

FROM DIGBY TO DOWNSVIEW

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THE HISTORY OF No. 411 (GRIZZLY BEAR) SQUADRON

Formed as a fighter unit in England in 1941, No. 411 (Grizzly Bear) Squadron today is the Toronto-based County of York auxiliary squadron.

OF the eleven RCAF day-fighter squadrons that served overseas in the Western European and Mediterranean theatres in the Second World War, five were formed in the United Kingdom during 1941 under the terms of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. One of these units was No. 411 Squadron, which bore the badge of the "Grizzly Bear" with the motto *Inimicus Inimico* (Hostile to an Enemy).

The new squadron was born on 16 June, 1941, at Digby in Lincolnshire, England, where at that time the two original Canadian fighter squadrons, Nos. 401 and 402, were stationed as components of 12 Group of the RAF's Fighter Command. The first commanding officer of No. 411 was S/L Paul B. Pitcher, a veteran of the Battle of Britain, who brought with him from No. 401 two other experienced pilots, K. A. Boomer and R. C. Weston, to be his flight commanders. Around this nucleus was built Canada's fourth, and one of its finest fighting units.

Throughout its career overseas the Grizzly Bear (or "Roaring") Squadron flew various marks of R. J. Mitchell's famous *Spitfire*. After a brief training period on the *Mark IA* it began operations in August, 1941, with *IIA Spits*. In October of that year it was re-equipped with the *VB* type which it flew for the next two years. October 1943, brought the new *Spitfire IX*, a greatly improved modification of the type, which the squadron then used until the end of the war. After the fighting ceased the *IXs* were replaced first by *Spit XVI*s and later by *Spit XIV*s.

IMPRESSIVE RECORD

The pilots of 411 put these sturdy machines to good use in the circuses, rhubarbs, rodeos and ramrods of the long months of the air war as they guarded shipping along Britain's east coast, escorted the air armadas that blasted the vaunted strongholds of Hitler's *Festung Europa*, and clashed with the Luftwaffe's *Messerschmitts* and *Focke Wulfs* in the skies of France, the Netherlands and Western Germany. The battle honours of 411 include: Defence of Britain (1941-1944), English Channel and North Sea (1942-1943), Fortress Europe (1941-1944), Dieppe, France and Germany (1944-1945) Normandy 1944, Arnhem, and the Rhine. The squadron destroyed 84 enemy aircraft, damaged 44, and scored three "probables" in air combat, while in ground-strafting attacks it wrote off five *He. 177s* and one *Me. 262*. No. 411's bag of other ground targets was equally as impressive and included 367 *MET* destroyed, 353 *MET* damaged, 23 locomotives destroyed and another 65 disabled, as well as many rail lines cut in dive-bombing attacks.

The squadron's first CO, S/L Paul Pitcher, was succeeded in December 1941, by S/L P. S. Turner, DFC and Bar, a Canadian in the RAF who had already distinguished himself as a fighter pilot in France and Britain, and who later won further honours in North Africa, Sicily and Italy. Stan Turner was followed in February 1942, by another RAF officer, S/L R. B. Newton. Then, through the last three years of the war, came a succession of 12 COs, all members of the RCAF—S/Ls N. H. Bretz, DFC (28 September 1942), D. G. E. Ball (22 March 1943), B. D. Russel, DFC (16 April 1943), G. C. Semple, DFC (8 July 1943), I. C. Ormston, DFC (26 September 1943), J. D. McFarlane (21 December 1943), N. R. Fowlow, DFC (10 April 1944), G. D. Robertson, DFC (20

May 1944), R. K. Hayward, DSO, DFC (5 August 1944), E. G. Lapp, DFC (10 October 1944), J. N. Newell (19 December 1944), and B. E. Innes, DFC (30 June 1945).

A glance through the squadron record book discloses the names of many other famous fighter pilots. It was with No. 411 Squadron that "Buck" McNair and Wally McLeod trained for their later successes over Malta. Dick Audet (who scored a total of 10 1/2 destroyed and one damaged in the air, and on one occasion destroyed five enemy aircraft in two minutes), H. C. Trainor (6 1/2 destroyed, one "probable"), J. J. Boyle and M. G. Graham were some of the squadron's top-scoring "aces". One DSO, a score of DFCs and two Bars appear on its list of honours and, in addition to these decorations won in air combat, two pilots were awarded the MBE for persistence and courage as escapers when brought down behind the enemy lines.

FIRST BLOOD

From Digby, after their preliminary period of training, the pilots started operations with a round of patrols and bomber escorts over the French coast and it was on one of these missions that they drew their first blood of the war. Shortly after reaching their patrol line on 27 September 1941, the *Spitfires* met a considerable force of *Me. 109s*, which immediately attacked from above. The action soon developed into a number of individual dogfights during which P/O R. W. McNair fastened on to the tail of one of the enemy and followed it down to 10,000 feet as he fired several damaging bursts. Thus the squadron's first score went to a pilot who was destined to become one of the RCAF's most famous fighters. Over the French coast Sgt. J. D. McFarlane's aircraft was hit by flak; after gliding his *Spitfire* to within a few hundred yards of the English coast, McFarlane was forced to bail out and was subsequently rescued.

From Digby the squadron moved south, in November 1941, to a more forward operational base at Hornchurch in Essex. Here it suffered its first losses in action. P/O John R. Coleman (AD264) and Sgt. Donald A. Court (AA840) were shot down on 8 December while No—411 was flying top cover for a formation of *Hurri-bombers*. A week later P/Os Gordon A. Chamberlain (W3639) and Thomas D. Holden (AD117), both members of the squadron since its formation six months previously, were lost on a convoy patrol when their section was jumped by five *Me. 109s* near Calais.

On 12 February 1942, the squadron, led by its new CO, Bob Newton, took part in the attack on the German battle-wagons *Schatnhorst*, *Gneisenau* and *Prinz Eugen* which, ringed with E-boats and flak-ships and covered by a busy umbrella of fighter escorts, were steaming through the English Channel on their way to Heligoland Bight.

DISTINCTLY CANADIAN

Then, early in March, No. 411 moved to Southend and, leaving most of its RAF groundcrew behind, began to assume the distinctly Canadian character among the ground personnel that it had had for some time in the aircrew department. It was from the soggy airfield at Southend that the squadron took off on 24 March to support a bomber mission against Commines. After the target had been reached and the bombers turned homeward, 411's *Spitfires* were attacked by GAF fighters. The first assailants were beaten off, but more dogfights developed, forcing the squadron to fall behind the rest of the wing until finally it was engaged single-handed with the enemy. When the pilots eventually fought their way home they claimed three German aircraft damaged, but three of their own were missing and two more had crash-landed on the English coast. The missing pilots were P/O John W. Sills (W3213), WO Ronald H. Gridley (AB268), both presumed dead, and P/O (later F/L) W. F. Ash, who was shot down and taken prisoner.

The citation accompanying the award of the MBE to Ash, a native of Dallas, Texas, tells a story of dauntless courage. Crash-landing near Calais, he was able to evade capture and made his way to

Lille where the French Underground made arrangements to take him to Paris. He was apprehended there at the end of May and sent to a prison camp at Schubin. In September 1942, he exchanged identity with an Army private and joined a fatigue party from which he escaped, only to be recaptured the same night. In the spring of 1943 he took part in a mass escape from Schubin through a tunnel. With a companion he tried to reach Warsaw but was caught four days later and shortly afterwards he was sent to Stalag Luft III at Sagan.

There Ash served as an active member of the escape committee for the next 21 months. When other ranks were being transferred to Stalag Luft IV at Heydekrug, he again changed his identity and accompanied them. Under his direction a tunnel was constructed for a mass escape, but it was discovered by the Germans after ten prisoners had got away. Once again Ash was recaptured and returned to Stalag Luft III. After that he was kept under close surveillance until liberated by the Allies at the end of April 1945.

RETURN TO DIGBY

At the end of March 1942, No. 411 returned to Digby and operated from there for the next year except for brief visits on exercises at such places as Shawbury and West Mailing. It was from Digby on the cool morning of 19 August that the pilots took off to fly fighter cover for the largest-scale attack on "Fortress Europe" to date—the Dieppe combined operation. The squadron, flying more than 73 hours on four sweeps over France, chalked up the busiest day in its history up to that time. On the first sweep the wing found itself greatly outnumbered by enemy aircraft, mostly *F.W. 190s*, and in the ensuing battle two pilots were shot down; P/O Paris R. Eakins was killed and P/O D. D. Linton became a prisoner of war. On the credit side, S/L Newton shared in the destruction of one enemy aircraft while F/L McNair probably destroyed another. The next three sweeps were less eventful, the only claim being a *Do. 217* damaged by S/L Newton and FS D. R. Matheson.

October 1942, was highlighted by Exercise Aflame which sputtered and finally fizzled out. After five successive 24-hour postponements had reduced the pilots to nervous wrecks and stranded the road party—with no equipment, not even razors—for a couple of days in the wastes of Digby's satellite at Fairlop, the exercise was called off. The squadron returned to Digby. Next day the exercise was on again and they went back to Fairlop. Then it was off and they came home to Digby.

"Pilots and groundcrews", noted the adjutant, "expressed their disgust in rather certain terms". When, to add to their misery, the 3-tonner with all the armament and heavy equipment overturned on the homeward journey, the language became as foul and Anglo-Saxon as the weather.

DARK DAYS

Duff weather continued through November ("the dark November days when Englishmen hang themselves") and precluded large-scale operations. The squadron flew only 10 operational hours during the entire month and was far below its average in the next month as well. The "soup" hung on for week after week. Finally, in March 1943, when Exercise Spartan commenced, the weather improved and 411 had 12 profitable days at Kidlington before moving to Kenley, Surrey, for a few weeks and then to nearby Redhill to spend the summer.

Through the long, dreary fall and winter months 411 had been under the command of S/L Norm Bretz, who had taken over from Bob Newton at the end of September 1942. As he left the squadron Newton took with him its first "gong", a well-merited DFC. With the arrival of spring in 1943 came a new CO, S/L D. G. E. Ball. Three weeks later, on 14 April, Ball was killed in action. That was a dark day in the annals of 411: it cost them their commanding officer and two flight lieutenants. In a wing rhubarb over German-occupied France to strafe locomotives, transformers and various

buildings, the *Spitfires* ran into trouble. F/L James G. Banford (EN907) disappeared as he dived to attack a locomotive in a valley. F/L William T. Johnstone's *Spit* (P8175) was riddled by machine-gun fire, forcing him to bail out off Cherbourg. Six pilots, led by S/L Ball, immediately set out on an Air/Sea Rescue search for Johnstone, during which they were pounced upon by a gaggle of twelve *F.W. 190s*. P/O C. S. Pope destroyed one, and F/L G. C. Semple and F/O A. M. Barber shared another, but S/L Ball was shot down.

SUMMER 1943

Command of the squadron passed to S/L Dal Russel, one of the RCAF's Battle of Britain "aces", on 16 April, 1943. That summer the squadron earned plaudits on the ground as well as in the air. The fleet-footed adjutant, F/O A. J. Dale, breezed home to win the 440 at the RCAF No. 1 District Track Meet at White City, London (thus qualifying for the Overseas Championships), and LAC Grant placed third in the hotly-contested 800-yard race.

On 8 July F/L Semple, long one of the squadron's stalwarts, became the CO when Dal Russel was promoted to wing commander and appointed Wingco Flying for 17 Wing. Semple was an example of "local boy makes good". He had served continuously with 411 since his arrival, fresh from OTU, as a sergeant pilot on 7 November 1941. The jubilation of the pilots in seeing one of their number receive a well-earned promotion was not unmingled with regret at losing W/C Russel whose policy of improving the squadron's efficiency, already outstanding in the wing—"all the dud pilots have been posted" exulted the squadron diarist—endearred him to its personnel. Certainly, having left 411 after only a few months as its leader, a less modest man might well have taken great credit to himself for having welded a number of fighter-pilot individualists into a harmonious and well-balanced team.

With the change of command in July 1943 came a change in the organization of the squadrons in the field. Rumours that had been circulating on the subject for some time were finally set at rest with the announcement of the "gen". In the new organization of the 2nd Tactical Air Force the Canadian squadrons in the sector were grouped under 17 Fighter Wing in two airfields numbered 126 and 127. No. 411 Squadron with Nos. 401 and 412 would comprise 126 Airfield. All ground personnel except the adjutant, the medical officer, a technical NCO, and a clerk would be carried on the strength of the Airfield and the whole organization, living under canvas, would be completely mobile and adapted to the rapid movement involved in the concept of a second-front invasion force. On 18 July, 411's ground personnel were posted to 126 Airfield and, after a hectic Battle of the Bulge, the adjutant and FS H. J. Thomas emerged victoriously clutching the 17 secret, six confidential and 50 open files which had still to be retained by the squadron.

MOVE SOUTH

On 6 August, 126 Airfield moved to Staplehurst, Kent, with an ease that reflected the wisdom of the new set-up. In the canvas caravanserai there the squadrons remained until the move to their "winter quarters" at Biggin Hill in mid-October. In addition to their operational commitments, the pilots were now learning to recognize AFV_r MET, artillery and army formations—training which was later put to good use.

Exercise Starkey, an attempt to lure the enemy out into the open by tempting him with a feinting convoy of cruisers, destroyers, tank- and troop-landing craft, and large merchant vessels was staged in September. But the *Luftwaffe*, conspicuous by its absence of late, refused to rise to the bait and wouldn't play. The squadron's first real action in some time came on 19 September during a ramrod against Lille-Nord. In the engagement F/O V. A. Haw was jumped by two *Focke-Wulfs* which shot him down near Courtrai. As a sergeant pilot at No. 11 SFTS, Yorkton, Victor Haw had won the AFM in October 1942 for his outstanding work as a flying instructor.

"Chuck" Semple finished his tour late in September and S/L Ian Ormston then took command of the squadron.

On 13 October the fog at Staplehurst lifted long enough for the Grizzly Bears to make the trip to Biggin Hill—no sooner arrived than they began to improve "the very sordid appearance" of the dispersal allotted to them. With "paint brush, broom and scrounge" they made the place look "fairly habitable". Eventually the squadron's artist, F/L R. S. Hyndman, was let loose with his paints and produced three large human forms on the walls. Since Sixtus IV dropped in at his chapel to see what that Buonarotti chap had been dabbling on the ceilings there had not been such delight as that expressed by the squadron pilots when they first viewed Hyndman's frescoes, which showed that he shared with Michelangelo a sound knowledge of "significant form".

WINTER ACTION

Along with the refurbished winter quarters 411 also had new aircraft, *Spitfire IXs*. Like the *Spit VB*, it was armed with two 20 mm. cannon and four .303-inch machine-guns, but its performance was much superior: maximum speed of 408 m.p.h. at 25,000 feet, a service ceiling of 43,000 feet, and a rate of climb of 6.7 minutes to 20,000 feet.

During the winter months at Biggin Hill the squadron lost two of its seasoned pilots, F/L D. R. Matheson and P/O John A. St. Denis (MJ288). Returning from a ramrod operation to Cambrai aerodrome on 1 December, the pilots saw enemy fighters taking off from the airfield at Chevres and Blue section was ordered to attack. Matheson and F/O S. A. Mills each destroyed a *F.W. 190*, but as St. Denis and Matheson sought to rejoin the squadron they were bounced by a pair of *Focke-Wulfs*. Both *Spitfires* went down; St. Denis was killed in his aircraft. Matheson survived as a prisoner of war. Three weeks later the squadron CO, Ian Ormston, was injured in a flying accident and S/L J. D. McFarlane, one of 411's old-timers, replaced him in command.

PREP FOR INVASION

In February 1944 the Roaring Squadron began dive-bombing and strafing training that was soon to prove of use in supporting the combined assault on Europe. The "dreadful note of preparation" was in the air. Most of that month was spent on an air-firing course at Peterhead in Scotland; in March 411 took part in an army cooperation scheme after which it moved into tents at Tangmere and then went on to Fairwood Common in Wales for dive-bombing training. The Grizzly Bears' role in softening up the enemy for the impending invasion, and in participating in the vast plan for knocking out his lines of communication preparatory to the Allied landings, was becoming clearer.

Gradually administration in the wing was decentralized to increase still further its mobility. The squadron became more and more efficient at packing its gear and pitching and folding its tents, operating in ever-increasing independence as a member of the smoothly functioning team. Meanwhile, the pilots continued their ramrods and sweeps, or relaxed at softball and the cinema—waiting, preparing for "The Big Show".

During the long months of the air offensive that preceded "D"-Day, No. 411 Squadron had tallied 13½ enemy aircraft destroyed in air combat, plus two more counted as probably destroyed and 16 damaged. Its own casualties in that period had been 17 pilots killed or missing, presumed dead; four had become prisoners of war, and four others reported missing in action had later returned home safely.

As the preparations for "D"-Day began to reach their climax in May 1944, the Grizzly Bear squadron met less and less opposition from the *Luftwaffe* in the air. Air superiority had been gained. Antiaircraft fire, however, continued to exact its toll. On 19 May the squadron lost its C.O.

when S/L Norman R. Fowlow, DFC, was hit by flak while the *Spitfires* were pasting a target at Hazebrouck with 500-pound bombs. His aircraft (LF834) disintegrated when the bomb exploded. Norm Fowlow had taken over command of 411 just five weeks previously. S/L G. D. Robertson replaced him as leader of the Grizzly Bears. He found a squadron trained to a fine edge and (as the Navy says) "hanging on a split yarn" in anticipation of the invasion.

The Roaring Squadron had not long to wait. On 3 June the aircraft received their black-and-white "invasion stripes". Late in the evening of the 5th all flying personnel were summoned to emergency meetings. The great armada had already sailed for Normandy: the Channel was alive with ships of all sorts and sizes. Heavy bombers were poised to strike the landing areas. Parachute troops were being dropped to seize key positions. Coastal Command was keeping a sharp eye on the Channel and the Bay of Biscay. At 2330 hours G/C W. R. MacBrien told the assembled fighter squadrons: "This is it."

D-DAY AND AFTER

No. 411 Squadron patrolled Gold, Juno and Sword sectors all day long on 6 June. The enemy was not in the air. "This was very disappointing," commented the squadron diarist curtly. Though the first sweeps began at 0810 hours and the last touched down at 2325 hours, none of the pilots even sighted a German aircraft. But, despite the "inactivity" it complained of, 411 was doing its job, and the inactivity on "D"-Day could be attributed largely to the fact that the Grizzly Bears and all the others had done their job well for a long time. The work for "D"-Day had begun many months before. The landings were possible only because the battle for air supremacy had already been won. The following day (7 June) was more eventful. As on the preceding day, four sweeps were carried out over the beach-head. On the first two patrols W/C George Keefer, the Wing Commander flying from 126 Airfield, destroyed a *Ju. 88* and an *F.W. 190*. On the third mission S/L Robertson shot down another *F.W. 190*, while F/L G. W. Johnson destroyed an *Me. 109* to open a string of victories which he ran to nine before the summer was out. His combat report describes the brief action:

"(I) went down with Red Leader on two e/a chasing a Thunderbolt on the deck. They split and I took the port one. First burst from 600 yards dead astern knocked small pieces off. Fired several bursts during a steep turn without seeing results. E/a straightened and I noticed strikes on cockpit and engine. Smoke poured from e/a and it crashed into a farmhouse."

On D/4 (10 June) 411 began operating from the continent of Europe, putting down at the hastily-constructed re-arming and refuelling strips that had been built between St. Croix and Ver-sur-Mer, just west of Courcelles. Then, on 18 June, the squadron moved as a whole to Beny-sur-Mer (Airfield B.4). Henceforward, until their disbandment in Germany after the war, they were to operate on the continent, within what had been Hitler's "impregnable fortress". Their first airfield, a sea of mud in the rains of June (and promptly christened "Flounders Field"), was by no means their most attractive bailiwick.

On 27 June, the day the Americans captured the port of Cherbourg, the *Luftwaffe* came out in force for the first time. A new attack began around Tilly in an attempt to outflank Caen, and *Typhoons* and *Spitfires* were assigned to bomb and strafe ground targets in support of the push. Accordingly, despite an overcast sky and intermittent showers, 411 took off at 1255 hours on an armed recce, south of Caen and soon encountered more than 15 *F.W. 190s*. S/L Robertson proceeded to destroy one, F/L George Johnson damaged two, and WO J. A. Kerr scored hits on another. F/O P. Wallace went missing in this action but turned up safe early in September. Later in the day F/L H. J. Nixon had to bale out within the Allied lines when his aircraft was hit by flak south of Bayeux.

The next day was even more eventful. On the ground a great tank battle raged around Caen and on an armed reconnaissance in search of ground targets in the Lisieux area, Wheler's *Spitfire* was

damaged by anti-aircraft fire, forcing him to take to his parachute. He landed safely in an orchard, hid his parachute and other superfluous paraphernalia, and then, after laying a false trail to send pursuers off in the wrong direction, he took to his heels. After running northward for a couple of hours, Tommy found a barn where he spent the night. The next three days were passed alternately hiding and walking, and swimming two rivers. A deserted house provided shelter for two days during which the pilot lived "like a native" on vegetables and frogs' legs.

WHELER'S WALK

Rested and nourished, Wheler resumed his journey but almost immediately fell into the hands of the enemy and was taken to Pont l'Eveque. After two days' confinement there he was put in a truck for transport to Paris, by way of Lisieux. There was a small window in a door at the front of the truck through which Tommy managed to wriggle his way and remained clinging to the outside of the vehicle until an air raid on a target ahead of the truck forced it to come to a stop. Dropping to the ground, the pilot rolled under the truck into a ditch and, undetected, got to his feet and resumed his journey under his own power. All night long he walked southward. Morning found him north of Livarot where he approached a farmer who gave him food and a bed to rest up during the day. That night Wheler set out again, provided with a leather tunic and a map from his farmer friend who told him that the British forces were near St. Pierre, a few miles to the west. Walking by night and resting at farms during the day, Tommy tried to reach the Allied lines, but once again he had the bad luck to be captured by the enemy.

His captors took Wheler to a farm where a small group of 20 German soldiers was ready to retire eastward. For two days and nights the airman marched with this party, stopping only for meals and short rests. En route more prisoners of war were picked up until the German soldiers had 25 under escort, and the whole party was then loaded into a truck. The prisoners were forced to remain standing all night and were forbidden to raise the curtains to let in any air; the atmosphere in the covered vehicle became so stifling that several of the exhausted prisoners fainted. In the morning the men left the transport and set out marching once more with a file of guards on each side. That night Wheler edged his way into the file of guards and, under cover of darkness, stepped off the side of the road and slipped away unnoticed. Heading across a valley and river, he finally took cover in a barn near St. Etienne l'Allier. The next morning a little French girl discovered his hiding place and told her parents; they brought food to Wheler and passed him on to another farm where he remained until the British forces reached the area on 26 August.

CROSS COUNTRY

While Tommy Wheler was travelling over the French countryside, alone and escorted, his squadron had started moving forward to keep pace with the advances on the ground. From Beny-sur-Mer it went to Cristot and then, in a series of rapid jumps, crossed northern France to reach the new battle zone in eastern Belgium and Holland. During the latter half of 1944 the Grizzly Bears operated from ten different airfields on the continent — with scarcely a break in their daily round of strafing and dive-bombing. The groundcrew "erks" did yeoman service under difficult conditions and 411's record in the air was undoubtedly attributable in large part to the fact that the serviceability of their aircraft was kept exceptionally high. To the old verse:

*This is the Gong that Jack got.
This is the Kite that flew in the Fight
And carried the Guns that shot down the Huns
Who crashed in Flames, confirming the Claims
That earned the Gong that Jack got.*

it was not surprising that there was added:

***I'm the Erk wot did all the work
To service the Kite that flew in the Fight.***

Early in December the squadron set up winter quarters at Heesch in the Netherlands, and there it had some of the best hunting in its career. When von Rundstedt launched his counter-offensive in the Ardennes in mid-December the *Luftwaffe*, of which comparatively little had been seen for many weeks, joined in the last ditch rally. As a result, 411's *Spitfires* ran up some remarkable scores. In the last week of December seven of the Squadron's pilots destroyed 15 enemy fighters and counted two more as damaged. Included in the bag were two of the new *Me. 262* jet-fighters, one of which F/L J. J. Boyle shot down on Christmas Day while F/L E. G. Ireland got another (damaged) on Boxing Day.

The red letter day was 29 December when 411 chalked up nine kills, surpassing even its performance on 28 June: and five of the nine were scored by one pilot. The day began with a fighter sweep in the Rhine area during which the *Spits* destroyed four locomotives and damaged five more as well as 39 railway cars. On this sortie F/L Boyle and F/O R. A. Gilberstad bounced a couple of *Focke-Wulfs*. Gilberstad damaged one and then was set upon by two more. His evasive action proved too much for one of the German pilots who stalled, flicked and spun in as he tried to follow the *Spitfire*. On the day's second operation F/Ls Ireland and R. M. Cook were vectored onto three *Me. 109s* and chalked up one each. While they were engaged with these *Messerschmitts*, another section of *Spits* tangled with a gaggle of 12 enemy fighters. F/O R. C. McCracken shot down one *Me. 109*, and F/L R. J. Audet made history by destroying five *Focke-Wulfs* and *Messerschmitts* within two minutes, thereby winning an immediate DFC.

Audet's combat report tells the story of those unforgettable two minutes:

" . . . I attacked an Me. 109 which was last in a formation of twelve flying line astern. At approximately 200 yards . . . I opened fire and saw strikes all over the fuselage and wing roots. The 109 burst into flames (as) I broke off the attack . . . I spotted an F.W. 190 which I immediately attacked . . . It burst into flames and as I passed closely over the top I saw the pilot slumped in the cockpit . . . My third attack followed immediately (on a 109). I gave a very short burst and the aircraft whipped downward in a dive. The pilot attempted to bale out . . . but his parachute had been ripped to shreds. . . I (next) spotted a 190 being pursued by a Spitfire which in turn was being pursued by another 190. I called to this pilot to break and attacked the 190. (From) about 250 yards I opened fire. . . I saw this Focke-Wulf go straight into the ground and burn. . . I spotted another 190 from about 4000 feet (when) he was at about 2000 feet. (The German) attempted a head-on attack. I slowed down to wait for him to fly into range. At about 200 yards I gave a very short burst but couldn't see any strikes. This aircraft crashed into the ground."

In January 1945 Dick Audet continued his meteoric career with four and a half *F.W.s* destroyed, two *Me. 262s* destroyed and another damaged, and earned a Bar to his DFC. Then, on 3 March, came his tragic death when he was hit by flak while strafing a rail siding. His aircraft (MK950) burst into flames and plunged straight in from 500 feet. In his 83 sorties (108.45 operational hours) he had bagged 10½ enemy aircraft in the air and another on the ground to become 411's undisputed "ace".

MOPPING UP

On 7 March the US First Army crossed the Rhine at Remagen. Germany was crumbling. By April more than a million Allied troops had crossed the Rhine. Twenty thousand Germans were surrendering every day. On a 300-mile front the British were threatening the North Sea ports and the Americans were poised to deliver the *miseri-corde* in the industrial heart of the Reich, the Ruhr. The mopping up still remained, however. No. 411's operational sorties for April 1945 totalled 658 for

1081.10 flying hours. In the last week of the month the squadron added three more *Focke-Wulfs* destroyed and one damaged to its scoreboard. On 29 April a *Ju. 52* landed at the squadron's airfield to surrender, and 6411 Servicing Echelon's airmen had the pleasure of waking the CO before dawn to report the capture of German prisoners.

P/O P. B. Young (missing near Hagenow on the first of May) and F/L Stanley M. McClarty (shot down by flak (NH263) near Kiel on 3 May, while on his second tour) were 411's last casualties. F/L D. F. Campbell and F/O T. D. O'Brien shared an *He. 111*, shot down near Flensburg on 4 May, before the word came through from 83 Group Headquarters: "All hostilities on Second Army front cease at 0800 hours tomorrow May 5th 1945. . . " And the Third Reich, which Hitler had promised would last for a thousand years, was no more. After two thousand and seventy-five days of the most bitter struggle the world had ever known, "peace" returned to Europe.

After the V-E celebrations, everything was anti-climactic. In the weeks that followed 411 moved to Fassberg and then to Utersen as one of the RCAF units in the British Air Forces of Occupation. There at Utersen the squadron was disbanded on 21 March 1946 and the adjutant, F/L J. R. Hughes, closed the Operations Record Book with the comment: " . . . So No. 411 goes down into history, with a record of which we feel justly proud."

POSTSCRIPT BY F/L R. J. CHILDERHOSE

On 1 October 1950, just over four years from the date it was disbanded overseas, No. 411 was re-formed at Toronto as a Fighter Squadron (Reserve) under the command of W/C R. I. A. Smith, DFC and Bar. Operating from Downsview Airport, the Grizzly Bears became airborne again on 4 February 1951, using *Harvards* borrowed from No. 400 Squadron (Reserve). At its first summer camp, held at Deseronto in July of that year, the squadron began converting to *Vampire* jets in anticipation of being allocated to the newly formed Air Defence Command in August.

After summer camp the pilots settled down to a training schedule emulating the activities of the war-time Grizzlies. Week-ends usually found them either engaged in tactical exercises or noisily practicing air-to-air and air-to-ground firing at the Trenton gunnery range. At St. Hubert, in July 1952, they put in many valuable hours on fighter scrambles, interceptions, and G-racking dog fights during Operation "Signpost", the first United States-Canadian joint air defence exercise. A memorable event in June of that year was the squadron's adoption by the County of York, resulting in the official designation of No. 411 County of York Fighter Squadron (Auxiliary) — the only county squadron in the RCAF.

In September 1952 W/C Smith became 14 Wing COpsO. W/C R. Rohmer was then CO until March 1953 when he was succeeded by W/C C. Darrow who held the number one position for the next year and a half. "Chuck" Darrow guided the squadron through two successful summer training sessions — in 1953 at North Bay on Operation "Tailwind," and in 1954 at Bagotville on "Check Point". At North Bay the squadron distinguished itself on the ground as well as in the air by winning the Marani Trophy for all-round athletic prowess.

S/L M. F. (Mac) Cliff succeeded W/C Darrow on the latter's becoming COpsO in September 1954. Cliff's regime was notable for the arrival of the squadron's first T-33s and also for its rescue operations during the aftermath of hurricane "Hazel". After seeing the completion of the T-33 conversion programme at St. Hubert in the summer of 1955, S/L Cliff was SOS on his moving to California. He was succeeded by the colorful and energetic S/L (later W/C) J. W. P. Draper under whose guidance the squadron was chosen as one of the four auxiliary units to be equipped with F-86 *Sabre* Vs. The pilots began training on the swept-wing fighters in the summer of 1956 at 1 (F) OTU, RCAF Station Chatham; the unit *Sabres* arrived in the fall. At that time about a third of the squadron's pilots were ex-RCAF (Regular) jet jockeys. This cadre of experience, plus an exceptional Support Unit headed by S/L D. K. Burke, enabled 411 to operate on standards set by No. 1 Air Division. At the 1957 summer camp, their most successful to date, four of the unit's pilots spent

the entire two weeks at Chatham flying Regular Force hours with Gunnery Flight — an indication of the squadron's operational efficiency. Another outstanding achievement was realized in September when No. 411 became the first Auxiliary unit to be 100% instrument rated. In October 1958, in common with other Auxiliary squadrons, 411 was assigned to a new transport and search-and-rescue function. Accordingly it became part of Air Transport Command, the term "Fighter" was dropped from its name, and it reluctantly turned in its *Sabres* for *Expeditors*. The abrupt change in role, from being "swept back and supersonic" to assuming more sedate transport duties, was not easily accomplished. Yet it has been made. In its first year with ATC, 411 Squadron, now under the able leadership of W/C F. J. Mills, maintained its pre-eminence as one of the top Auxiliary squadrons in the RCAF.

(Reference: The Roundel, 1960, Volume 12, No. 1, 2)