

“God’s Gift to the Empire”:

Canadian Veterans and the Memory of the British Commonwealth Air Training Program

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The British Commonwealth Air Training Program was a massive air-training program involving the United Kingdom and its commonwealth and Empire, which was responsible for training nearly half the pilots, navigators, bomb aimers, gunners, wireless operators and flight engineers of the Commonwealth air forces during the Second World War.¹

— Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939-1945*.

The British Commonwealth Air Training Program utilized both the manpower and facilities for flying school expansion available in Canada, where 360 schools trained over 200,000 aircrew by the end of the war.²

— Richard Overy, *The Air War, 1939-45*.

For most people the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) is something understood solely through reading history books such as those of Webster, Frankland, and Overy. However, the BCATP is largely forgotten in traditional historiography. Instead of discussing the vital importance of how the program provided the desperately needed pilots needed to win the war against Hitler's Germany, most of these books describe the BCATP as a mere stepping stone to greater things, placing a greater emphasis on the glorious achievements of pilots overseas. Moreover, since most people understand the BCATP through books, many view the program as something abstract, locked within the pages written by historians. However, to the brave men who were pilots, instructors, or auxiliary personnel in the Second World War it was much more—it was their life, now part of their memory, and history owes them far more than a few abstract and misrepresented sentences. A new image of the BCATP is necessary, but this raises the question of how we can best illustrate the experience of the BCATP when traditional history has largely forgotten it? The answer: oral history.

¹ Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939-1945* (London: York House Publishing, 1961), 110.

² Richard Overy, *The Air War, 1939-1945* (London: Europa Publishing Ltd., 1980), 143.

In his article “Talking about War: Reflections on Doing Oral History and Military History,” Edward Coffman states in order to get “contemporary colour, [and] contemporary atmosphere one must seek it among the impressions which can only be obtained from those who lived a life amid particular surroundings.”³ Thus, in trying to recreate the experience of an historic event one should not search for explanations in books, but rather from the very people who witnessed and lived their lives during that particular event. This is of particular importance when dealing with World War II since the majority of books on the topic were written forty to sixty years after the war by historians who not only did not experience the conflict themselves, but who grew up in the post-war world. Thus, in trying to understand the training experience of the BCATP one ought to ask the experts on the subject—the men who went through the program and who later served overseas as pilots or who remained in Canada as instructors.

However, the traditional history of the BCATP should not be thrown out entirely; although most of it does not do the recruits of the program justice, some, like F. J. Hatch’s *The Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Program, 1939-1945* or Peter Conrad’s *Training for Victory: The British Commonwealth Air Training Program in the West*, provide detailed descriptions of training and daily life in the BCATP, and thus should not be completely ignored. Rather, to depict both a realistic, factual, and true image of the BCATP oral history from Canadian veterans ought to be employed alongside the already existing foundation of traditional history. Thus both types of historical documentation may collaborate and support each other. With the method of historical documentation in place, it is easy to accurately reconstruct the training experience of a recruit in the BCATP during the Second World War.

³ Edward Coffman, “Talking about War: Reflections on Doing Oral History and Military History,” *Journal of American History* 87.2 (September 2000): 582-592.

The BCATP was as multinational as its name implied. After receiving limited air training in their mother countries, recruits came from all areas of Britain's commonwealth and empire to receive advanced training in Canada. Small groups of Norwegians, Poles, and even Free French trained in the BCATP after their countries had been invaded by Nazi Germany in the early years of the war. However, the BCATP was also multicultural in the Canadian recruits it trained; Canadian recruits came from all religions, classes, locations, and sectors of the economy. For example, Flight Lieutenant Fred Ashbaugh came from a farming community outside Edmonton,⁴ while Flight Lieutenant Fred Sproule grew up in urban Vancouver and had a job in a local bank before the war.⁵ Likewise, Flight Lieutenant Wilf Sutherland came from urban Alberta and also worked in the Royal Bank of Canada before the war.⁶ As Jonathan Vance argues in his book *High Flight: Aviation and the Canadian Imagination*, the only thing many recruits of the BCATP shared in common was a fascination with flight that argues states was a common characteristic of children growing up in the wake of the Great War in the 1920s and 30s.⁷

Upon enlisting, recruits of the BCATP began their training at the manning depots. Manning depots were large reception centres through which all recruits were funnelled and in the process changed from civilians to airmen. In his book *The Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Program, 1939-1945*, F. J. Hatch states there were five manning depots operating in Canada during the war: No. 1 in Toronto, No. 2 at Brandon, Manitoba, No. 3 at Edmonton, No. 4 in Quebec, and No. 5 in Lachine, outside Montreal.⁸ From

⁴ Fred Ashbaugh, interviewed by Tyson Rosberg, 9 Nov 2009, Esquimalt, British Columbia. 0:50.

⁵ Fred Sproule, interviewed by Tyson Rosberg, 14 Nov 2009, Esquimalt, British Columbia. 0:57.

⁶ Wilf Sutherland, interviewed by Tyson Rosberg, 25 Nov 2009, Royal Oak, British Columbia. 0:32.

⁷ Jonathan F. Vance, *High Flight: Aviation and the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Penguin Publishing, 2002), 17.

⁸ F. J. Hatch, *The Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Program, 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing, 1983), 121.

these, Hatch adds, most aircrew recruits from Eastern Canada were sent to No. 1 Manning Depot in Toronto, while most of the recruits from the west went to No. 3 at Edmonton.⁹ Life at manning depot was strenuous, rigorous, and gave recruits their first introduction to military discipline and organization. Flight Lieutenant Asbaugh describes the daily regime of life at manning depot, which he remembers as being a shock to new recruits unused to military life:

Manning depot was quite a shock...It was our first introduction to the air force and military discipline...We were in the cow barn, in double-tiered bunks. There was just a mass of people in there...And we had drills and marching, and learnt to use the Ross rifle, and all that good stuff...The food was terrible; it was really shocking...They had some sort of arrangement with a caterer, and he could make the best rubber eggs you ever had in your life. The one thing that was really good about it was you got all the milk you could drink and all the bread and butter you wanted. The rest of the food was bad.¹⁰

Hatch states that these manning depots were important to air training because they were the first sites to organize recruits by ability; those recruits who did not display the capabilities of possible pilots were quickly funnelled off into other air schools, such as navigation or gunnery.¹¹ If lucky enough to be selected as a pilot, the recruit's path took him to three different schools: an Initial Training School (ITS) for pre-flight instruction, an Elementary Flying School (EFS), and finally to a Service Flying Training School (SFTS), from which recruits graduated as fully-trained pilots.

At the Initial Training School, Hatch explains, "pre-flight instruction was given in aerodynamics, engines, navigation, meteorology, mathematics, and science."¹² The earliest recruits of the British Commonwealth Air Training Program, including Flight Lieutenant

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Ashbaugh 4:40.

¹¹ Hatch 125

¹² *Ibid*

Ashbaugh, spent only a few short weeks at initial training school, but Hatch suggests ground school was lengthened and given more importance as the war went on so that by 1942 recruits spent ten or more weeks in the course. Hatch argues the actual course content changed very little during the war, although more time was allocated to the criteria taught and the quality of instruction was greatly improved from that of earlier years. Although most selection procedures were centralized at manning depots, some weeding out was still conducted at the Initial Training Schools, which Hatch believes encouraged recruits at this level to become “eager learners, [and] hard workers, enthused with the prospect of flying and anxious to ensure that [they] remained in the pilot stream.”¹³ According to Hatch, the average failure rate for recruits at Initial Training School ranged between approximately fifteen and twenty percent during the war.¹⁴

It was at the Initial Training Schools that recruits encountered the Link trainer—a simulator used to train recruits in the basics of aviation. Flight Lieutenant Fred Sproule remembers the Link trainer quite fondly:

It was set up like a little airplane with wings...and was on a machine that could be moved up or down, left to right to simulate flight. It had a panel just like an aircraft with the basic instruments, a stick for the steering wheel, and rudders. When you put the hood down then you can't see, which was for blind flying. There you learnt to keep it straight and level. Lots of fun.¹⁵

In his book *Training for Victory: The British Commonwealth Air Training Program in the West*, Peter Conrad notes the number of hours spent in the Link trainer was greatly increased over the course of the war: “in 1940 the number of hours spent in a Link was 5 hours, but by 1941 that

¹³ Hatch 127.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Fred Sproule, 14:24.

had increased to 20, and 25 hours in 1943.”¹⁶ With a large curriculum content to cover in such a short amount of time, instructors at the Initial Training Schools were distant and firm with their recruits. Understandably, however, firm regimentation and routine was the key to training pilots in such a short amount of time. Flight Lieutenant Ashbaugh fondly remembers Initial Training School and one instructor in particular:

It was terrific...we had a sergeant that was a fantastic person. He had been a sergeant in the RCMP and his discipline was so tight, but so good...As soon as he got us he said, “This is A-Flight, we’ve been the best flight group for x number of years here, and this is going to continue to be the best flight group.” He really put us through our paces, but it was all done very well. He was a terrific disciplinarian.¹⁷

After eight weeks or more of training, recruits progressed to the Elementary Flying Schools where they finally came face to face with their first aeroplane and the instructor who would teach them to fly it. Hatch explains how the time spent at the Elementary Flying Schools changed dramatically over the course of the war: initially the elementary timetable provided for a course lasting nine weeks, which was then cut to six weeks in the summer of 1940 when the demand for pilots rose substantially because of both the Battle of Britain and the Blitz.¹⁸ However, because of high loss rates and the decreasing demand for pilots in the fall of 1941, after the end of the Blitz and the start of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the nine week program was eventually restored.

At the Elementary Flying School recruits finally experienced flight on a real plane. Conrad explains how the first flight many recruits experienced was more of a rollercoaster ride

¹⁶ Peter Conrad, *Training for Victory: The British Commonwealth Air Training Program in the West*. (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1989). 33.

¹⁷ Ashbaugh 9:50.

¹⁸ Hatch 129.

than a basic training flight, as instructors pushed recruits' physical endurance to the limit in order to determine whether or not they could handle the physical punishments of flight; Conrad states that air sickness or any other sign that one could not handle such an experience resulted in many recruits being reassigned to a different air trade.¹⁹ Flight Lieutenant Ashbaugh remembers his first flight at Elementary Flying School in much the same way as Conrad describes:

We went up and a guy by the name of Moone was my instructor, and he really threw the Fleet Finch around, did a spin and a loop. I think he was trying to figure out whether I'd get sick out of it, which I didn't. From then on it was more straight and level flying, but for the first flight he really threw that plane around. I got a real bang out of it.²⁰

Conrad states after only eight hours of flying instruction recruits were expected to be ready for their first solo flight—an important milestone that could make or break a pilot's career.²¹ Conrad explains how the first solo flight was a problem for many recruits: “If a candidate was not able to solo when expected, he was tested by the chief flying instructor” to make sure there wasn't a problem between a recruit and his instructor.²² Some twenty-two percent of recruits who entered Elementary Flying School were reassigned to different air trades if they could not solo when expected.²³ Flight Lieutenant Sproule, who later went on to become a flight instructor after getting his wings, clearly remembers the steps undertaken in a recruit's first solo flight:

You looked behind you. Then you take off and you climb to 500 ft, and then you turn and go up another 500 ft. Then you go down wind at 1000 ft, and then you

¹⁹ Conrad 30.

²⁰ Ashbaugh 12:59.

²¹ Conrad 30.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

turn and start dropping down to 500 ft. And then you turn to into landing, level off, so that you touch down.²⁴

The primary training aircraft for recruits at Elementary Flying School was the Tiger Moth. In his book *A History of the Royal Canadian Air Force*, Christopher Shores describes the Tiger Moth as a “two-seat biplane developed in the early 1930s, and powered by a 130-hp (97-kW) De Havilland Gipsy Major piston engine.”²⁵ Shores states the Tiger Moth proved to be ideal for training future pilots: while generally “docile and forgiving in the normal flight” conditions encountered during initial training, when used for aerobatic and formation training the “Tiger Moth required definite skill and concentration to perform well—a botched manoeuvre could easily cause the aircraft to stall or spin.”²⁶ Although the Tiger Moth was the most common training aircraft in Elementary Flying Schools of the BCATP, it was not the only one in use. Flight Lieutenant Ashbaugh describes a Fleet Flinch, an aircraft he trained on at EFS: “It was just about the same as a Tiger Moth, but it wasn’t as well known. At the time they were grabbing any kind of an aircraft they could.”²⁷

On board the training aircraft communication technology was limited, and recruits faced exactly the same technology as pilots had twenty years earlier in the First World War. Communication with the ground was non-existent, and a device called the gosport tube offered the only means of communication between recruits and their instructor. According to Flight Lieutenant Wilf Sutherland, a student and subsequent instructor of the BCATP, the gosport tube was, “A mouthpiece that goes into a tube with earphones at the back; you shout into it and hope it gets through. There’s no electric...you could talk to your instructor too...it was both ways, but

²⁴ Sproule 19:50.

²⁵ Christopher Shores, *A History of the Royal Canadian Air Force*. (Toronto: Royce Publications, 1988). 18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Wilf Sutherland 25:06.

generally you had to keep both hands on the stick.”²⁸ Once recruits completed six or nine weeks at Elementary Flying School they graduated to Service Flying Training School.

At the Service Flying Training School, according to Conrad, there was a greater emphasis on precision flight. Students “were expected to improve their navigational abilities with cross-country flights while drawing maps of towns, roads, bridges, railways, and other important landmarks.”²⁹ Recruits were also required “to do instrument, night flying, and formation flying exercises,” as well as “take part in simulated bombing raids.”³⁰ In addition, Hatch explains how proficiency training in the air was also supplemented by ground school lectures and more practice in the Link trainer.³¹

One of the most difficult adjustments for recruits at the Service Flying Training Schools was the change from the small, relatively light powered aircraft of Elementary Flying School to larger and much more powerful ones. According to Hatch, the aircraft of Service Flying Training Schools were the Harvard, Anson, Oxford, or Crane—all of which had at least twice the power of the Tiger Moths and Fleet Finches used at the Elementary Flying Schools. Flight Lieutenant Ashbaugh remembers the striking difference between the Fleet Finch and the Harvards he flew at Service Flying Training School in Summerside, Prince Edward Island:

It was like going from an Austen to a Mercedes. Here you got a great bunch of instruments in front of you, where in the Fleet Finch you had a needle, a ball, and an airspeed. Whereas in the Harvard you had needle, ball, and airspeed, temperatures, and God knows what else...Of course eventually it all became familiar...Of course it was also quite a powerful aircraft and fully aerobatic. It was a beautiful machine to fly.³²

²⁸ Ashbaugh 15:40.

²⁹ Conrad 34.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Hatch 148.

³² Ashbaugh 20:07.

Hatch believes that, one of the main benefits of these new aircraft was that although they were difficult to train on when compared to the Tiger Moth or Fleet Flinch, they all had practically the same cockpit as a Spitfire or Typhoon, and thus pilots could easily adapt to any fighter aircraft in use overseas.³³ As Hatch notes, even the cockpits of larger bomber aircraft had the same instruments in the same place.³⁴

According to Hatch, one of the most demanding parts of the service flight training course was instrument flying—“the art of controlling an aircraft solely by the use of instruments without any reference to landscape.”³⁵ The importance of teaching instrument flying became apparent as pilots overseas were initially unprepared for the poor visibility and bad weather conditions of Europe. In addition, there was also a growing demand for pilots to perform night bombing raids over Germany after 1942.³⁶ Consequently recruits were soon expected to perform all aircraft manoeuvres by the use of instruments alone, and learnt to trust their instruments through training exercises involving opaque or darkened cockpit hoods.³⁷ Flight Lieutenant Ashbaugh remembers a similar exercise intended to simulate night flying by using darkened goggles and flares:

Instead of actual night flying they had flares on the ground during the day...and you had dark goggles on so that you could just see the flares to simulate night flying in the daytime...the instructor was able to see because he didn't have the goggles on...it was quite the deal.³⁸

³³ Hatch 143.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Hatch 147.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Ashbaugh 44:57.

Hatch states training aids such as opaque cockpits or darkened hoods were not widely employed in Canada until after 1943, when the demand for pilots decreased and the time recruits spent in the BCATP was extended.³⁹ Although used infrequently in the earlier years of the war, these training aids, alongside the Link trainer, were vital components of the Service Flying Training School curriculum; they enabled recruits to get hundreds of hours of training at relatively low cost and in times when aircraft were in short supply because of critical overseas demands, such as in 1940-41 with the Battle of Britain and then the Blitz.

Of course, life at the Service Flying Training Schools was not always so positive. Although flying accidents were infrequent, they did nevertheless occur throughout the war. Flight Lieutenant Sproule remembers that although dog fights were forbidden at all stages of air training, enthusiastic recruits yearning for their chance to get overseas often engaged in these forbidden exercises. Sometimes these exploits ended in disaster. Sproule remembers the loss of two recruits in particular:

We had two guys get killed. After you got a certain number of hours you were allowed to go up with another student and he would do his training under the hood...As it turned out they were in our flight, but they weren't my students. What had happened, one of them went down, and they were doing circling. And I guess they pulled it too tight and they spun out. Not a good thing.⁴⁰

Hatch states by the end of the war a total of nine hundred and fifty-six aircrew trainees were killed or seriously injured in flying accidents.⁴¹ Most of these accidents, Hatch believes, were the result of dog fighting escapades by students whose skill did not yet match their daring.

³⁹ Hatch 150.

⁴⁰ Sproule 43:00.

⁴¹ Hatch 151.

After the Service Flying Training Schools recruits faced the final and most important component of their training career—the wings test, which gave recruits their wings or saw them funnelled off into some other air trade. If pilots passed their wings test they finally received their pilot's licence and much celebration ensued. The official form of celebration was the wings parade. Flight Lieutenant Sutherland recalls his graduation:

There was a square...with the commanding officer in the middle, and we were all lined up along the edge alphabetically...He calls out your name, in my case L. E. C. Sutherland...I happened to be down near the end...And what you do is you walk up to the centre, come to attention, walk forward up to him, salute, and then he took your lapel and pinned on your wings. My CO said to me, "My God my fingers are getting sore from shoving all these pins in."⁴²

Unofficial celebrations also occurred in the form of large parties. Flight Lieutenant Ashbaugh remembers the party thrown upon his class's graduation:

Prohibition was still in effect, and Prince Edward Island was dry at that time. So they got a special deal so that we could get booze at the big celebration that the mayor and the governor general threw for us...We were the first batch through there [Summerside Service Flying Training School]...we were God's gift to the empire. They treated us wonderfully well, and we had a wonderful big party with lots of booze. And another thing, my buddy was dating the mayor's daughter, so we were in like Flin.⁴³

Once a recruit succeeded in receiving his wings there were two possible paths his career could take. Firstly, he could be sent overseas to Europe or the Far East, where pilots attended one or more Operational Training Units until they attained a level of proficiency, whereupon he was transferred to full military operations. Like the majority of pilots, this path was taken by Flight Lieutenant Ashbaugh, who upon arriving in Britain went to an Operational Training Unit

⁴² Sutherland 37:05.

⁴³ Ashbaugh 25:06.

at Lossiemouth before being assigned to a crew and ultimately serving two tours of duty in Bomber Command—one bombing Germany, the other in the Middle East bombing Italy and Yugoslavia.

The second option that presented itself to successful pilots was to become an instructor in the same schools where they had learnt to become pilots. Conrad states this was the path many pilots were forced to take as a means of ensuring that the BCATP would continue to meet the demand for pilots overseas.⁴⁴ This was the path taken by Flight Lieutenants Sproule and Sutherland, though Sproule did eventually get sent overseas after a year of instructing—first as a fighter pilot in Britain in 1943 and then as a fighter-bomber pilot in Burma. Sutherland, however, remembers being disappointed at the thought of instructing while other pilots got combat experience: “We trained as pilots, not instructors.”⁴⁵ Despite their enormous contribution to the war effort, instructors have largely been forgotten in traditional histories of the war.

In his book *Behind the Glory: Training Heroes in Canadian Skies*, Ted Barris describes the discrimination that was encountered by many instructors at the close of the war. One example is that “Only service personal who had been overseas could qualify for a Civil Service Post” and that “Trans-Canada Airways would not employ pilots who had not completed a tour of operations.”⁴⁶ Sutherland became aware of these discriminations in 1945, when he realised that he was going to finish his air force career as an instructor, he inquired about pilot positions with

⁴⁴ Conrad 36.

⁴⁵ Sutherland

⁴⁶ Ted Barris, *Behind the Glory: Training Heroes in Canadian Skies*. (Toronto: Macmillan Publishing, 1992). 311.

Trans-Canada Airways, only to find out those jobs were reserved for pilots returning from overseas—some of which he had undoubtedly helped train.⁴⁷

The discrimination Sutherland remembers and that Barris describes is an ideal example of how the British Commonwealth Air Training Program has been forgotten in traditional historiography. Like Webster, Frankland, and Overy, the post-war world placed all the emphasis of the air war against Nazi Germany upon those pilots who served overseas. Yet, it should not be that way. The brave pilots of the Second World War whom traditional history glorifies owe much to their instructors and, more importantly, to the British Commonwealth Air Training Program as a whole, which was largely responsible for preparing them for overseas combat. To quote Sutherland, “For Christ’s sake, who taught you to fly? God?”⁴⁸ The British Commonwealth Air Training Program and the men and women behind it are the true heroes of the air war against Nazi Germany.

Because traditional historiography has largely forgotten the British Commonwealth Air Training Program it can be of only limited usefulness in recreating the training experience of the program. In addition, the traditional historiography provides only an abstract and detached portrayal of the war. It is upon the foundation of traditional history, however, that oral history allows us to build a unique, deeply personal, firsthand perspective of the past.

⁴⁷ Sutherland 1:26:11.

⁴⁸ Sutherland 1:31:23.

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