

# THE TUSKERS' TALE

## Squadron No. 413

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NUMBER 413 Squadron was the most widely-travelled, and at one time the most widely-dispersed (with detachments located 5000 miles from the parent unit), of any RCAF squadron during World War II. Its main function, that of maritime reconnaissance, was commemorated in the motto, "Ad Vigilamus Undis" (We Watch Over the Waves), and its elephant's head emblem won for it the nickname "Tusker."

The life of No. 413 began officially on 1 July 1941 at Stranraer, an RAF base on the south-west coast of Scotland. Only the commanding officer, W/C V. H. McBratney, an RAF officer, was on hand that day. Oddly enough, this RCAF squadron was initially manned almost wholly by RAF personnel.\*

\*Provision had been made in the BCATP agreements for RAF personnel to serve in Canadian units until RCAF personnel became available.

On 18 Aug. '41 the first Canadians arrived: W/C R. G. Briese and F/Ls J. C. Scott (now G/C, rtd.) and L. H. Randall (now G/C). Wing Commander Briese took command the next day. As for Scott and Randall, their lives were to be interwoven with that of No. 413 Sqn. for the next three years.

The squadron's first accident occurred during night flying training on 23 August, when a *Catalina* crashed on take-off, killing five of its RAF crewmen. The deceased were buried at Stranraer during a heavy snowstorm. Training continued through September, using lighted dinghies for flarepaths at night. On 1 Oct. '41 the squadron moved to Sullom Voe in the Shetland Islands and became operational on shipping escort patrols, scouting far out to sea and eastward to the Norwegian coast. On one of these flights F/L R. Thomas (RAF) sighted what was believed to be a *Fock-Wulf Kurier* patrol bomber, but the enemy aircraft escaped into cloud.

On 22 Oct. W/C Briese took off for a special reconnaissance operation around Tromsø, Norway. The aircraft was never heard of again, and No. 413 had suffered its first operational casualties as well as losing its CO. Squadron Leader M. Gibbs (RAF) took temporary command, and was succeeded in November by W/C J. D. Twigg.

The long flying boat patrols produced nothing in the way of epic encounters with the enemy. Flights meant 10-12 hour patrols, often in appalling weather, searching the ocean for shadows. Icing conditions over the North Sea turned these tedious excursions into dangerous trips. If a crew was forced to "ditch", its members could not hope to live for more than a few hours in the bitterly cold water.

Sometimes the monotony was broken by the impressive sight of British warships. On 31 Oct. one crew discovered and marked a minefield. Early in December F/L Thomas and his crew located and escorted back to base two *Blenheims* which had been damaged on a strike near Norway. Two days later, half-way round the globe, the fate of the world and of No. 413 was radically changed as Japanese dive-bombers attacked Pearl Harbour.

### MOVE TO CEYLON

For a time No. 413 continued its patrols as before. A rapid series of Japanese victories, however, led to a decision by the British government to transfer forces to Asia. Number 413 was selected to go to Ceylon and preparations for the move began early in March 1942. Personnel first went to West Kirby, and on 17 March eight officers and 327 other ranks embarked on the "Nieuw Holland" at Liverpool. They were to go the long way to Ceylon — around the southern tip of Africa. During the move, W/C J. L. Plant (now A/V/M, rtd.) took command from W/C Twigg, who subsequently went to No. 408 Sqn. and was killed on operations in 1944.

Meanwhile, four *Catalinas*, piloted by W/C Plant, S/L L. J. Birchall (now A/C), and F/Ls Thomas and O. G. Roberts, undertook the long trip via Gibraltar, Cairo, Basra, Aboukir, and Karachi. On 28 March F/L Thomas touched down and was moored at Koggala, Ceylon, followed by S/L Birchall on 2 April. If ever aircraft appeared in the nick of time, it was these two.

The military situation in the east in the spring of 1942 was critical. At Pearl Harbour, off Malaya, and in the Dutch East Indies, the Japanese had inflicted heavy casualties on Allied air, sea and ground forces. In a blitzkrieg whose scope, speed and successes dazzled even the Germans, the Japanese had swept over the Pacific. Singapore was gone, Burma going. The enemy was at the gates to India, the Bay of Bengal was open to his carriers, and Ceylon was threatened. Realizing this danger, the British rushed forces into the area. These included a fleet under Admiral Sir James Somerville, a handful of fighters, and No. 413 Sqn.

The aerial defences of the island were sparse indeed: 50 fighters, 14 *Blenheims*, a small number of *Fulmars* and *Albacores*, and no more than seven *Catalinas*. Moreover, the city of Colombo had no radar units, although the naval base at Trincomalee had a few. There were vague reports of Japanese fleet movements, and as a result Admiral Somerville was patrolling south of Ceylon, where he hoped to intercept the enemy. What forces were afoot, however, were unknown.

## THE BIG TIP-OFF

The *Catalinas* had no sooner arrived than they were set to work. Flight Lieutenant Thomas made a patrol of more than seven hours on the night of 2/3 April, but saw nothing. Then, at 0052 hours on 4 April, S/L Birchall took off on a search for enemy shipping. He found it in the form of Vice-Admiral Nagumo's force of five aircraft carriers and supporting vessels. Even as *Zero* fighters peeled off to attack the *Catalina*, the radio operator got off a warning. Then 20 mm. and 7.7 mm. shells riddled the flying boat.

The message was picked up, garbled but still intelligible, and as a result the island's defences were alerted and the harbour of Colombo was cleared of major shipping. The next morning, when Japanese dive-bombers and fighters attacked, they were met by determined opposition.

At the same time, Admiral Somerville made a bitter but wise decision. Facing a vastly superior enemy force which could, if brought to battle, hammer his fleet into oblivion, he withdrew his ships by day, hoping to close on the enemy and engage him with gunfire at night. While the British carrier pilots fretted, radar operators watched the Japanese aircraft on their scopes. Warned by Birchall's message, the admiral was able to save the British fleet, and thus deprived the Japanese of the most sought-after prize.

That night, 5 April, F/L Thomas (whose crew and airplane now constituted the whole of No. 413 in Ceylon) searched for the enemy fleet, knowing full well that if he located it he would almost certainly be shot down. On this occasion he saw no sign of the Japanese ships, which had faded away into the Bay of Bengal. The following day, F/L Roberts and W/C Plant arrived at Koggala after flying as far west of Ceylon as possible to avoid interception by *Zeros*.

Meanwhile, the Japanese forces were ranging about, sinking two cruisers and 100,000 tons of merchant shipping in the Bay of Bengal. On the 6th two small ports on the east coast of India were bombed. Still the exact location of the raiding fleet was unknown.

At this juncture, No. 413's *Catalinas* again stepped into the breach. Early on the morning of 9 April, F/L Thomas located the Japanese Fleet and radioed its position, speed and course. Again enemy fighters silenced the sentinel, and the *Catalina* crashed into the sea, killing all the crew. But the naval base at Trincomalee had been alerted, and when the Japanese attacked that day, they lost ten of their aircraft.

They then sank a British carrier, the "Hermes", and its escorting destroyer, after which Admiral Nagumo withdrew from the area.

In retrospect, although Nagumo seemed to have had things all his own way, he had failed in his prime mission. The main British fleet had refused to accept the role of the opponent who perishes in glorious and pointless defeat. It had not been brought to battle, and remained as a threat to the Japanese.

For more than a year it was presumed that S/L Birchall and his crew had been killed. In May 1943 it was learned that he was alive and a prisoner of the enemy. While in captivity he was awarded the DFC for his warning of the Japanese fleet and was also promoted to wing commander. His actions while a prisoner were no less courageous than was his flying. As Senior Allied Officer in the camps where he was held he worked, often at great personal risk, to obtain the best possible treatment for the men. This entailed defying enemy officers, and on one occasion it meant forcibly preventing a Japanese NCO from using sick prisoners for work. He accepted beatings and solitary confinement from his captors. At the same time he kept records of prisoners who died, and his secret diary later proved to be of great assistance in the prosecution of Japanese war criminals. In 1946 W/C Birchall was awarded the OBE for his courage and leadership in the enemy camps.

## BACK TO ROUTINE

Although no one realized it, No. 413 had come through its most intense crisis. Enemy ships never again haunted the Bay of Bengal, and the Tuskers again carried on the routine of a flying boat squadron, hunting for shadows which seldom materialized.

The squadron began to take shape again in May 1942 as four more *Catalinas* arrived, flown by S/Ls Scott and Randall, F/L R. J. Furzman and WO D. S. Martin. The ground crews finally arrived on 29 May after weeks at sea. Few, if any, had any desire to sail again. On the last leg of the trip, from Bombay to Colombo, life had been made tolerable only by substituting RAF cooks for the ship's regular cooks. In July a *Catalina* was detached briefly to the Seychelle Islands, the first of many such detachments.

August was a month of tragedy, frustration and some measure of success. During an exercise with the navy, S/L Randall was almost shot down and his flight engineer was killed, when two *Fulmar* fighters opened fire on the *Catalina* by mistake. With rudder and aileron controls shot away and petrol and oil pouring from the tanks, Randall was able to limp back to Koggala and land safely.

On the 26th a crew, captained by S/L J. N. Stacy, discovered three life boats with about 60 men from a torpedoed vessel. Supplies were dropped and the lifeboats escorted for 11 hours. A second *Catalina*, piloted by F/L O. G. Roberts, was sent to relieve the first and to direct a ship to rescue the men. While doing this, the crew spotted an enemy submarine and attacked. The luck was with the enemy, however, for in two runs the depth charges refused to drop and the submarine escaped.

Then the monsoon season arrived — day after day of rain — and for diversions, the men began to publish a breezy newspaper, "Tropic Topics". They also established a "radio" station, C-O-R-N. It was merely a studio where shows were performed, and the results piped to the huts where speakers had been installed. The "Voice of Ceylon" carried only as far as these speakers. An advertisement in "Tropic Topics" invited people to visit the station "on the ground floor of the RCAF building", which was, in fact, a hut with one floor only. What the station lacked in paid talent, it made up in enthusiasm, and an orchestra, called the "Corn-huskers", was very popular. Sports were varied — cricket, football and softball — and the airmen established a Rota Mota or benefit club.

## ORIENTAL ODDITIES

Life in the Orient had its peculiar features, such as saucer-sized scorpions and mosquito netting. Happily, the base was not in an area where malaria was present, and the only cases which developed followed a series of hunting expeditions. On leave, personnel discovered such things as Buddhist temples and railroads which made the Toonerville Trolley look like the Super Chief. On a train in India or Ceylon, they found no platform linking the cars. To eat, one got off the train at a stop and entered the dining car. After the meal it was necessary to wait for another stop to return to one's coach.

Above all else there was the heat — prickly, persistent, and stifling. Rain increased the humidity without dropping the temperature. There were few places to go, and only limited means of transportation to get there. Leave in Colombo was a welcome break, where haggling merchants, missing the prewar tourists, welcomed the airmen. The key-word, however, was monotony.

## **OPERATIONAL INCIDENTS**

For the aircrew, at least, the tedium was relieved by incidents on patrol and by duty on detached operations. In mid-October F/L Furzman and WO Martin located lifeboats of the SS "Martaban", which had been torpedoed and set on fire. Eventually, all personnel of the ship were rescued. The part played by the flying boat crews won high praise from senior officers.

One of the most unusual operations undertaken by the Tuskers was carried out on the night of 20/21 Dec. '42. The Japanese at that time had a submarine base at Sabang, on the western tip of Sumatra. Allied headquarters decided that more should be known about the military installations. At the same time a scare should be given to the Japanese to keep them guessing, and boost Allied morale. Three flying boats, two from No. 205 Sqn. and one from No. 413, were detailed for this hazardous assignment.

Wing Commander J. C. Scott, one of the original RCAF members of the squadron, had succeeded W/C Plant as CO, and he was assigned to attack Lho Nga aerodrome. Shortly after leaving Koggala, the "Cat" developed engine trouble, so he returned to base, transferred his crew to another aircraft and took off again.

Eight hours later they sighted land and dropped to 50 feet as they flew down the west coast of Sumatra. There were no lights and no signs of life. The enemy "aerodrome" turned out to be a waterlogged expanse of rice paddies, so W/C Scott headed for an alternate target, the harbour at Koetaradja. From 800 feet he dropped six 250-lb. bombs and three tons of incendiaries. Swinging over another harbour, he checked for shipping, and then headed for home. There had been no fighters and no flak, although the other two aircraft had been peppered by light AA fire. Wing Commander Scott touched down in the mid-morning of 21 December, having been airborne for more than 17 hours. The reconnaissance proved to be of great military value, and he was subsequently awarded the DSO. Operations from Koggala, however, were relatively few during the winter of 42-43, for the simple reason that most of the aircraft were on detached duties. At the end of December, two aircraft were at Koggala. Two more were undergoing repairs at Bangalore. One was at Mombassa, Kenya, and two, captained by F/Ls Furzman and Fielding, were at Bahreim in the Persian Gulf. Late in January '43, F/L G. H. Bayly and S/L Randall took their aircraft to Langaban, South Africa, where they remained until June.

Some detached crews found their strange bases downright terrifying. En route to Aden, F/L Roberts landed in the Seychelles Islands after dark. As he took off again, an ominous shape loomed up ahead. The flarepath led directly into a group of mountains. By using full power he was able to skirt the mountain sides with only 40 feet to spare.

As spring approached, several of the aircraft returned to Koggala, but detachments still took from one-third to one-half of the squadron's machines. However, work was available in Ceylon. Patrols from Koggala increased, and were flown as far as the Straits of Malacca.

## **BLAZING A TRAIL**

Another special job was assigned to the Tuskers that spring. Commercial air communications between Britain and Australia had been severed by the outbreak of war. By 1943 British Overseas Airways Corporation wanted to establish a route, with prior rights, for post-war use. Two specially modified *Catalinas*, stripped of armament and carrying extra tanks, were provided by the company, and crews from No. 413 opened the route between Ceylon and Australia.

The first of these flights was made by W/C Scott with a skeleton crew. He left Koggala on 3 May '43 and droned eastwards. There was radio silence at all times. After nearly 26 hours in the air they landed at Exmouth Gulf in Western Australia where they refuelled from an American destroyer. They then carried on to Perth, six hours flying

time from the gulf. They were back in Koggala by the 12th. The feat was later repeated by F/L Furzman and by F/L P. A. S. Rumbold, who put down in the Coco Islands to pick up a sick man and flew him to Perth.

In June S/L Randall was promoted and took command of the squadron from W/C Scott. Both officers, it will be recalled, had reported to No. 413 in August 1941. Wing Commander Randall had only recently returned from more than four months of detached duties in East and South Africa.

## **SUBMARINE OFFENSIVE**

In July 1943 the first group of officers and men to be repatriated since the movement to Ceylon some 15 months before was celebrated by a round of farewell parties. But the work of the squadron went on, and increased in tempo as Japanese and German submarines stepped up their operations. On 1 Oct. '43 F/L S. V. Kembry located lifeboats and survivors from the SS "Banffshire" which had been torpedoed two days before. His crew reported the position of the boats, dropped supplies, and then directed a ship to the scene. Later in the month W/C Randall did similar work when the SS "Congello" was sunk. The submarine offensive also brought a dramatic touch to the history of No. 413, giving some Tuskers a chance to fire on the enemy.

On the evening of 3 Nov. F/O J. R. Gowans was providing air cover to a straggling ship from a convoy when a contact was made on the radar. The aircraft homed on the blip, dropping to 500 feet. At first the crew saw only a fishing boat, but two minutes later they spotted an enemy submarine fully surfaced and travelling at 16 knots. Gowans swung round and came in on the U-boat's stern. Four depth charges dropped away. At that moment the sub altered course, but the D.C.'s straddled the stern.

The *Catalina* then flew along the starboard side of the sub. A 20 mm gun on the sub opened up, hitting the tail plane and smashing the rudder and elevators. The blister gunner aimed for the flash, silencing the enemy gun. The sub then submerged to conning tower depth and headed south.

A message was sent out to the effect that the sub had been damaged, as well as the "Cat", and a reply came back saying that a Liberator was on its way. Despite the damage to his aircraft, F/O Gowans continued to track the sub until the moon went down and contact was lost. The Liberator did not arrive, so he finally set course for Cochin, in southern India, where he landed and refuelled before returning to Koggala. Flying Officer Gowans was eventually awarded the DFC for his skill in attacking the sub and in handling the damaged airplane.

Nearly two months later, on 27 Dec. '43, F/O S. J. Grandin (now S/L) dived on a submarine wake. As he levelled off at 50 feet the wake vanished, leaving a swirl in its place. Five depth charges were dropped just ahead of the swirl and in line with the wake which was now fading. The first four explosions churned up the water into white foam, but the plume of the last explosion was black. What appeared to be the bow of a sub rose from the water, then slipped under, leaving a patch of oil which gradually spread until it was several hundred yards wide. The Tuskers had racked up a "probably destroyed".

## **SEARCH AND RESCUE**

Throughout 1944 the squadron continued its watch over the waves. Many a torpedoed sailor gave thanks for that vigilance, and a number of vessels under attack were undoubtedly saved by the intervention of the *Catalinas*, which forced the enemy subs to break off engagements.

Late in Dec. '43, F/L Kembry, operating from Kelai, had been instrumental in the rescue of survivors from the SS "Navarro". In Feb. '44, F/Ls Grandin and Fink directed a ship to lifeboats from the SS "Fort Buckingham". Flying Officer E. G. Cork dropped supplies to lifeboats from another torpedoed ship. He also escorted a tanker which had evaded two torpedoes, and on 29 Feb. an extensive search was carried out for an enemy submarine which had sunk the SS "Palma". At month's end two earthquakes rocked Koggala.

In April F/L A. Gelamn escorted another tanker which had been attacked by a submarine. The day afterwards he discovered 18 survivors from the SS "Sutley" and directed a ship to them. Flying Officer C. L. Emerson did similar work on two occasions in June.

The Tuskers set an all-time record in July 1944 when they flew more than 1000 hours. This was due to a search for the survivors of two ships which had been sunk in the Indian Ocean. Flying from Addu Atoll and Diego Garcia, No. 413 aircraft first located the rafts and life-boats. In a ten-day period 34 sorties were flown and ships directed to several groups of boats. At last, 207 persons were plucked from the sea, a major rescue which would have been impossible without the assistance of the *Catalinas*.

Not all the Tusker flying was air-sea rescue. In March S/L Bayly had flown a reconnaissance sortie, photographing the Cocos Islands. The aircraft covered some 3000 miles and was airborne for 27 hours. He was subsequently prominent in the rescue operations outlined above. For this, and for his attack on a U-boat in the spring of the previous year, he was awarded the DFC. Flight Lieutenants E. G. Cork and R. M. Smith had also been active in rescue operations, and were decorated with the AFC in Jan. 45.

#### TURN OF THE TIDE

By the spring of 1944 approximately one-half of the aircrew and about 99 per cent of the ground crews were members of the RCAF. That March Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Peirse, KCB, DSO, AFC, the air officer commanding for South-East Asia, presented the squadron with its crest.

The fortunes of war now favoured the Allies. No. 413 had undergone many changes in the last two years. All but 23 of the original groundcrew had been repatriated by the summer of 1944; among the aircrew, W/C Randall was one of the few remaining "originals". In September 1944 he was succeeded in command by W/C S. R. McMullan (now rtd). Two months later the squadron was informed that it was to leave Ceylon and return to Britain. Operations ceased on 3 December, and those persons with little "eastern time" were posted to Nos. 435 and 436 Sqns. The remainder embarked for England. No. 413 was placed on the establishment of Bomber Command, but VE Day came before the squadron could be reformed.

Thus ended 44 months of service, extending from the north Atlantic to the Bay of Bengal, and involving four continents — Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia. The squadron's battle honours were Atlantic 1941-43, Ceylon 1942, and Eastern Waters 1942-44. Other war honours included one DSO, one OBE, five DFCs, two AFCs, and several Mentions in Despatches. The Tuskers had lost only three aircraft to enemy action, and one in a non-operational crash — a tribute to the skill of those who flew and those who serviced the aircraft in one of the most unsung fronts of the war.

#### POST-WAR OPERATIONS

The end of World War II did not mean the end of No. 413. Indeed, its postwar career closely resembled its wartime one.

In 1943 No. 13 Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron was formed at Rockcliffe, and through the use of far-flung detachments it carried out extensive mapping operations. In 1946 F/L J. F. Drake (now W/C Drake, AFC, CD), flying a *Canso*, rediscovered the Spicer Islands north of Hudson Bay, where they had been "lost" for nearly 50 years. The squadron was re-designated No. 413 in 1947. It formed part of No. 22 Photographic Wing, which came under No. 9 Transport Group, the immediate forerunner of Air Transport Command. The squadron's many detachments operated *Lancasters*, *Dakotas*, *Norsemen*, *Cansos*, and *Mitchells*.

In Jul. '48 a No. 413 Sqn. *Lancaster* crew discovered two islands, hitherto unknown, in Foxe Basin. The navigator was appalled at first, because the islands were not on his maps, and he believed that he had made an error in navigation. When the full story became known, the islands (two and a half times the area of Prince Edward Island) were named Barnett and Tomkinson Islands, after the pilot and navigator of the *Lancaster*.

The wartime rescues of the Tuskers had their counterparts in the post-war years. In 1948 a U.S. Navy *Beechcraft* vanished in northern Manitoba. Two *Cansos* from No. 413 took part in the search, and one of them, piloted by F/L

R. V. Virr (now S/L), searched for and discovered the five men who had been aboard. A map of the district was dropped to them with such accuracy that the container landed in the middle of their campfire. Flight Lieutenant Virr then landed on a nearby lake, picked up the men and flew them to The Pas. He was subsequently made a legionnaire in the American Legion of Merit.

Transport operations dominated the winter of 1949-50, and these continued into 1950, including airlifting of supplies to flood-stricken Winnipeg. *Cansos* of No. 413 pioneered the use of JATO (jet assisted take-off) for northern operations. During that year the unit participated in three successful searches. Then, on 1 Nov. '50, the Tuskers once more disbanded.

## **JET-AGE TUSKERS**

Less than a year later, on 1 Aug. '51, No. 413 reformed at Bagotville, P.Q., this time as a fighter squadron flying *Vampires*. In December they converted to *Sabres*. For more than a year the crews engaged in training and exercises until they were ready to join the RCAF Air Division in Europe. On 7 Mar. '53 the three squadrons which were to constitute No. 3 (F) Wing (Nos. 413, 427, and 434) set out on "Leapfrog 3" which was to end at Zweibrucken, Germany.

The members of the squadron were acutely aware that the Iron Curtain was less than 30 minutes 28 away by jet. Frequently their *Sabres* flew to Rabat, Morocco, for gunnery practice. This paid off when their marksmanship contributed to No. 3 Wing's winning the Chadburn Trophy in 1953.

On 1 May '57 the squadron was disbanded in Europe and replaced by No. 440 Sqn. equipped with CF-100s. Simultaneously, No. 413 was reconstituted as an all-weather squadron at Bagotville, one of the nine CF-100 squadrons deployed for the defence of North America. It immediately made itself felt. Commanded by S/L C. Allison (now W/C), the Tuskers won the Steinhardt Trophy as the most efficient squadron in Air Defence Command in 1957-58 and won it again in 1958-59. With the phasing out of the *Canucks*, however, No. 413 was disbanded on 2 Jan. '62.

The Tusker squadron, whose aircraft touched every continent except South America, is no more. But if it is ever reformed its members may indeed look back on a proud heritage.