school in 1942. She was looking forward to a new career as a schoolmarm. Evelyne was accepted for teacher training at the Normal College in Truro. It was a big step for a country girl, with little experience of men or living outside the confines of her small rural community. As far as Evelyne was concerned, she was heading off to "the big city".

Evelyne remembered her first days at Normal School. Debert was at the zenith of a male population boom. The training at Debert saw tremendous influxes of airmen and soldiers with a lot of time on their hands.

Evelyne recalled two things in particular about her in-briefing to the Normal School. First, the predominantly female student body was advised that they were to avoid certain areas and establishments in the Town of Truro.

The young ladies of the Normal School were then informed that if they ever did go in these areas, they would be on the unwelcomed receiving end of undue attention from many of the off-duty military personnel.

Second, and this was important, they were emphatically told, in no uncertain circumstances, that "They were never, ever to go to Debert!"

But realistically, that was very hard to control. Young people somehow managed to find one another. The young were heedless of such warnings, exhortations, admonitions, and cautions. Many chose to ignore them. After all, the area was filled with lonely soldiers and airmen who simply wanted to get away from the mud and dreariness of training. And for our young ladies, the uniform proved exotic and irresistible for there was something appealing about a man in uniform. It was a volatile and uncontrollable mix!

Military life was debilitating and dreary in the early days of Debert. The base was filled with yawning gulfs of mud with exposed sewers and drains everywhere. There was unfinished construction all about. Many of its facilities were incomplete including living quarters. There was a need to get away from the drabness of this existence.

Deliverance came with a hop on the bus and a run into town that became a regular run for many a lonely serviceman. A quick hop on the bus to Truro only cost 35 cents return.

The reward at the end of the line was a few hours relief at least. They were able to walk up and down the streets, remembering what walking was like without mud underfoot. Then there was always the chance hope of an encounter of meeting someone there.<sup>230</sup>

Sadly Truro, like many Canadian towns at the time, wasn't a welcoming place. Many residents abhorred the invasion that had befallen them in an avalanche of newly arrived servicemen, with way too much time on their hands.

Regrettably with few options available, Truro was just about the only available leave or party destiny for many servicemen. They really had nowhere else to go!

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<sup>230</sup> Sergeant R. W. Harris, **Memories of Debert, N.S.**, undated  
Written account in Debert Military Museum Archives  
Source: <http://www.debertmilitarymuseum.org/harris.htm>  
Accessed: 5 October 2010

## 19. The Sights and Sounds of Truro

Servicemen had few amenities at Debert, and sought refuge at the nearest big centre. That was for them the town of Truro, NS, where they weren't always welcomed. Some servicemen said that only the public toilets at the railway station were open to them in the very early days. Then too, they were often under the scrutiny of the railway police!

The lucky ones on day pass or leave might just get a table at the Palliser Restaurant then located on Prince St. There they could while away a few hours from base if chance favoured them. The Palliser's meals were an affordable fifty cents! But odds were, there was often quite the wait.

The Palliser wasn't geared for the influx of military business or satisfying servicemen's needs. The restaurant employed only one waitress for the afternoon shift. There would often be a three hour wait for an order to be served. But then again, it was three hours away from the misery of the mud and the dreariness of Debert.<sup>231</sup>

Despite all difficulties and hardships, young people somehow managed to have a goodtime. Some even married. F/Sgt H. Jacks (RAF) found his true love in Truro in 1944. He married a local girl. Their nuptials were published in the June newsletter of Pukka Gen.

The station photographer and reporter, F/Sgt Davies, saucily suggested where Jacks' marital state would lead to in a year's time. Regrettably, the caption in Pukka Gen was truncated so we do not know who was F/Sgt H. Jacks' bride.

Surprisingly the military had few restrictions for married personnel regarding spousal visits or living arrangements. Many married men arranged accommodations for wives and children to either visit or to live in and around Truro. They rented whatever space or accommodation was available. It was a chance for a normal life even for a short time.

There were conditions to be adhered to though. Servicemen had to be in walking distance or a within a bus ride back to their unit. It was important to report on time for a duty shift. But the off duty hours were simply theirs to enjoy.

Many took advantage of a semblance of "family" life, by making their own arrangements. Young couples could live and remain together for a time, for the duration of a tour at least.

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<sup>231</sup> Sergeant R. W. Harris, **Memories of Debert, N.S.**, undated  
Written account in Debert Military Museum Archives  
Source: <http://www.debertmilitarymuseum.org/harris.htm>  
Accessed: 5 October 2010

The trouble was the lack of available accommodations. Accommodations were neither easily found nor readily available. Typically, the young couple would spend some days in hotels looking for a cheaper situation until something became available.

It was simply a matter of supply and demand in the boom of the war. There wasn't enough habitable space available for all. So beggars could not be choosers. Couples simply took what was there and then made do.

Sgt RW Harris did exactly that in 1943. He trained at Debert, was posted overseas and promoted Pilot Officer (RCAF), and subsequently repatriated back to Debert to the position of Flying Controller. His job was the equivalent of air traffic controller today. He arrived at #31 O.T.U., R.A.F. just before Christmas, 1943 with a wife and a six-month-old son in tow.<sup>232</sup>

The family stayed a night or two at the Palliser Hotel on Prince St., Truro, before they found accommodation in the home of Mrs. Brison. They rented a simple single room because nothing else was available.

Harris recalled that Mrs. Brison's home had no hallway upstairs. The Harris's shared the upper floor with another service family. The rented single bedrooms simply opened one onto another. Harris, wife and son had the first room while the second room was occupied by a R.A.F. airmen and his Canadian wife.

This situation was tight and uncomfortable. The women shared whatever facilities there were including the use of a wood burning cook stove, It was done without conflict or incident. The home was heated with wood from a pipe-less furnace. The warmth of the furnace simply wafted upwards through a large register in the front hallway floor.

The heat from downstairs was nebulous and quickly dissipated in the cold of the upper floor. Very little heat reached the upper levels of the house at all. The upper floor proved to be a veritable ice box.

One-night Harris found the baby's bottle frozen on the dresser. This misstep caused a considerable flap and uproar. A hungry baby cried, screaming like a banshee, demanding to be fed.

This kerfuffle caused some discomfiture for both young couples in those very tight quarters. The baby's bottle was left on their dresser so it would be at hand when required. But it froze solid! It took all Harris's effort to thaw the bottle that regrettably took some considerable time!

The bottle for the evening feed was never kept on the dresser after that. It was securely placed under a pillow of a sleeping parent thus ensuring it was always kept warm and more importantly, was immediately available on demand!<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid Harris, undated archive account

<sup>233</sup> Ibid Harris, undated archive account

Harris made several moves from one place to another throughout the war in order to improve his family's circumstances. Each had a tale of its own!<sup>234</sup>

The married men were the lucky ones. In one respect their diversions were directed to the well-being of their loved ones. Life went on in some form of domesticity for them at least. It alleviated one anxiety of "what to do" next. There was always something to do that would occupy their minds in a very meaningful way of getting on with life.

### *...The Single Men and Women*

It was a different story for the single serving men or women of the day. Still their lot wasn't all doom and gloom. Life in Truro evolved during the war and the town adapted. There was a vibrant social and cultural life once the base was fully complete and operational.

Station dances were held. Civil – military relations improved. There remained a certain reticent with the presence of such a huge population of single males. Their imminent presence imposed moral problems and concerns in the region, much to the dissatisfaction of the administration of the Truro Normal School and other community leaders. Busloads of girls came from Truro to meet the boys in blue, even when roads in spring or weather suggested it would be more prudent to stay away.<sup>235</sup>

Few at Debert had cars. Most service personnel made use of either buses or taxis. The taxi fare for the one way trip between Debert and Truro was \$2.50. It was quite the expense for the day. But fares were shared and split by many anxious servicemen looking for a way out and for a night on the town that was found in the hustle and bustle of downtown Truro.<sup>236</sup>

Those who remained on base had other diversions. There were movies in the recreation hall. Games and sports of every type were played that kept many engaged and otherwise busy. The favorite games of the day included basketball and squash. Then there was always a baseball game in season.

Crafts and hobby clubs abounded that included a camera club, a music appreciation circle, amongst the many activities available.<sup>237</sup> There was always something to keep one occupied but these were the staid activities.

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid Harris, undated archive account

<sup>235</sup> Ibid Harris, undated archive account

<sup>236</sup> Ibid Harris, undated archive account

<sup>237</sup> Ibid Harris, undated archive account

### *...Blowing off Steam*

The young at Debert were civilians in uniform who joined up for the duration. Many chafed under the bit of military rules and authority. Many bucked the system as a way of expressing their individuality and to see how far they could get away with it.

Perhaps it was the expression of youthful exuberance that was the underlying cause of concern for the Town of Truro and other such places. They paid the price for it in the off-hour pursuits!

There was another place to blow off steam, one that was closer to home and to monitor, the mess. The military is very hierarchical and each rank class has its own mess, one for the officers, one for the Sergeants and Warrant Officers, and one for the other ranks.

The mess was the heart of base life. It was a home away from home. Here the troops could relax and let their hair down to a point.

Alcohol and youthful exuberance were so often a dangerous mix. A mix deadly when compounded by a difference in rank distinction. The concoction could be humorously explosive.

The first graduates from Debert held a course party at the conclusion of their training in October 1941. It followed their disastrous training flight to Windsor, On that ended at Dorval Qc. They could not return to their own base to do so. Arrangements were made for a course graduation at the Officer's Mess in Dorval in which both officer and non-commissioned candidates of this course participated. It was a big mistake.

This particular course had an extremely tough time of it, having lost several comrades in tragic circumstances, most recently, on their very last exercise. They were ready to blow off a little more than steam.

Copious amounts of alcohol were consumed. Dorval's Base Commander, a Group Captain, made the mistake of leaving his service cap unattended in the mess cloak room. It shouldn't have been a problem. It was normal to leave one's cap in the cloak room. But to those raucous, now beer soaked airmen, it was the perfect receptacle to vent their spleens by peeing in his cap to rebel against service authority.

The Group Captain's hat was passed around and filled to the brim. Needless to say the Group Captain was less than amused. The graduates were about to move on and shipped out overseas. But their imminent departure was soon delayed as result of this incident. Dorval's commanding officer demanded to know the identities of the malefactors in the ruination of his service cap.

The course was held back at Dorval four days while awaiting the culprit(s) to fess up!

It was only by Eastern Air Command's (EAC) intervention that the graduates were finally allowed to leave in mid-November 1941. In the end, EAC ordered the Group Captain to release them.<sup>238</sup>

Chomping at the bit, chafing under military discipline, youthful rebellion, the need for amusement was problematic from the very beginning. It was a problem that set the tone and tension in civil-military relations that led to many ruptures in community harmony across Canada that would take a long time to heal.

For example, a fair came to town in July 1941. It was very well attended by the Army, O.T.U. 31's immediate neighbour. What was supposed to be a fun time, turned into a disaster. Trooper D. Dufresne of Montreal was wounded by gunshot in an argument with Frank Elliot, owner of the shows. The argument was over a \$5 prize from a game of chance. Dufresne alleged that Elliot cheated him out of his winnings.

Word spread throughout the Camp of this altercation. Five hundred angry soldiers from Camp Debert descended upon the fairgrounds the following day, 31 July 1941, rioted, and wrecked Elliot's amusement park. Only the Ferris wheel was left standing.

There were rumours of an en-masse gathering well in advance. Precautions were taken to protect the venue. The authorities knew something was amiss. Fifty military police were initially posted around the show. It wasn't enough. One hundred and forty-five military police were eventually called to quell the melee.

Despite all their efforts, the military police was unable to control the rioting soldiers and failed to stop the senseless destruction. The riot was eventually broken up, with no serious injuries. Regrettably it was all witnessed by thousands of Truro's town folk.<sup>239</sup>

This display did great harm to their reputation. It marked a significant turning point in the relations with the town's folk too. Their attitude had changed unfavourably towards the common soldier. It couldn't have happened at a worst time just when these soldiers needed relief the most. Harshness and restrictions were to be added burdens to their dreary lives. Doors were now shut and exclusions put in place.

*...Doors are closed*

Michael Dwyer, former Nova Scotia minister of mines, recounted one

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<sup>238</sup> Ernest E. Allen, **An RCAF Pilot's Story 1939-1945 from the memoirs of Ernest E Allen**, 1996, Part One - Pilot Training

Source: <http://www.seawaymall.com/eallen/>

Accessed: 13 August 2010, pg. 8-9 of 46

<sup>239</sup> Globe and Mail, **500 Soldiers Riot in Truro-Carnival Demolished After Trooper Wounded**, 31 July 1941, Canadian War Museum Archives, File (050- 031-016), 149 War European L939 Canada Army Riots, August 1941

Remembrance Day banquet at the Canadian Legion in November 1941. A young private soldier of his acquaintance, his guest, was barred by two soldiers with crossed bayonets from entering a leading Hotel in Truro. Three such hotels were now off-limits to private soldiers unless accompanied by a civilian chaperone.

Mr. Dwyer remarked "While the private soldier is willing to lay down his life overseas, apparently he is not good enough to eat in these places and must go to second and third-class places,"<sup>240</sup>

The doors were closed to the bulk of the military community because of the events of that July. It all had an adverse impact in many communities across Nova Scotia. An attempt to deflect and defuse the servicemen's anger was made by the local communities.

The concerned communities put forward the excuse that these restrictions were in place due to a request from military authorities because of the actions that had taken place earlier. This excuse infuriated Mr. Purdy. The Hon. C. G. Power, promised to investigate this situation further in response to a parliamentary question posed by G.T. Purdy (Liberal, Colchester-Hants).<sup>241</sup>

The scourge of public disorder and discord were widely felt throughout Canada not just at Truro. There were many such instances of civil-military discord throughout the land over the course of the war. They were widely written in local and national newspapers noting large bodies of servicemen rioting or fighting over some grievance or injury.

It was a clash of cultures that was at the heart of the issue. It arose from the young men and women uprooted from familiar surroundings, thrust into close quarters and mixed in unfamiliar communities. It was a situation where tolerance, patience, and understanding were required but where little equanimity existed or was extended. It was a cauldron where service and local customs grated. Overtime people adjusted and learned, if not to live together, at least to tolerate one another. It was eventually swept under the carpet and forgotten, only the pleasant memories remained.

John Innis, station reporter for Pukka Gen, in an article at the closing of O.T.U. 31 wrote "When the war ends, you who were stationed at Debert, will occasionally think of your stay in Canada; and your old copies of Pukka Gen will serve to remind you of all the new friends you made, and the happy times you had there. I hear grim laughter as I write

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<sup>240</sup> Hamilton Spectator., **Hotels Forbidden for All Privates**, 12 November 1941, Canadian War Museum Archives, File (047-015-038), 149 War European Canada Army Laws, August 1941

<sup>241</sup> Hamilton Spectator., **Truro Hotels Explain Cause of Troop Ban**, 14 November 1941, Canadian War Museum Archives, File (047-015-037), 149 War European Canada Army Laws, August 1941

“Happy Times”, but the mind has a queer habit of rejecting bad memories and you will find yourself becoming quite sentimental about Debert in the years to come.”<sup>242</sup>

Innis describes what is truly best in human nature, our ability to forget the bad and only remember the good. There were some very good times at Debert.

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<sup>242</sup> LAC J. Ennis, Ed., **Pukka Gen**, Monthly Station News Magazine, published by permission of Group Captain L.W. Howard, DFC, Commanding Officer, RAF Debert, printed by Truro Printing & Publishing Co. Ltd., 30 June 1944

## 20. Transition to RCAF Control

The tide of war changed imperceptibly by 1943. The Air Force was amongst the first to feel it. Victory was not yet imminent. There was still a way to go but what was evident was the change in requirements for men and materiel.

The first sign was an apparent glut of surplus air force personnel in the BCATP training system. This glut prompted a draw down in the program beginning in 1944. Training was curtailed. Eventually the Allies agreed to terminate the program entirely and it was to finally end 31 Mar 1945.<sup>243</sup> The British government requested that RAF schools be closed first.<sup>244</sup>

The ramifications of that decision were keenly felt amongst the trainees then in the system. Many felt that they were being robbed of the opportunity of serving their country. But the simple fact was, they were surplus to requirements. There was an over-abundance of aircrew. The training system was most successful. The question soon became “what do you do with the surplus personnel?”

Canada urgently required manpower elsewhere. RCAF Headquarters decided when it discontinued its training, it would simply transfer the surplus men to the Army Reserve. One thousand young men then quartered at RCAF Manning Depot Toronto were informed of the decision. They vehemently objected and protested. These recruits had no desire for a simple change of uniform, much less a transfer to the Army. Their only ambition was to wear Air Force “blue”.

The RCAF’s transfer policy was most objectionable as it also cast a pall on their manhood. The Army Reserve was viewed as less than desirable. It was perceived as a transfer to Canada’s “Zombie” army, the reserve of last resort.

The Zombie Army was to remain in Canada until so directed by Parliament. The transferred airmen wished no such association with that force. It came to the point that many wanted to be released to return to their civilian occupation if that was to be the case.<sup>245</sup> It was not the reason why they joined up. They wanted to do their duty and fight, but in the air force!

The decision to curtail the training may have been the right one for the Canadian taxpayer, but it played havoc with the airmen’s morale then in training. But the decision

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<sup>243</sup> F.J. Hatch, **Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945**, Department of National Defence Directorate of History, Monograph Series No. 1, © Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983, 1983, Chapter 9 for full details

<sup>244</sup> *ibid* Hatch, 1983 Chapter 9 for full details

<sup>245</sup> **Sense of Injustice Felt by RCAF Recruits**, Toronto Telegram, 26 October 1944

<http://collections.civilisations.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irm=5019489>

Accessed: 13 November 2014

was firm and final. Henceforth, Canada no longer sent air force reinforcements overseas.<sup>246</sup>

Canada had an excess of 10,000 aircrew in training on 7 November 1944. The plan was simply to herd those in the system towards civilian reserve upon graduation and then, demobilize. RCAF officials stated that only a smattering of aircrew would be posted overseas in future.<sup>247</sup>

The war was indeed winding down, at least from the air force's perspective. It came down to determining and retaining what was truly essential. A rationalization process began that became a matter of establishing priorities.

On Canada's east coast, No. 31 Operational Training Unit at Debert and No. 36 at Greenwood, NS, were both quickly identified as essential and re-designated as No. 7 and No. 8 RCAF Squadrons respectively. They were eventually re-designated and staffed by RCAF personnel.<sup>248</sup>

But in the meantime, until that happened, Debert continued to function as O.T.U 31 and fulfilled its mandate in BCATP training. Yet, winding down of the BCATP meant the general winding down of the training at Debert too. It was well known that Debert was marked for closure given the British government's request at the curtailment of the BCATP.<sup>249</sup> The winding down of the plan would greatly impact the community's post-war prospects and economic prosperity.

### *...The Transfer*

The decision to remove O.T.U. 31 from the RAF's order of battle made the cancellation of further intakes very simple. But closing the airfield was not a simple matter. Debert was about to change its mandate and began training crews for Bomber Command.

There were a number of factors that deferred Debert's closure:

- The airfield was to be re-equipped with the Mosquito bomber
- The delivery of the Mosquito bomber was expected April 1944

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<sup>246</sup> [No More Contingents of Air Force Personnel Will Sail for Britain](#), Globe and Mail, 18 November 1944

<http://collections.civilisations.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5019385>

[Accessed: 13 November 2014](#)

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, No More Contingents, Globe and Mail, 18 November 1944

<sup>248</sup> ibid Hatch, 1983, pg. 184

<sup>249</sup> ibid Hatch, 1983 Chapter 9 for full details

- Conversion to the Mosquito meant the training on Hudson Bombers was “redundant”
- Hudson airframes were considered a drain on resources
- The Hudson bomber was retired and replaced
- Key maintenance personnel were sent for training on the DeHavilland Mosquito.

Regardless, the curtailment of training at Debert on the Hudson bomber began. One course schedule for March 1944 was cancelled. The courses currently in progress were permitted to be completed.

By May 1944 it was all but over for the Hudson Bomber at Debert. The implementation of the new mandate freed the field for the incoming RCAF unit and its Mosquito Bombers. The need for Mosquito trained crews became paramount as it was deemed the most urgent requirement overseas.<sup>250</sup>

The execution of the plan was not so easily implemented. O.T.U. 31 still had a commitment to carry out an anti-submarine patrol for EAC. O.T.U. 31 carried out this task regularly until 21 December 1943. It kept the requirement for the unit alive under RAF control.

Ironically, RAF officials at O.T.U. 31 argued at the time that this task was an undue strain on the training program, and asked that O.T.U. 31 be relieved of the task. The anti-submarine commitment impacted the unit by creating a lag in training. This lag was also exacerbated by delays arising from weather and from a general shortage of available aircraft. All these factors, it was also argued, drained resources that were already thinly spread.<sup>251</sup>

EAC finally relented and agreed that O.T.U. 31 could curtail this role commencing 19 January 1944 to get on with the primary role of training. It was a compromise of sorts.

O.T.U. 31 was eventually released from its anti-submarine patrol commitment. But little had changed in effect. The training profile and anti-submarine commitment were modified slightly. It may have resulted in an overall reduction of hours devoted to the anti-submarine role. But it remained a significant commitment nonetheless.

O.T.U. 31 maintained an anti-submarine commitment of two days of patrols of 3-1/2 hrs. and 5-1/2 hours respectively. It also maintained one night patrol of 3 hours duration. These reduced hours were subsequently fitted into the training schedule commencing 19 January 1944.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg. 5

<sup>251</sup> Ibid DHH 74/13, pg. 5

<sup>252</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, File 181.002 (D237) - **Operational Commitments - 31 O.T.U.**, 3 February 2011 (letter RCAF G 32A 1100M-10-41 (1022) H.Q. 1062-9-36, Letter “R.A.F. Schools, Debert, N.S. 25<sup>th</sup> January 1941)

This reduced commitment though was likely enough to hasten the decision to close this RAF school. However, the RAF did not wish to relinquish control so easily.

The “anti-submarine” role was a very important consideration. Even though the RAF was on record in stating that the anti-submarine task was not what they were there for, it took that as an opportunity to delay the handover of the field to RCAF.

Thus began the slow process of the handover of the school. Maintaining the airfield was a costly venture at this stage of the war. But one deadline after another passed in the delayed handover from RAF to RCAF control.

Initially the RCAF agreed to assume control of Debert by 1 April 1944. That deadline soon came and passed. Problems and delay forestalled the handover, the greatest being, the number of RAF personnel stationed there. There was certain reticence within the RAF to have its personnel under direct Canadian command and control.

A sliding scale was implemented to assuage those sensibilities. A suitable date was selected based on a tipping point when the base achieved a RAF /RCAF personnel ratio of 50/50. It was agreed that once this tipping point was reached a confirmed handover date would be set and a handover to “Canadian” command and control under the aegis of the RCAF.<sup>253</sup>

The RAF was the senior service relative to the RCAF. The delay in the handover nominally may have been due to a reticence of serving under its junior partner. But there may also have been a certain reluctance and hesitation in handing over a mature facility developed and commanded by the RAF too. Debert was their home for a number of years.

By June 1944 the number of RCAF personnel posted to Debert finally hit the magic number. The appropriate transfer date was set as 30 June 1944. Organization Order No.383 was then signed. O.T.U. 31 was disbanded effective 1 July 1944. No.7 O.T.U. RCAF was subsequently created and stood up by order, NO.384.<sup>254</sup>

The day of the Hudson bomber at Debert finally passed. The new stallion in the stable was the Mosquito bomber. Sadly, the future of the Hudson Bomber, the work horse of training at Debert, was bleak. Some were sent overseas. Others were issued to communication flights and squadrons in Canada.

The Hudson was no longer wanted nor was it required as an operational aircraft. The Hudson, relegated to the communication and transport flights, saw their role overshadowed and increasingly dominated by the venerable C-47 Dakota (DC3 civil).<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid DHH 74/13, pg. 5

<sup>254</sup> Ibid DHH 74/13, pg. 5

<sup>255</sup> Ibid DHH 74/13, pg. 7

*...The End Was in Sight*

The Hudson bomber was on its way out of inventory and was soon declared surplus to requirements. Operational Training Unit 31's Hudson bombers were sent to No.3 R.D. Scoudouc, NB, for disposal. The last departed Debert 18 July 1944.

The end of the war was finally in sight! But up until that time, training continued in earnest with the cost of additional lives. On 30 November 1944, Pilot Officer Breadner and Flying Officer K.B. Bennett were both killed when their Mosquito aircraft #KB278 struck a hill three miles north of Westchester, Nova Scotia. Pilot Officer Breadner was only 20 years old when he met his end.

Young Breadner left behind to grieve, like many other Canadian families who lost a loved one at the time, his father, and Canada's Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Lloyd S. Breadner, and his mother, Mary Evelyn of Ottawa, Ontario.<sup>256</sup>

Ironically it was Air Chief Marshal Breadner's request that brought the O.T.U.s to Canada, and the manning of a station at Debert. It all led to a very deep personal loss and tragedy in the death of his son, Donald Lloyd.

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<sup>256</sup> Find a Grave, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=20856798>, accessed: 20 December 2010.

## 21. The Tiger Force

Nineteen forty-four, a pivotal year, saw considerations, deliberations, and plans of the Allies come to fruition in the final phase of the war in Europe. The dawn on D-Day, 6 June 1944, launched all these plans and deliberations into action with the assault on and liberation of Fortress Europe.

Hard times and many battles lay ahead for the Allies from June 1944 to the end in May 1945. Victory in Europe was achieved on 8 May 1945 but the war was not over despite the unconditional surrender of Germany. Now the Allies could focus all their time and effort towards the defeat of Japan. That was always the plan.

On 8 May 1945 the war started to wind down. Demobilization would occur gradually. The shift of emphasis to the defeat of Japan was a reprieve of sorts for some of the airfields once used by the BCATP. They would be used either as staging or training areas. The next phase of the war; the gathering of forces, concentrating them, marked that change.

Debert was spared closure yet once again. It was blessed with yet another life. RCAF Squadron No 7 that replaced O.T.U 31, changed and transformed the base as it began bomber training. A further transformation came with returning RCAF forces repatriated from Great Britain that soon displaced No 7 Squadron RCAF.

The repatriated units were the foundation of a “Tiger Force”, the air element representing Canada’s contribution toward the defeat of Japan. The training for the Tiger Force at Debert began with the arrival of the Lancaster bomber.

The new job at Debert was now refocused totally to train and prepare for the final invasion of Japan. No. 7 Squadron RCAF, first RCAF unit at Debert, terminated mosquito training. The arrival of 63 Wing, part of Canada’s Tiger Force bomber contingent of 141 Lancaster Mk. X’s from Great Britain supplanted that mission now that the war in Europe was over.<sup>257</sup>

### *...The Tiger Force*

The “Tiger Force” was proposed by Winston Churchill back in 1944 where he and Roosevelt met at the Quebec Conference, September that year. Churchill proposed that Great Britain transfer between 500 to 1000 of its heavy bombers, to the Pacific theatre to assist the United States.

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<sup>257</sup> Anon. Lancaster's Of Tiger Force - Canada’s Contribution to Tiger Force, [www.lancaster-archive.com](http://www.lancaster-archive.com) ,Updated: June 2008  
Source: [http://www.lancaster-archive.com/lanc\\_tigerforce.htm](http://www.lancaster-archive.com/lanc_tigerforce.htm)  
Accessed: 13 August 2010

Churchill vowed to release this force only after victory in Europe was achieved. President Franklin D. Roosevelt quickly accepted Churchill's generous proposal.<sup>258</sup> The wheels for creating a "Tiger Force" were set in motion.

The final decision for this force was made on 20 October 1944. The initial planning for the force structure was planned about a formation of twenty-two squadrons in three bomber groups. The Royal Air Force (RAF), the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and a number of miscellaneous nationalities within the existing squadrons of Bomber Command were to provide the bomber groups for this Tiger Force.

The miscellaneous group included the Royal Air Force, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) and South African Air Force (SAAF).<sup>259</sup>

Over time that initial force structure was greatly reduced to a commitment of ten bomber squadrons allocated in two groups, one coming from RAF and the other from RCAF squadrons. A final revision of the force structure further reduced the commitment to eight squadrons. These became the final planning elements for the task.

Concurrent to that planning effort, key decisions were also made in the composition of the air assets and weaponry. The principal weapons for the Tiger Force were founded on the availability of the Avro Lancaster and the Consolidated Liberator. Canada looked at replacing the Avro Lancaster with Avro Lincoln's (still in production) when they became available in quantity.<sup>260</sup>

### *...The Question of Leadership*

Canada contributed a significant portion of the resources required for the "Tiger Force". The size of that contribution demanded Canadian Leadership and oversight. A Canadian hand was necessary. The Royal Canadian Air Force by this time was a very well trained force. The RCAF ranked the fourth largest air force amongst the Allies. Canadians were no longer amateurs but leaders in the employment of air power.

The RCAF largely operated under the umbrella and control of the RAF during the Second World War in Europe, an umbrella that became most unpopular over the course of the war. The size of the Canadian contribution and the risks assumed by RCAF personnel demanded Canadian oversight in the tremendous investment made in Canadian treasure and lives too!

Canada and the RCAF had little control over the use and employment of its resources for the better part of the Second World War. Given the size of the investment and sacrifices,

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid Lancaster's Of Tiger Force. June 2008

<sup>259</sup> Ibid Lancaster's Of Tiger Force. June 2008

<sup>260</sup> Ibid Lancaster's Of Tiger Force. June 2008

there eventually came a great push, debate, and demand for the Canadianization of units overseas.

Canada had built a tremendous air arm and weapon of war. Its achievements alone paid for a prominent role in the Tiger Force. More importantly there was a need to ensure that Canada maintained a voice, marking its own policies that ensured its ideals were carried out and given due weight in the councils of the world.<sup>261</sup>

More importantly was the assurance above all that Canada's sovereign choices were secured in the prosecution of the war against Japan. Canada now chose to exercise full sovereignty and independence as a sovereign nation, attendant with the risks involved in the final phase of the war.

It was an onerous task. Canada needed to ensure that its resources were properly utilized concomitant with the investment, dangers and pitfalls in the application of the task that would ultimately consume young Canadian lives. Capable leaders were necessary and selected to ensure that vision and oversight was maintained.

Air Vice-Marshal C. Roy Slemon of Winnipeg, Manitoba was nominated to be Canada's Task Force Commander for the RCAF's Pacific force in 1945. Air Vice-Marshal Slemon, an airman of great prominence, was the first member trained by the RCAF after the first Great War. First and foremost, Slemon was a capable and respected leader.

Uppermost in Slemon's mind were Canada's obligations, share and responsibility toward ending the war in the Pacific. He was tasked with the preparation of the volunteers who had just returned from Europe. Slemon would hone their skills further. His weapon was first honed in the European theatre where the RCAF had an outstanding reputation of being both a highly efficient and a hard hitting force.<sup>262</sup>

Air Vice-Marshal C. M. (Black Mike) MacEwen, DFC, of Montreal, Quebec was also called to the fray. MacEwen too was to be assigned a prominent role. MacEwen was made the Pacific theatre commander, head of the Canadian bombing group. It was a wise choice.

MacEwen was a man's man and a sympathetic commanding officer. MacEwen served in Europe with No. 6 Bombing Group from February 1943 to June 1945 until the cessation of hostilities. He was a well-regarded airman of note. MacEwen was a World War I ace. He was one of Canada's most renowned figures in two air wars.

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<sup>261</sup> ["Canadian Fliers Ready For Pacific, Slemon Reports"](#), Globe and Mail, 9 July 1945 Source:  
<http://collections.civilisations.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5134516>  
Accessed: 13 November 2014

<sup>262</sup> Ibid ["Canadian Fliers Ready For Pacific, Slemon Reports"](#), 9 July 1945

MacEwen was a fighter pilot who shot down 34 enemy aircraft during the First World War. MacEwen served under the famous W. G. Barker, - VC.<sup>263</sup> AVM MacEwen was affectionately known to his men as “Black Mike”.

But MacEwan was a most unusual commander, best known for his keen interest for all his subordinates. He was one commander who frequently visited bombing stations under his command. His visits weren't mere site visits. MacEwan came during operations with a mission, to make sure that his subordinates were keenly aware of his personal interest in their welfare.

MacEwen was unusual in this sense because he truly believed in building the team from the ground up! All his team members were important. No role was neither too small nor unimportant. They were all key to a winning combination.

MacEwen's concern for the welfare of his men included all who served under his command, not just aircrew. He truly respected the efforts and the importance of ground staff, who supported his heavy bombers. He was loved and respected for this by all his subordinates. MacEwen, the man of such varied and valuable experience, made his selection as theatre commander inevitable.

MacEwen was also well versed in the needs of training. MacEwen was the air force officer who once commanded No. 7. Training Command at Toronto, No. 3 Training Command at Montreal, and No. 1 Operational Group in Newfoundland at various times during the war.<sup>264</sup> Thus MacEwen was very familiar and an intimate with all details of command and training. His leadership ensured the Tiger Force was properly led from the top down!

### *...The Wings*

No. 6 Bombing Group was composed of four Wings: No's 661, 662, 663 and 663 (Heavy Bomber) Wings. This group, equipped with aircraft and personnel, directly transferred from England to Canada was the Tiger Force. The task of creating this force was simplified as a matter of transferring the elements of No. 6 Group, RCAF back to Canada. Formation orders were subsequently issued to that effect after VE Day.<sup>265</sup>

The squadrons arriving back from England upon repatriation following VE day were truly wholly Canadian. In addition to personnel, the groups were already equipped with the Canadian built Lancaster Mk. X's FM and KB series. Canadian built equipment greatly simplified the Tiger Forces supply, maintenance and logistics requirements.

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<sup>263</sup> [Black Mike Quits After 30 Years](#), Globe and Mail, 27 April 1946,

Source:

<http://collections.civilisations.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5020238>

Accessed: 13 November 2014

<sup>264</sup> Ibid Black Mike, Globe and Mail, 1946

<sup>265</sup> Ibid Lancaster's Of Tiger Force. June 2008

The FM and KB series were built by the Victory Aircraft Production plant at Malton, Ontario. They were part of Canadian shipments overseas that arrived in England mid-1944. This was a wise move that saw all Canadian squadrons operate with the same Lancaster variant.<sup>266</sup>

### ...The Stations

The Canadian group was comprised of No's 661, 62, 63 and 664 wings. No. 63 Wing, RCAF was stationed at Debert, Nova Scotia, Canada. No. 63 Wing, RCAF components included:<sup>267</sup>

- No. 420 Squadron, RCAF
- No. 425 Squadron, RCAF

The big picture was much larger than Debert. Canada allotted 141 Lancaster Mk. X's to its Tiger Force. These units were trained at:<sup>268</sup>

<b>Wing</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Formation Date</b>
No. 661 Wing	Yarmouth, Nova Scotia	July 15-September 5, 1945.
No. 62 Wing	Dartmouth, Nova Scotia	July 15-September 5, 1945.
No. 63 Wing	Debert, Nova Scotia	August 1- September 5, 1945
No. 664 Wing	Greenwood, Nova Scotia	August 1- September 5, 1945

The Tiger Force was to be deployed in 1946. Training on the Lancaster began in earnest upon arrival that summer of 1945. The Lancaster bomber was only an interim measure. All RCAF Lancaster bombers in the Tiger Force were to be replaced eventually with newly built Canadian Avro Lincolns.

Re-equipment would take place once the production number of Lincolns coming off the production lines was achieved in sufficient number.<sup>269</sup> It never happened. The surrender of Japan on 2 September 1945 rendered the point, the requirement, and the "Tiger Force", moot. The Tiger Force was disbanded soon after. It was no longer required. So too, had the airfields and other facilities become surplus to requirements.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid Lancaster's Of Tiger Force. June 2008

<sup>267</sup> Dave O'Malley, **Last call for the Avro Lancaster: From Tiger Force to derelict on the Alberta prairie**, RCAF News Article, 13 March 2014  
<http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/article-template-standard.page?doc=last-call-for-the-avro-lancaster-from-tiger-force-to-derelict-on-the-alberta-prairie/hspruu8s>  
 Accessed: 14 November 2014

<sup>268</sup> Ibid Dave O'Malley, 13 March 2014

<sup>269</sup> Ibid Lancaster's Of Tiger Force. June 2008

### *...On the Chopping Block*

Without a purpose, Debert came once again on the chopping block of Crown Assets Disposal. The firm decision made in 1943 to commence winding down the BCATP with the final termination in March 1945 proved significant.<sup>270</sup> The financial taps for many communities were turned off as units disbanded and closed.

Debert and other airfields were briefly spared when there was a proven need. Concurrent to all this though was Canada's consideration for its post war future. There was always hope of reprieve. But dark days lay ahead, economically, for many towns and villages as the war ground to an end and the airfields and stations closed. Hard decisions were made. There would be winners and losers after the war.

Looking back on 1943, victory was never a certainty. The inner circles of government began to look forward. "Victory" may have been fore-shadowed in the successes of the BCATP as well as Canada's industrial production.

This foreshadowing may have prompted some optimism regarding Canada's post war prospects. It may have fostered some decisions to the end re-alignment of resources with consequence to the final impacts, the eventual draw-downs, and the changing demands placed on Canada's economy. Choosing the right path for the way ahead was not going to be easy.

By late 1944, victory was just a matter of time. May 1945 brought the joy and relief of Victory in Europe. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki led to Japan's unconditional surrender on 2 September 1945. That finally ended the war and brought about a new threat to the world order, nuclear war.

Japan's surrender rendered Debert's purpose and those of many other bases, stations and establishments in Canada, moot.<sup>271</sup> Now came the time. What to do with them? But life went on for a time until that was sorted out.

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<sup>270</sup> F.J. Hatch, **Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945**, Department of National Defence Directorate of History, Monograph Series No. 1, © Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983, 1983, 178- 183

<sup>271</sup> Anon, **Lancaster's Of Tiger Force- Canada's Contribution to Tiger Force**, [www.lancaster-archive.com](http://www.lancaster-archive.com), June 2008

Source: [http://www.lancaster-archive.com/lanc\\_tigerforce.htm](http://www.lancaster-archive.com/lanc_tigerforce.htm)

Accessed: 13 August 2010

## 22. Girl on the Wing

The war in Europe ended May 1945, but life carried on much as usual at Debert. There was little let up or respite in its training that would continue until the final days of the war in September 1945.

Right up to VJ day, Canadians, politicians, administrators, and the military chain of command pondered what to do next with its BCATP air fields. In the mean time aircrews had to be kept busy.

Debert was saved from closure. Training continued fast apace. first with the arrival of No. 7 RCAF Squadron and then No. 63 Wing (Tiger Force). Too many people much of that activity appeared only to be concentrated in and around the air field.

Nothing ever seemed to happen outside its boundaries. Little impact or consequences were known to communities outside those boundaries until something happened, especially around Nova Scotia.

But the unexpected often did happen. There were some 300 air crashes of consequence in and around Nova Scotia during the war.

Some events in our lives are indelible, remembered as if they happened yesterday. One such an event was the air crash in a field at Glenelg, NS just at the end of the Second World War. Claire McKeen and Graham Kirk, both lifelong residents of Glenelg, remembered it well. They were just 15 and nine years old respectively at the time.

It seems appropriate to record their recollections so long after the fact. Their recollections were captured in 2015. That year marked an important anniversary for Canada. It was the 70th anniversary, the end of the Second World War. The eighth of May 1945, VE Day, was the end of the war in Europe.

For many Canadians the 8<sup>th</sup> of May was the final act of the Second World War. In fact, the war was not yet over. There was still Japan and the Pacific war to be dealt with.

The final push on Japan was the final act. True peace was delayed until Japan's unconditional surrender was achieved. Some thought that peace was still a long way off in the late summer of 1945.

Our government wanted Canada to be represented in the final act. There was no big Canadian role planned though. Canada was to send elements of all three of its armed services to participate in the Pacific fray as a token force to satisfy a commitment made to our allies.

A Tiger Force was assembled by the Royal Canadian Air Force as part of that effort. No. 6 Air Group was reformed and re-assembled from air units recently returned from England.

The units of No. 6 Group trained at many bases in Nova Scotia for this upcoming mission in which the Army and Navy would also participate.

In so far as the training continued, Saturday, 11 August 1945, was a typical summer day. But it would be atypical for one unit at No. 6 Group. It would visit Glenelg, Nova Scotia in an unseemly manner. An air crash occurred there.

The crash was witnessed by Claire McKeen (nee Cruikshank), Graham Kirk and many others. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of August, the war or the remnants of the war, were suddenly made very real to the people of Glenelg. The ladies of the community had just gathered for the local monthly Women`s Institute meeting at the home of Herbie McLaughlin. This was a social occasion of note, especially for the children there. It was an excuse, for what young people do on those occasions, get together. laugh, play and socialize while their elders attended to the more important matters of the community.

In the distance the children heard the roar of piston engines and saw a low flying aircraft circling the hills around the St Mary`s River and Lead Mines. Claire McKeen remembers she was in the company of three friends that afternoon. It was in the mid-afternoon between two and three PM. The temperature was a sultry 27 centigrade.<sup>272</sup>

Claire was only 15 years old at the time. She remembers this unique event quite clearly.<sup>273</sup> An Avro Anson appeared over Glenelg, flying under control, and was proceeding away from Glenelg in the direction of Silver`s Pool on the St Mary`s River.

Suddenly the aircraft turned and backtracked up river on approach to a cornfield at Glenelg. The field was bounded by the West River branch of the St Mary`s River and the crossroads on Highway 348 . The plane touched down shortly thereafter.

The landing was both a surprise and eventful. An Avro Anson touched down. Its wheels soon collapsed, with engines churning the dirt, and then coming to a skidding halt. Official records indicate that “The landing gear collapsed during harsh application of the brakes”.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Weather Underground, [Weather History for CXTD \(Antigonish\), Nearest airport to Antigonish, Nova Scotia](http://www.wunderground.com/history/airport/CXTD/1945/8/25/MonthlyCalendar.html?req_city=Antigonish&req_state=&req_statename=Nova%20Scotia&reqdb.zip=00000&reqdb.magic=2&reqdb.wmo=71308), Saturday 11 August 1945

Source:

[http://www.wunserground.com/history/airport/CXTD/1945/8/25/MonthlyCalendar.html?req\\_city=Antigonish&req\\_state=&req\\_statename=Nova Scotia&reqdb.zip=00000&reqdb.magic=2&reqdb.wmo=71308](http://www.wunserground.com/history/airport/CXTD/1945/8/25/MonthlyCalendar.html?req_city=Antigonish&req_state=&req_statename=Nova%20Scotia&reqdb.zip=00000&reqdb.magic=2&reqdb.wmo=71308)  
Accessed: 28 April 2015

<sup>273</sup> Interview Claire McKeen, Glenelg NS, **Claire`s recollection of an air crash at Glenelg, NS WWII**, conducted by telephone 23 April 2015, 1400-1425 hrs, author`s archives

Unless otherwise cited or noted, this is Claire`s recollection, account and story on the day.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid Larsen

Graham Kirk, another witness, only 9 or 10 years old at the time, remembered the plane landing in the field too. The plane came up through the yard at Herbie McLaughlin's home who lived on Lead Mine Road. Graham followed its approach and remembers the events unfolding exactly as Claire did.

Graham saw the aircraft touch down. But he saw it swerve as it landed towards the crossroads. To Graham it seemed that the aircraft hit an embankment where the force of the impact caused the landing gear to collapse. Graham saw the aircraft belly skid across the field before coming to a halt.

Graham remembers the aircrew of three were neither excited nor upset by their recent experience. There was a flurry of activity as many rushed to the scene to lend assistance. Luckily, the crew was uninjured.

The Avro Anson ended up in Ernest Jordan's Hayfield. It was the subject of much interest and the crash was well documented in photographs, one of which portrays a young girl on the wing of Avro Anson Serial #12578 that crashed at Glenelg on 11 August 1945. That young girl was Claire McKeen.



Plane Crash in field at Glenelg

Claire MacKeen

Photograph from the files of Timmy MacDonald, Memories in Pictures, With permission

Avro Anson Mk V Serial #12578, flying out of No. 6 (RCAF) Group Communications Flight at Debert, NS, was on a training mission in the general area of New Brunswick - Nova Scotia.<sup>275</sup>

The crew said they were caught in a thunderstorm that formed over the hospital at Antigonish and then became disoriented. They diverted their aircraft south in the direction of Glenelg in the hope of avoiding this nasty system.

Avro Anson Mk. V #12578 was piloted by F/L M. J. Callahan accompanied by two passengers that day, LAC A. Tubb and LAC A. Drew.<sup>276</sup> The official crash report states that “The pilot got lost flying from Scoudouc to Debert. He did a square search but was unable to get a pin point on his true location.”

Callahan elected to do a precautionary landing. He only had 30 minutes of safe flying left. He flew over a field once then came in for a landing near Glenelg, New Brunswick (*record is incorrect*).

The field was fairly short and *a farmer raking in the field* (for emphasis) caused the pilot to apply the brakes harshly. The undercarriage collapsed when the brakes were applied.<sup>277</sup>

The accident report and the recollections of those there, give us a general flight track of Avro Anson Mk. V Serial #12578. The Anson was part of Debert’s unit establishment. It was on a flight outbound from Scoudouc, NB to Debert, NS for an unspecified reason.

F/L Callahan was on a return flight departing from Scoudouc, NB heading generally eastward toward Debert, his home base. The flight plan from Scoudouc to Debert was relatively easy to fly. The flight track was bounded by many known points and geographical features.

We have no idea what F/L Callahan’s actual flight plan was though. All we do know from the accounts is that he ended up over Antigonish, NS surprising as there were many known waypoints along the way, Amherst, Parrsborough, and so on.

The waypoints should have assisted his orientation and navigation. There was also a clear path pointing the direction to Debert. The approach was along the railroad lines and TransCanada Highway that pointed the way to Debert if Callahan had proceeded overland.

There was nothing in the report that commented on the weather, other problems, time of day, or other details that may have indicated why the pilot encountered difficulty in locating Debert or why he ended up near Antigonish. The report was typical of its time,

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<sup>275</sup> Email Major Chris Larsen, Wing Historian CFB Debert, NS, 30 April 2015

<sup>276</sup> Ibid Graham Kirk, this confirms Graham’s recollection

<sup>277</sup> Ibid Maj Larsen (RCAF) May-08-15 1:08:44 PM,

rendering the story in one simple paragraph and conclusion. Not much time was spent either in analysis or on details.

This should have been an easy return trip. The reasons why F/L Callahan got lost or why he didn't have a navigator on board was never answered in the official crash record.

### 23. Landing in Ernest Jordan's Field

The crash of Avro Anson Mk. V #12578 at Glenelg, NS in August 1945 was also witnessed from another perspective, the farmer in the field, Ernest Jordan. By the time Callahan reached Glenelg, his aircraft was flying at an extremely low altitude and was observed to be getting lower and lower. The residents of Glenelg watched the plane circle about with great interest. It was clear that Callahan was about to either land or crash!

F/L Callahan put down and crashed in Ernest Jordan's hay field. Jordan was probably the first on the scene given the proximity of his home. F/L Callahan and his two aircrew were out of their aircraft and now stood in his field with their maps out.

Ernest Jordan approached them. They had the temerity to ask where they were while pointing at the maps. Ernest said "You're in my F\*\*\*ing hay field!"<sup>278</sup> The crew...was indeed, lost! So it appeared that Ernest Jordan was indeed first on the scene that fateful day!

Oral histories give us a sense of the event. Photographs though provide concrete evidence as to an accurate scale, and are a permanent image and record of the moments of an event. They also hint at their potential consequences.

The archives of Bonnie McGrath, Glenelg are an excellent photographic account of what happened. One photograph shows the Anson stopped just before the crossroad at highway 348, immediately below the Jordan homestead.

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<sup>278</sup> [Jim MacLaughlin](#), **Anecdote, family history comment**, Glenelg, Aspen, Melrose, Smithfield & East River. Memories in Pictures, 3 May 2015



From the archives of Bonnie McGrath, Glenelg NS (with permission)  
Caption: This picture was given to us from Jessie Lawson.

The Jordan home has now long since gone. Nothing remains there today. But in the day, the Avro Anson was heading in the direction of either Ernest Jordan's house and the hill upon which it sat at the end of this field. In either case it was heading directly for he and his family. It was probably one cause of his consternation at the casual inquiry of where the crew was! But there was another.



From the archives of Bonnie McGrath, Glenelg NS (with permission) Bonnie's father, Bob Archibald and Aunt Ella (Hattie) Archibald

F/L Callahan probably had to brake hard for a number of reasons. One he was about to hit a dirt berm at the end of the field. Then, odds were that he was approaching too fast and was about to either punch through or fly over the berm, hitting the Jordan house. He was about to impact on the berm or the house destroying the aircraft, killing all there.

F/L Callahan had few options but to hit the brakes in the end. He had simply run out of room!

But the more pressing reason for hitting the brakes so hard and quickly was that Ernest Jordan was making hay in the field. The official record puts it succinctly “The field was fairly short and *a farmer raking in the field* (for emphasis) caused the pilot to apply brakes harshly. The undercarriage collapsed when brakes were applied.”<sup>279</sup>

Jordan’s field is still used today, in more recent times, as a cornfield. Little has changed in 70 years in perspective. That field is bounded by the West Branch St Mary’s River on the left facing Glenelg looking toward the Jordan homestead. The field is cut in the middle by highway 348. There are obstacles at each end of the field, trees at the lower end nearest Silver’s pool and the berm at the crossroad on the 348.



Photo archive of Gerry Madigan 6 May 2015  
In the direction of Silver’s Pool, St Mary’s River NS

It looked like a good place to land. But the field is approximately 800 meters (875 yards) long.

The next photo’s (#4) gives us some clear clues on the importance of that fact. Its perspective appears to have been taken from under the wing of the crashed Avro Anson. The object in the foreground is a piece of metal wreckage from that aircraft.

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<sup>279</sup> Email Major Chris Larsen, Wing Historian CFB Debart, NS, 30 April 2015



From the archives of Bonnie McGrath, Glenelg NS (with permission)  
Caption: Not sure who these people are (from Jessie Lawson's photo).  
Photograph 4

The men in the middle ground of the photo are very near the aircraft. If you measure the distance between this group and the people in the far ground you can see that the aircraft was not very far from clearing and exiting the field. You can also see how close the Jordan home was to the crash and on how this event came so close to disaster!

It would appear that the aircraft landed and stopped with only about 100 feet remaining in the field. Here's a picture of that rough distance today taken from the same angle and perspective.



Photo archive of Gerry Madigan 6 May 2015  
In the direction of berm, hill, Jordan homestead at Crossroads Highway 348/Waterish

The Avro Anson was designed for operations on short air fields with a minimum runway requirement of 2000 yards or 6000 feet.<sup>280</sup> It was also very capable of landing on grass.<sup>281</sup> The landing requirements for most aircraft are usually somewhat shorter than that required for take-off.

The field at Glenelg is estimated to be under 2700 feet at most. That distance was likely very tight for the safe landing of an Avro Anson Mk V. This was especially so, given the obvious obstacles at both ends of the field, consisting of trees at one end, and the berm at the other. The usable run out length was probably greatly reduced below the minimum required for a safe landing.

Had F/L Callahan not taken action to brake hard though, his aircraft could have easily continued and plowed into the farm house or the berm-hill killing or injuring all in the resulting crash.

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<sup>280</sup> David Ogilvy, **The Anson in later life**, General Aviation, October 2006, pg. 34-35

<sup>281</sup> Ibid Ogilvy, pg. 33

F/L Callahan had the presence of mind and courage to take steps necessary to avoid that. He did so at great personal risk both to his aircraft and his crew. Had he not braked hard, collapsed the gear, and skidded to a halt, that event today would most certainly have different consequences and remembered most differently!

The Glenelg air crash was a very near disaster. The Glenelg air crash was just one amongst the 300 air crashes that occurred in Nova Scotia during the war.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> [Nancy Kelly](#), **Military looking for memories of Valley aircrews, crashes from the past**, Kings County Register, 8 September 2008

Source: <http://www.novanewsnow.com/World/2008-09-08/article-596939/Military-looking-for-memories-of-Valley-aircrews-crashes-from-the-past/1>

Accessed: 22 April 2015

## 24. The Crew of Anson 12578<sup>283</sup>

The crash of Avro Anson Mk. V #12578 at Glenelg, NS August 1945 proved to be quite the event for a small community. They had observed various aircraft flying over their rural community throughout the war.

Imaginations would often wonder about those who traversed so effortlessly overhead. But all the residents saw was the machine. This crash was probably the first contact for many in the community that brought them together with those who flew. Each airman aboard this doomed aircraft were interesting characters and each had an interesting story of his own.

Three souls were aboard Anson 12578 that was the airframe involved in the accident at Glenelg, NS. These men were:

- J89815 F/L Richard Joseph CALLAHAN
- R125563 LAC Arthur Henry DREW
- R256120 LAC Albert TUBB

All three men were experienced, long serving airmen and very qualified in their own right.

F/L Callahan enlisted in the RCAF on 3 December 1942. He was a member of the University of Toronto's, University Air Training Corps. F/L Callahan attended NO 23 Pre-Aircrew Education Detachment at the University of Toronto before going to No. 1 Initial Training School (February 1943).

F/L Callahan commenced pilot training at No. 12 EFTS on 10 July and on graduating continued training at No. 2 SFTS commencing 4 September 1943. F/L Callahan was deployed overseas on 23 March 1944 to a bomber squadron. He returned to Canada in June 1945 and posted to 420 Squadron at Debert and discharged on 17 October 1945.

LAC Arthur Henry Drew enlisted in Ottawa on 27 August 1941. He was an aero engine mechanic. He commenced his service at No. 1 Manning depot, then posted to No. 4 Bombing and Gunnery School on 13 September 1941. He was subsequently posted to No. 6 Repair Depot on 25 November 1941 and served there for the next 3 ½ years.

LAC Drew was posted to Scoudouc, NB on 27 July 1945. and was finally discharged on 20 September 1945. There is no record that LAC Drew attended the Technical Training

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<sup>283</sup> Major Mathias Joost, Department of National Defence / Government of Canada, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Operational Records Team, **Crash Record Avro Anson Mk V 11 Aug 1945**, e-mail May-13-15 10:00:22 AM & 14 May 2015 13:28:49 +0000

(this entire section was written with notes from DHH noted above)

School at St. Thomas as part of his schooling. He was one of the few who joined up that had previous mechanical experience upon enrolment.

LAC Albert Tubb was also an aero engine mechanic, enlisting in Hamilton on 5 May 1943. Common in the day, LAC Tubb had to wait awhile before he commenced his training. His first posting was to No. 4 Wireless School where he did menial jobs while waiting for a billet to become available.

LAC Tubb finally commenced his basic training at No. 1 Manning Depot on 15 September 1943. Upon completion of this training, LAC Tubb was posted to No. 14 SFTS, where he then worked and was mentored in AEM job duties under supervision until 27 January 1944. At that time he was posted and commenced level B AEM training at St. Thomas, Ontario.

LAC Tubb qualified in his trade on 1 July and for his Level A on 1 October. LAC Tubb was posted to Scoudouc on 27 July 1945. He was subsequently posted on 25 October to Greenwood where he was discharged on 21 December 1945.

Scoudouc, NB was just a newly formed and re-organized unit on 13 July 1945. It had previously been established as No. 4 Repair Repot. Both LAC Drew and LAC Tubb were posted to Scoudouc, NB on 27 July 1945. F/L Callahan was from Debert.

So how had Callahan, Drew and Tubb come together on the day? What we can say at this point is that F/L Callahan was teamed up with LAC Drew and LAC Tubb for a flight from Scoudouc, NB to Debert, NS. It is clear that they got lost along the way. But it is also clear from their discharge dates that all three walked away from the crash and clearly survived their ordeal.

F/L Callahan had 2 hours dual and 5 solo flying hours on the Anson. He was an accomplished pilot who had already amassed 210 hours dual and 530 solo on various aircraft types.

The Operations Record Book (ORB) for Scoudouc, NB noted under ferry flights for August 1945 that they ferried 1 Menasco Moth, 3 Mosquitoes at Moncton, 3 Norseman and 1 Anson. It would appear that the one Anson never made it to its destination. Callahan, Drew and Tubb were out on a simple administration flight. Drew and Tubb were simply along for the ride!

## 25. Winding Down

Peace arrived September 1945 with Japan's formal unconditional surrender. Hostilities finally ended. Debert and its defence facilities were no longer required.

Demobilization proceeded as quickly as possible. But "Peace" was also a two-edge sword. Without any purpose for its continued existence, the war time boom soon dried up. Where once there was a frenzied pace, now was only silence and a slow decay.

This situation was faced by Debert and many other small Canadian communities that Fall of 1945. The prosperity and boom of the war was all but gone. Many small Canadian communities languished after the bust! And the bust came ever so quickly.

Camp Debert, once considered the jewel in the crown of an Army training system, was no longer needed and came under the hammer. Camp Debert was a ghost town by 1946.

The Calgary Herald reported that 400 men were hired for its deconstruction and salvage. The Army Camp had been long abandoned. Windows were left open on many of its buildings. Gaping holes were evident in others.

The only sign of any recent activity were initials left carved on the walls by many of the soldiers from the 168 units who had trained there. For many, this was their final mark of the time spent here in Canada. Sadly, many young men and women never came home.<sup>284</sup>

At the time the Calgary Herald reported, 68 buildings had come under the hammer with a total of 55 demolished. In the process some 1.25 million board feet of lumber, 12 tons of nails, 1000 windows, 39 bath tubs, 200 basins, 139 radiators, and 24,000 feet of piping and plumbing fixtures, assorted electrical supplies and other items were recycled, salvaged or re-purposed.

These materials received new life under the Veteran's Land Act or in emergency shelter programs through the erection of new homes. The project was started in the fall of 1946 and was to be completed April the following year. Crown Assets Disposal expected that at least 75% of the materials were salvageable.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> The Calgary Herald, **War Assets Salvaging Debert Camp Buildings**, 21 November 1946, pg. 8

Source:

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=JilkAAAIBAJ&sjid=onsNAAAAIBAJ&pg=7393,2288245&dq=debert&hl=en>

Accessed: 2 March 2012

<sup>285</sup> Ibid Calgary Herald, 21 November 1946, pg. 8

Ralph Harris was posted to Debert at war's end. His reminiscence is poignant, "Debert, with all its natural advantages of clear approaches, cheap land for expansion, proximity to the army camp, location beside the Trans-Continental Railway and soon- to- be Trans-Canada Highway, not to mention its favourable weather record, was closed in a very few days.

On October 6, 1945, I went to the release centre at Moncton, N.B., returning to Truro October 7. On October 8, 1945, I went out to Debert to see what was going on and found that most of the windows had been boarded up, about 50 personnel of all ranks dining in the Airmen's Mess, and the Control Tower gutted. Radios and speakers had been ripped out of the console, furniture gone (contents of drawers simply dumped on the floor), even the motor gone out of the furnace."<sup>286</sup>

The airfield at Debert no longer served any purpose. There were too few people to safeguard whatever assets remained.

### *...The Results in a Nutshell*

In the aftermath of the war, the government learned a very valuable lesson from the BCATP experience. Defence spending brought prosperity. Government had a role to play through policies that enhanced and sustained the economy. So too, did the private sector.

At the back of their minds loomed the recent experience of the Great Depression and the public censure that the government received by its laissez faire approach taken in managing that disaster.<sup>287</sup> Nobody wished to endure that ever again!

The experience of war brought great privations, trials and tragedy. But it also brought prosperity and jobs. A vast industrial complex and expansion created by increased defence spending generated demand for labour and war production. The policy led to full employment.

In some ways the war restored the Nation's confidence, hope, and prosperity, that negated what was simply lost during the Great Depression. Defence spending stimulated Canada's moribund economy. It was a revelation that came as the catalyst for a new view on fiscal management and for social policy development in the post war period.

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<sup>286</sup> Sergeant R. W. Harris, "Memories of Debert, N.S.", undated written account in Debert Military Museum Archives, Debert, N.S., <http://www.debertmilitarymuseum.org/harris.htm>, accessed 5 October 2010

<sup>287</sup> Alexander Brady and F.R. Scott, **Canada After the War – Studies in Political, Social, and Economic Policies for Post-War Canada**, The Canadian Institute of International Affairs, The Macmillan Company of Canada Lt, Toronto, 1945 (@1943), Pg. 3,

A country that had been unable to find work or succour for about one fifth of its population during the Dirty 30's and Great Depression, suddenly and miraculously found work for all during the war! And "All" included women, young boys and girls, and old men.<sup>288</sup> The War was truly an economic miracle that had not gone unnoticed!<sup>289</sup>

Government spending was widely and broadly felt across all reaches of Canada, especially Nova Scotia. In the post war, the government would not allow a back slide to the ways and old times and policies of the Great depression.

Defence spending on the RCAF, Army, and Royal Canadian Navy during the war had a huge bearing toward the development of economic policies after the war. There was a certain hope on the government's part that the sacrifice invested would make Canadians the happiest people on earth.

The government looked to civil aviation as a key component during the post war to sustaining that prosperity. It was considered as early as 1943.

The investments made in the BCATP and Debert were the basis of an envisioned expansion and prosperity in an expanded commercial aviation sector. Such expansions happened for some, but not for others, though.<sup>290</sup>

Still hope, confidence, and prospects remained high. There was a prosperous economic outlook despite the large industrial draw-downs in war production and the rapid demobilization of Canada's armed forces.

Canadian exports were far above the level required for full employment in 1946 and were forecasted to remain so. But the government thought a buffer was necessary to ease the future transition to a peace time economy. Many measures were to be taken to ease any

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<sup>288</sup> ibid Pierre Berton, **The Great Depression - 1929-1939**, 2001, pg. 503-504

<sup>289</sup> Ibid Alexander Brady and F.R. Scott, 1945 (@1943), Pg. 3

"if we are not now to take thought for the future we can expect nothing but backsliding to the bad old ways of the inter-war period. As to the claim that thinking of the post-war future slackens the war effort, nothing could be more paltry. People are bound to think of the future. Only the promise of better things to come sustains us in war. If this promise is not to be frustrated and our high hopes disappointed, we must be prepared to discuss now in a realistic manner the modifications of our institutions necessary to fulfil man's aspirations for a "better world".'

<sup>290</sup> Anon. **Goal Is to Make Canadians Happiest People on Earth!** Hamilton Spectator, 13 December 1943, Canadian War Museum Archives, accession number 893-866-803, 149, War European. 1939 Canada Parliament, Cabinet Howe Speeches

Source:

<http://collections.civilisations.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5059746>

Accessed: 5 March 2012

transition that prevented social dislocation such as the institution of unemployment insurance plans and social welfare policies.<sup>291</sup>

*...The Tough Questions*

The average Canadian was very concerned with the transition to peace. The war left many asking some deep social questions on the use of taxpayers` money. Many questioned the Government of Canada`s policies and demanded answers.

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<sup>291</sup> a. Ibid Alexander Brady and F.R. Scott, 1945 (@1943),

b. Kenneth C. Cragg, [Far-Reaching System Told By Mackenzie](#), Globe and Mail, 17 March 1943, Canadian War Museum Archives, accession number 100-006-005 149 War European 1939 Canada Post War Social  
Source: <http://collections.civilisations.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5063669>

Accessed: 19 April 2012

c. Anon., [SOCIAL CHANGES REQUIRE MOST INTELLIGENT STUDY](#), Hamilton Spectator, 22 March 1944, Canadian War Museum Archives, accession number 100 017 004, 149 War European 1939 Canada Post War Social Whitton

Source: <http://collections.civilisations.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5063723>

Accessed 19 April 2012

d. Anon., [Postwar Planning Information](#), Saturday Night, 16 May 1944, Canadian War Museum Archives, accession number 100-017-003, 149 European 1939 Canada Post War Social  
Source: <http://collections.civilisations.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5063722>  
Accessed: 19 April 2012

e. Anon., [The Political Implications Of Family Allowances](#), Toronto Telegram, 20 July 1944, Canadian War Museum Archives, accession number 084 016 019, 149 War European 1939 Canada Labour Family Bonus

Source: <http://collections.civilisations.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5053637>

Accessed: 19 April 2012

f. Charlotte Whitton, C.B.E., [We're Off To Social Security Confusion](#), Saturday Night, 29 March 1945, Canadian War Museum Archives, accession number 100 017 002, 149 War European 1939 Canada Post War Social Whitton

Source: <http://collections.civilisations.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5063721>

Accessed: 19 April 2012

How was the government able to find a billion dollar gift to Britain during the course of the war but found no money to aid the destitute during the Great Depression? Where did that capital come from? Why was the government unable or unwilling to ease the public's suffering during the Dirty Thirties/Great Depression if such largesse was possible or readily available?<sup>292</sup> These were tough questions to answer.

Canada's Gross National Expenditure (GNE) in 1943 was approximately \$11 billion. The loan to Great Britain which was an outright gift, represented 9% of GNE. Looking at it from another perspective, that gift represented 24% of \$4.1 billion of government spending that year.<sup>293</sup>

Pressure was placed squarely on the government for answers as a consequence! The seeds for change in Canadian public policy had been sown during the war. The public had no desire to return to darker days.

Looking ahead then to 1946, the domestic market was strong and demand for goods and services continued to increase as they became available.<sup>294</sup> There was pent-up demand

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<sup>292</sup> a. Anon., **Bulk of Billion U.K Gift Spent on Munitions –Breakdown of Goods Canada Contributed Furnished by Ilsley**, Globe and Mail 12 May 1943  
Canadian War Museum, Accession Number: 071-017-012, 149 War European 1939 Canada Finance Britain Gift

Source:

<http://collections.civilisations.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5044854>

Accessed: 18 April 2012

b. Conversation: Mr. V.G. Madigan/ G.D. Madigan 28 March 2012

My father lived through the Depression as a young boy. I asked him to review my paper for his opinions and for historical context and accuracy. Interestingly, he mentioned the \$1 billion gift to Britain which I found earlier but did not include as a reference in earlier versions of this paper. In the Context of his time, he stated that many Canadians found it incredulous that Canada could provide an outright gift of this sum, yet did nothing on the same scale to relief the pain and suffering of many during the Great Depression.

<sup>293</sup> Canada, Statistics Canada, Robert Crozier (Conference Board of Canada), **Section F: Gross National Product, the Capital Stock, and Productivity, Series F14-32, Gross national expenditure, by components 1926 to 1976**, 1999, 53 pg.

Source: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-516-x/pdf/5500096-eng.pdf>

Accessed: 7 July 2012

<sup>294</sup> Anon., **Minister of Reconstruction Confident Regarding Future**, Hamilton Spectator, 11 February 1946, Canadian War Museum Archives, accession number 898-817-881, 149, War European. 1939 Canada Post War Economics Howe

Source:

<http://collections.civilisations.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5062612>

Accessed: 5 March 2012

after the many years of scarcity, saving and privation during the War years. The world had to be re-built. Canada continued to be a bread basket and a source of raw materials for the post war reconstruction. Thus prosperity seemed assured and Canada's future looked bright indeed!

But the reality was that for all the prosperity forecasted, it was once again to be a boom for some, and a bust for others. The Canadian economy grew but for many regions, the pace was much slower than expected. Many communities languished as their wartime tactical and strategic importance declined. Many reverted to what they were before.

The Second World War's legacy was as Dickens foretold, "... the best of times...the worst of times...". Investments were not only for prosecution and victory, but were also the forge for change in Canada's future. It was a lasting legacy whose use in blood and treasure are still paramount and relevant to our generation.

It was the active participation and work done in the cities, small towns and villages, accomplished by average Canadians, was important to winning the war. The collective effort was important and vital. The home front was also a war front. That effort was often lost in translation as Canada converted from war to peace. It is an effort worth remembering too!

## 26. True costs

Like so many facilities, Debert was paid off in 1946. Crown assets disposed of or managed the civil conversions. Debert reverted back to a pastoral setting with a greatly reduced population. The airfield was abandoned and facilities stripped bare. Now all was silence and solitude.

The silence gives pause and time to reflect on the other cost, that in lives consumed in the training plan. A river runs nearby Debert through the former training area. The Debert River winds its way around out to Cobequid bay in the Bay of Fundy. But many years ago, this river was a silent witness to acts of baptism of fire, heroism, and tragedy.

At approximately 0445 hours on 20 July 1943 a Hudson Bomber crashed in a nearby wood off the Debert River. First on the scene at the crash site was Lance-Corporal Edwards from the nearby army camp. Edwards made his way a considerable distance in the dark to the inferno of a burning Hudson Bomber. With fire extinguisher in hand, Edwards waded through the Debert River only to find the Hudson bomber fully engaged in a fiery inferno.

Edwards arrived too late to save the crew. He managed to pull the burned bodies of the pilot and another officer from the wreckage with the help of another NCO. He was badly burned for his efforts. Only his wet clothing from the dunk in the river saved him from very severe burns.

Edwards' bravery was recognized and was awarded a "highly commended" letter from the Officer Commanding the Royal Air Force station. But Lance-Corporal Edwards' efforts surely warranted a much higher distinction than a mere letter.<sup>295</sup>

Such scenes were played out time and again, at Debert, and at many other airfields and military units across Canada. Lance-Corporal Edwards' effort was just an accepted part of his duty. Heroism and selflessness were often overlooked in the effort.

The battle in the Gulf of St Lawrence too reminds us that there were casualties on Canadian soil during the Second World War. Our memory is most often drawn towards those battlefields on foreign shores, not here, at home, in Canada. This sadly leaves us with an impression that nothing ever happened here. It solidifies a myth that there were no significant battles on Canadian soil. There were!

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<sup>295</sup> [NSExplore](#), **Exploring Nova Scotia - Debert River July 1943**, in Canada Gazette 1 January 1944, 2010

Source: <http://www.nsexplore.ca/aircraft-crash-sites/debert-river-july-1943/>

Accessed: 13 December 2010

Duty in Canada was not benign. That perception gives a false impression that deprecates the sacrifices of those souls lost here. If anything it was beyond benign as the records so often show.

Sergeant Leonard Hornsey (RAF) from Coastal Command in Scotland, took part in many flying operations over the Atlantic, Iceland and Norway prior to his posting to Debert. Significantly, Hornsey was commended for his role in spotting the prison ship Altmark subsequently captured by the Royal Navy. Many captured prisoners of war were on board that ship and were freed because of his actions. Young Leonard Hornsey was recognized and rewarded by promotion to Sergeant with a posting to Nova Scotia for his effort.

Sergeant Hornsey was a Wireless Instructor at Debert, NS, rested from operations. But it was at Debert where he met his end. On 23rd October 1941 the aircraft in which he was a passenger, crashed into the ground, disintegrating, at Great Village, Nova Scotia. All aboard were lost.

The news report of Hornsey`s demise was a simple laconic account of an aircraft crashed with the loss of four RAF lives at Great Village, NS on 23 October 1941. That news account amounted to a mere three small paragraphs, which were then republished in sundry newspapers.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> The Calgary Herald, **Four RAF Fliers killed in N.S.**, October 23, 1941

Source:

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=0vBkAAAAIBAJ&sjid=SHsNAAAAIBAJ&pg=5019.2458176&dq=rcaf+debert&hl=en>

Accessed: 13 January 2011



*Norman Leonard Hornsey 1920 - 1941  
Sgt. Wireless Instructor, RAF. Died Nova Scotia*

Hornsey's flight commander wrote to young Leonard's parents expressing his deep regret and condolences at Leonard's loss stating Leonard was a fine young man. Mr. A.L. Hornsey wrote in reply on 6 January 1942:

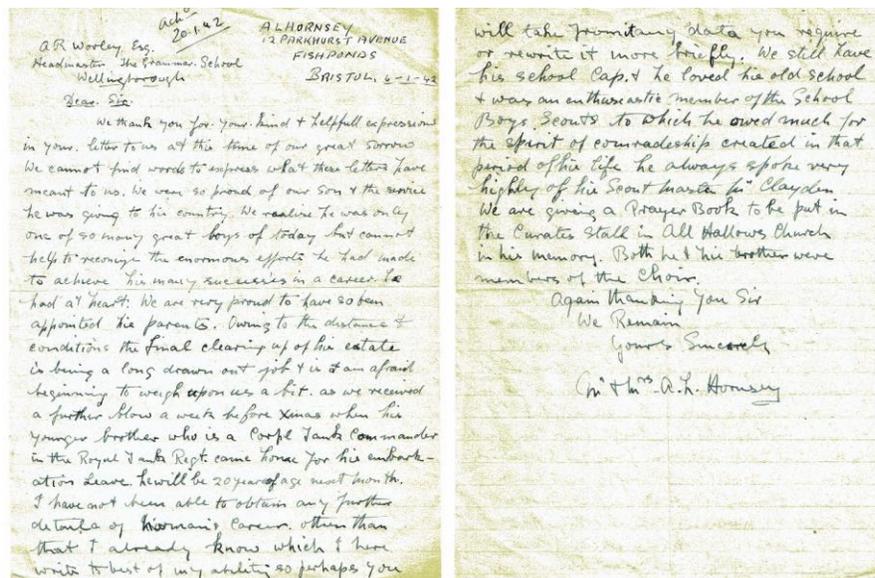
"Dear Sir;

We thank you for your kind and helpful impressions in your letter to us at this time of our great sorrow. We cannot find the words to express what these letters have meant to us.

We were so proud of our son and the service he was giving to his country.

We realize he was only one of so many great boys of today but cannot help to recognize the enormous efforts he had made to achieve his many successes in a career he had at heart.

We are very proud to have so been appointed his parents...".



Archives Graham Tall, 19 January 2011: Mr. A.L. Hornsey (father) letter dated 6 January 1942

Mr. Hornsey's letter conveys the thoughts, pride and feelings of many families who dealt with similar tragedy and loss.<sup>297</sup> But it wasn't just the families who were bereaved. Deep

<sup>297</sup> From the archives of Graham Tall, 19 January 2011 and

friendships were also made during the war. The loss of friends and comrades was so deeply felt by all their comrades, even after the long passage of time.

There were losses in training and on operations here too. Hudson Mk V (AM773) met its end on 19 April 1943 while on a “special” anti-submarine patrol. There were four crew aboard AM 773.

There are few details on the demise of AM 773. The body of Sgt Longstaff (RAF) on AM 773 was found on the shore near Greenwood, Nova Scotia. Sgt Longstaff was buried in Middleton, NS. Another aboard was Sgt Burns. The body of Sgt Burns was recovered later. Sgt Burn’s remains were buried in Truro, Nova Scotia.



Archives Gerry Madigan, Terrace Hill Cemetery, Truro NS August 2017

Two others lost in AM 773 were never found though. The bodies of Sgt Gillis and P/O Howard-Bangs, were simply swallowed by the dark waters of the Bay of Fundy.<sup>298</sup>

Graham Tall & David Tall, More **Memories of Wellingborough Grammar School, Mr. Woolley & The War Years, 1937–1945**, Clock Tower Publications, 2012, pg. 122-123

<sup>298</sup> Steve Mayo, Webmaster, **RV2011- The Bay of Fundy Memorial**, Web Hosting, [Primehost.ca](http://www.rv2011.ca), Copyright © 2010 RV2011 Reunion

Source: <http://www.rv2011.ca/lost.html>

Accessed: 5 October 2010

The news reports of the day did not always put a face to these losses. The casualties were not just officers or other ranks of RAF but also the RAFVR, RCAF, RAAF, and RNZAF.<sup>299</sup>

We tend to measure our war success as a cost either in dollars and cents or in the manner of a benefits/costs ratio. We seldom measure the true cost of war in terms of the lives lost or sacrifices made which is the true measure for the liberties gained.

There were some 856 deaths in the training of 131,553 aircrew in the BCATP in Canada. It was estimated that 70% of these was due to youthful exuberance nominally known as disobedience, carelessness, and pilot error.<sup>300</sup>

Debert incurred 110 of these 856 fatal casualties (13%).<sup>301</sup> However the true cost is often hidden in the margins of a slight casualty rate. Total losses measured less than one percent of the total under training from October 1940 to March 1945.

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<sup>299</sup> Ernest E. Allen, **An RCAF Pilot's Story 1939-1945 from the memoirs of Ernest E Allen**, 1996, Part One Pilot Training

Source: <http://www.seawaymall.com/eallen/>

Accessed: 13 August 2010

<sup>300</sup> R. Byers (Ed.), **The Canadians at War 1939-1945 Second Edition**, The Reader's Digest Association (Canada) Ltd, 1986, pg. 86 and

F.J. Hatch, *Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983), pg. 202, Appendix B

<sup>301</sup> Hosted by RootsWeb Ancestry.com, **No.31 Operational Training Unit**

**June 3, 1941-July 1, 1944 - No.7 Operational Training Unit July 1, 1944-July 20, 1945 Debert, Nova Scotia, Roll of Honor**, 2010

Source:

[http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nbpennfi/penn8b1RollOfHonour\\_No31O.T.U.\\_TrainingCasualties.htm](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nbpennfi/penn8b1RollOfHonour_No31O.T.U._TrainingCasualties.htm)

Accessed: 20 December 2010



## 27. "Is it the way you remember Dad?"

"Is it the way you remember Dad?" was a question asked by a loving daughter on the day the Yellow Wings" came to town in August of 2012. There was a poignant moment, preceded by profound silence and reflection before Dad's reply.

There was no way of knowing what this veteran's thoughts truly were. There was only his solemn look and stare at the aircraft and the air field. There was a longing in his look, that suggested what his mood and thoughts were.

We are greatly impacted by the events of our lives. Some moments are emblazoned upon our memory as if they happened only yesterday. They are etched on our souls forever.

Others, more dark and lonely, remain buried deeply in the recesses of our minds for they are too terrible to bear witness. These are only rekindled by some emotional triggers. These dark passages are often masked by thoughts of happier times, for total recall is often all too painful.

The pregnant pause and reverent reply of this man's "Yes" was a testimony to the memory of both the good times and the bad.

Group Captain Howard's remarks in 1944 speak volumes of those times:

"Many will be leaving with pleasant memories of Canada and of the hospitality received from the Canadian people in Truro, from Canadians living in Debert and also whilst on leave in other parts of Canada."

Operational Training Unit 31, RCAF Squadron No. 7 and RCAF No. 63 Wing (Tiger Force) are very important threads in Canada's wartime history. All who served at Debert played very vital and key roles.

No one theatre was more important than another when based on the scale of lives lost. Sacrifices were made everywhere. Like a tapestry we tend to focus on the larger motifs as the most important, for in them lie the dominant features of a story.

But a tapestry is also made up of smaller motifs. Those smaller motifs tell a tale, without which, the total story is incomplete.

The small motifs explain what sacrifices were necessary and what was required to achieve total victory. The sacrifices in the smaller motifs were just as important, for without them, the ends may have been totally different.

The Operational Training Units that served in Canada are owed a special debt of gratitude and respect. Seventeen units participated in the Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence. Twelve Bomber-Reconnaissance squadrons, one Fighter Squadron, and four advanced operational training units/schools participated in its defence. Neither the RAF

operational training/schools nor fighter squadron were accorded such a Battle honour in this effort though!<sup>302</sup>

The story of Debert was not simply just one of the training conducted there. It was also the story of the lives and time of the people. It is the story of the crossroads of people and of destiny.

“Is that the way you remember Dad?”

Remembering both the good and the bad, the joys and the sorrows, and the spirit of those young men and women who gave their lives so others might live in peace and freedom, Dad replied softly in his heart, “Yes, that’s the way I remember them, heroes all.”

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<sup>302</sup> Canada, Veterans Affairs Canada, **The Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence, Royal Canadian Air Force Squadrons/Units that Participated in the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence**, 10 February 2006

Source:

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=history/secondwar/battlegulf/airforce>

Accessed: 20 December 2010

Date Modified: 2006-02-10

## *Appendices*

### *Appendix 1 - Antisubmarine Warfare Results Eastern Canada*

Little was known concerning the efficacy of airpower against the German U-boat during the Second World War. Its power was greatly masked by the lack of data. Determination of its impacts on maritime or anti-submarine warfare was especially hard to do.

The lion's share of U-boat losses between 1939 and 1942 were largely attributable to naval action. The contribution of land based aircraft during this period appeared to be marginal. It was only after 1942 though that land based aircraft came to have a real impact and play a role in mounting U-boat losses.

In the meantime, the value of land based aircraft was marginalized and was largely discounted. What was significant in the employment of land based aircraft was the effort made in the role of 'denial and suppression'. This is where land based aircraft most likely had the greatest impact.

The virtual presence of aircraft, whether operational or training, kept the U-Boat below at bay. The mere presence of aircraft overhead minimized U-boat activities that denied them access to targets. The mere presence of patrolling aircraft whether on operations or training on Canada's east coast was therefore a real asset. It was the mere presence of the same that posed a danger and a present threat to U-boat operations.

The problem was that the impact was not directly measurable. It was virtually an unseen and an indirect effect. Any effort or attribution was easily written off in importance as by appearances, it suggested that nothing at all was contributed.

Operational research and analysis proved to be the key to teasing out lessons that eventually enhanced the odds in the Allies' favour. Operational research and analysis led to improvements that successfully led to contact the enemy; thereby improving the odds in the attack, which led to deterrence, damage, or destruction of a U-boat.

It was a matter of learning from experience then applying that on operations or in training. It all took time.

Still, even with the odds lined up in your favour, the matter of sinking a U-boat successfully, was often simply a matter of pure luck. There was much more to it than getting an aircraft in position to attack.

At the juncture of the war near 1942 and the Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence, disposition of air assets would increasingly be guided by operational research. Air assets were directed to areas of known concentration of U-boats based on a combination of intelligence and probability analysis.

On the Canadian side of the Atlantic, EAC reported 84 attacks on U-Boats between 1941 and 1945 with a resulting confirmation of 6 U-Boat kills. This was quite an achievement given the resources at hand.<sup>303</sup>

There were four key air zones in Canada based on density analysis that guided EAC's operational units. Table 1 provides a picture of these zones as they existed in February 1942:

Table 1 – Density Analysis Zones<sup>304</sup>

Zone - miles from Base	Probability of Finds- Uboats
0-200	48
200-400	82
400-600	106
600-800	47

Source: Ruffili, 2001, pg. 70

EAC placed and organized its dispositions accordingly, improving the chances of contact. It was based on the probability analysis of a U-boat's location. It was assumed that a zone of a higher probability would lead to a potential attack. EAC employed all its resources in addition to those of the operational training units towards the goal in the defeat and suppression of the U-boat in Canadian waters.

Pilot Officer Homer and contemporaries played a vital role in that task in controlling and containing the U-boat threat on Canadian shores. Homer's attack was one example of two contacts and attacks made by O.T.U. 31 during 1943. A second attack was also made by Sgt Wallace and crew in position 43 degrees 37' north by 64 degrees 3' west on 4 July 1943 a few months later.

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<sup>303</sup> [Hugh A. Halliday, Canadian Military History in Perspective](#)  
**Hunting U-boats From the Air: Air Force, Part 15**, Legion Magazine  
[May 1, 2006](#).

Source: <http://www.legionmagazine.com/en/index.php/2006/05/hunting-u-boats-from-the-air/>

Accessed: 22 March 2011

<sup>304</sup> Dean C. Ruffili, **Operational Research and the Royal Canadian Air Force Eastern Air Command's Search for Efficiency in Airborne Anti-Submarine Warfare, 1942-1945**, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2001 (thesis), pg. 70

Source: <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk3/ftp05/MQ65204.pdf>

Accessed: 1 February 2014

Homer's attack was not mentioned in official historical summaries save a brief unattributed comment. His attack was lost in the comment of "no. of attacks 2 of which one did any damage and the casualties suffered two missing." Wallace's attack though rated a damaged. Homer's attack rated an "undamaged" account.<sup>305</sup>

The attacks emanating from O.T.U. 31 for 1943 were indicative of the value of operational research conducted during the Second World War. Air assets were placed in the right place and at the right time for maximum effect.

O.T.U 31 was a subset of EAC's operational data (Table 2). O.T.U. 31's results for 1943 (only year data available) when compared to EAC's summary profile for 1942 has a high positive correlation of 0.92 (1.00 a perfect correlation).

Table 2 – 1942 1943 U-boat Contact Summary East Coast Canada

Unit	Year	Number of Sorties	Hours	U-Boat sightings	Attacks	Damaged	Destroyed
EAC	1942	8600	51000	63	40	16	3
O.T.U.31	1943	1404	6541	7	2	1	
				0.928773893			

Ref: Ruffili, 2001 pg. 74-75

DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U, pg. 4-5, D.D. 14/7/43

Coastal Command had very different expectations of EAC's effort. Coastal Command held to expectations and results based on operations found in the Great Britain and therefore, expected one U-Boat kill for every 50 sorties.

EAC's results were markedly different. EAC attained one U-boat kill for every 134 sorties, a higher sortie per kill rate compared to Coastal Command's results. This difference was due to many variables. Characteristics of operations as well as geographical conditions of the separate theatres suggested that they be treated differently, but weren't.

The peculiarities of Canadian operations on this side of the Atlantic were not recognized by Coastal Command. The two theatres of operations had little in common based on the geographical features and other factors in Coastal Command's theatre of operations. Coastal Command operated principally in the confines of the Bay of Biscay with natural choke points offered in a confined area.

The Bay of Biscay offered probable transit paths from which it was easy to determine where U-boats transited and then, concentrated air patrols to great effect as U-boats moved to and from their patrol lines in and out of the Atlantic.

The approach through the Bay of Biscay thus tended to concentrate U-boat density. The probabilities tended to concentrate the effort to catch the U-boats before they dispersed in the open Atlantic.

<sup>305</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U, pg. 4-5, D.D. 14/7/43

Anti-submarine operations off Canada’s east coast were very different. The Canadian area was a vast expanse. Canadian shores did not offer the same probabilities, natural choke points or identifiable transit paths leading to concentrate U-boat density anywhere except in the Strait of Belle Isle.<sup>306</sup>

Despite these differences, the activities of O.T.U.31 were indeed important. Table 3 is indicative of O.T.U. 31’s contribution to EAC’s effort.

Table 3

Unit	Year	TO EAC 1942 Totals		U-Boat sightings	Attacks	Damaged	Destroyed
		% of Sorties	% of Hours				
O.T.U.31	1943	16%	13%	11%	5%	6%	0%

Operational units were a supernumerary force. Their records were not necessarily included as a part of EAC’s total. O.T.U. 31 was not recorded in EAC’s summaries.<sup>307</sup> O.T.U. 31’s efforts were thus an additional capacity to the ongoing effort.

O.T.U 31 bolstered EAC’s resources through increased patrolling, adding to 16% of sorties that provided an additional 13% of flying hours for this command. This operational training unit’s effort alone led to 11% of U-boat sightings, 5% of attacks, and possibly caused an additional 6% of U-boat damages.

This result would not have been achieved otherwise if they weren’t on active patrols. The analysis does not include the efforts of the other operational training units in the Maritimes, which likely added an additional and equivalent capacity.

Operational Training Unit 31 and other operational training units thus played a huge role in “denial and suppression’ of the U-boat threat merely by the act of flying a simple mission over water. It was the presence of aircraft, whether on operation or in training, that kept U-Boats wary and at bay.

Those who flew the missions saw it as a thankless and a tedious task. They just did not realize how important the mission was at the time. But boredom and tedium could change in a heartbeat as Pilot Officer Homer found out May 1943.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid, Ruffili, pg. 74-75

<sup>307</sup> Ibid, Ruffili, pg. 172 Appendix 6, Table 3 and Table 4

## Appendix 2 - Analysis of Hudson Bomber 901/B3 in Attack

Pilot Officer Homer from Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.) 31, attacked a U-boat, 15 May 1943. His attack was not successful.

The key question in the aftermath was why? Homer achieved all the parameters that were necessary to do so. His attack should have resulted in a successful conclusion but it didn't.

Commanders were often forced to derive essential lessons from these incidents without detailed analysis. Analysis was essential to the correct interpolation and application of tactics in operations and in training during the Second World War. The official analysis concerning Homer's singular attack provides some insights on how perfunctory they were.

In summary, the unit combat reports states Homer's depth charge attack was pressed home but his munitions passed the periscope and the depth charges fell too far to port to do any lethal damage.<sup>308</sup> This tactical error may have seemed inexcusable to some. But O.T.U. 31 was a training unit, not an operational unit.

Still, Homer's results were consistent with expectations at the time! Command staff remarked in its official review and findings that "from the crew's description of the attack it would appear "that this *inexperienced* crew carried out a very good attack".

The official report went on to state that the depth charges overshot the submarine by 50 feet. Professional opinion suggested that Homer should have released the munitions before the periscope had passed under the nose of the aircraft.<sup>309</sup>

It was a quick and dirty review. Perhaps there was more to it that was worthy of further investigation. But that would take time, a commodity in short supply at all training units.

No matter the result, Homer and crew likely put the fear of God into what was no doubt, one very lucky U-Boat crew!

The official report of Homer's experience offers interesting perspectives. But it also suggests that several lines of inquiry should have been pursued further.

The first line of inquiry should have been the investigation of the question of experience. Experience may have been a factor in this attack. O.T.U. 31 was an advance training unit after all. The main task was the training of pilots in the conduct of such operations. Was this level of training adequate for the development of "experience"?

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<sup>308</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Public Record Office (PRO) file ADM 199/435 – **RCAF attacks on U-Boats**, 3 February 2011

<sup>309</sup> Ibid DHH (PRO) file ADM 199/435, 3 February 2011

O.T.U. 31 set aside 100 hours of advance flight training leading to this end in its curriculum. At this juncture in the training syllabus, most time was also devoted to instrument flying and night cross-country exercises. This segment of the training was necessary for the development of the skills necessary to engage long range targets successfully, especially those at sea.<sup>310</sup>

The problem with ascertaining “experience” though is not as simple as setting aside a set number of logged air hours to develop a required skill set. It truly was a matter of combat experience, entailing a combination of many skill sets. It was also a matter of coordinating training in all aspects of the attack. This coordination involved the combined efforts of all air crew from the pilot to wireless air gunner, navigator, to air observer, who in the end had to work together as a team.

The syllabus for operational training proper conducted at Debert and other Operational Training Units was not designed for team training. The various curricula brought together the many separate and disparate individual training plans at a single moment. It was a matter of fate that brought the crews together at these critical junctures in their training when participants would only meet and fly together for the first time.

Pilots and wireless operator/air gunners trained separately on a twelve-week cycle. Observers trained on an eight week schedule. The crew never fully trained together as a team at the O.T.U’s. That team training came later at the operational units.<sup>311</sup>

Regardless there was a level of proficiency demanded in all the component parts of the training system to a given level and standard. All trainees were competent in performing their individual jobs as they were all assessed individually before posting to operational units.

The proficiency and coordination of the crew training was first measured on the bombing and gunnery ranges at the operational training units. In Nova Scotia practice bomb ranges were established at Economy and Greenwood.

Students on bomb ranging and gunnery exercises were observed by range safety officers from a nine-meter wooden tower who would assess student performance. These exercises were controlled and performed by aircrew despatched either from Greenwood or Debert.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> F.J. Hatch, *Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983), pg. 108

<sup>311</sup> Ibid Hatch, pg. 75

<sup>312</sup> Greenwood Military Aviation Museum, WWII Observation Tower, 18 Nov 2009,

Page 5.1 Rev. 0

Source: <http://gmam.ca/tower.htm>

Accessed: 30 November 2010

Aircrews were then tasked to more advance training once they had reached a satisfactory level of performance in all training objectives. They would progress to longer ranging patrols and finally, graduation. This was in the form of final exercises on the patrols that contributed to EAC's anti-submarine effort.

Once the crew of Hudson 901 achieved all the minimal requirements, they conducted the final series of exercises that led to an operational posting and tour of duty. This aspect of their training ultimately led to a contact and the subsequent attack on a U-boat in May 1943.

The crew was inexperienced as a team. They were simply a group of men, thrown together, who had just learned their individual trades. The nuances of teamwork were still to be learned. Those nuances would only be developed once permanently crewed at an operational unit.<sup>313</sup> So what Homer and his crew of Hudson 901 achieved on the day was indeed phenomenal within the limits of their training!

Clearly all their performance objectives were achieved and executed within the parameters of the training syllabus! A contact was identified. A contact was pursued. An attack was made. Although it failed to sink a target, it was a result. A sullen result yes, but a result nonetheless. If training or teamwork were not at the root of the problem, then what was?

### *...Tactics*

It may have been a question of tactics employed. Homer may have incorrectly employed an attack profile. The synopsis of the attack indicates that Homer was on the southern leg of his patrol when the observer sighted the target at 197 degrees. At that time of day the sun would have been on his right hand side.

Homer rapidly descended from a height of 3200' to a height of 100' keeping the target on his left. He turned 15 degrees to target at the end of his descent and attacked. He attacked on the starboard side with the sun roughly positioned at his back.

Homer let loose his full load of ammunition *from* 100 feet on the periscope feather. The post-operation analysis suggested that he let loose too late while the aircraft was passing *over*, and not *before*, the periscope feather. It was a critical misstep and misjudgement.

True to tactics taught, Homer stayed on in the area for 10-20 minutes hoping for a damaged target and that the U-boat would resurface. If so, Homer was in position to re-engage the target with his guns if it had done so.

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<sup>313</sup> Ernest E. Allen, **An RCAF Pilot's Story 1939-1945 from the memoirs of Ernest E Allen**, 1996, pg. 13 of 46

Source: <http://www.seawaymall.com/eallen/>

Accessed: 13 August 2010

Was Homer in the wrong in the application of these tactics? The experience of Ernest Allen, one of the first Coastal Command pilots trained at Debert in 1941 suggests not! Homers' attack profile was a textbook application of his training.

We can determine this from Ernest Allen's recollections. By 1943 Allen was the much more experienced pilot and warrior than Homer. Allen too attacked a U-boat in 1942 but his attack was in the Bay of Biscay. Allen's attack was patterned on the same target profile employed by PO Homer later on 15 May 1943. Allen learned his attack profile at Operational Training Unit 31, Debert, NS.<sup>314</sup>

Allen, like Homer, attacked a U-boat then circled and waited for 10 minutes as his initial result was indeterminate. Then the nose of Allen's target unexpectedly breached the surface at the 10-minute mark into his attack and resurfaced at an extreme angle. One third of the U-Boat was suddenly exposed.

Allen turned his aircraft about so his gunners could engage the exposed portion of the now distressed U-boat. After half an hour the U-boat slowly sunk beneath the waves. Allen's official result based on the Admiralty's conclusion was a confirmed kill.<sup>315</sup>

The attack profile and tactics employed from rookie to experienced pro were strikingly similar! We may conclude then that Homer and crew were indeed very well trained and trained to great effect, in very short order, at Operational Training Unit 31!

Homer's training in and of itself was not an over-riding factor in the performance of Hudson 901/B3 on 15 May 1943. It seemed that luck may have played a role too! There were many variables at play. All these variables had to align perfectly to achieve the desired result.

### *...Observer's role*

One key variable at play was the release point of the munitions drop once discharged. Once let loose the fall of shot was beyond Homer's immediate control. Bombing and anti-submarine missions were conducted by observer pilot teams using pilot-director indicator (PDI) signals. The observer's task was to maintain contact and to coordinate the pilot's movements to keep the aircraft on course with the target, correcting left or right and lining up as needed.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid Allen, 1996, pg. 25 of 46

<sup>315</sup> Ibid Allen, 1996, pg. 25 of 46

<sup>316</sup> Lloyd Searle., **The bombsight war: Norden vs. Sperry**, High Tech Promotions Inc., SPECTRUM IEEE #0018-92235/89/0900-0060, September 1989

; and  
Captains of the Cloud -Training sequence

In the case of Hudson 901/B3, a target was effectively acquired and engaged. Therefore we must assume that the crew properly coordinated the attack. The results may suggest that the problem may have been at the point of release or with the munitions themselves.

The tools available to the crew to assist them at this juncture of the attack were fairly simple and rudimentary. Aiming mechanisms were obsolete and dated to 1930. The instruments available were only designed for high level bomb aiming, not for low level surface attack of a U-boat.

The mechanisms employed allegedly guaranteed accuracy for hitting targets below 5000 feet. But these mechanisms were designed for aerial bombardment of ground targets and not naval targets. Attacking a submarine was a totally different matter.<sup>317</sup> There were no effective bomb aiming mechanisms that existed then designed specifically for use in the anti-submarine role.

The bomber was thought of as an aerial platform to be fought above the range of anti-aircraft guns at the time. This was not always the case in the anti-submarine role, especially when engaging a U-boat at low level flying. The prevalent strategic thought of the day suggested that maritime patrol aircraft be employed in the role of the bomber. This was a job that the Lockheed Hudson was originally designed to do, that is, to attack from great height.<sup>318</sup>

This simply was not the case for the Hudson Bomber in the anti-submarine role. An aircraft attack on a U-boat was geared to low-level flying in the danger zone of anti-aircraft fire. The employment of the airframe once a target was engaged was markedly different from its designed function and role. More importantly, low flying aircraft faced very imminent threats from the anti-aircraft guns of the U-boat. Finally, their target acquisition and bomb aiming mechanisms were no better than the accuracy of the Mark I “eyeball”!

Despite these differences, the final target acquisition and bombing solutions were similar. There was always a degree of difficulty for the bombardier or air observer. It was difficult to calculate in real time a proper release point for the aircraft’s munitions. The determination of this point was made much more difficult by the reduced height of release and the imminent threat of anti-aircraft fire.

### *...Physics*

Apart from that, the problem was further compounded by a number of factors and simple physics. The path of the dropped munition was a function of:

- acceleration of gravity;
- speed of the plane;

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid Searle, 1989

<sup>318</sup> Ibid Searle, 1989

- altitude;
- wind direction; and
- ballistics of the specific munition.<sup>319</sup>

Dropping a 250-pound bomb on a stationary target at training range was one thing, dropping a depth charge on a moving target at sea was another. Thus, there were many compounded variables to be considered. All variables had to align, come together at the right instant, and at the right point to attack a submarine successfully!

Thus, targeting in the anti-submarine role was very problematic. Coastal Command units faced many problems beyond these that also had to be addressed to sorting out the U-boat problem. Coastal Command lacked proper bombsights from the very beginning of the war. The need for proper target acquisition systems was recognized but little was done to resolve the issue in a timely fashion.

### *...Munitions*

The other problem was the efficacy of its munitions. Amatol filled depth charges were the primary munitions used in Canadian waters by aircrew. Torpex filled depth charges were not available to anti-submarine patrols conducted in Canadian waters. It is worthy to note that Coastal Command used the more effective torpex munition. So, the munition load may have been one factor in Homer's lack of success. Height may have been another.

Another key to successful attack in the antisubmarine role was the maintenance of proper height, neither too high nor too low. Aircraft had to be up close and personal if their attack was to have any measure of success.

The measure of height had a number of consequences. Dropping too high meant, the target would be missed. Dropping too low, meant the munition skipping upward striking the aircraft or self-immolation from the blast effects.<sup>320</sup> It happened.

Gravity bombs and other ordnance had the tendency to skip back off the water's surface, or exploded on the surface when dropped from low height. Those blast effects could be disastrous and were often catastrophic for the attacking crew.<sup>321</sup>

Dropping the munition from the proper height was recognized early on in the development of the anti-submarine role. Coastal Command's early research suggested an

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid Searle, 1989

<sup>320</sup> Dean C. Ruffili, **Operational Research and the Royal Canadian Air Force Eastern Air Command's Search for Efficiency in Airborne Anti-Submarine Warfare, 1942-1945**, Thesis, Master of Arts, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2001, pg. 20 &76

Source: <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk3/ftp05/MQ65204.pdf>

Accessed: 1 February 2014

<sup>321</sup> Ibid, Ruffili, pg. 20 &23

attack profile and a munition drop at 100 feet of altitude, at a speed of 115 mph for the Anson bomber.<sup>322</sup> The 100-foot level became the standard for the Hudson bomber as well.<sup>323</sup>

Despite this height, EAC's success rates were still very low from 1940-1941 prompting further study.<sup>324</sup> It was found that there was nothing essentially wrong with the weapon, the depth charge, or the general attack profile. What was found though was that depth charges fused to explode at 100 foot of depth, were unsuitable for EAC's conditions.

New fuse depth settings were recommended. EAC's settings were changed to discharge at a depth level of 25 feet to engage surfaced or recently submerged U-boats. Operational research determined that depth to be the lethal zone. Any detonation below this depth was found to be a safe zone for a submerged U-Boat.<sup>325</sup>

A second factor found was the spacing of the munitions themselves. Most Coastal Command Squadrons through to 1942 set their munition dispersion settings spaced to 50 feet. This would place the charges astride a target, which was thought to be the optimal setting to crush it between two opposing forces.<sup>326</sup>

At this time Coastal Command began to experiment with dispersion settings. Coastal Command finally recommended a tight dispersion setting of 36 feet between charges. Further operational research adjusted the final setting to 38 feet that avoided overlap and that maximized blast area. Both Coastal and EAC units used these tighter settings by 1943.<sup>327</sup>

The final variable to consider then was the effectiveness of EAC and O.T.U. 31's munitions. A depth charge exploding within 10 or 20 feet of the U-boat hull would indeed prove fatal.<sup>328</sup> But the likelihood of hitting that exact mark was so very slim. Homer's attack exemplifies that point, his munitions likely fell outside an effective range.

The pressure hull of a U-boat was also designed to withstand a great deal of stress and abuse. Accurately placing munitions that close to the U-boat hull was an extremely difficult prospect. U-boats were not passive targets. They could take drastic evasive

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid, Ruffili, pg. 23

<sup>323</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Public Record Office(PRO) File 199/435 – RCAF Attacks on U-Boats, 7 June 1943

<sup>324</sup> Ibid Ruffili, pg. 79-80

<sup>325</sup> Ibid, Ruffili, pg. 42-43

<sup>326</sup> Ibid, Ruffili, pg. 49

<sup>327</sup> Ibid, Ruffili, pg. 78

<sup>328</sup> Anon., **Fighting The U-Boats, Weapons and Technologies, Depth Charges**, U-Boat Net, © 1995 - 2014 Guðmundur Helgason

Source: [http://www.uboaat.net/allies/technical/depth\\_charges.htm](http://www.uboaat.net/allies/technical/depth_charges.htm)

Accessed: 27 January 2014

maneuvers, return effective anti-aircraft fire, and at the very least, evade by rapidly diving to evade destruction if caught on the surface. They would not remain exposed unless they were totally surprised.

*...Conclusion*

Homer's attack was conducted by the book. Homer meticulously employed what he had learned. No matter, for Homer and his crew, it was not meant to be as the stars were not aligned for success on that fateful day. It proved a point that sometimes sinking a U-boat was just a matter of luck, at being, at the right place, and at the right time.

### Appendix 3 –Internal Struggles

The Second World War was a struggle between opposing forces. The face of that struggle was the armies, navies, and air forces opposed in battle against one another. But there was an unseen battle too, the battle behind the scenes. It was a battle that raged for scarce resources that was part of an internal struggle. It was a common battle fought by all belligerents!

Resourcing and balancing were necessary to create the capabilities need to defeat the enemy. It was the panacea found in the arguments of all forces that promised quick and ready defeat of the enemy at minimal cost, time, and effort. It was the internal war within the war that looked to economy and efficiency. It was the war that who would win and get the resources to do so.

Surprisingly it too, had common properties felt by all the belligerents. These properties were the struggles in the internecine wars within all bureaucracies. It was all about arguments of whose strategy, doctrine or plan would win the war in the cheapest quickest and most efficient way.

The battle of the internal struggles pitted both the opposing forces and their bureaucracies one against the other in many unseen ways. Internal battles were played out in many areas. They may seem as contextually unimportant and irrelevant to the innocent bystander. But it was the battle behind the scenes, which set the tone of public policy and the direction of war, its economy, research and development, intelligence, and public life in general.

There was much infighting throughout the Second World War. It took time to recognize that combined operations and cooperation were the necessities to achieving that end at least from the Allies' perspective. One such example was found in the allocation of air resources. The distribution and allocation of these scarce assets had to be balanced to the many tasks and demands at hand. This balancing was paramount to success.<sup>329</sup>

Key decisions had to be made. There was never enough and there would always be winners and losers in the distribution. The consequences of these decisions flowed downward through the chain of command to the units at the front.

Coastal Command was the poor second cousin in the internal struggle for a fair share of the allocation of scarce resources. Its needs had to be satisfied in and amongst the many competing demands of all allied services during the Second World War.<sup>330</sup> Consequently the subordinate units and O.T.U. 31 too were all caught up in this internal struggle.

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<sup>329</sup> Greg Baughen, **The RAF – In the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain (A Reappraisal of Army and Air Policy 1938-1940)**, Fonthill Media Limited, 2016, 270 pg.

<sup>330</sup>Dean C. Ruffili, **Operational Research and the Royal Canadian Air Force Eastern Air Command's Search for Efficiency in Airborne Anti-Submarine Warfare, 1942-1945**, Thesis, Master of Arts, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2001, pg. 10.

Coastal Command worked within a set framework of priorities. The framework had consequences extending through the chain of command down to the internal assignments, allocations, priorities and resources. It taxed many units including O.T.U. 31 within the Canadian Order of Battle on Canada's East Coast as well.

The internal struggles and competing demands of all Coastal Command's units had to be contended with. It was an extremely complex situation. The allocation and training priorities were simply elsewhere when it came to considerations and decisions impacting the Canadian Order of Battle.<sup>331</sup>

The air attack made by pilot Officer Homer on 15 May 1943 on a U-boat off Canada's East Coast highlights Coastal Command's difficulties and choices made at the time. The availability and choice of munitions used in this attack highlights the difficulties presented.

Homer's aircraft carried four 250 lb Mk VIII amatol depth charges set for 25 feet detonations. His dispersion spacing was 36 feet for 150 knots of air speed.<sup>332</sup> Homer's attack profile was a standard one and executed within the parameters specified by Coastal Command's operating procedures for the aircraft type. He may have indeed overshot his target but then again, his munitions may have not been totally effective!

Eastern Air Command carried 250 lb amatol filled depth charges. They simply lacked the punch and killing power of Coastal Command's torpex filled depth charges. EAC tried to rectify that deficiency with an order for torpex filled depth charges. The order was placed by May 1942. That order was never filled because Coastal Command determined that the priorities were "elsewhere".<sup>333</sup>

The sum and short of it was that Canadian based units never used nor were ever issued torpex filled depth charges during the Second World War. The direct result was that Canadian weaponry was not as effective and with the attendant consequences. The less effective amatol filled depth charges may have resulted in attacks, but these attacks may have led to a lower rate of success in U-boat sinkings.

Torpex was a game changer for anti-submarine warfare. There was some consideration given to Canadian production. The Canadian requirement for torpex filled munitions was

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Source: <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk3/ftp05/MQ65204.pdf>

Accessed: 1 February 2014

<sup>331</sup> Ibid, Ruffili, pg. 45-48

<sup>332</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Public Record Office(PRO) File 199/435 – RCAF Attacks on U-Boats, 7 June 1943

<sup>333</sup> Ibid, Ruffili, pg. 49

recognized. Unfortunately, it never occurred in time for the lack of available production facilities.<sup>334</sup>

The date of Homer's attack is indicative that torpex filled munitions had not filtered down to the O.T.U's at this point in time. Homer had no choice but to employ whatever munitions were at hand. His aircraft was armed with the less effective 250 lb Mk VIII amatol depth charges.<sup>335</sup> The aircraft could have easily been load with 250 lb bombs. This lack of killing power may have been a factor in the results achieved from land based aircraft on Canada's east coast.

This is an important point. The consensus of opinion was that most U-boats sunk by depth charges, especially in naval action, required *repeated* depth charge attacks. There were many documented cases of U-boat surviving 300 or more depth charge attacks over many hours.<sup>336</sup> Airpower did not have the luxury of such largesse in quantity of available munitions. These attacks were often limited to four depth charges alone, thus the munition's efficacy was indeed critical to success.

Homer's munitions had to straddle the boat at very close range if his munitions were to have any impact at all. Four depth charges were all that were available to him. There was no on-site replenishment. Homer needed to target and place his munitions in the U-boat's imminent danger zone. His munitions once launched either landed inside or outside the effective zone. The killing zone was dependent on the type of munition employed. One wonders what results Homer may have achieved had torpex filled charges been available to him!

Who got what resources was based on results. There was little visible evidence of the efficacy of land based aircraft in the Maritime surveillance and anti-submarine role. Decisions were swayed on the basis of actual not theoretical results.

The weight of evidence served to muddy the waters between 1939 and 1941. Those results led to inter-service rivalry for the control of air power and favoured the arguments of strategic bombing. The need to optimize efficiency amongst all competing resources was in disfavour. This internal struggle thus governed the organizational schemes at the time.<sup>337</sup> You simply placed your chips on the table and gambled that they would pay off on the highest probability!

EAC made do with the 250 lb Amatol filled charges until war's end. Regardless, EAC's pilots, aircraft, and tactics made a deep impression on the Kriegsmarine. Patrolling aircraft were much feared, armed or not!

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid, Ruffili, pg. 50

<sup>335</sup> ibid File 199/435 – RCAF Attacks on U-Boats, 7 June 1943

<sup>336</sup> Anon., **Depth Charges**, U-Boat Net.com, © 1995 - 2014

<sup>337</sup> William S. Hanable, **Research Studies Series, Case Studies In The Use Of Land-Based Aerial Forces in Maritime Operations, 1939-1990**, Air Force History & Museums Program, Washington, D.C. September 1998, pg. 11 and pg. 14



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## Abbreviations

### *Air Force Ranks and Trade*

ACM - Air Chief Marshal  
AVM – Air Vice Marshal  
WAG – Wireless Air Gunner  
W/C – Wing Commander  
W/L – Wing Leader  
S/Ldr- Squadron Leader  
F/L – Flight Lieutenant  
FO – Flying Officer  
PO - Pilot Officer  
F/Sgt Flight Sergeant  
Sgt – Sergeant  
LAC- Leading Aircraftman

### *Army Ranks*

LAC – Lance Corporal

### *Canadian Provinces*

NS- Nova Scotia  
NB – New Brunswick  
NL – Newfoundland (New)  
Nfld – Newfoundland (traditional)  
PEI – Prince Edward Island

### *German Naval Ranks*

Kptlt. – Kapitänleutnant

### *Organizations*

AFHQ - Air Force Headquarters  
AFTERO - Atlantic Ferry Organization  
BCATP – British Commonwealth Air Training Plan  
CMHQ – Central Military Headquarters  
DHH - Directorate of History and Heritage  
DND - Department of National Defence  
EAC - Eastern Air Command  
HWE - Home War Establishment  
KMW - Kriegsmarinewerft  
O.T.U - Operational Training Unit  
RN – Royal Navy  
RAF – Royal Air Force  
RAFVR- Royal Air Force Voluntary Reserve  
RAAF – Royal Australian Air Force  
RCAF- Royal Canadian Air Force  
RNZAF- Royal New Zealand Air Force

Sqn – Squadron  
VF -Visiting Flight (VF) Program

*Political Party*

Lib – Liberal  
PC – Progressive Conservative

*Terminology*

DFC – Distinguished Flying Cross  
DFM - Distinguished Flying Medal  
Hon. - Honourable  
M.D. – Doctor of Medicine  
Mk. - Mark  
MiD - Mention in Despatches  
ORB - Operations Record Book  
GDP – Gross Domestic Product  
GNE – Gross National Expenditure