

No. 405 SQUADRON

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No. 405, THE FIRST BOMBER SQUADRON of the R.C.A.F. overseas, was formed at Driffield, Yorkshire, on 2 April 1941, and equipped with Wellington II aircraft. The unit carried out its first operation (an attack on the marshalling yards at Schwerte) on the night of 12 June 1941 and from then to the end of the war in Europe it was actively employed on offensive operations over land and sea, participating in most of Bomber Command's heaviest and most telling assaults on targets in Germany, the occupied countries, and northern Italy.

The success of No. 405, like that of any other unit, was due in no small measure to the personality and efficiency of its commanding officers. Its first C.O., Wing Cdr. Gilchrist, D.F.C., led the squadron through its formative stage and its first six weeks of operations, until he went missing. He was succeeded, after a short period during which Sqn. Ldr. R.C. Bisset, D.F.C., held temporary command, by another R.A.F. Canadian, Wing Cdr. R.M. Fenwick-Wilson, A.F.C., who led the squadron until February 1942, when he handed over command to one of his flight commanders, Sqn. Ldr. J.E. Fauquier, of Ottawa, the first member of the R.C.A.F. to command a bomber squadron on active operations. Wing Cdr. Fauquier, after a notable tour that won him the D.F.C., was replaced in August 1942 by another flight commander of No. 405, Sqn. Ldr. L.G.D. Fraser, who, in turn, left in November 1942. Wing Cdr. Fraser was awarded the D.F.C. after completing 22 operational sorties in which he displayed remarkable fortitude, daring and tenacity. The next C.O. was Wing Cdr. A.C.P. Clayton, D.F.C. and Bar (R.A.F.), who was welcomed as a capable successor with a wealth of experience in bombing operations and who led the squadron with distinction for five months.

In June 1941 No. 405 joined in the series of heavy raids, which Bomber Command had just started on the Ruhr, the Rhineland, and the ports of Northwest Germany. The same month brought a move from Driffield to Pocklington, which was to be the squadron's home for more than a year.

Two operations of special kind in July are worthy of mention. These were attacks on the German battleships, which lay in Brest harbour.

On the night of the 4th/5th, which marked the first raid of this sort undertaken by the R.C.A.F., No. 405's aircraft did so excellent a job that the A.O.C. No. 4 Group told them theirs "was easily the best group show last night." A similar raid, carried out in daylight on the 24th, proved both spectacular and disastrous for No. 405. Its nine Wellingtons were among the last bombers to reach the Gneisenau, which was their particular objective, and five of them were engaged by enemy fighters, which shot down two over the target. One of these was piloted by the C.O., Wing Cdr. Gilchrist, who was taken prisoner and later escaped to Switzerland. Sgt. Craig's gunners shot down two Me's, but his aircraft was so badly damaged that he was forced down in the sea near the English shore, where the crew scrambled into their dinghy and were picked up by a motor boat. Aircraft "Q" was attacked by a Me. 109, which the rear gunner, Fit. Sgt. R.E. Parsons (R.A.F.) shot down as it broke away. "L" for

"London", after making what appeared to be a direct hit on the Gneisenau, was fired on by a He. 113 and a Me. 109. The rear gunner was mortally wounded and the whole aircraft so shot up by cannon and machine gun fire that it made a crash landing at Plymouth. In all, No. 405 lost four aircraft and two crews, and claimed three enemy aircraft shot down. Sqn. Ldr. W.B. Keddy received the D.F.C. and Flt. Sgt. Parsons the D.F.M. for their services in this raid.

However, the first member of the unit to distinguish himself especially, though the war was over before his achievements became known, was Sgt. V.R.J. Slaughter, R.A.F.V.R., crew member of an aircraft shot down over Holland on the night of July 14th/15th during a bombing mission to Hanover. Sgt. Slaughter was able to bale out, and from the first day (when he was seen by a German sentry whom he shot and threw into a canal) right on through nearly four years of war his experiences, if recounted in detail, would fill a book. He jumped from moving trains, hid with Dutch farmers, concealed himself in the washroom of German officers' quarters, obtained civilian clothes, warrants and money, helped dig tunnels out of prison camps, and broke away from a marching column. With each recapture serving only to spur him on to further attempts, he continued these exploits right up to 26 April 1945, when he got away from a stationary railway truck and four days later, aided by a Dutch family, made contact with the 6th Airborne division. In December 1946 he was awarded the M.B.E.

Meanwhile operations had continued for the crews of No. 405. On the last night of November 1941 they took part in a major raid on Hamburg. Sqn. Ldr. Bisset reported after an hour's flight that he was abandoning the operation, presumably because of mechanical difficulties. For another hour further signals were received from his aircraft, and then silence. An intensive sea-search discovered no trace of his crew. Later the award of a Bar to his D.F.C. was published, in recognition of his gallantry, devotion to duty, and outstanding qualities of leadership.

Early in 1941 the R.A.F. had brought into use a 4,000 lb. bomb. No. 405 first made use of this terribly destructive missile in an attack on Bremen on 17 January 1942. Sqn. Ldr. Fauquier, whose "J" for "Johnny" was carrying one of the new bombs, released it by hand, the mechanical release having failed, and saw it burst with an enormous flash in the centre of the town north of the docks. An hour after take-off on this same raid a message was received that Sqn. Ldr. Keddy was returning because of engine trouble. Then the Observer Corps reported that a Wellington was down in the sea, south of Flamborough Head. Searches by aircraft and Air Sea Rescue boats found nothing. Next morning, however, word came that a destroyer had picked up two of the crew, Flt. Lt. D.R.S. Scrivens (R.A.F.) and Sgt. R. L. Turnbull, suffering from exposure and frostbite after fourteen hours adrift in their dinghy.

No. 405 took part in the unsuccessful attempt to intercept the German battleships in their flight up the Channel on 12 February 1942, and March found its crews involved in some of the early night attacks on industrial targets in occupied France. In April the squadron was withdrawn from operations for five weeks to re-equip with Halifax II aircraft. But the new "Hallies" and their crews were ready to join in the first three of the famous 1,000-bomber raids on May 30th and June 1st and 25th, when the principal targets were Cologne, Essen and Bremen respectively. After bombing Bremen from 12,500 feet, Wing Cdr. Fauquier dived to 100 feet over the city and attacked two pairs of searchlights and light flak guns which had engaged him, silencing one gun and extinguishing one light. There followed several more smaller scale attacks on Bremen. That of July 2nd called for a maximum effort from the four R.C.A.F. bomber squadrons then operating. No. 405 had no losses, but a Halifax with Sqn. Ldr. L.G.D. Fraser at the controls encountered heavy flak while crossing the Dutch coast and was thrown on its back by one shell which burst close under the right wing. Out of control, the heavy bomber spun for 3,000 feet before the pilot could right it again. A month later

when Sqn. Ldr. Fraser took over from Wing Cdr. Fauquier, his place as "A" Flight Commander was taken by another rising young bomber pilot, Flt. Lt. W. H. Swetman, a native of Montreal, who soon after received a D.F.C. for his bold and resolute leadership in numerous raids against German targets. At the same time the squadron moved from Pocklington to Topcliffe.

October opened with a very costly raid on Flensburg. Three of the eight aircraft despatched by No. 405 failed to return from this low level attack, in which intense light flak and dazzling searchlights proved serious obstacles. Pilot Officer C.W. Palmer's outstanding effort on this operation won him a D.F.C.; and his flight engineer, Sgt. H.J. Anderson, who carried on with his duties in spite of wounds received over the target, was awarded the D.F.M. Attacking Krefeld under poor conditions on the following night, one of our aircraft received a flak burst under the port wing just as one of the starboard motors failed. The aircraft became uncontrollable and lost height from 11,000 feet to 1,000 feet before Pilot Officer J.H.M. Macintosh regained control. He pulled out at about 100 feet and flew back to base at 500 feet. On the night of October 13th, Halifax "U" for "Uncle" was hit by heavy flak when approaching the target at Kiel, and the pilot, Sgt. G.T. Chretien, received a wound in the neck. Despite the pain and his dazed condition, he remained at his post, ordered bombs jettisoned, and then skilfully piloted the heavy bomber away from the area. During the return flight Sgt. T.E. Carlon, the navigator, tended his wounded captain while ably navigating the aircraft. When nearing their base Sgt. Chretien again took over the controls and made a good landing. Both received the D.F.M. for their display of "high courage and devotion to duty."

On the 23rd No. 405 sent ten Halifaxes to attack Genoa in conjunction with the Eighth Army's operations in North Africa. Two days later No. 405 sent a detachment of fifteen aircraft with crews and ground staff to Beaulieu, in Hampshire. In its new location the squadron operated for over three months as a unit of Coastal Command. On the 29th, what was probably the unit's worst single disaster occurred when a Halifax which had been detailed to fly fifteen personnel to their new base, crashed and burned five minutes after take-off from Topcliffe, killing all its occupants instantly.

During this period with Coastal Command, No. 405 sent out Halifaxes in threes or fours nearly every day on patrols over the Bay of Biscay. Most of them were uneventful, but incidents enlivened what were otherwise, especially for bomber crews, very monotonous flights. During November there were five sightings of enemy submarines, two of which were attacked, and several strikes at enemy shipping, including one in daylight against a submarine and four ships at the mouth of the Gironde. Several times there were encounters with FW. 190's, Ju. 88's and Arados, which the Germans sent out to intercept our patrols. After the Gironde attack Wing Cdr. Fraser dived to sea level and, with only three engines running, outdistanced three Arados attempting to pursue him. On the 26th a Halifax, returning from a patrol with only two serviceable engines, made a forced landing at St. Eval but bounced off the runway and caught fire. All except the mid-upper gunner got free; and the captain, Sgt. R.A. Symes, and flight engineer, Sgt. A.J. Nichols, with great courage returned and after an effort extricated the trapped man just before the gas tanks blew up. For this gallant action both sergeants were awarded the B.E.M.

December and January were fairly quiet months, in which the weather and a grounding for a technical check-up cut down the number of patrols. On December 9th a Halifax engaged in shadowing an enemy convoy was attacked by two Ju. 88's, both of which were destroyed by the bomber's gunners. February 1943 was a more active month, with 98 sorties, the outstanding incident of which was Flying Officer W.W. Colledge's bout with four Ju. 88's, which attacked his aircraft together, two on either side. By means of a skillful corkscrew dive and excellent work on the part of his gunners, who fought off numerous individual attacks, Flying Officer Colledge finally was able to gain cloud cover and returned to base "after a brilliant duel with superior numbers." He was awarded

the D.F.C., and Sgt. E.A. Taylor, his mid-upper gunner, the D.F.M., for their coolness and skill in this thirty-six minute running fight which resulted in the destruction of one enemy aircraft and damage to two more. On its departure from Coastal Command at the beginning of March, No. 405 received a highly congratulatory message from the Admiralty. It was at this time that the squadron was formally adopted by the City of Vancouver.

From Beaulieu No. 405 moved back to Yorkshire—first to Topcliffe and then Leeming—where for six weeks it joined the recently formed No. 6 (R.C.A.F.) Bomber Group. Its activities were bombing raids against important German targets and a few mine-laying sorties. Two crews distinguished themselves during March. Sgt. (shortly after Pilot' Officer) Symes, B.E.M., and crew survived a thirty-minute combat on a Stuttgart trip and came back safely from Duisburg in spite of severe flak damage. Pilot Officer N.D. Daggett's American rear gunner, Flt. Sgt. L.I. Thomas, destroyed an Me. 109 en route to Stuttgart, winning for himself a D.F.M.; and the very next night the same crew came back from Essen with 200 flak holes in their bomber. Stuttgart was the squadron's first operation since returning to Bomber Command, and it had the misfortune to lose four crews, including that of Sqn. Ldr. L.E. Logan, "A" Flight commander. On the night of April 8th Pilot Officer C.C. Stovel and his crew had a really "shaky do". In taking violent evasive action from a box of heavy flak over Duisburg, all the motors cut and the aircraft went into a prolonged spin. Four members of the crew, misunderstanding their instructions, baled out; then at 1,000 feet three engines started up again and the pilot regained control, but before reaching base he had to bring the aircraft out of another bad spin. Pilot Officer Stovel was given a D.F.C. for this fine performance.

In April the Vancouver Squadron was honoured by being selected to join the elite of Bomber Command, the Pathfinders of No. 8 Group, and on the 19th the unit moved to Grandsen Lodge, Bedfordshire, just in time to celebrate its second anniversary. At the same time Wing Cdr. Clayton went to a senior operational post at R.C.A.F. Base, Topcliffe, and Wing Cdr. J. E. Fauquier once again took command of No. 405 (P.F.F.) Squadron, as it now was. A month later he was privileged to take a party of twenty-five air-/and groundcrew personnel to Group H.Q. at Wyton to meet their Majesties the King and Queen.

From this time forward to the end of the war the Vancouver Squadron continued to add to its laurels by its record of steadily increasing efficiency, borne out by a high level of bombing leadership combined with remarkably low losses in view of the results achieved. The Battle of the Ruhr raged on with concentrated attacks throughout April, May, June, and into July, when it was superseded by the Battle of Hamburg. Sgt. J.A. Phillips won an immediate D.F.M. for bringing his Halifax back after it was most critically damaged by a fighter en route to Cologne on the night of July 3rd. A month later he and his crew were interned in Sweden where they were forced to land after an attack on Hamburg. On the night of July 15th Flying Officer M. Battler's mid-upper gunner, Flying Officer W.R.W. Anderson, though wounded four times in the arm, staved off seven fighter attacks and finally shot down a Dornier 217. He was awarded a D.F.C. In the first of four annihilating attacks on Hamburg, on July 24th, the Pathfinders began using new special equipment enabling them to identify the target even when it was obscured by cloud. On this same raid Pilot Officer H. Gowan won a D.F.C. when he brought back an aircraft badly battered by flak and with one gunner mortally wounded. In August Wing Cdr. Fauquier received a D.S.O. for his sterling leadership in raids against Peenemunde and Berlin. His navigator Sqn. Ldr. P. G. Powell, D.F.C., also received a D.S.O. for his unerring skill on the same two raids and his yeoman service as squadron navigation leader.

The foregoing examples of individual effort and heroism are merely typical of the achievements of a first class bomber squadron. Other cases, equally courageous, could be recounted almost to the point of monotony; but in a short account it is impossible to give them all. For instance, in September

the squadron received five more D.F.C.'s and five D.F.M.'s. On the night of the 27th, Sqn. Ldr. L.E. Logan, D.F.C., who had "walked back" from Stuttgart, took off to bomb Brunswick and went missing for the second time. In this same month the growing importance of the squadron was recognized when the C.O., Wing Cdr. Fauquier, D.S.O., was made a group captain. From this time on it became the practice for No. 405 to have relatively higher ranks amongst its senior aircrew officers than were found in most bomber squadrons. For example, in October, we find on one day three pilots appointed acting squadron leaders: Sqn. Ldrs. H. Gowan, D.F.C., M. Sattler, D.F.C. and W. Weiser, D.F.C. All three had over thirty "ops" to their credit, and in May 1944 all three received Bars to their D.F.C.'s. On the very next day Sqn. Ldr. R.J. Lane, D.S.O., D.F.C., arrived and took over "A" Flight with the rank of wing commander.

During August the squadron had been receiving Lancaster III aircraft, and early in September its crews became operational on them, though they continued to use Halifaxes as well during that month. Then in October they took to "Lancs" alone and flew them for the duration of the war.

In November, No. 405 took part in an attack on Modane to block the French end of the Mont Cenis tunnel, "anti-recovery" raids on Mannheim-Ludwigshafen and other targets, and in all four of the month's major operations of the Battle of Berlin, which opened in earnest on the 18th. In the fourth of these trips to Berlin the "Ruhr Express", first Canadian-built Lancaster, which had been assigned to No. 405, made its first successful operational sortie, with Pilot Officer H.A. Floren at the controls.

Along with major raids on various other German cities, further blows in the Battle of Berlin proper continued into March 1944. On the night of December 16th, bad visibility and fuel shortage caused three of the squadron's aircraft to crash on their return from Berlin, resulting in the death of sixteen members of their crews. Warrant Officer S.H. Nutting, D.F.M., a rear gunner on his 45th sortie, was the only survivor from one of the crews.

In January the squadron had to bid Group Capt. Fauquier farewell for the second time when, having completed two tours, he was transferred to a higher post; and Wing Cdr. Lane took command of the squadron for the next eight months. It was a period of tremendous activity. Most of the key German cities had already been wholly or largely devastated, but from time to time anti-recovery raids were considered necessary; and at this stage of the development of bombing methods, very often a certain specific area or even an individual building would be marked for destruction. Then, too, as D-Day approached, there were numerous tactical raids on pre-invasion targets in France. In all of this No. 405 played an important and impressive part, adding constantly to its laurels.

August 1944 was the peak month of the war for most bomber squadrons, yet No. 405, while it flew its highest number of operational hours (962:52 in that month), actually reached its high figures for sorties (224) and tons of bombs dropped (943.9) in July. Nevertheless, August was a notable month for the unit. Four senior officers received immediate awards of the D.S.O.: two pilots, Sqn. Ldr. J.R. McDonald, D.F.C., and Sqn. Ldr. L.L. MacKinnon, D.F.C.; a navigator, Sqn. Ldr. G.B. Ellwood, D.F.C.; and an air bomber, Sqn. Ldr. G.A. Sweany, D.F.C. On the 23rd, Group Capt. Lane was transferred to a post at No. 6 Group, and handed over command of the squadron to Wing Cdr. C.W. Palmer, D.F.C.

On September 8th, Wing Cdr. H.A. Morrison, D.F.C., of Winnipeg, was master bomber in a daylight raid on Le Havre. Over the target heavy and accurate fire seriously damaged his aircraft, rendering it almost uncontrollable, and a rapidly spreading fire soon filled the fuselage. As the aircraft could not be saved, Wing Cdr. Morrison ordered his crew to leave by parachute and coolly waited until he was satisfied that all his comrades were clear before jumping himself at a very low altitude. They landed near the Allied lines and were soon back in Britain, where Wing Cdr. Morrison was awarded an immediate D.S.O. At the end of the month he replaced Wing Cdr. Palmer as C.O.

when the latter failed to return from his 38th operation, an attack on Cap Gris Nez in which he was a "visual backer-up". Only a month later the command changed hands again when Wing Cdr. Morrison was posted and his place was taken by Group Capt. W.F.M. Newson, D.F.C. and Bar, who was destined to be the last in a list of outstanding C.O.'s.

The high standard of efficiency which No. 405's crew had set themselves was maintained in major raids, mopping-up operations and attacks on special targets such as marshalling yards, oil refineries, and key airfields. Towards the end the scope for bombing became very limited and the targets more and more specialized. One of their last two offensive operations, however, on 25 April 1945, must have given the crews considerable pleasure. This was a daylight bombing attack on Berchtesgaden, Hitler's mountain retreat. Five days later began a week of marking points for dropping supplies to the famished people of Holland. Then with V.E.-Day came a week of flying liberated Allied prisoners from Brussels, Lubeck and Juvincourt to Britain; and on May 15th the squadron's war operations came to an end.

During May, No. 405's Mark III Lancasters were replaced by Mark X's, and at the end of the month the squadron was transferred to Linton-on-Ouse in Yorkshire. The main party departed by rail—as the unit diary put it—"amid cheers and tears of R.A.F. personnel of Gransden Lodge and the local village of Great Gransden". Among those at the station to bid them farewell was Air Vice-Marshal Bennett, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O., A.O.C. Pathfinder Force—a gesture which was much appreciated. Training continued until June 16th, when twenty crews took off from Linton on the first leg of their flight to Canada. This took them in stages to St. Mawgan in Cornwall, the Azores, Gander in Newfoundland, and finally to Scoudouc, N.B. The remaining personnel returned by boat to Canada, where a more elaborate programme of training had been projected. However, the capitulation of Japan in August put an end to all thoughts of going on to the Orient, and the squadron was formally disbanded in September 1945.

Somewhat belatedly, after No. 405 had disbanded, it received a unit badge. Both the design and the motto were particularly appropriate. The design is an eagle's head, holding in the beak a sprig of maple. The eagle's head is derived from the Pathfinder badge and by its position ("facing to the sinister", in heraldic terms) suggests leadership, the role of the P.F.F. units. This is further borne out by the motto "Ducimus" (We Lead) which recalls not only that No. 405 was a Pathfinder squadron and the only R.C.A.F. unit in that famed group, but also that it was the first Canadian bomber squadron overseas.

At the time of writing it is planned to re-form No. 405 Squadron at Greenwood, N.S., in March of this year. The squadron will be equipped with Lancaster X aircraft which have been modified to make them suitable for Maritime Reconnaissance duties. Wing Cdr. D.T. French, D.F.C., will be appointed as the Officer Commanding No. 405 Squadron and Sqn. Ldrs. R.J. Gordon and A.G. Dagg will be the Flight Commanders.