

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM
DISPERSALS
2TAF MEDIUM BOMBERS ASSOCIATION NEWSMAGAZINE
Nov 2020

***JACK & NORMA WATTS
COLLISION OVER HORSHAM
THE WARMTH OF FEAR
CRASH OF MITCHELL 312
ME AND THE 'B'
THE LIFE THAT I HAVE***



2nd TACTICAL AIR FORCE MEDIUM BOMBERS ASSOCIATION

Incorporating
88, 98, 107, 180, 226, 305, 320, & 342 Squadrons
137 & 139 Wings, 2 Group RAF

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On our cover: Field of poppies.

WE SHALL REMEMBER THEM



CHAIRMAN'S NOTES • Issue 129

November 2020



A different solemnity will be on view this Remembrance Day.

We will all observe the 11:00am two-minute vigil but, with public attendance to Cenotaphs strictly limited, it will likely be in our own homes. For the first time, the Royal Canadian Legion is asking the public to pay their respects virtually instead of in person for the National Remembrance Day Ceremony at the National Cenotaph in Ottawa. Proceedings will be broadcast live on the Legion Facebook page and on national television stations.

Usually attended by thousands, this year's ceremony will see just 100 official participants; all will be masked. Other changes for 2020 include:

- No Veteran's parade
- No Canadian Armed Forces Parade
- A reduced Colour party
- Wreaths pre-positioned so that no bearers/assistants are required
- No members of Cadets or Junior Rangers.

Buy a poppy, or two, or three. Remember and thank those who served.

This issue of Dispersals carries the article 'Collision Over Horsham' submitted by John Reijnders, a crewman on 'Sarinah', the B-25 of the Royal Netherlands Air Force Historic Flight. John tells us of an unfortunate accident which his Great Uncle, a 320 Squadron Wo/AG witnessed; and soon after, experienced his own incident that ended his combat flying tour. John has been working to uncover the exact location of his Uncle's crash site, but was prevented this year, thanks to COVID restrictions, from his third exploratory visit to France.

BATTLE OF BRITAIN PROFILE

NORMA ZELIA WATTS • WAAF Radio/Telephonist

Dominique Boily • RCAF Association News

Eighty years ago, from early July until the end of October 1940, a deceptively straightforward battle was fought in the skies over England... a battle that ultimately would shape the rest of the Second World War for the Allied Forces in Europe and beyond.

In 2020, the challenges we face with COVID-19 mean there will be no large gatherings, no parades. But with almost no survivors of the Second World War left among us, we must take time to remember those who fought in the Battle of Britain.

Here is the story of Norma Zelia Watts, who was part of the British Women's Auxiliary Air Force and one of the many Canadians who took part in the Battle of Britain.



Cpl Norma Tilley, WAAF

Norma Zelia Watts (née Tilley), formerly of Coventry, England, served as a radio telephonist with the British Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF).

During the Battle of Britain, she was the ground contact for the aircrews that fought back the German Luftwaffe in the British skies. Later in the war, she first served with Fighter Command, and then with Bomber Command which is where she met her husband, Flight Lieutenant Jack Vincent Watts, a Royal Canadian Air Force navigator.

During the Battle of Britain, the Luftwaffe attacked airfields and radar stations on the southeast coast of England.

"I started at Fighter Command Biggin Hill, which the Germans bombed the hell out of . . . and killed 30 of us WAAFs, at which point [our leaders] decided they would move us off the base." The WAAFs then moved to a

beautiful home a few miles away from the base.

"It was wicked, the planes would come over and would shoot up those Spitfires ... you hated to see it...you just hated to see it. However, it happened."

The day to day duties of radio telephonists were mainly to keep radio contact with the aircrew, but the WAAFs were also involved in other activities.

"You would be in bed asleep and be awakened by some officers: 'Get up! Get up! We have to go out there and put out some fire bombs!' They would give us some shovels and kick us out the door to go out looking for flames and put them out."

Most of the time, however, her duties were much more serious. The loss of comrades was especially hard to bear.

"You always hoped the news was good. . . . That was a hard part, for us girls, as radio telephonists. We were in direct communication with the aircrew, handling take-off and landing telecommunication with them. You would hear them coming back, and if there was a problem

you would hear them. . . . They would be asking for ambulances, but of course there would always be one on stand-by because you never knew what was going to land.”

Emergency situations might include loss of an engine, control problems, or wounded on board. “The ground crews have to know. So you were waiting for these guys to come back and you may hear something ...but you may hear nothing. You just knew there would be fatalities, you couldn’t avoid it. You would just read the board in the morning to see the names that were crossed out.”

For the WAAFs, it was personal. When they heard a call sign for a landing, there was relief. If they didn’t hear a call sign, it meant an aircraft was missing. Everyone on the ground shared in that fear. “You had to face it, it was a sort of ...a deadly kind of business.”

“It was a war. Period.” Mrs. Watts concluded. “The tears came later.”

Norma (Tilley) Watts passed away 30 Sep 2018 in Ottawa, Ontario



Brigadier-General (Ret) Jack V. Watts, DSO, DFC, CD, Croix de Guerre/Legion d’Honneur, Knight of St. George



F/L Jack Watts, RCAF

Approximately 50,000 Canadians served with the Royal Canadian Air Force and Royal Air Force in Bomber Command operations over occupied Europe during the Second World War. One of those brave Canadians was a courageous and highly skilled navigator, Jack Vincent Watts.

Brigadier-General Watts was born in 1920, in Hamilton, Ontario, and enlisted in the RCAF on July 2, 1940. He met his future wife, Corporal Norma Tilley, in England in the spring of 1944 while she was serving with the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) with the Bomber Command. They married in the fall of the same year.

He flew over 100 sorties with Bomber Command, serving in several units. During his outstanding war time service, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) and Bar. He left the RCAF after the war with the rank of squadron leader, but later returned, retiring as a brigadier-general in 1975. He commanded

the RCAF contingent to Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation in 1953 and was decorated by the Queen with the coronation medal.

Brigadier-General Watts had a front row seat to the famed raids on the German battleship Tirpitz, sister ship of the more famous Bismarck, while serving with the Royal Air Force’s 10 Squadron. For most of her wartime career, the Tirpitz sat in Norwegian fjords at Trondheim. It was an ongoing threat to the Royal Navy and a constant target for British attacks, but the fjords made it difficult for airmen to attack the vessel.

On the night of April 27, 1942, Flight Lieutenant Watts expertly guided the pilot of their Halifax bomber through an intense ambush of fighter attacks, bringing them down to an astonishing 250 feet [76 metres] to deliver their load on the ship.

“It was night time and we were carrying mines instead of bombs. The mines were to drop down below the stern and explode to try and damage the rear of the Tirpitz. We attacked at 250 feet, which was just over mast height. It was as low as you could be and make it. We did it two nights running.”

On the first night, the ship was shrouded in protective smoke and remained undamaged. “You couldn’t see anything,” he said. The second night saw success and Flight Lieutenant Watts was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions on the two nights.

His level-headedness and courage was again put to the test on November 11, 1942, when his aircraft was shot down in the Mediterranean near Tobruk, Libya.

He survived, but was injured by his parachute. He was shot down close to midnight; the stars were his only reference in the dark. Even in this extreme situation, he had the courage and strength of character to keep his cool and ignore the fear, the pain caused by his injury and the grief for the apparent loss of his crew. He used his expert navigational skills to save his own life and swim toward shore—an ordeal that lasted more than five hours.

“I swam every stroke in the book. I would roll over to look up at the stars and get lined up,” he said. “I know at least three times I think I started to drown.” At one point he thought he heard the surf but would not let himself believe it was the shore. “I didn’t want to have false hope, so I refused to accept it and I just kept on going. Then finally, my hands and knees touched bottom. I crawled up on the slope until I hit the shore, crawled between two big rocks and just passed out.”

When he came to, he realized he had landed on the shore of an occupied German army camp. He noticed activity as well as a watch tower nearby, and opted to stay still for two or three days, not moving an inch by fear of being spotted. After being exposed to the elements, without food, water or shelter, he decided to move once night had fallen.

“I made my way up to a hut and up the stairs,” he said. “Inside there was a big square room, big set of tables, sorted mail in boxes, and then I noticed that right there on the wall, looking at me was a big picture of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel—commander of the German Army in Africa.

F/L Watts found clothes, food and supplies, including a bayonet and an automatic pistol. He couldn’t find any water that he trusted, but he had a quick drink of Chianti and, due to extreme exhaustion, fell asleep.

He awoke to the sound of a vehicle engine and, as the door was kicked open, he recognised the outline of a British helmet. He hit the floor and asked, “Are you British?” The startled British military policeman reached for his side arm, which was secured in its holster. F/L Watts then blurted out: “I’m Canadian! I was shot down! I’m an RCAF airman!”



F/L Jack Watts in Tobruk. He is still wearing the German clothing he found in the camp as he had discarded his own clothing during his long swim.

DND Archives, PL-13674

After a brief scuffle and an intense exchange, the military police determined that this was in fact a stranded Canadian in German's clothing. They sat him down and asked him if he was hungry. They brewed tea, wrapped him in a British Army coat and drove him to an RAF base. On the way, they passed army personnel in pursuit of the Germans who had abandoned Tobruk the day before Flight Lieutenant Watts broke into their camp.

He said that having good morale and a positive attitude were essential to survival. "If a night fighter is attacking you and you're in the middle of search lights and flack is all around you, you have to have high morale at that time. It's a very personal challenge, really. And to say you took so many youngsters off the street, trained them and put them in that kind of context with that attitude and capability is quite amazing."

The sense of duty and loyalty was also key. "A lot of people had been killed, I had not," he said. "I had a job still to do, a responsibility I still had to face. I wasn't in fear and trembling, I felt I was trained, equipped and capable, and that's what I was there for. [There were] many people to whom I owed that kind of loyalty."

When asked what lingers in his mind the most all these years later, he mused: "Looking back, you can't possibly recall in the sense of how you felt that long ago. What stays with you is that you must now recognize the incredible attitude with which the Bomber Command air crews operated when they went out night after night with the knowledge that numbers of them would not make it.

Every time you came back you had a meal at the mess waiting for you and there would always be places unoccupied. I don't think it was discussed. You didn't know if they were prisoners...or dead. It was, in a sense, the way in which the game was played. You knew the chances were there and some would not make it, but most crews felt that they could handle it, could make the trip and come back."



Brigadier-General Jack Watts, a veteran of Bomber Command, and his wife Corporal Norma Zelia (Tilley) Watts, a veteran of the Battle of Britain, attend the Battle of Britain parade held at the Canada Aviation & Space Museum, Ottawa 15 Sep 2013. Holly Bridges photo

Jack V. Watts passed away 20 Sep 2019 in Ottawa, Ontario.



We Will Remember Them

COLLISION OVER HORSHAM

John Reijnders • B-25 'Sarinah' Crewman, Royal Netherlands Air Force Historic Flight

My Great Uncle [Rinus T.M. van der Heyden], on my mother's side, was the only one of both families to escape to England at the outbreak of WWII; the rest of the family remained in occupied Netherlands and did resistance work. Oom [Uncle] Rinus served with 320 Squadron as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner on the crew of Lt Vlieger D.H. Brand. The following story took place about a week before they themselves were shot down over France.

It was midnight on the evening of 7 Jun 44 at Dunsfold Aerodrome as fourteen Mitchells took off in the dark with only their topside blue lights and red lights in the tail and port wing lit [were detailed to attack Railway Emplacements at Vire, Montsecret and Flers, France].

Shortly after midnight, the sky was lit up beyond the Alfold Crossways; two 320 Squadron aircraft had collided while climbing just south of the Town of Horsham. At 05.00 on 8 June, as the final Mitchells returned, it became clear that 320 (Dutch) Squadron had lost a total of twelve airmen Killed in Action and three aircraft.

FR150 (NO-W)

Lt W.C. Dobson
S/Lt J. Meester
Sgt R.D. Stoffels
Sgt J.H. van Hagen

FR182 (NO-R)

S/Lt J.A. Vasselsteen
S/Lt Mulder
Sgt P. Engels
Sgt T.P. Mensingh

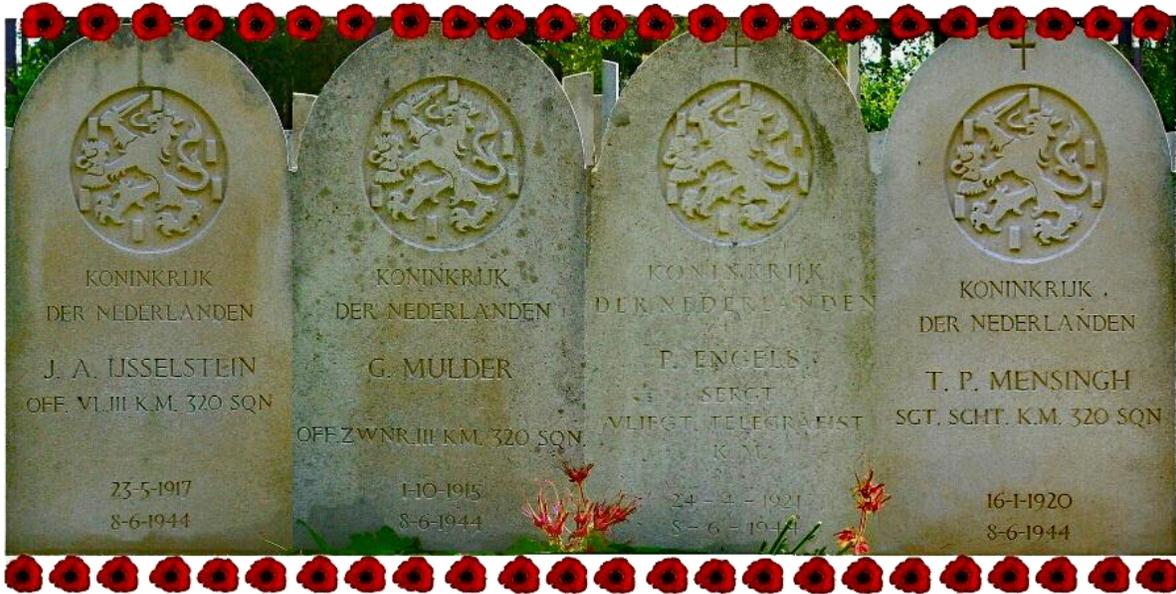
FR179 (NO-T)

Lt H.L. Hamilton
S/Lt W. Badings
Cpl L. Posthumus
Sgt F. Kuypers

FR150 (USAAF 42-32284) and FR182 (USAAF 41-30724) had collided over Horsham shortly after take-off; FR179 (USAAF 42-34789) was shot down by flak over Montsecret. The crews of FR150 and FR182 were buried in Brookwood Cemetery, just east of Dunsfold.



Collage of the Brookwood Cemetery headstones for the 320 Squadron crew of FR150 John Reijnders photo



Collage of the Brookwood Cemetery headstones for the 320 Squadron crew of FR182 John Reijnders photo

The crew of Mitchell FR179

Lt. H.L. Hamilton • S/Lt W. Badings • Cpl L. Posthumus • Sgt F. Kuypers
have no known graves

May this inspire others to also share their stories in Dispersals, and to put further into the spotlight the men and women of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission who do their best to keep up the sites of our fallen brothers in two world wars who gave their all for freedom.

And, when in the neighbourhood of a CWGC cemetery, do stop by and pay your respects.

Editor's note: On 12 Jun 44 John's Uncle Rinus and crew, in Mitchell FR149 'NO-N' were part of a force of eighteen 320 Squadron Mitchells assigned to attack a Panzer location at the Forêt de Grimbosq and St. Laurent de Condel. 320 Squadron Operations Records Book (ORB) reads:

"Bursts seen to W of Grimbosq village and in edge of forest. 4 concentrations in forest with two of them running out into the village of St. Laurent. Explosions seen in forest after bomb bursts. Flak: intense heavy accurate flak all around target. A/C 149 'N' was hit by flak near target and seen on fire. 4 parachutes seen to come out. A/C 191 'A' was hit at the same time and had, owing to the damage sustained, to ditch in the Channel. Crew safely picked up by English torpedo boat..."

The crew of **FR149** (USAAF 42-32283): **Lt D.H. Brand, S/Lt W.C. van Haeften** and **Cpl C. Smit**, were captured and spent the duration as POWs. **Cpl Rinus T.M. van der Heyden** evaded, with help of local partisans, and reached Canadian Army lines and safety; as was standard after an evader's exposure to resistance, Rinus was not returned to combat flying service.

The crew of **FR191** (USAAF 42-87265): **LtCdr G. van der Wolf, S/Lt Arriens, Sgt T van Dijk** and **S/Lt A.J. de Haan** were returned to safety as noted above in 320 Squadron ORB.

THE WARMTH OF FEAR

From the Memoirs of Fred Guest • Pilot • 180 Squadron 

In November and December of 1944 the weather in Belgium was usually just above freezing at ground level but by the time we reached our flying altitude of 12-15,000 feet the temperature was about -25°F.



180 Squadron Mitchell at Melsbroek in December '44. R. Legross photo

The cockpit heaters in our Mitchells almost never worked and, with the standard issue of winter flying suits, gloves and boots, I found I was always cold at altitude in winter. Particularly my hands and feet, which were most often frozen by the time we reached our assigned altitude prior to crossing into occupied territory.

A pilot was particularly susceptible to cold hands and feet as he was unable to move from his seat; one hand continually gripped the control column, the other the throttle levers and both feet firmly on the rudder bars, all of which was necessary to stay in close formation.

Once we were at altitude, crossing the lines and headed for the target, all thoughts of the cold were forgotten as you concentrated on staying in formation; once the flak started coming up the concentration level climbed even higher and adrenaline began flowing. With the bomb run completed and we came across to our side of the front line, I would start to relax and was always amazed that my body, hands and feet were now warm.

I guess as my fear level increased, my heart rate went up and increased the circulation throughout my body, even though there had been no extra physical effort.

MITCHELL 312's FINAL CRASH

From the Memoirs of Fred Guest • Pilot • 180 Squadron RAF & 418 Squadron RCAF (Aux) 

Mitchell 312 was an aircraft that, in January of 1952, came to 418 'City of Edmonton' Squadron (Aux) from No. 5 Operational Training Unit at Boundary Bay, BC and had been in service at the OTU long before I arrived there in March, 1945.



No. 5 O.T.U. Boundary Bay, 1944-45
Carefoot photo from the DesMazes collection.

B-25D-35-NA Mitchell RCAF serial HD312 (USAAF 43-3780) at Boundary Bay, BC after 22 Jun 45 Category 'B' crash when landing with gear locked in 'up' position. She was repaired on site and put into storage at Abbotsford; then to Avro Canada at Malton Jun '49 for conversion to light bomber and assigned to 418 'City of Edmonton' Squadron (Auxiliary) at Edmonton in Jan '52. She was overhauled by MacDonald Brothers in Winnipeg Dec '54 and back to Edmonton. She crashed during take-off at RCAF Whitehorse Summer exercises and scrapped 11 Sep 57.

For some reason it was a 'dog'. The engines checked out OK, but on the low side of acceptable; they sounded fine but it always took a longer take-off run than the other Mitchells and required more power to keep up in formation.

On the take-off from Edmonton to our 1957 Summer Camp at RCAF Whitehorse, with '312' loaded much heavier than we normally flew it, Owen Cornish¹ and I decided that because it was so slow to accelerate, we would not lower the 20° flap for take-off until we were $\frac{3}{4}$ the way down the runway (flap was usually lowered on the pre-take off check at the top of the runway). We were using Runway 16 that day which took us over Kingsway Avenue. Many people used to stand outside the fence at the end of the runway to watch aircraft take off; we gave them a real thrill that day as we would have been at no more than 20 feet when we went over them!

At Whitehorse, one of our pilots attempted a take-off in 312 with the nut on the nose wheel shimmy damper missing (a poor pre-flight inspection); on the take-off roll a severe nose shimmy developed and the pilot aborted the take-off. The aircraft was inspected and declared serviceable.

The next pilot to fly '312' was a senior Regular Air Force Pilot and, as he was about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way down the runway, noticed the airspeed indication was not as high as it should have been. Even

¹ Owen W. Cornish was CO, 418 Squadron (Aux) from Jan 59 through Oct 61.

though the aircraft felt like it was ready to fly, the pilot pulled off all power and as he did not have enough runway left to stop with brakes, he pulled the undercarriage and '312' went down on its belly, skidded off the end of the runway, broke its back and was later written off.

It was felt that an experienced pilot, feeling the aircraft was ready to fly, should have carried on with the take-off; once airborne, if he was not happy landing with the airspeed indicator reading, he could have requested another Mitchell to come up and fly formation with him during the landing run.

An inspection later found that during the early take-off run (with the severe shimmy damper), a static line to the bomb sight in the nose had broken, was undetected on inspection, and had affected the airspeed indicator for the next pilot.

The AOC (Air Officer Commanding) always paid a visit to our Summer Camps and this required a parade that we all grumbled about. Jack Campbell² was CO of 418 Squadron at the time and was required to meet the AOC and answer the many questions he always had. After they had finished with the preliminaries the AOC asked about the crash of aircraft 312. Jake, in an offhanded way, said "It's a good thing because it was dog anyway." The AOC was beside himself, stuttering and stammering; any Regular Air Force CO would have been immediately relieved of command.

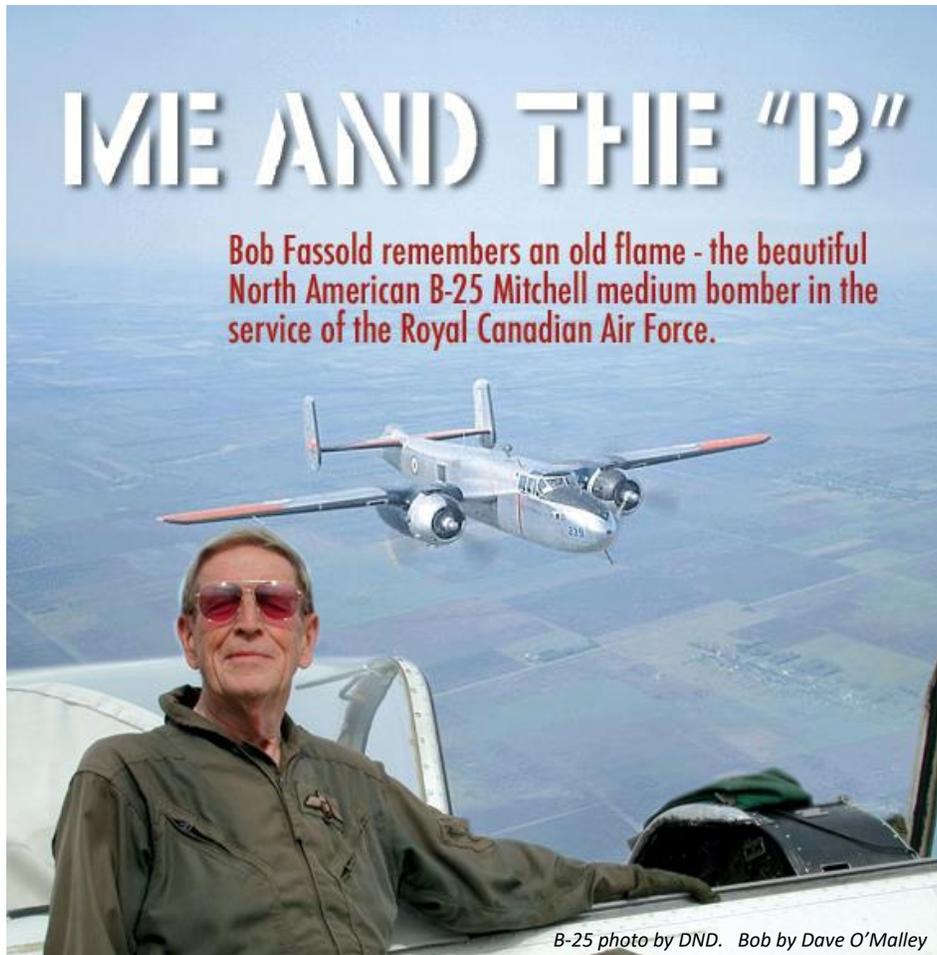


RCAF B-25D serial HD312 trailered from runway after the Whitehorse crash. John A. Morrison photo

Editor's note: Fred Guest was an RCAF Pilot flying B-25 Mitchells in 180 Squadron RAF during the Second World War. He completed his tour at Christmas 1944 and was witness to the Luftwaffe New Year's Day 'Bodenplatte' raids that included RAF B.58 Melsbroek Aerodrome. After being repatriated to Canada Fred was posted to instructional duties at No. 5 Operational Training Unit (OTU) at Boundary Bay, BC where Mitchells were used to assist RAF crews convert to B-24 Liberators. In 1951 he joined 418 'City of Edmonton' Squadron (Aux); he was Squadron CO from Oct '61 through Dec '62. Fred left the reserves in 1969 at the rank of Colonel. He died 27 Dec 2014.

² Jack Campbell was CO, 418 Squadron (Aux) from Sep 55 through Jan 59.

Editor's note: This article by Maj Gen (Ret'd) Robert Fassold RCAF is his fond memories of flying B-25s with the peacetime Royal Canadian Air Force. It was published in Vintage Wings of Canada's 'Vintage News' (History and Heroes Section) and is reproduced here with permission. 5 photos of former RCAF Mitchells still flying were added by me.



Maj Gen (Ret'd) Robert Fassold RCAF • From Vintage Wings of Canada Website.

A classic warbird not in the Vintage Wings of Canada collection (yet?) is the B-25 "Mitchell". It served impressively in more theatres of war than any other aircraft in WWII. Not only was it flown by RCAF pilots during the war (in RAF units), but it also served in the RCAF in a variety of roles for almost two decades afterwards – few realize how actively or extensively, especially in Training Command, where I first met it. At one time we had well over 100 scattered throughout the RCAF, coast-to-coast, and I alone flew more than 60 different airframes.

It's fast, has good to long range, can carry at least eight souls, considerable cargo (in the bomb bay), and has excellent short field capabilities. To me at least, it's an attractively no-nonsense bird by sight and sound, and a thrill to fly...it's a pilot's airplane. It early on became and remained my favourite RCAF aircraft; the one I probably flew the most for the longest consecutive period (in a variety of roles) and that determinedly pulled us through a number of sticky situations. In fact, the B-25 (we just called it the "Mitchell") significantly changed the course of my life...it really did. But how could that be? Well... I joined the RCAF as a pilot on a Short Short Service

Commission, sponsored by 420 Auxiliary Squadron in London, Ontario – to fly the P-51 Mustang with which it was then equipped. The deal with the SSSC was that if sponsored by a reserve squadron you could do pilot training in the regular force to wings standard and then return to civilian life with no obligation except to fly with the sponsoring reserve unit. My plan was to be an airline pilot, so I was hoping to get multi-engine AFS (Advanced Flying School) and my "wings" on the B-25, rather than fighter AFS on the T-Bird. It should be much easier, I figured, to get my Airline Transport Pilot Licence with 150 hours or more on the former, than with 80 hours or so on the latter.

I started my flying training on the Harvard at #2FTS (Flying Training School) at Moose Jaw, but before that, while still at Pre-Flight School at Centralia, the 420 Sqn Mustangs were retired and replaced with T-33s. And then, before I completed FTS, the Squadron was disbanded! It seemed now I could get my RCAF wings and leave the service with no obligations whatever.

I really enjoyed FTS and apparently had no difficulties with the Harvard. But we had done everything you could do with it – day and night circuits, stalls, spins, aeros, formations, tail chases, day nav trips including low level at 50', night navs – and I must confess, I wasn't pining to continue our relationship. Really, and with all due respect, it was a bit like flying a bathtub. To me the Harvard just never seemed to really enjoy anything you did with it – actually, I don't think it was cut out to be an airplane.

But the B-25 Mitchell, now that's a different story! As I got close to one for the first time at #1AFS at Saskatoon, I was first awestruck, then intimidated and then excited, in rapid succession...it was perfect... love at first sight!

For those not familiar with the B-25, there's tons of stuff on the web. But a bit on the interior layout may give a sense of our working environment. It was a heavily armed medium bomber; accessibility and comfort were not design priorities. Entrance is by belly hatches, one forward of the bomb bay to the cockpit and nose compartment and one aft to the waist and tail of the aircraft. The forward hatch accesses what was quite descriptively called "the well", the darkest, most confined and noisiest place in the aircraft. A transverse bench seat against the front of the bomb bay accommodated at least two. The back of the aircraft is accessible from the well (and vice versa), but you have to crawl the full length of the bomb bay through a small tunnel on top. The cockpit floor is elevated above a crawlway to the nose compartment and you climb up and into the cockpit from the well. Once in though, it is roomy enough and quite comfortable. With glass all around and on top, it's bright and the visibility is excellent.

In addition to completing training for pipeline pilots, the AFS provided multi-engine conversions for qualified pilots. So it was very active with an interesting mix of pilots flying with an instructor or flying "mutual" with another student. At the beginning we did 3-hour training sessions with an instructor and two students, usually twice a day. Each student would spend 1.5 hours in the left seat with the other listening and observing from the well.

The B-25 and I really connected, right from the start. To me it just oozed determination and purpose, always seemed to know exactly what it was doing and why, but clearly expected the same from the pilot. The union was exciting and rewarding...mutually it seemed. So...standby now...here's how it first affected my life: I loved it so much that I decided to stay in the RCAF...so

I joined the permanent force before completion of AFS. No airline job and pretty stewardesses, for me...I had the B-25!



*An RCAF B-25 Mitchell Mk II flies elegantly in the Alberta sky. HO*891 of 418 'City of Edmonton' Squadron was one of a total of 164 Mitchells on RCAF strength from 10 Jul 42 to 25 Feb 65 [6 of which were on temporary loan from USAF for weapons systems development/training at North Bay, ON]. The last Mitchell on RCAF service, serial 5244 (USAAF 44-86699), was transferred to Sec. of State 25 Feb 65 for Rockcliffe Museum use. '891' (USAAF 41-29886) served from 1944 to 1956 as a photographic survey aircraft among other duties at No. 13(P) squadron based at RCAF Station Rockcliffe (Ottawa). In this shot the nose glass has been painted over, the nose camera ports removed and skinned over, and she's serving as a pilot trainer. Canadian Forces photo*

As testimony to our compatibility, I graduated top in my course and the AFS apparently was so impressed with our performance together that I was selected to be a VIP pilot at 412 (VIP) Transport Squadron in Ottawa.

OK...I'll confess...I had no competitive course mates at AFS...mine was a course of one...me! So I suppose you could just as well say that I graduated at the bottom of my class...but that wouldn't be very nice. Besides, Base Saskatoon laid on a "Wings Parade" just for one person...lonely me. I don't think they would do that if I were at the bottom of my class...would they?

But one needed a minimum of 1500 hours (I think it was) as "captain" to go to 412, so I was posted to #2AOS (Air Observer School) at Winnipeg as a staff pilot to accumulate the required hours as quickly as possible [ca 1956]. Usually just called "Nav School", it was comprised of Basic, AI (Airborne Interception) and LR (Long Range) sections, utilizing the Beech 18 Expeditor, B-25 Mitchell and DC-3 Dakota respectively – each fitted with appropriate consoles in the cabin. New staff pilots started on the Expeditor, flying it solo with a nav instructor and 2 or 3 students in the back, and then "graduated" to either the Mitchell or the Dak. Operationally, AI was really the lead

unit on the base, and because of school requirements and my currency on the Mitchell, I found myself flying it sooner than normal...which of course suited me just fine...it was really hard to "love" the Expeditor!



In AI we were training CF-100 "backseaters" for airborne radar intercepts. A number of the Mitchells were modified with radar noses and were designated as "fighters", and those without as "targets". The missions for paired aircraft would be 3 hours on location with an AI instructor and 3 students in the back, each student receiving one hour of instruction/practice. The fighter captain would fly the first student, the copilot the second (from the right seat) and the captain again the third. If the weather was questionable (often) the target aircraft of one pair would take-off early for an airborne weather check for all the schools. If it appeared marginal for AI work (good visibility required) it would proceed to one of the designated training quadrants for an on-site check. If OK it would hold there until joined by the fighter for the training session. If not, it might check out another quadrant or return to base depending on the prospects. Although we preferred flying fighters to targets, we did like doing the weather checks because it meant extra time in the air.

Unlike the LR and often the Basic training flights, that were usually quite boring for the pilots, the AI work never was! Avoiding midair collisions on student intercepts kept the pilots of both the fighter and the target very alert at all times, and especially when the training had progressed to LCCs (Lead Collision Courses). So we never received a 'rocket', as did the LR pilots, warning that the student (who in the Dak brought heading changes to the cockpit on a slip of paper) was not to find both pilots fast asleep!

We AI pilots were an especially "spirited" group...thoroughly enjoying ourselves...due of course to the character of the B-25. This was demonstrated in various ways, sometimes with unforeseen results. One such happened to one of our most popular pilots, who ejected the cockpit's overhead escape hatch...in flight! Not due to exuberance however, but a need to get to the "pee tube" provided in the well. We wore backpack parachutes, he was tall, and in exiting his seat the parachute snagged the release lever for the hatch, and away it went, luckily not hitting the aircraft. But it was the middle of a very cold Winnipeg winter; a priority recovery was required and conducted without incident. So...what's the connection? Well...on the long taxi back to the AI flight, the "offending" pilot elected to stand on the seat, sticking well out of the top of the hatchless cockpit, gesturing to everyone and everything in sight in the manner of Royalty on a state visit...to the amusement of the B-25 crew, but apparently not to all. While there were no repercussions for losing the hatch (never found), the pilot was severely chastised for his "unseemly" behaviour on the taxi in...with, one can only hope, tongue-in-cheek!

We seemed to be flying all the time, but without complaint. The student load was heavy then, we also were required to do regular local training flights – and a long range cross-country on at least one weekend each month. We could go wherever we wanted, except to the USA, but our planned destinations and scheduled stops were to be at RCAF bases with accommodation and fuel available; little limitation then as there were lots of RCAF bases. You departed Friday afternoon and came back on Sunday. The B-25 cruised easily at 200K and had about 6.5 hours of fuel, so bases on either the west or east coasts of Canada were common destinations. We nearly always had passengers because base personnel would regularly check with the AI flight to see what was going where...and frequently made requests. Requests were welcomed because we did so many "weekenders" that often neither pilot had any place left that they wanted to go to (again) ...and you were not allowed to "decline" your monthly trip! As might be expected in flying such distances from our home base, incidents occurred (rarely reported). And especially in winter, nasty weather conditions were often encountered, sometimes getting us into a real "pickle" (rarely reported). But with the nature and the amount of flying we did (no autopilots... hands-on every minute), we could hardly be more proficient or current on the aircraft, and very challenging flights were undertaken routinely and confidently. We accumulated "real" flying hours probably more rapidly than in any other RCAF flying job of the day. In little more than a year I had well over the minimum required for VIP flying and at the two year point was posted to 412 (VIP) Transport Squadron at Uplands (Ottawa)...just as planned...quite amazing!

At that time the 412 fleet included a gaggle of VIP Daks, two VIP B-25s, two de Havilland Comets and the unique Canadair C-5, the "Queen's airplane". While I was on the squadron the Cosmopolitans (turboprop Convairs) arrived, and later two VIP Yukons. All 412 pilots first became "restricted captain" (meaning for passengers below one-star or equivalent rank), and then were upgraded to unrestricted "VIP captain". All remained qualified on and flew operationally at least two types of aircraft. The Dak was the basic and initial aircraft, so I was sent immediately to the Dakota OTU (Operational Training Unit) at Trenton. On completion I flew the Dak operationally at 412, but soon was flying the Mitchell...and in an unusual utilization of the aircraft.

Highly polished, spic and span Mitchells 5248 and 5220 were equipped with the latest in avionics, and the rear was quite nicely appointed as a VIP passenger compartment. They both had a fuselage tank (always kept full) installed in the top portion of the bomb bay giving us a total of

8.5 hours of fuel. Below that in the bomb bay was a large cage for cargo or luggage. This could be lowered and hoisted to and from the ground for loading and unloading. A priority role for the squadron's Mitchells was their use by "Air Members" at RCAF Headquarters for duty travel. What that meant was Air Commodores and above who had pilot wings, could, if they wished (almost all did), fly the aircraft from the left seat on such trips. Accompanying personnel, if any, would travel in the passenger compartment.

We never knew if an Air Member was or had been qualified on the B-25, however some were quite good, knew their limits (sort of) and were popular with us. The squadron crew included two pilots and at least one crewman. The captain would be in the right seat trying to ensure the proper and safe operation of the aircraft and conduct of the flight. The other pilot (available to replace the VIP in the left seat if required) and the crewman would be in the well. Many if not most of our Air Member missions were to the USA, often to American military bases, but often not. In fact, Washington, DC was one of our most common destinations, usually Washington National Airport.

Air Member flights were always interesting and usually enjoyably challenging for the captain. Often the VIP would voluntarily turn the left seat over to the FO (First Officer) for landings at high-density airports or in IFR conditions, but sometimes a switch had to be requested by the captain. Of course as junior officers we were reluctant to do so, and often didn't when we probably should have. On the other hand, we became quite used to having to do everything ourselves from the right seat. Also, changing seats in flight was not that easily or quickly done,



Former RCAF Mitchell Mk IIs still flying are (above) B-25D 'Yankee Warrior' (RCAF KL148/USAAF 43-3634) of Yankee Air Museum at Belleville, MI. David Youngdahl photo • (Below) 'Grumpy' B-25D (RCAF KL161/USAAF 43-3318) of Historic Flight Foundation at Spokane, WA. HFF photo



and situations could develop or worsen too fast for such action. As you might expect, this feature of the operation could lead to "interesting" occurrences, some quite amusing, and some not.

We were a small and closely-knit group on the two VIP Mitchells and were devastated when 5220 was lost with all six souls on board [Apr 1960]. It was on a typical Air Member mission one night from Ottawa to Truax AFB, Wisconsin, when an engine failed near Milwaukee. Engine failures were very rare in the B-25, single-engine performance normally very good, and Milwaukee had a good airport for recovery. But tragically, through a series of bizarre happenings, it ended in an unsurvivable crash in Lake Michigan, just off the Milwaukee airport that ironically was named "Mitchell Field". It was a sad time for the whole squadron.

The aircraft was not replaced and we carried on the Air Member role with 5248 for only about another six months. Appropriately, her last operational flight in the RCAF was an Air Member mission, which we shared. Mitchell 5248 was then retired from the squadron [Nov 1960] and soon after from the RCAF [Feb 1961]. Luckily I went on the Comets, and that turned out to be the highlight of my whole flying career. But it was dramatically different, and flying a Comet back and forth across the Atlantic, reaching altitudes then as high as 41,000', was quite unreal...and unforgettable. As much as I enjoyed the Comet, it could at best only equal, not surpass the B-25 as my favourite.

Of course, I, along with many others, was very lucky to have started as an RCAF pilot in the halcyon days with lots of aircraft, lots of fuel, lots of flying, and few restrictions. Totalling just the Harvard, Expeditor, Mitchell and Dakota, I flew well over 200 different airframes. The Mitchell and I spent four years and over 1500 flying hours together, doing over 600 missions and probably over two thousand take-offs and landings...and we both enjoyed every minute...well, almost. We did get ourselves into a couple of situations that took a lot of teamwork (and good luck) to get out of. We've enjoyed a number of amusing occurrences, also done some silly things and maybe one or two not-too-bright ones – like late one night trying to land on a wharf at Summerside [Prince Edward Island]. But, hey...it had been a long day and it did have lights on each side, just like a runway, albeit a bit short!



Former RCAF Mitchell Mk IIIs: (Left) 'Super Rabbit' B-25J (RCAF serial 5243/USAAF 44-86725) of Oklahoma Museum of Flying at Bethany, OK. Oklahoma Museum photo • (Right) 'Buster' B-25J (RCAF serial 5211/USAAF 44-30254) of Flying Heritage & Combat Armor Museum at Everett, WA. FH&CAM photo

I certainly did love the B-25, it really did change the course of my life...and I hope to fly it again! I must admit though, that it really was noisy, and our kapok headsets were noise amplifiers, not

defenders. In ignorance, we had no concern or complaint, in fact the noise just added to the thrill of flying the aircraft. But the fact is, it's a rare B-25 pilot who hasn't suffered a noise-induced hearing loss...but probably also a rare one who complains about it...it was worth it!

As an aside, many moons later I was at a reception for WWII flying aces that included, among others, Douglas Bader, Johnnie Johnson, Adolf Galland (with his young mistress)...and...Jimmy Doolittle. I could hardly believe it when I was actually introduced to Doolittle...Mister B-25...wow! What do I say to him? The noise level was a bit high with music and chatter, so in a somewhat raised voice I rather awkwardly blurted, "I've flown your B-25 a lot and I loved it...but it's very noisy!" Oops...he didn't respond...he just stared at me with a puzzled expression. Then he rather shouted, "Sorry, what did you say? I've spent too much time in the B-25...I don't hear very well!"



RCAF Winnipeg Officers Mess – 1977:

Front row l-r: Francis 'Gabby' Gabreski USAAF (34.5 victories), Jimmy Doolittle USAAF (B-25 pilot), Gen Bill Carr RCAF (Commander, Air Command), unknown, unknown, John Farquier RCAF (Lancaster pilot), Douglas Bader RAF (22 victories), Adolf Galland Luftwaffe (104 victories). Back row: unknown, Johnnie Johnson RAF (38 victories), unknown, Moe Gates RCAF (Winnipeg Base Commander) Bob Fassold photo (with basement flood damage)

Curiously, our last VIP flight did not mark the end of my relationship with 5248. While at university in post-graduate training after completing my tour on 412 Squadron, I was tracked down by an individual who had purchased her from Crown Assets [*likely 'Hicks and Lawrence' of Olander, ON*]. The aircraft was being overhauled by a company in Toronto, and he wanted me to do the test flight and other flying for him. Would I be interested? Guess!

The quite festive debut was on a clear-blue summer Sunday at Toronto International, with a lot of spectators. The aircraft had been stripped of all RCAF equipment and accoutrements, including the bomb bay tank, and now was designated CF-NWU, but it looked the same...and we immediately recognized each other. The first flight was to be with the owner in the right seat and a company tech in the well. I noticed on pre-flight that the undercarriage selection lever was lock-wired in the 'down and locked' position and asked the tech to free it.

The flight was turning into a bit of an event at the airport and we wanted to put on a good show. Boy...on take-off, 5248 was sure doing her part...we were going like stink! At first I thought there was something wrong with the gauges, but then realized with all the RCAF stuff gone and only a partial fuel load, the aircraft was much lighter than I had ever flown it. What a display...so far...but when I went to retract the gear... (you guessed it)...the selector was still lock-wired down! So we disappeared into the blue with the gear hanging down, as the tech in the well, with no tools, struggled to remove the lock-wire. How embarrassing...and 5248 was not at all happy with me!

There were a few other flights, but then the company contacted me; the owner had defaulted on the overhaul bill, they had taken possession of the aircraft, had it up for sale and wanted to put me on reserve to demonstrate or ferry it. But it wasn't until many months later that I was contacted again. They had found no buyer, needed to get rid of the airplane, and asked if I wanted to buy it. Price: \$6000.00!

Editor's note: Bob Fassold didn't take up the offer. During the following 35 years RCAF Mitchell Mk III serial no. 5248/USAAF B-25J 44-86698 had 9 owners before 'Mitchell Mania' in Santa Rosa, CA purchased and restored her during 1998 to 2001 and flew her as 'Sunday Punch' with an 8-gun nose. She was sold to 'Fagen Fighters WWII Museum' of Granite Falls, MN 17 May 2012 and underwent another extensive restoration back to her original glass nose configuration; she now flies as 'Paper Doll' pictured below. Photo by Fagen Fighters



Maj Gen (ret) Robert Fassold served from 1956-1988.

He died 02 July 2018 in Ottawa • Cremains dispersal were via DHC 1 Chipmunk.

THE LIFE THAT I HAVE³

Leo Marks

The life that I have
Is all that I have
And the life that I have
Is yours.

The love that I have
Of the life that I have
Is yours and yours and yours.

A sleep I shall have
A rest I shall have
Yet death shall be but a pause.

For the peace of my years
In the long green grass
Will be yours and yours and yours.

³Composed by Leo Marks (Head of Communications, Special Operations Executive) following the death of his girlfriend. He gave this poem to Violet Szabo, SOE agent, as an identification code. Szabo was captured after her 2nd drop into occupied France and was transferred to Ravensbrück concentration camp in Germany where she was executed 05 Feb 44. She has no known grave. Violet Szabo is commemorated on the Memorial to the Missing (panel 6, column 3) at Brookwood Military Cemetery, Surrey.