

December 1, 2018 CAHS Toronto Chapter Meeting

Topic: 2nd Allied Tactical Air Force Operations

Speaker: David E. Poissant, Historian

Reporter: Gord McNulty

Our final meeting of the 2018 season concluded on a very high note. David Poissant, of Burlington, enjoyed sharing his expertise on Second Tactical Air Force operations, focussing on the role of the North American B-25 Mitchell. His informative, well-illustrated presentation proved rewarding for everyone. It was, as David later said, “A great way to spend a Saturday afternoon.” David was introduced by Brigadier-General Paul Hayes, Chapter Treasurer. David’s interest in Allied Tactical Air Force Operations grew

from his father’s Second World War service as an RCAF pilot attached to 98 Squadron of the Royal Air Force, where he flew Mitchells on operations over France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. In 2002, David joined the 2nd Tactical Air Force Medium Bombers Association Canada as an Associate Member. The Association was founded in September, 1985, in Great Britain. The Canadian wing was established in 1987,



2TAF Crest – Photo Credit - John Bertram

originally open to 2TAF air crew. Membership was rightly extended to include ground crew. The Canadian wing executive works closely with counterparts in Britain and Australia. David chairs the Canadian wing and edits the quarterly newsmagazine, *Dispersals*, distributed in hard copy to members and contributors. Digital copies are posted on the website of the Brussels Air Museum Fund. (www.airmuseum.be) David has also contributed all four 2018 *Dispersals* Issues to the Chapter Website under “Blogs / References” The original members were A-20, B-25 and Mosquito air and ground crew veterans.

David has researched 2TAF Mitchells for more than 20 years and has a growing association with like-minded researchers in Canada and the U.S. He transcribed 98 Squadron RAF WWII Operations Records Books into Excel format to facilitate more efficient research. David is also a historian with the B-25 History Project (<https://b-25history.org>) recording the service of Mitchell aircraft and their builders, crews and support personnel in the war effort. He has been a member and Tour Guide of the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum for more than 20 years. David began by noting how the wide-ranging operations of the RAF 2TAF ranged from the routine, to some that were rather hair-raising, to others that were tragic. Many young men had to endure hours of routine punctuated by sudden and unforgettable terror. Friends could be lost in a split second of flash and flame. Others became prisoners of war. More were grounded due to nervous exhaustion, which David noted “the RAF rather brutally and also controversially termed lack of moral fibre.” The final Mitchell operation of the RCAF crew of his father, pilot Cyril Poissant and his three colleagues, told a story in itself. Their B-25, VO-G, had been battered by intense flak on 25 November, 1944, all the way back after attacking railway marshalling yards in Germany. Its windscreen had been shattered, hydraulic systems shot out, and the crew came to a stop only as the wheels of the B-25 sank into a freshly filled bomb crater near the end of the runway. The ground crew counted 94 flak holes.



Speaker David E. Poissant

Cyril Poissant, also known as Cy, enlisted in the RCAF on 4 June, 1942. He enjoyed his first ride in a Cessna Crane at No. 3 SFTS in Calgary. He flew the Fairchild PT-26 Cornell at No. 5 EFTS, High River, AB. Then he advanced to No. 7 SFTS, Fort Macleod, AB, flying Avro Ansons. He was awarded his wings on 1 Oct., 1943. At No. 34 OTU in Pennfield Ridge, NS, he was part of very informal BCATP crewing up exercises. All the current classes of pilots, observers, air gunners, and wireless operator air gunners (known as WAGS), were assembled in a hall and told to form four-man crews. They were also told that if they didn't do it, their superiors would do it for them. Cy, pilot; Peter (Doc) Ryan, observer; Paul Saumer, air gunner, and Fred Bing, WAG, formed a crew amid the melee. All were sergeants.



98 Squadron Mitchells on an airport perimeter track
Courtesy - Imperial War Museum

They converted to the Lockheed Ventura and became proficient in bomber crew operations during the next three months. They crossed the Atlantic aboard the Ile de France, disembarked in Scotland, and travelled by train to No. 3 Personnel Reception Centre for Dominion Aircrew at Bournemouth, Hampshire. They were posted to No. 13 OTU at Finmere, Buckinghamshire, for conversion to Mitchells. In July, 1944, Cy, Pete, Paul and Fred were posted to 98 Squadron, RAF, at Dunsfold, Surrey. The squadron was part of 139 Wing, 2 Group, Second Tactical Air Force, also known as 2nd TAF or simply 2TAF. TAF was the SWAT team with the RAF, called upon for rapid response to disrupt and destroy German communications, transportation systems, military targets, and troop movements, as well as interdiction sorties. Formed on 1 June, 1943, 2 Group was equipped with rocket- and bomb-carrying Typhoon, Tempest, Spitfire, Mosquito and Mustang fighters. Medium bombers were the B-25 and the Douglas A-20 Boston, both replacing the outdated Bristol Blenheim. TAF comprised four Groups and 33 Wings. Most Wings had three squadrons. The medium bombers first flew operations from England's RAF airfields at Dunsfold, Surrey; Swanton Morley, Norfolk; Hartford Bridge, Hampshire; and Foulsham, Norfolk. They attacked marshalling yards, bridges, V-1 'buzz bomb' sites, and V-2 rocket launch sites.

Many squadrons flew raids on D-Day, 6 June, 1944. They started in the early morning hours, preparing the way for Allied troop landings. Six Mitchell squadrons --- 88, 98, 180, 226, 320 and 342 (Free French) ---- frequently worked in concert with 107 and 305 Mosquito squadrons. Crews were of many nationalities: Australian, British, Canadian, Czech, Dutch, French, South African, and New Zealander among others. In September, they moved to captured airfields in Belgium and France, operating closer in support of the 21st Army Group as it advanced through Normandy and northwest Europe.

A little-known part of 2TAF was 226 Squadron's Special Signals Flight, code-named Ginger Flight. Their operations began 1 June, 1944. Ginger Flight Mitchell crews carried out low aircraft intelligence gathering operations. Those pre-D-Day solo missions were flown late at night, at 20,000 feet, deep in enemy territory. French Resistance forces provided radio information leading to immediate action by 2TAF fighter-



Mitchells over Dunsfold Aerodrome (Lower Centre)

Photo Courtesy - Imperial War Museum

bombers and Typhoons. Cy's crew flew their first op on 12 July, 1944. Three six-plane boxes led by Wing Commander Christopher Paul successfully attacked fuel dumps in France, at heights from 9,500 to 13,000 feet. Not all operations were so uneventful. On 23 July, 15 aircraft of 98 Squadron attacked a railway yard at Glos-Montfort. W/C Paul led the first box, Squadron Leader Paynter the second, Flight Lieutenant Brown the third. The target was bombed by a Mitchell from 10,000 feet over dense cloud. There wasn't any flak but a tragedy occurred as the bombs fell. A Mitchell, VO-S, flown by S/L Paynter exploded in mid-air, killing S/L Paynter, Pilot Officer Dodd, Flying Officer Riley and Pilot Officer McGregor. Another Mitchell, VO-R, flown by Flight Lieutenant Weeks, in the same box, was set on fire and was last seen flying into dense cloud. Killed: F/L Weeks, P/O Mills, Sgt. Taylor, Sgt. Thomas. Mitchell VO-G flown by F/O Barry was damaged by the explosion and forced to land in France, in the American side. Three crew members were wounded, with one man losing a hand. Also damaged in the explosion and forced to land at Tangmere was Mitchell VO-H. One crew member was badly wounded in the leg.

An investigation determined that S/L Paynter's bombload was jettisoned probably due to intervalometer timing problems (*An Intervalometer was a device that counted intervals of time*). Some bombs had collided and exploded directly below the aircraft. Crews were then directed to jettison problematic bomb loads only over the English Channel and away from the main group. On 9 Sept., after an attack on German gun positions at Boulogne, P/O Denis Loveridge, Cy's friend from training, had a 500-pound bomb hang up in his Mitchell, VO-B. Over the channel, Denis's crew were heard struggling to free the bomb, to the extent of lowering a man into the open bomb bay to hack at the release mechanism. Despite all efforts, the bomb would not release. Approaching Dunsford aerodrome, Denis attempted as soft a landing as possible. As the Mitchell's wheels touched, the bomb jolted free and exploded. With a blinding flash, the blazing bomber careered along the runway. The entire crew was killed: P/O Loveridge, pilot; F/L Logie, observer; F/S Churchard, WAG; and P/O Durling, air gunner. Chards of metal struck several groundcrew members who had counted the bombers as they landed. One piece went across the airfield, gravely injuring Fitter Sergeant Albert Jones who died shortly afterward. Cy and crew were landing directly behind the Loveridge crew. Upon the explosion, Cy immediately hit full throttle, raised the gear, and flew through

the blast. They circled until another runway was clear to land. When David asked Cy many years later, shortly before he died in 2009, what life's memory stood out in his mind, Cy's answer was immediate: "Flying through the explosion of Denis Loveridge's aircraft." The wreckage of VO-B was unceremoniously bulldozed into trees, landing in a nearby canal on the aerodrome's eastern boundary.

In 1987, a British Aerospace employee discovered the remains. A group of citizens worked to salvage major pieces and some of the wreckage was smelted to become miniature replicas of V0-B. They became fitting memorials of the sacrifice of P/O Loveridge and crew. There is one remaining piece of Loveridge's Mitchell: a port fuselage panel bearing the lower part of the letter B. It's a valued possession of Paul McCue, author of *Dunsfold: Surrey's Most Secret Airfield, 1942-1996*.



Flight Crew reviewing a model of a V-1 Site
Photo Courtesy - Imperial War Museum

Celebrities invariably made an appearance whenever young men were concentrated, especially in wartime. Ernest Hemingway, then a correspondent with Collier's magazine, was interested in the V-1 and interviewed Typhoon pilots. He then went to Dunsfold, where three squadrons of Mitchells regularly flew in raids on V-1 sites. On 15 July, Hemingway was in the No. 98 Officers' Mess, regaling everyone with stories of his exploits as a WWI ambulance driver in Italy and a reporter in the Spanish Civil War. Then a V-1 was heard passing by the aerodrome, to explode in the nearby village of Cranleigh. Hemingway and friends hurried to visit the site. He was later obliged to return several illegally liberated pieces of the rocket wreckage when the police found him at Dunsfold. Hemingway did manage a trip to observe a V-1 site. On 20 June,

1944, he flew with W/C Alan Lynn in a 180 Squadron Mitchell, leading an attack by 21 B-25s on a heavily defended site. The bombing run was made from 12,000 feet. Moderate to heavy flak was encountered during the operation. Hemingway wanted to go around again for a better look at the target, but Lynn's reply was unprintable. 2TAF conducted spectacular daytime strikes. Probably the most important, and least publicized, was an evening raid on 10 June. The intelligence for the op, gathered at Bletchley Park by Ultra, had to remain secret.

It was just days after D-Day, and Rommel had all but used up his Panzer tank divisions. Hitler allowed him to use Panzergruppe West Reserves. The ensuing radio traffic was monitored by the British, who located the German headquarters at chateau La Caine, southwest of Caen. Early the next morning, 10 June, TAF HQ carried out a maximum strike, using Typhoons at low level, with Mitchells bombing from medium height. 'Tiffy' squadrons 181, 182, 245 and 247 squadrons came to immediate readiness, while B-25 squadrons 98, 180, 226 and 320 were also alerted. The force totalled 42 heavily armed Tiffys and 72 Mitchells, each with eight 500-pound bombs. Four squadrons of Spitfires were on standby for escort. The Mitchells of 98, 180 and 320 squadrons climbed out of Dunsfold and were soon met by 226 squadron B-25s while 33 Spitfires flew high and low escort. The attack devastated the Germans. Seventeen Tiffys released 136 rockets from 2,000 feet, while the B-25s dropped 536 500-pound bombs from 12,000 feet, with great accuracy. The chateau and entire target area were shattered. The entire German planning staff,



2TAF Typhoon taking off from B2 Bazenville, Normandy, France

as many as 18 officers, including chief of staff General von Dawans, perished. Panzergruppe Commander Gen. von Schweppenburg, who was arriving in his staff car at the time was wounded. In a second wave of attacks, Tiffys finished the smoking ruins and shot up a nearby village where German NCOs and other ranks were billeted. Panzergruppe West had ceased to exist. It was a most serious setback for the Germans. Together with additional attacks by Mosquitos and Mitchells at dusk on key German targets such as petrol trains, wagons, troops, they further frustrated a German counter offensive to the Allied invasion.

Operating at night, Mitchells of 98 Squadron dropped flares to illuminate flares as Mosquitos attacked prominent roads west of Caen. One Mitchell, VO-D was shot down by a German night fighter, with the loss of three crewmen and capture of one who spent the rest of the war as a POW. The first air gunner on Cy Poissant's crew was grounded due to nerves after their 34th operation. George 'Ole' Olson took his place after serving 37 operations as a squadron gunner. They completed their tour on 25 November, 1944, as mentioned. 'Ole' experienced stomach problems that intensified during the raid. The RCAF medical officer concluded 'Ole's nerves wouldn't take another operation and the crew was declared expired. Cy returned with his colleagues via RAF Dakota to Bournemouth on 3 December and were struck off



Mitchell Mk.II 98 Sqd RAF in flight 1944 showing Ventral Turret extended

strength. Cy and Pete volunteered for a second tour, but were told too many Canadians had not yet flown operations. Trevor Grice, who had joined the crew on his second tour, continued as a squadron gunner. A few ops later, he was hospitalized with a flak hit to his back. Trevor is gone now, but his daughter still has his open jacket with the flak hole. Cy went north to Durham County, England, to marry Myra Elgie. He brought her to Canada in 1945.

David concluded by paying tribute to the Canadians who served in 2TAF, “ordinary men performing extraordinary deeds.” Ranging in age from 18 to 27, they gave up an unreasonable part of their youth in the line of duty. We owe them a great deal for their heroic service. As David said, “Remember them, as we enjoy the freedoms they preserved for us.” The audience had numerous questions. Earlier models of the Mitchell had a ventral gun turret, but it wasn’t popular with gunners. It had a telescopic sight. Gunners had to be on their knees as they tried to follow fighters and it was disorienting to the point of sickness. If it was lowered too quickly, it could jam and add drag on the way home. Tail guns were introduced with later models. Paul Hayes thanked David and presented a gift for a terrific presentation. David can be reached at david.poissant@sympatico.ca.
