

November Meeting

Topic: “The History of 436 Transport Squadron”

Speaker: Canadian Forces Captain Tim Brodie, MMM, CD, ACC

Reporter: Gord McNulty

An inspiring audio-visual overview of 436 Transport Squadron, past and present, was given by Captain Tim Brodie, introduced by CAHS Toronto Chapter President George Toppie. Tim, a passionate speaker, grew up in Hamilton. He has served in the Canadian Forces since 1983, when he enrolled as an Administration Clerk. He worked his way through the ranks of the non-commissioned corps until 2002, when he was commissioned from the rank of Warrant Officer and posted to 436 (Transport) Squadron as their Adjutant. He worked there for five years, supporting personnel who flew on a constant basis into the Afghanistan Theatre. He currently works as a military Conflict Management Practitioner in the Dispute Resolution Centre at 8 Wing



Speaker - Captain Tim Brodie
Photo - Neil McGavock

Trenton.

Tim has been posted to the Middle East on United Nations missions and has served in several operational squadrons including 444 (Combat Support) Squadron, 405 (Maritime Patrol) Squadron, 14 Airfield Engineering Squadron and 436 (Transport) Squadron. Tim has always been an innovator. His ability to improve service and support to operational missions and elements was recognized in 2008 when he was appointed a member of the Order of Military Merit, receiving his award from Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean at Rideau Hall on Feb. 24, 2009.

Tim is the vice-chairman of the 435/436 Burma Squadrons Association, air force veterans who have met consistently every year since 1946. Through his connections to this group, he has come to respect, admire and hold as sacred the traditions and stories that make the Canadian Air Force experience both unique and admirable.

Tim began by unabashedly expressing his intense pride in the Canadian Forces, as represented especially by his colleagues during his five years in 436 Sqdn., and by the “incredible” veterans of 436 who taught him a great deal. He loved the experience and his enthusiasm showed. Tim noted air mobility might not be the “sexiest” part of the air force and is often overlooked, especially in comparison to highly publicized CF-18 tactical fighter operations. However, the reality is that transport crews are flying in combat roles on a daily basis in Afghanistan and Canadians don’t hear much about them. He showed a video of 436 Sqdn. crew dispensing flares and chaff, defensive mechanisms employed to avoid detection by adversary air defence systems, in a CC-130 Hercules over Afghanistan. The video also showed cargo being dropped from the mighty Herc. Much of this flying, he noted, isn’t straight and level. Whether it is delivering supplies or people, Tim asserted that 436 Sqdn. does tactical airlift “better than anyone else on this planet.”

He noted that the foundation of excellence for today’s 436 Sqdn. rests on the

legacy of courageous wartime service during its key role in the Burma campaign. "In Burma, we dropped more stuff and more people than any other squadron in the area," he said. While giving full credit to Operation Overlord, presenting the Allies with the huge logistical challenge of invading German-occupied western Europe, Tim said that in comparison, the Burma campaign was a logistical nightmare. Burma, similar to Afghanistan today, struggled with a lack of transport, mountainous conditions, and retarded technology. There wasn't any way to move material on the ground to support the troops trying to push the Japanese out of Burma. Air mobility was the answer, and in response, 435 and 436 squadrons were stood up in September, 1944. They trained for three months under their first commanding officer, W/C Ralph Gordon, DFC, and became operational in January, 1945. Tim said they "immediately starting setting the pace for every other Allied squadron in the theatre." He showed photos of a crew of a Dakota. They had joined to seek adventure, and in the end did extraordinary things to serve their country.



435 & 436 Squadron Dakota
Photo - rcaf.com

"Dak" crews performed all sorts of jobs, dropping cargo at 1,000 feet, landing and offloading supplies on the ground, double-stitching bags of rice and generally maintaining an incredible pace. Around February of 1945, the reality of delivering supplies to support a fighting force on the move became problematic. Meat for the soldiers posed a significant issue. The squadron used local handlers to offload meat, but they refused to handle it for religious reasons. The squadron offered to pay any groundcrew, who desired to fly as aircrew, 75

cents a day as their flying pay (which they never received) to load and offload material. The job was supposed to last two weeks. Lo and behold, that job still exists in 2010. "That two weeks has been going on forever," Tim said. "That was the start of the loadmaster trade." What a job it was. Photos showed loadmasters, also known as kickers, throwing cargo out the door in-flight without any safety harnesses.

Tim cited an example of Canadian ingenuity in solving the problem of ensuring that material was dropped into the right location, considering that there wasn't any overland transportation to move it from the landing spot to where it was needed. Strategists decided to drop mules from the Dakota to carry the cargo to the right place. The mules, naturally, were frantic about being dropped in-flight and were petrified when they hit the ground. Many of them sustained broken legs and other injuries and had to be shot. The answer proved to be none other than --- wait for it --- the drunken mule. The mules were "loaded," so to speak, with about half a bottle of rye whisky each to make them much more amenable to the journey to the ground.

Tim first met W/C Ralph Gordon about seven years ago when he was calling all of the living ex-COs of 436 to celebrate the squadron's 60th anniversary. Ralph, who was in his eighties, had been in Florida visiting his girlfriend and enjoying sailing. He even went all the way to Cuba in a 40-foot sloop. Unfortunately, he died of cancer a couple of months later and never made the reunion. But Tim thought of Ralph as an inspiration ---one of his heroes. He told Tim, "The secret of living long is not dying while you are alive." In researching Ralph's story, Tim found that Ralph grew up in Toronto and joined the air force at age 23 in 1940. At 27, with four years of experience, he was given command of 436 Sqdn., facing the daunting challenge of Burma. Tim said, "He rose to that challenge, surpassed that challenge, and kicked the crap out of anyone else who wanted to stand up against that squadron with incredible audacity." The monsoons in Burma challenged 436 Sqdn. like nothing else. Ralph Gordon, however,

insisted that when all of the other squadrons were grounded, 436 would keep on going as long as men were on the ground fighting. In the monsoon season, cumulonimbus (Cb) clouds would throw a Dakota 6,000 feet up and down, in the blink of an eye. Gordon created a system called "Watchbird" to solve the problem. A Dakota would leave an hour in advance of any other aircraft to report the location of the Cbs and how to avoid them. Gordon also had a great way of relating to people. Tim noted that the Canadians, to the dismay of a visiting British air vice-marshal, didn't have an officers' mess. When the incredulous British officer asked Gordon how the enlisted men could be eating with the officers, Gordon replied: "You know what...We are in the rain rotting together, we are in the monsoons flying together, we are fighting together, and by God we will eat together." When the British officer insisted that such a practice was inappropriate, Gordon firmly told him to leave. Tim said the same spirit of teamwork continues at 436 Sqdn today.

Tim read a page from Gordon's logbook, on a Watchbird mission, describing a harrowing incident where his Dakota went onto its back after encountering a severe storm. In his logbook, Gordon recalled that the aircraft was hit by heavy rain, possibly hail, giving the impression it would break the windscreen. What he described as "severe bumpiness" began. He immediately put the aircraft into a turn to avoid the threat but he completed only half of it when the force of the Cb hit. The next thing he knew, the Dakota entered into a terrific dive. "The control column was absolutely frozen, so I had to rely entirely on elevator trim to pull out," Gordon wrote. "The airspeed indicator was reading 300 miles an hour, the vertical speed was at 6,000 feet per minute down, and the altimeter was unwinding at a frightful rate." He finally managed to pull the aircraft out of the dive, only to observe in a fraction of a second that the vertical speed showed 6,000 feet per minute up! Gordon frantically applied more downtrim and forward pressure on the control column, but by then, the aircraft was on its back and he was hanging by

his safety belt. He continued: "I applied full aileron and kicked the rudder and the aircraft must have half-rolled and entered into another dive. I was finally able to level out and suddenly I came into a clearing." Tim underlined that 436 Sqdn. flew in conditions that no one else would fly in. Gordon was fittingly honoured with the DFC at age 27 for his outstanding leadership.

Another of Tim's heroes was Dick Denison, shown in a photo conversing with a British air vice-marshal. As evidence of the *savoir faire* that the Canadians had in dealing with the British, the British officer wore his best uniform, while Dick wore shorts. The squadron lost two aircraft in Burma --- one hit the side of a mountain during a monsoon, killing all aboard. The second was Denison's aircraft, which went down because of fuel starvation. But no one was lost because of Dick's courage.

Dick was returning from an operation in the middle of a monsoon and couldn't find the camp despite repeated efforts at low altitude. Finally, he took the Dakota to a higher altitude and told his crew to bail out while he remained at the controls to hold it straight and level. Only one of the crew members, a sergeant, had actually parachuted before. He quickly instructed the rest of the crew and they proceeded to jump. Denison told the sergeant to fire a flare that the rest of the crew could use to get together again and get home. In retrospect, Tim noted the Dakota has a loud, powerful sound and it was hard to imagine anything that would have sounded more quiet than a Dak with the crew gone. In that moment, Dick was ready to sacrifice his life for the rest of his crew, Tim noted. As soon as the crew had exited the Dak, Dick stood up to put his own parachute on. Then the aircraft immediately started a violent spiral dive, straight to the ground. Dick hit the floor but was able to get one arm through the parachute loops. His jungle survival kit went out the back of the aircraft, but he made his way to the door and threw himself out. Coming down, Dick landed in the middle of a raging river. He swam with the current and managed to make it to shore. Exhausted and cold, he saw

the flare but there was no way that he could swim back to join his crew. For their part, they thought he was dead as they returned to the camp. Dick was deputy commanding officer, more importantly a personal friend, and the presumed loss of their friend was deeply felt by his colleagues. That is exactly how the squadron members think of each other today. The story ended happily for Dick. He was finally found by some villagers, who took care of him. A joyous celebration took place when he returned and Dick went out to meet the British officer in his best shorts!

Tim also told the story of the “brick bomber,” Art Adams of Hamilton. Art is an active volunteer and supporter of the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum at age 86, and a longtime chair of the 435/436 Squadrons Association. He recently organized the dedication of the Burma Theatre exhibit at the CWHM. In March of 1945 Art was standing outside the back of a Dak when Dick Denison approached him about the idea of loading bricks aboard the aircraft. Bricks were needed to supply troops who had been pushing back the Japanese so rapidly that they were surviving on sea rations. With bricks, the soldiers could build a cook’s stove and get some hot food. Dick was barely able to manage a take off in the Dak, heavily loaded with some 2,000 bricks. It wouldn’t fly any higher than 1,000 feet. As they flew over isolated small islands, Art saw a Japanese seaplane that was beached. He asked Dick for permission to offload some bricks. Dick gave the green light and Art starting bombarding bricks at a furious rate at the seaplane. After the war, Art determined that a brick weighs four pounds. With 2,000 bricks aboard, they had been some 2,000 pounds over the maximum load of 6,000 pounds. Had they not offloaded the bricks, Tim suggested they surely would have crashed on landing.

Art never knew if he hit the Japanese seaplane, until three years ago when he came across a newspaper with a story and a photo showing a Japanese seaplane on a remote beach in the Burma area. The seaplane had been knocked out of commission by unknown

sources but was surrounded by bricks. So, chalk one up for Art Adams and 436 --- “the only time an enemy plane was ever knocked out of commission by bricks!”

Tim then moved to the current Afghanistan operation, which he described as today’s breeding ground for heroes. He noted that 436 Sqdn. flies tactical missions, delivering supplies and personnel in the face of enemy fire...just as the Canadians did in Burma. In Burma, Canadians faced a battle-hardened, intelligent force and at one point it looked as if they had their opponents surrounded. After weeks of fighting, the Japanese had to send a message to their supreme command, saying they had surrounded their opponents but had to withdraw from the campaign because of the Allied air mobility advantage. When the war ended in 1945, a captured Japanese flag was given in appreciation by the soldiers who had been surrounded and in danger of annihilation. The same flag is displayed at 436 Sqdn.’s operation rooms today.

Tim noted that with the United Arab Emirates’ recent refusal to renew the lease of the critical Camp Mirage military staging base near Dubai, 436 is using other countries such as Cyprus, Germany to reach Afghanistan. He showed video of good colleague and friend of his, Aidan Costelloe, who outlined the very first operational air drop resupply mission to coalition forces directly involved in combat in Afghanistan. They loaded the Herc, among other things, with a maximum of 16 CDS (container delivery system) bundles, the maximum number of bundles they could carry. Some 24,000 pounds of supplies were transported to the drop zone, and released on time and on target. It was the first time since the Korean War that Canadian Forces flew a combat resupply operation to troops. He and other Canadians had been ambushed in a schoolhouse and desperately needed assistance. As Tim said, it was remarkable how Aidan and other crew members seemed to regard the operation as “just another Sunday drive.” Video footage of the operation, taken inside the Hercules, showed the aircraft being prepped, the bundles

being loaded, flying out of Kandahar, and making the drop. Provision of water is a major issue in Afghanistan, where temperatures can soar and dehydration is a threat. 436 crews must wear full combat gear at all times, including flak jackets and helmets.

The squadron drops personnel as well as supplies. One operation, on July 6, was historic in that it was the first time 436 Sqdn. had made a high altitude paradrop. A Herc left Kandahar for an undisclosed location, made a spiral climb to get high and away from ground threats, then circled for about an hour to make sure the crew had the required light. Nine members of a Special Forces team from one of Canada's coalition partners dropped from 14,000 feet, on oxygen, together with an Afghan interpreter who had never made a jump before. The jumpmaster noted that it was night flying, and no lights were used. With the ramp open, the moonlight came in and it "lit up the eyes like a pack of raccoons in your backyard." Ground forces in Afghanistan serve on two-year cycles, where a unit serves for six months, returns home to decompress for six months, and then has a one-year preparation period before going back to Afghanistan. In contrast, 436 Sqdn. has been there all along. Tim mentioned that 436 is the only transport squadron that flies tactical in the Herc, and has done it ever since the fighting started. The stress has taken its toll on families and individuals, but the squadron quietly keeps on serving without any fanfare.

436 Sqdn. also responded rapidly to the devastating earthquake that ravaged Haiti on Jan. 12, 2010. As told by a friend of Tim, the squadron had received its tasking to fly to Haiti with medical support, food and aid by the following morning, even though its resources were stretched thin. After the Hercules was unloaded, the aircraft was reconfigured for as many seats as they could get. The crew managed to set up 75 seats, then were told to try for 102 --- something that wouldn't normally be done. They made makeshift seats, using boxes, sleeping bags and straps. The first of the passengers showed up a few hours later. There were two buses worth, holding 70 personnel.

Another 30 people were at the embassy. Normally, it would have been a 10-minute drive to the airport, but it took three hours given the conditions after the earthquake. All of the passengers had fear, shock and sadness in their eyes. Some had not eaten or slept in the 30 hours that had elapsed since the earthquake. The crew tried to lift the spirits of the people as best they could, playing games, listening to them, etc. The Haitians responded right away, laughing and smiling as they boarded the Herc, rebounding nicely despite the living hell they had endured. When they landed in Montreal, and shut down the engines, all of the passengers spontaneously sang the national anthem. It was a touching moment for everyone in the squadron.

Remembrance Day was highlighted by our speaker as well. Tim noted that because it was November, he would be remiss if he didn't mention some of the Canadians who have fallen in Afghanistan. He has four daughters and a son. Instead of going to a Legion hall for Remembrance, Tim and his family started their own tradition. While in Nova Scotia, they found a cemetery with a huge plot of war veterans. So, every Nov. 11, at 10 a.m., Tim and the family would dress in his best uniform and their finest clothes, purchase whatever poppies were left, and visit the cemetery together. They would read headstones one at a time. Tim would ask the children to think about how old the fallen individual was when he died, what time of year it was, what that person would have experienced (and missed out on) in his short lifetime, and how he would have been buried. The kids would decorate the headstones with poppies, and not one would have a dry eye when they were done. Tim recalled that his wife told him the experience was really hard on the children. In reply, Tim noted that remembering the fallen is hard but that doesn't mean you shouldn't do it.

Our speaker shared that tradition by remembering four gallant young Canadians who fell in Afghanistan, and the role played by 436 Sqdn. in their journey home to Canada. Tim underlined what it means to the Canadian Forces to see Canadians welcome home the

fallen through spontaneous gestures such as the Highway of Heroes from Trenton to Toronto. Briefly outlining their personal stories, he paid poignant tribute to Sgt. James MacNeil, of Glace Bay, NS; Pte. Kevin McKay, of Toronto; Private Tyler Todd, of Bright, Ont; and Sapper Steven Marshall of Calgary. In June of this year, Tim decided to go an extra mile. He asked if a photographer could sit with the widow of a soldier in the convoy during the repatriation ceremony. The idea was to provide Canadians with a pictorial tribute from the soldiers' viewpoint. The result was a moving tribute which really captured the emotion of the memorial service, with a behind-the-scenes perspective of the images now so familiar to Canadians. The funeral was that of Sgt. MacNeil, held on a rainy day in June. He was killed by a homemade landmine on June 21 and was engaged to his girlfriend less than 24 hours before he died. When he saw the kids in Afghanistan on his tour, he felt he had to return.

Tim, answering several questions, noted that the first of the new CC-130J Hercules models arrived in June. In September, a J model landed at the CWHM as part of the dedication of the Burma exhibit at the CWHM, making Hamilton the second city outside of Trenton to host a landing of the J. About half of the squadron's aircraft are J models, the rest are earlier models, which will be shifted to search and rescue. The J model has huge advantages in airspeed and cargo capacity. George Topple thanked Tim for an exceptional, emotional perspective, culminating a week of Remembrance presentations by Tim to high schools and service clubs. Bob Winson presented a gift to Tim in appreciation.

