

**Triumph and Tragedy of Operational Training Unit 31  
Debert Nova Scotia**

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**Disclaimer**

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author cultivated in the freedom of expression and of an academic environment.

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## **In Sepia tones – Looking back**

Training has long been a *raison d'être* at the airfield in Debert, Nova Scotia. It is still conducted there today on a small scale with the Atlantic Region's Royal Canadian Air Cadet Summer Glider Camp. But in World War II that training was one of an entirely different sort. It was particularly urgent it was decidedly focused. There was an urgent need for trained crews for the delivery of combat aircraft to Great Britain and time, was of the essence.

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 heroism, and of tragedy.

At approximately 0445 hours on 20 July 1943 a Hudson Bomber crashed in a nearby wood off the Debert River. Lance-Corporal Edwards was first on the scene at the crash site. Edwards had made his way to a burning Hudson Bomber, a considerable distance in the dark, with fire extinguisher in hand. He waded through the Debert River to find it a fiery inferno.

Edwards was too late to save the crew. Edwards only 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 in the process. His wet clothing and a dunk in the river in the rescue attempt saved him from severe burns.

Edwards' bravery was recognized with a "highly commended" letter from the Officer Commanding the Royal Air Force station.<sup>1</sup> His actions likely deserved better but scenes like this would play out time and again at Debert and at many other airfields in Canada under the British Commonwealth Training Plan in the training tempo of the day.

## **Dire Straits**

There was little time for recognition and reward during the war. Battles were being fought on many fronts. The Germans were ascendant in building the Battle of the Atlantic causing great shipping losses and casualties.<sup>2</sup> In 1940, the Battle of France was about to be lost and the Battle of Britain about to be fought.<sup>3</sup>

The United Kingdom and allies, largely on their own from 1939 to late 1941, were view on the short end of the stick with the loss of France in the fight with Germany in 1940. The thin red line "Air Power" was in short supply. The trip wire the naval force was heavily tasked. The merchant navy, the lifeline, was being mauled. The Army, the shield, was virtually unarmed having lost most of its arms following the retreat from France at Dunkirk. The strategic balance was definitely not in the Allies favour. They were

struggling to organize against looming defeat. The Battle of the Atlantic was at its peak and Britain and its allies were hanging on by a thread.

The United Kingdom had a great need for all types of defence stores. The only way to get these stores across an Atlantic was either by sea or by air from its main supplier Canada who was its conduit, bread basket and industrial base. The United States remained virtually “neutral” until 7 December 1941.<sup>4</sup>

### **Moving a Backlog**

Britain’s thin red line “Air Power” though was about to be bolstered by aircraft orders from the United States. It was an Allied responsibility to get these delivered in theatre. Canada was to be the junction point for that aircraft delivery. Many aircraft types were transported by ship. But there was a far greater risk of losing them by trucking airframes across in the Atlantic in this way. Ships were being sunk in scores.

The logistics of transporting Great Britain’s was daunting. The aircraft order of 26,000 airframes with the United States and the limitations of trans-Atlantic shipping for the bulk of the aircraft delivery demanded an establishment of a unique organization to move these orders.<sup>5</sup> The Atlantic Ferry Organization (ATFERO) was established to meet the growing demand and to deal with a looming backlog of undelivered aircraft.

The concept for ATFERO commenced with a general contract placed by Lord Beaverbrook in 1940 with the Canadian Pacific Railway on 16 August 1940. Montreal banker, Royal Bank President Morris W. Wilson and President of the Canadian Pacific Railway, Sir Edwin Beatty were placed in control of its general operations.<sup>6</sup> This contract was subsequently cancelled though and the Ministry of Aircraft Production took full control by creating the Atlantic Ferry organization (ATFERO) in May 1941.<sup>7</sup>

AFTERO had minimal resources available. It was organized about three group leaders consisting of 35 first pilots and 11 second pilots to move 26,000 aircraft of various types.<sup>8</sup> The day to day running of the operation was left to the management of an experienced pilot, Punch Dickins.<sup>9</sup> The organization’s capacity though was still too small. There was an urgent requirement for AFTERO’s augmentation.

It soon became very evident that even with additional crews from civilian sources; AFTERO would remain under capacity and unable to deal with the backlog without additional help. A system of quickly returning pilots to Canada had yet to be worked out in 1940-42. It was only later that a return loop was created by Trans Canada Airlines. A few converted Lancasters were purchased in 1943 and 1944 to carry passengers and freight.<sup>10</sup>

AFTERO problems in 1940-1941 loomed on two fronts, the lack of trained crew, both pilots and navigators. The backlog of aircraft that need to be delivered continued to grow. It was simple labour economics. The deliverable pool of aircraft swamped an insufficient supply of pilots. Staring Dickins and AFTERO squarely in the face in December, 1940, was the accumulation of 674 Hudson aircraft awaiting delivery to the United Kingdom.

Looking ahead to 1941, AFTERO and Ferry Command forecasted an increased inventory and various new aircraft types including, 91 PBY Catalina, 58 B-24 Liberators and 20 Flying Fortress with an unknown quantity of Marauders, Baltimore and Boston aircraft.

It became very evident that the ferrying aircraft would shortly become a more complex problem. The increased number of aircraft types, the volumes, their complexity and size of the operation would continue to try AFTERO's handling capacity. One solution was to hire more civilian pilots. But complaints were already being raised that this source of supply was becoming inordinately expensive.<sup>11</sup>

AFTERO's problems were also exacerbated by pressing demands elsewhere. Most of AFTERO's staff were on short term loan and were urgently required by the burgeoning needs of Canada's domestic commercial airline system. Civilian commercial pilots were supposed to be seconded to AFTERO only for a three month tour. They were then to be replaced by others on a rotational basis. However this system proved ponderous and impractical. It did not help that the airlines demanded their pilots back. They were needed to run the growing and expanding demands in domestic operations.<sup>12</sup>

### **To the rescue**

The pressures with the looming backlog had to be dealt with. The Chief of Air Staff proposed that 31 OTU be developed in order to train crews for assemblage and given the necessary flying practice as crews with the view to ferrying aircraft to the United Kingdom.<sup>13</sup> This course of action was agreed to.

An operational training unit was to be organized at Debert with two functions in mind, the conduct operational training and the conduct of a short conversion course. The initial establishment for 31 OTU consisted of 86 officers and 861 Ors. OTU 31 was to be equipped originally with 32 Hudsons and 11 Ansons for the OTU establishment and with 12 Hudsons for the short conversion course to meet the training demand.<sup>14</sup>

The original O.T.U. course was to be of eight weeks duration and was arranged to produce 10 crews every 4 weeks. Each crew trained consisted of two pilots and two wireless air gunners. The pilots were given General Reconnaissance training where possible. Pilots would also be trained in part to meet the requirements for second officers for the AFTERO ferry duty.

The trainees would be given sufficient training to gain a standard level of proficiency in Canada with final operational training at the gaining units overseas. The ferry duty was supposed to be an extra bonus to alleviate the strain in aircraft delivery for overseas theatres. The initial planned output was adjusted to 50 pilots per month with a peak population of 25 on station at anyone time.<sup>15</sup>

This output would go a long way to addressing the needs of AFTERO, at least in theory. In the short term there would be a mismatch of expectations to delivery rates. The surge of the backlog of aircraft being delivered still out stripped the capacity of the available

staff and the expected output from the schools at least from 1940 to 1941. Aircraft were not moving into theatre fast enough prompting many complaints from American Suppliers.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the increased numbers trained, there continued to be a pilot/navigator shortage. These shortages tended to put pressure on the training staff that, for operational necessity, crews must be trained and delivered expeditiously. Put quite simply the BCATP had not reached its stride in 1940. It was simply in its infancy. Any appreciable training did not occur or start until the spring of 1941 because the bases of the BCATP were still under construction.<sup>17</sup>

The demands for pilots and navigators were but one problem to contend with. An air bridge over the Atlantic had never been attempted on such a scale before. There were few navigations aids and those aids that did exist, were primitive at best.<sup>18</sup>

Then there was the weather! The North Atlantic was notoriously noted for bad weather. Pilots were on their own when assessing the meteorological conditions. It was not uncommon for a 10 day delay at Gander awaiting clearing conditions.<sup>19</sup> Weather delays exacerbated the delivery schedule and helped adding to the growing backlog. But it under these circumstances that crews would have to be trained under all weather conditions if they were to be useful in ferrying operations.

These factors placed additional stresses on those conducting the training as well as high expectations and goals from those being trained. The strategic situation demanded the development of highly skilled, truly focused, and well-motivated crews trained under very tight deadlines to meet the pressures of the delivery pipeline and pressing operational needs. Movement of critical aircraft was viewed as an operational need.<sup>20</sup>

### **A System In Crisis And Distress**

Despite AFTERO's best efforts the system remained in crisis. The use of commercial pilots was likely only a short term stop gap measure until the tide could be turned from the arrival of the graduates from the BCATP. Still this was a matter for concern as Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Bowhill; the Royal Air Forces top ranking officer responsible for Coastal Command, was tasked with sorting things out. Bowhill arrived from Great Britain on a short two days notice. His new responsibilities were deemed more vital to Britain's defence than his then important function at Coastal Command.<sup>21</sup>

Air Chief Marshall Bowhill was highly respected and had a reputation for getting things done. The new job was to be purely administrative. But hopes were riding high on Bowhill's skills and reputation. His performance was considered crucial to tilting the strategic balance from defeat to victory.

Bowhill's job would be to sort out the rough spots upon assuming the duties of aircraft transfer from AFTERO pioneered by a Morris W. Wilson and Sir Edwin Beatty back in 1940. Bowhill's task was simply to make flying the Atlantic a matter of routine.<sup>22</sup>

Bowhill took up his new appointment on 14 June 1941.<sup>23</sup> Bowhill would soon assume full responsibility of AFTERO. In August 1941 Ferry Command was created, Bowhill was its commander and all AFTERO's responsibilities was transferred to Ferry Command for the vital aircraft transfers from Canada to the United Kingdom.<sup>24</sup>

Bowhill faced the same challenge as AFTERO in one respect, pilot and navigator shortages. A large civilian component was retained to make the system work but it was under now military supervision that coordinated a vital large scale enterprise of strategic importance.<sup>25</sup> Bowhill still faced a growing displeasure at the backlog and one could see the sense the urgency of the situation that demand results! But he could not fight the weather nor could he get the graduates quick enough from the BCATP in 1941.

### **Pressure flows downhill**

Operational Training Unit (OTU.) 31 was virtually being established as Bowhill assumed his new command in Canada. The decision to train ferry crews was made by the UK Air Ministry in April of 1941. OTU 31 was moved from England in three echelons for this task.<sup>26</sup> The First Echelon departed the U.K. on April 25th, 1941, sailed on May 2, arriving Canada on May 21st. The Second echelon assembled May 9<sup>th</sup>, sailed 11 May, arriving June 4<sup>th</sup>. The third Echelon formed on May 23rd, sailed May 30th and landed on June 16th, 1941.<sup>27</sup>

OTU. 31 was supposed to off and running once the staff hit the ground. But the airfield was largely under construction, save the runways. Its mission and scope were also changed or modified regularly. The staff was also broken up and dispersed on arrival. The unit must have been under considerable stress. To add to its distress neither of the two instructors included in the first echelon had ever flown the Hudson.<sup>28</sup>

The Hudson was chosen presumably, because of the dire need for combat aircraft in the United Kingdom. Second they were readily available and easily obtained from the United States. The subsequent decision to combine the training to produce crews able for operations and ferry command duties was seen as a side benefit. This was the solution that aimed to ease the growing demand for qualified pilots and navigators and that aimed to reduce Bowhill's looming backlog in 1941.<sup>29</sup>

### **Beech O'Hanley and AM896 -the Great Village Crash 23 October 1941**

Student train began in this chaotic environment. Twenty pilot trainees arrived at Debert late August 1941 for training on Lockheed Hudsons. The training would lead to crewing up and qualification as "Captain" for Atlantic ferrying with the expressed purpose that each new "Captain" would take one aircraft over to England.<sup>30</sup> Some would come to find the training to be as realistic as operations.

During the course, 12 Hudson Bombers were tasked with a night exercise on 23 October 1941 with a cross-country flight to Windsor, Ontario. A flight of 12 Hudson bombers

were fully loaded and fuelled Hudson bomber in preparation for the eventual “Ferry” task. The exercise came to be daunting one as the Hudson was a relatively new aircraft type to both instructors and students.

Pilot Officer Beech O'Hanley was in the first aircraft to take off just after 1 a.m. in the dark that morning. O'Hanley climbed to about 2000 feet where he and his crew met with an unknown catastrophic failure. His aircraft turned upside down and plunged straight into the ground killing all aboard.<sup>31</sup> The cause of this crash was considered “obscure” according to a court of inquiry held later on 25 October 1941. The court simply noted that the aircraft flew into the ground and disintegrated.

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 determining the cause of the demise of the crew of Hudson AM896.<sup>32</sup> There were eyewitness reports on the ground that the plane was in flames as it plunged in toward Great Village Nova Scotia.<sup>33</sup> But as eyewitness accounts are often notably considered unreliable, these reports were likely discounted by the Court.



Beech O'Hanley killed in a nighttime flying accident with his Crew at Debut N.S. in November 1941.

The remainder of the flight was subsequently held back for daylight take-off whence once again it proceeded to Windsor. The weather held until about fifty miles west of Montreal, where the ceiling fell and heavy rains came in. The flight was flying visually and had very little forward visibility. All in this flight were relying on a Radio Direction Finder (RDF) compass tuned in to St. Hubert. Regrettably nobody told Debert that the transmitter had been moved a little further east to Dorval only a week earlier.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the weather and incorrect RDF location, most made it to Dorval with difficulty. However weather, probable misdirection of the radio beacon, and possible equipment failure contrived to make the issue of navigation and a safe landing doubtful for Hudson AM895. These factors were to have tragic consequences for the second aircraft lost that day, 23 October 1941. Hudson AM895 crashed and burned beyond recognition near Cartierville Quebec.

Pilot Officer J.F Boyd was the captain of AM895 and Pilot officer A.E.G Wainwright, his navigator. Both were RCAF trainees. Other crew members included Wireless Air Gunner A Sergeant A. Kirsch (RCAF) and LAC A.J. Morris (RAF).<sup>35</sup>

Another Court of Inquiry was held into AM895's demise, the same day 25 October 1941, as AM896. The court members were the same too. The relevant facts determined by the

Court found that AM895 while on a final training flight, crashed and burned while attempting a forced landing at l'Abord a Plouffe near Cartierville, Quebec at about noon on 23 October 1941.

The Court ascertained both a probable primary and a secondary cause into this particular crash. The primary cause was assessed as "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. The secondary cause was "That the pilot stalled the aircraft commenced into a spin and crashed into the barn." The court did not make any direct findings on the mis-location of the Radio Detection Finder as a probable cause or as a factor in the crash. It would seem that the onus was being squarely placed on the crew for their demise.<sup>36</sup>

However the Courts recommendations on AM895 are also telling for the faults within the training system at the time. The recommendations were:

- a. " That Pilots, Air Observers, and Wireless Operator Air Gunner course at 31 OTU be extended to enable crews under training to be given ample experience in flying in adverse conditions under supervision,
- b. Before crews under training are sent OTU 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.
- c. That instrument flying instruction to a minimum of ten hours should be given to pilots on the course prior to night flying instruction,
- d. In order that the above recommendations may be put into effect, that all I.E. aircraft be equipped with dual sets
- e. 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."

Like the Court for the Great Village crash on the same day, the Court also failed to incorporate any eye witness accounts. Witnesses on the ground reported that AM895 too, was on fire, and was side slipping toward an outhouse when it crashed at l'Abord a Plouffe. The plane settled on the small structure and simply ignited. A terrific heat burned the building to the ground and left AM895 largely unrecognizable, melting the aircraft beyond recognition, save a wing tip that was left comparatively undamaged.<sup>37</sup>

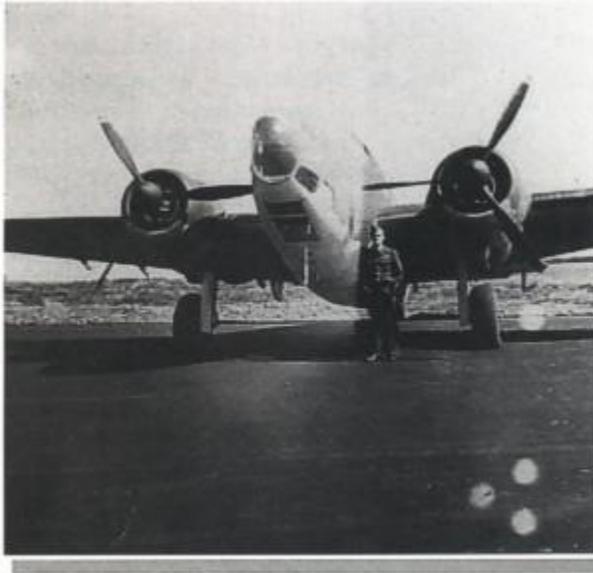
Pilot Officer O'Hanley had a total of 275 flying hours; 29 on instrument, 22 at night, 9 hours solo and 33 hours dual on type.<sup>38</sup> Pilot Officer Boyd had a total of 295 flying hours; 29 on instrument, 9 at night, and 12 dual and 61 solo on type.<sup>39</sup> Each pilot exceeded the minimum instrument flight recommendation based on the Court's findings. It is doubtful then that flying on instruments was the problem.

Their demise points to other probable causes not investigated by the Court. There was no indication in the record that the conditions of the other aircraft in this flight were looked

at. In any case they couldn't as there was little remains to do so. Other witness accounts suggested the Court should have looked at other factors.

Reporting in the Montreal Gazette of 24 October 1941 was a sidebar article on the l'Abord a Plouffe crash near Cartierville, Quebec that described the condition of the remains of the four victims of the crash. AM895 was a funeral pyre. The bodies of Wainwright and Boyd had been identified by non-inflammable objects found on their remains, while Kirsch and Morris were identified conclusively by other means.<sup>40</sup>

Orders were received by the surviving crews to remain at Dorval until the issues were sorted out. They checked in at the Mount Royal Hotel in downtown Montreal. They were there three days waiting for the weather to improve while awaiting further instructions.<sup>41</sup> The cost of the day's training had been the loss of two valuable aircraft and 8 crew.<sup>42</sup>



This is the Lockheed Hudson, the aircraft type on which we were training.

### **Training Assessment – A Balanced Point of View**

This training was not conducted in a vacuum. The need for quality control was established early on in the BCATP prior to these events. A Visiting Flight (VF) program was instituted at CFS Trenton in the summer of 1940 to assess the training program. The VFs assessed most training and OTU establishments and assessed the quality of both the

instructors and students.

The VF early assessments were both rigorous and very thorough instilling fear in many. They indicated though that the training was being conducted at a high standard of efficiency given the limited resources available and the time under which the BCATP was established.<sup>43</sup> There was no doubt that VF assessments considered the training staff to be both proficient and dedicated in the performance of their duties.

The British Air Ministry also securitized the schools and held a similar opinion. In late 1941, the Ministry found there was little difference between RAF and RCAF conducted training. Air Marshal A.G.R. Garrod, its the chief investigator, found the instructors to be of a high quality and that school personnel were enthusiastic and driven in the training function.

Garrod noted though that despite the graduates being well trained and capable, there was room for improvement in the areas of signals, map-reading, and instrument flying.<sup>44</sup> This

observation may have been related to the events above in the eventual review of the activities of OTU 31 on 23 October 1941 and the high wastage rate for 1941.<sup>45</sup> Air Marshal Garrod's observations though hint at some underlying improvements that were needed in 1941.

These assessments held until the spring of 1943 when the UK started to complain about the quality of pilots trained overseas and currently taking pre-operational training in Britain.<sup>46</sup> It was obvious that the standards required in 1941 were satisfactory and met the demands of the day. All student trainees passing through OTU. 31 met the exacting standards required of them in 1941. All were very capable and all were very accomplished young airmen.

It was more probable that there was a collusion of multiple factors in the early training system from the events noted previously that contributed the higher wastage rates observed in 1941-42. The wastage rates were 18.8% from opening to the end of 1942. Then held steady at 13.9% 1943 and 13.5% to OTU31's closure in 1944.<sup>47</sup>

In 1941 every one was new and on a learning curve. It would seem that those early lessons were learned and improvements were made. Wastage rates did decline and an increase in the number of flying of flying hours between fatal accidents was noted from 1942 on.<sup>48</sup>

The evidence tends to suggest that there other probable causes outside the control and influence of the trainees of the Class of 1941. The instructors were assessed and they were rated "proficient". The candidates themselves met the standards required of highly trained pilots and navigators The evidence at hand, though not all encompassing, does suggest that three probable causes as factors for further investigation by the Court of Inquiry on 25 October 1941:

1. Mechanical Failure and Maintenance;
2. Navigation and Communication; and
3. Weather and all Weather Training

### **Other Probable Factors – Mechanical Failure and Maintenance**

The first evidence of possible mechanical and maintenance issues arises from the observations of the AFTERO civilian pilots. This evidence was not necessarily available to the Court of Inquiry. But AFTERO's civilian pilots were dismayed with the visual condition of the aircraft that they received in the fall of 1941. The aircraft were from the training units and were reported as having had obviously seen a good deal of life.

AFTERO civilian pilots noted mud splashes lining the fuselage, the back of the wheels and that dirt was adhering in some open spots. This was not surprising considering that many of the airfields were under construction and virtual mud plains.<sup>49</sup> Of most concern to them though was the observation of the engines, which had a series of oil streaks running back on the cowlings.

These aircraft handed to them were the ones to be shipped to the United Kingdom, which for many was to be a first attempt at a transatlantic crossing. Their problems and concerns were promptly dealt with. All the aircraft were given a good working over and controls were replaced. They were now assured that the aircraft were now in good working order.<sup>50</sup> It begs the question though “what order were they in before being delivered?”

Although these observations cannot be directly tied to the preceding events, it is possible that these may have been one and the same aircraft.<sup>51</sup> Both the AFTERO pilots and Debert pilot trainees were quartered at the Mont Royal Hotel. Both groups reported the raucous atmosphere therein!<sup>52</sup> It must surely be no mere coincidence that the receipt of these aircraft occurred in roughly the same timeframe.

Whether these aircraft arrived from Debert or not for transshipment is irrelevant. It is indicative of the condition of the aircraft that were being received for possible transshipment from the training units. These aircraft were surely not in prime condition for training if they were not up to par for release to civilian pilots whose concern caused a major maintenance effort to ready them for a ferrying crossing! The proof may lie in the fact that both AM896 and AM895 were reported to be afire by eyewitness accounts on the ground as they plunged into the ground killing all aboard at Great Village Nova Scotia and at l’Abord a Plouffe near Cartierville, Quebec on the very same day.<sup>53</sup>

### **Other Probable Factors – Navigation and Communication.**

A great burden was being place on pilots and their navigators. Two of five of the Courts recommendations did concern communication and navigation aids. It is clear that there was insufficient internal communication amongst the crew to warn the pilot or navigator of any impending problems that may have been observed by the crew while in flight. But it was also clear that there were communication problems with ground control to assist the crew while enroute.

But it was probably a little more basic than that. A great part of the mis-direction in the case of AM895 was due to the relocation of a radio beacon that no one bothered to tell any in authority of a change. Navigators work to a known fixed point. One can assume that AM895 was certainly plotting toward a beacon that was not only out by a wide margin but also one that they were relying on for accuracy. The failure to relay the correct information to all concerned was not commented on by the Court.

It may well be that AM895 was trying to sort out where it was in relation to where it was supposed to be when events rapidly degraded and added to their degree of difficulty. There were no visual cues from the ground, they were unable to find the airport, and perhaps in conjunction with some unknown mechanical failure, they met their end by burning and crashing in the field near Cartierville, Quebec.

## **Other Probable Factors – Weather and all Weather Training**

The mission focus was really to train aircrew for all weather conditions. In truth aircrew survival depended greatly on the skills of the pilot and astuteness of the navigator while under pressure. There were no navigation aids other than landfalls and celestial navigation to get you to and back from the target. So there was a singular demand to make the training as realistic as possible without getting shot at! Canadians were to be at the forefront in ferrying aircraft overseas. This would be a very unkind and unforgiving environment, so the pressure may have been on to get it right at the outset.<sup>54</sup>

This is no exaggeration! The need for competent crew was extreme. For example, Churchill and Roosevelt were meeting in Washington in December 1941. Churchill had unfortunately forgotten some important documents back in London that were urgently required for his meeting with Roosevelt. He ordered that they be delivered immediately.

Churchill's order was given Christmas Eve 1941 under the worst possible weather conditions then over the Atlantic. The meteorologists rated the day as "impossible flying conditions".

Captain Gants and Captain Evans both Americans serving in Ferry Command, had recently made a 3200 mile trip from Bermuda to Britain. They volunteered to make the return trip in a Catalina PBV. Gants and Evans made the epic journey in 22 ½ hours. The flight was made at extremely slow speed and at extremely low altitude flying into the heart of a winter gale. They maintained a height of between 200 to 800 feet altitude for this important delivery to Churchill and Roosevelt.

Gants and Evans said that the Atlantic licked at the hull of their PBV for most of the way of their crossing. Both were awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for their hazardous work and devotion to duty much later on 24 November 1943.

The journey of Gants and Evans must surely have been a benchmark for training. This benchmark was one based on sacrifice, diligence in the face of adversity and duty. All weather training was certainly being demanded.<sup>55</sup>

## **The Instructors Dilemma**

The staff and instructors also faced a problem of getting themselves organized. Administration was to become a looming workload. The situation on the ground was likely organized chaos. The unit had to sort out aircraft dispositions, training areas within the Maritimes, command responsibilities, and most important its aim and mission.<sup>56</sup>

All these issues regarding the unit's establishment had to be sorted out between the advance party's first arrival in 21 May 1941 and the commencement of the first conversion courses 1 August 1941. This strongly suggests that everyone was involved either in training or an administrative capacity, and that all were extremely busy, under stress, and heavily tasked.

OTU 31 was principally designed to be a Ferry Command Despatch Reception and Training Unit. Yet an idea was raised to have several different types on the Unit's establishment in order to give training on as many U.K. bound aircraft as possible. It was proposed that 1 B-17, 2 B-24s, 4 Hudsons and later a few Lockheed 37s and B26s be considered to give pilots experience on a variegated group of aircraft that were to be ferried overseas. These issues were still being reviewed while the unit was being established.

The unit was to be fitted with 15 Dual Hudsons with long range equipment to get the ball rolling. They were required to develop multi-engine training for ferrying aircraft of new 'types'. The appropriate additions of these types for training purposes would be added to the establishment as the airframes entered the ferry stream noted previously.<sup>57</sup>

The long and the short of it was though was that the needs for Coastal Command crews trained on Hudsons proved to be the far greater need in the end. It was eventually decided to combine the training and produce crews able to go onto operations on arrival in U.K. and able to fly the Atlantic in accordance with Ferry Command rules and regulations.<sup>58</sup> The unit consolidated its training on the Hudson bomber. Only then, once these issues had been decided, did the unit settle down to conduct its training.

The instructors may have been time expired RAF types being rested from operations.<sup>59</sup> Yet it is also clear that in this milieu they were under considerable stress, under pressure, and under extreme deadlines to deliver the goods. The training was conducted under very operational conditions. The burdens of training and administration weighed heavily on them. The instructors were far from being rested from operations! Theirs was a daunting task and they had a major role to play in a very vital strategic theatre.

### **Back to the Future**

Seventy years later in the summer of 2011 the cycle will be repeated once again at much leisurely, pleasurable and less frenetic pace. The Royal Canadian Air Cadet Gilder camp will train another 50 candidates. The Debert Airfield will come alive with active training once more.

But looking back, we must recognize the courage, triumph and tragedy of wartime Debert. The spirit of the past still lingers along its runways' edge, or found in the footings of old buildings and tarmacs now hidden in alders, grassy knolls, in the wind and waters of nearby forests and fields.

The activities at Debert in 1941 reflect the urgency of the time. There was no time to reflect, there was only time to move on. What is often lost in these vignettes was the fact that these young men and women were both warriors and pioneers. They paved the way for commercial aviation by opening the trans-Atlantic route. Each flight undertaken was a flight into the unknown. There were no routes, no navigation aids, and meteorological

and forecasting data was just its infancy. Getting there was often a matter of good luck as much as good planning.

The story of OUT 31 is one of many that can be told of all the airfields and training units mustered here in Canada during World War II. If this story tells us anything, it is a story of courage and devotion and the mettle of the men and women of the day. Their day was about pressing on in the face of adversity, doing your best, and lamenting your losses only once the job was done. There was a tale of triumph against all odds in getting the job done!

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<sup>1</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

<sup>2</sup> Juno Beach Centre, **Canada in WWII, Ferrying Aircrafts Overseas**, 2003,

Source: <http://www.junobeach.org/e/4/can-tac-air-fer-e.htm>

Accessed: 14 February 2011

“shipping was an increasingly uncertain business on account of U-boat attacks.”

<sup>3</sup> John Keegan, **The Second World War**, Penguin Books, 2005 (first published 1990)

Chapter 3,4,5 provide an excellent overview of the timeline

<sup>4</sup> Ibid Keegan, 2005, pg 538-540

<sup>5</sup> Ibid Juno Centre Ferrying Aircraft, 2003 “The logistics for the transportation of so many planes rapidly became a major undertaking.”

<sup>6</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>7</sup> Ibid Juno Centre Ferrying Aircraft, 2003

<sup>8</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011 ,pg 1

<sup>9</sup> George Lothian, **Flight Deck – Memoirs of an Airline Pilot**, McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1979, pg 74-75

<sup>10</sup> Ibid Juno Beach Centre, **Ferrying Aircrafts Overseas**, 2003

<sup>11</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=i5gFAAAIBAJ&pg=2646,3345415&dq=ferry+command&hl=en>

Accessed: 30 January 2011

<sup>12</sup> Ibid George Lothian, 1979, pg 88

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- <sup>13</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011 , pg.3  
<sup>14</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011 , pg. 2  
<sup>15</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011 , pg. 2-3  
<sup>16</sup> Ibid Juno Centre Ferrying Aircraft,  
<sup>17</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>18</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>19</sup> Ibid George Lothian, 1979, pg 78

<sup>20</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>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, Time Magazine, **World War: IN THE AIR: One-Way Airline**, 1941

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, Time Magazine, **World War: IN THE AIR: One-Way Airline**, 1941

<sup>23</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)

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<sup>24</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>

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<sup>25</sup> [Juno Beach Centre](http://www.junobeach.org/e/4/can-tac-air-fer-e.htm) , **Canada in WWII, Ferrying Aircrafts Overseas**, 2003,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011 , pg 8

<sup>27</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011 , pg 2

<sup>28</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011 , pg 8-9

<sup>29</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011 , pg 6

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<sup>30</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>31</sup> Ibid Ernest E. Allen, 1996

<sup>32</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, Air Crash Card Record 1300-AME896, 23-10-41, Time 07:30,

<sup>33</sup> 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

<sup>34</sup> Ibid Ernest E. Allen, 1996

<sup>35</sup> Canada, National Defence, Director of History and Heritage, Air Crash Card Record, 1300-AN895-1, 23-10-41, Time not recorded.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid Air Crash Card Record 1300-AN895-1, 23-10-41

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, Montreal Gazette, 24 October 1941

<sup>38</sup> Ibid Air Crash Card Record 1300-AME896, 23-10-41, Time 07:30,

<sup>39</sup> Ibid Air Crash Card Record 1300-AN895-1, 23-10-41

<sup>40</sup> 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>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid Ernest E. Allen, 1996

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, Montreal Gazette, 24 October 1941

<sup>43</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 326

<sup>44</sup> Ibid Dunmore, 1994, pg 327

<sup>45</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg 11 and Ibid Ernest E. Allen, 1996 Allen's comments "A message was given to us ordering us to stay at Dorval until someone came up from Debert to decide what should be done to stop us from killing ourselves"

<sup>46</sup> Ibid Dunmore, 1994, pg 327

<sup>47</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg 12 Wastage Rates No. 31 O.T.U.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid Dunmore, 1994, pg 337 and DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011, pg 11

<sup>49</sup> Ibid 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

<sup>50</sup> Ibid George Lothian, 1979, pg 76-77

<sup>51</sup> Ibid George Lothian, 1979, pg 74

<sup>52</sup> Ibid Ernest E. Allen, 1996

<sup>53</sup>a. Ibid Ernest E. Allen, 1996,

b. Montreal Gazette, Eight Airmen crash from R.A.F. School, 24 October 1941

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c. Montreal Gazette, Air crash Inquest Held – Identity of 4 Victims Said Fully Verified, 24 October 1941

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<sup>54</sup> Montreal Gazette, **Canadians to fore in plane ferrying**, 24 October 1941

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Accessed: 30 January 2011

<sup>55</sup> Montreal Gazette, **Churchill Mission by Ferry Pilot is bared at Ottawa Investiture**, 24 November 1943

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<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=ynYtAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=fpgFAAAAIBAJ&pg=1962,4071513&dq=ferry+command&hl=en>

Accessed: 8 February 2011

<sup>56</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011 pg 6-7

<sup>57</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011 pg 6

<sup>58</sup> Ibid DHH File 74/13 No. 31 O.T.U., 3 February 2011 pg 6

<sup>59</sup> Ibid Ernest E. Allen, 1996