

COLUMNS

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Bomber pilots overcame odds Canadians boasted best record in Second World War command



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Avro Lancaster bombers like this one were among several types of aircraft flown by Bomber Command during the Second World War.

At one minute past midnight on Jan. 1, 1943 - 65 years ago - the most powerful strike force that Canada ever possessed came into being. No. 6 Group, Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), was established as part of Bomber Command of the Royal Air Force (RAF).

The strength of No. 6 Group grew to 15 squadrons - all formed overseas. By the end of the war, it had flown 40,822 sorties (a sortie equals one operational flight by one aircraft), dropped 126,122 tons of bombs and lost 814 aircraft.

A total of 9,980 young Canadians died in Bomber Command. It was Canada's biggest and costliest air commitment of the Second World War.

The group flew a mixture of Hampden, Halifax, Wellington and Lancaster bombers from 10 bases in

northeast England. Its airfields were scattered along a picturesque crescent-shaped swath known as the Vale of York in south Durham and east Yorkshire, stretching from Middlesbrough to York.

The Canadians were the farthest from their targets in Germany and Occupied Europe - about 30 to 60 minutes more flying time than RAF squadrons to the south. When they got home, the dangers weren't over.

Their valley was overlooked by the Cleveland Hills to the east and the Pennines to the west, which resulted in limited manoeuvring space for landings. Factory smoke from nearby industrial areas and frequent fog exacerbated the problem.

When war broke out, the RCAF had only one bomber squadron. No. 10 Squadron was formed at Halifax on Sept. 5, 1939, and equipped with open-cockpit, two-seater Westland Wapiti biplanes, capable of carrying an unimpressive 263 kilograms of bombs at a maximum speed of 217 kilometres an hour.

First mission

The first RCAF bomber unit formed overseas was 405 Squadron, in April 1941. Equipped with two-engined Vickers Wellingtons, it flew its first mission a couple of months later on the night of June 12-13, against railway marshalling yards in Germany.

Three more squadrons followed by the end of the year: 408 and 420, flying twin-engined Handley Page Hampdens, and 419, equipped with Wellingtons. These squadrons served in various RAF groups throughout Bomber Command.

In June 1942, the RCAF's first francophone unit, 425 Squadron, was formed in an effort to recruit French Canadians into air force. In October, it was followed by two more squadrons: 424 and 426, all on Wellingtons.

By now, the idea of creating an all-Canadian bomber group - an air formation roughly equivalent to an army corps - had firmly taken hold, and four squadrons were hurriedly stood up in November: 427, 428, 429 and 431, equipped with Wellingtons.

Headquarters for No. 6 Group was established at Allerton Hall in Yorkshire, the gloomy 75-room ancestral home of Lord Mowbray, which was requisitioned by the British. His Lordship turned out to be a resentful landlord, who "complained loudly and vociferously about the many inevitable alterations to his property."

The Canadians referred to their headquarters as "Castle Dismal."

In April 1943, three squadrons - 420, 424 and 425 - were temporarily detached to Tunisia in North Africa to support the forthcoming Allied invasions of Sicily and mainland Italy. They did not return until six arduous months later, twice as long as intended.

During their absence, three more squadrons were formed: 432, 433 and 434. When 415 Squadron returned from its unhappy detachment to Coastal Command in July 1944, the Group's strength reached its final total of 15 squadrons.

The initial experiences of 6 Group were not entirely auspicious. It had expanded too quickly, and the lack of seasoned air- and groundcrew and administrative personnel soon showed. Loss, early return and serviceability rates were the worst in Bomber Command.

Improved aircraft

Conversion to different aircraft and improved models continued throughout the war. Eventually, four squadrons were equipped with four-engined Handley Page Halifaxes and eleven with four-engined Avro Lancasters - including Canadian-built ones. The Lancaster was generally considered to be the best British-designed heavy bomber of the war, in terms of survivability and bombload.

As the Canadians became more experienced, No. 6 Group boasted higher accuracy and fewer casualties than any of Bomber Command's five other groups. It took a special kind of courage to fly mission after mission through enemy flak and fighters, pressing on to designated targets. Most of the more than 8,000 decorations awarded to the RCAF went to Bomber Command.

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John Boileau extends best wishes for 2008 to all his readers.