

The War History of No. 414 Squadron

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WHILE the Second British Army was advancing from the beach-head in Normandy to the shores of the Baltic Sea, its reconnaissance requirements were supplied by No. 39 (R.) Wing, R.C.A.F., in No. 83 Group of Second Tactical Air Force. The three squadrons which comprised this wing during the last months of the war all stemmed from the original Canadian overseas air unit, No. 110 (City of Toronto) Army Co-operation Squadron, which arrived in England in February 1940. No. 110 was later redesignated No. 400 and provided a nucleus from which the second R.C.A.F. Army Co-operation Squadron, No. 414, was formed. Nos. 400 and 414 then supplied nuclei for the creation of the third unit, No. 430.

The story of No. 414 Squadron began at Croydon, the great airport of London, England, where it was formed on 13 August 1941 from a detachment of eight officers and 69 airmen provided by No. 400 Squadron, the remainder of the ground crew personnel, about 200 initially, being supplied by the Royal Air Force. A few days later Wing Cdr. D. M. Smith took command of the new squadron, which he led through the next eleven months while the pilots carried out intensive training on Tomahawk and Lysander aircraft. Much of the training was devoted to innumerable exercises with the Army, on which the squadron practised the technique of ground-air co-operation, and tested both the efficiency of its equipment and the adequacy of its establishment in aircraft and personnel. During this prolonged period of training one casualty was sustained when Pilot Officer G. M. Dunaway, an American in the R.C.A.F., was killed while flying over Dorset.

Early in June 1942, No. 414 began re-equipping with Mustang aircraft, the type on which it flew through the next two years; and at the end of that month three pilots used their new mounts to carry out the squadron's first operation, an uneventful defensive patrol along the south coast of England. A few weeks later, on 18 July, Wing Cdr. Smith handed over command of the unit to Sqn. Ldr. (later Wing Cdr.) R. F. Begg, who had recently joined the squadron after a long tour as an instructor in Canada.

When No. 414 celebrated its first birthday in August 1942, it had logged about 3000 hours of flying, of which only nine were on operations. After a year of nothing but flying training, the pilots were beginning to "bind" about their operational inactivity, but they did not have much longer to wait. The past few weeks had been filled with "alarums and excursions" of an impending major operation, which finally materialized on 19 August in the combined attack upon Dieppe — and Sqn. Ldr. Begg's pilots at last had an opportunity to carry out the role for which they had trained so long.

No. 414 was one of four Army co-operation squadrons detailed to reconnoitre the roads leading to Dieppe to watch for enemy troop movements into the area. Between 0445 hours and 1130 hours the pilots flew eighteen sorties on this task, and, although they found no enemy activity on the roads, they did encounter intense flak and had several brushes with hostile fighters, in the course of which Flying Officer H. H. Hills, an American member of the squadron, destroyed an F.W.190. His companion, Flt.

Lt. F. E. Clarke, was forced to ditch his Mustang in the Channel near a destroyer, which soon rescued him. The squadron shared in the congratulations sent to the Army co-operation wing for its part in "Jubilee," and two pilots were mentioned in despatches for their work.

For five weeks after Dieppe the squadron reverted to its old routine of training and exercises until, late in September, it resumed operations to fly "populars" (photo reconnaissances) and "rhubarbs" (ground attacks) in the French coastal area. By the end of October, when these activities were suspended for the winter, the pilots had tallied three locomotives and half a dozen other targets damaged by their fire. Through the last months of 1942, most of the squadron's operational activity was on defensive patrol to guard the south coast against low-flying attacks by enemy fighter-bombers. Almost 400 sorties were flown by pilots detached to Tangmere for this duty, on which they had a few chases after hostile aircraft but no decisive combats. Flying Officer C. L. Horncastle was killed in a crash while taking off for one of these patrols.

In December 1942, No. 414 moved from Croydon to Dunsfold, a new airfield in Surrey which had been constructed by the Royal Canadian Engineers, and at the same time it joined No. 400 Squadron in No. 39 Wing, the new R.C.A.F. wing which had been formed in Army Co-operation Command under the command of Group Capt. D. M. Smith. A few weeks later No. 430 Squadron was created, from nuclei provided by Nos. 400 and 414, as the third component of the wing.

The first three months of 1943 were devoted to further training and exercises, until the advent of spring and better weather permitted a resumption of "populars" and "rhubarbs." In the next three months (26 March to 1 July) Wing Cdr. Begg's pilots accounted for 17 locomotives, the outstanding feat being that of Flying Officers R. T. Hutchinson and B. B. Mossing, who damaged seven engines on one sortie into Brittany. Bad weather and enemy flak were responsible for two casualties on these operations, Flying Officers H. D. Steeves and R. C. MacQuoid.

Defensive anti-rhubarb patrols off the south coast were also resumed in April when the squadron moved to Middle Wallop for seven weeks. Then it travelled farther west to Harrowbeer, north of Plymouth, for a few days before moving on to Portreath in Cornwall for a fortnight. One incident of this period was an air-sea-rescue mission over the Channel, on which two pilots located a dinghy, to which ten American airmen were clinging, and kept watch until their rescue was effected. The squadron's major activity during its brief stay at Harrowbeer and Portreath was fighter patrols far over the Channel to protect our anti-submarine forces engaged in the "Battle of the Bay." It was a tragic period marked by the loss of three pilots, Flying Officers L. A. Doherty, R. W. Potts, and Flt. Lt. Vaupel.

From the Cornish coast No. 414 returned to south-eastern England in June to continue its mobile life. After a few days at Dunsfold, during which Sqn. Ldr. J. M. Godfrey replaced Wing Cdr. Begg in command, the squadron moved to Gatwick (on 5 July) where it became a part of No. 129 Airfield, one of the two Airfields into which No. 39 Wing was now subdivided as No. 83 Group of Second Tactical Air Force began to take shape. At the same time the strength of the squadron was pared to the air crew plus a few ground personnel, the remainder being attached to the Airfield, where they later were formed into No. 6414 Servicing Echelon. Late in July, Sqn. Ldr. Godfrey was posted to command one of the new Airfields, and Sqn. Ldr. H. P. Peters, D.F.C., from 400 Squadron, succeeded him as C.O. of No. 414.

Another move in mid-August took the squadron to Ashford, in Kent, where it went under canvas and became more active operationally. A series of defensive patrols over the Strait and Channel, in conjunction with a large-scale combined exercise, produced no encounters with the enemy; but other operations — reconnaissances and offensive forays — were more eventful. On photographic and tactical reconnaissances to get information, which the invasion planners required, the pilots ranged

from the Netherlands to Normandy in the face of usually intense flak opposition and occasional encounters with enemy fighters — in one of which Flying Officer R. E. Baker was shot down by an F.W.190 over the Strait of Dover. On offensive missions (which included some night sorties) two more pilots were lost, Flying Officers L. P. Theriault and D. H. Lewis; but the squadron could claim 28 locomotives, 19 electric pylons, five tugs and barges, and several gunposts as damaged, in addition to two enemy aircraft destroyed and two more damaged during the eight weeks that it spent at Ashford. Flt. Lt. R. T. Hutchinson, whose score of one He. 111 destroyed, another Heinkel and 21 locomotives plus several other targets damaged, placed him in the forefront of the "rhubarb" experts, received the first D.F.C. awarded to the squadron.

From Ashford, No. 414 moved to No. 128 Airfield at Woodchurch, in Kent, for a few uneventful days (5 to 15 October), and then accompanied the Airfield to winter quarters at Redhill. Offensive forays from this base added 13 locomotives and four aircraft to the squadron's score. Three of the aircraft were accounted for by Flying Officers L. F. May and R. C. J. Brown during a sweep around Paris on 31 October, when they shot down a Yale trainer bearing swastika markings, probably destroyed a Ju. 88 parked on an airfield, and then, meeting another 88 in the air, sent it down in flames. The fourth aircraft was an F.W. 190, which Flying Officers G. Wonnacott and R.O. Brown destroyed in a combat near Cambrai on a "rhubarb" sortie during which they also damaged four locomotives.

Leaving Redhill on 3 November, No. 414 Squadron rejoined No. 129 Airfield at Gatwick and settled down in winter quarters for a long stay. "Ranger" operations over France and the Low Countries were continued for a few days with considerable success - 15 locomotives, 10 pylons, 7 vessels and several flak posts being damaged, as well as a Ju. 52 destroyed on the ground — but Sqn. Ldr. Herb Peters and Flying Officer O. S. Peck did not return from their sorties. Command of the squadron then passed to Sqn. Ldr. C. H. Stover.

Unfavourable weather kept operations to a minimum through the winter months, the total number of sorties for the period November 1943 through March 1944 being only 170. Most of the work (140 sorties) was on photographic reconnaissance, with particular attention to the "invasion coast" around Caen and Bayeux. On one mission late in January, Flt. Lts. G. W. Burroughs and G. Wonnacott and Flying Officer R. O. Brown destroyed four enemy aircraft, all apparently Me. 109s, in two combats near Chartres, during which Bob Brown was shot down and killed. Operations were interrupted in February while the pilots attended an armament practice camp in Scotland, after which they travelled north again to take part in an exercise with the Navy and practice "spotting" for the gunners.

Shortly after the squadron returned to Gatwick it moved to Odiham, on April 1944, and went under canvas with No. 128 Airfield. The move coincided with a stepping-up of the Allied aerial offensive in preparation for D-Day, and in the next two months No. 414's pilots flew 293 sorties on photographic and tactical reconnaissance. About one-third of the tasks were concerned with "Noballs," the word used to designate the flying-bomb sites which the Germans were constructing along the Channel coast. Day after day the Mustang pilots went out to photograph these targets — before, during, and after bombing attacks upon them. They also took hundreds of pictures of the landing-beaches, the banks of the Seine, bridges, railroad yards and junctions, and coastal defences in the invasion area, and they recorded the progress of the campaign to seal off the battle area. Then, at the end of May, they played their part in blinding the radar eyes of the enemy, the last essential step before the invasion fleets set sail. The work, which No. 39 Wing did during these weeks of preparation, brought congratulations from Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force "for the magnificent way our demands for photography of all descriptions have been met."

With D-Day the squadron began to play the role of Army support for which it had been training and preparing for the past 34 months. During that long period its pilots had flown 1402 operational sorties; in the next eleven months they flew 4685, setting a record of over 900 hours of flying on 670 sorties in June. Prior to D-Day thirteen pilots had been killed on operations or training; after that date eleven went missing over the enemy lines, four of whom eventually returned safely.

The squadron's first task on D-Day was to "spot" for the naval bombardment of coastal defences from Le Havre to Cherbourg. Then it settled down to a daily schedule of tactical reconnaissances over the battle area and its approaches, watching for enemy road and rail movements. There were a few encounters with enemy aircraft, in which a Ju.52 was destroyed and an F.W.190 damaged, but the greatest opposition came from the flak defences, which damaged many Mustangs and forced several pilots to bale out. Flying Officer R. C. J. Brown came down in enemy territory and was captured. A few days later both Flt. Lts. J. A. MacKelvie and R. A. Bromley were lost on a mission over Vire. Towards the end of June, Sqn. Ldr. Stover and Flt. Lt. N. F. Rettie were wounded in combat with a group of F.W.I 90s, and Sqn. Ldr. R. T. Hutchinson took over command of No. 414.

On 13 June, the pilots began using a landing strip on the beach-head as an advanced base for their operations, reducing by almost one-half the time required to complete a mission. At the end of the month No. 128 Airfield moved across the Channel to Sommervieu (B.8), where it was merged in No. 39 Wing, but No. 414 remained behind at Odiham, awaiting re-equipment with Spitfires, and continued to operate through July from both its base in England and the airfield in Normandy. The reconnaissance areas were now being extended farther eastward across the Seine as far as Amiens and Abbeville. In combats with enemy fighters during July, the squadron destroyed an F.W.190 and lost two pilots, Flying Officer D. C. McLeod, who was shot down and killed, and Flying Officer J. A. Levi, who was wounded and held prisoner in a hospital in Paris until liberated by the Allied advance.

Operations on Mustangs ended early in August and, after converting to Spitfire IXs, No. 414 Squadron followed No. 39 Wing across the Channel to Normandy, on 15 August. The Wing had just moved up from Sommervieu to St. Honorine (B.21), about ten miles south-west of Bayeux, where Sqn. Ldr. Hutchinson's pilots arrived in time to take part in the holocaust of the Falaise "pocket". For a fortnight they kept watch over the escape routes of the Nazi army, reporting concentrations of vehicles and armour for the attention of our fighters and bombers, the total for one day running as high as 5000 M.E.T. (mechanized enemy transport) and 120 tanks. Then the Spitfires followed the German retreat eastward to the Seine crossings and beyond. The change from static to fluid warfare introduced a new type of mission, the contact reconnaissance, on which the pilots worked in co-operation with a patrol car moving with the forward elements on the ground. The car assigned tasks which the troops required — searches of areas immediately ahead, the presence of defences or road blocks, the condition of bridges, etc.— and in this way helped both to speed up the advance and keep Army headquarters informed of the location of its forces.

To keep in touch with the rapidly moving Army, the squadron advanced from St. Honorine to Illiers l'Eveque (B.26) in the last days of August, watched enemy transport "on the run" to the crossings over the Somme, and then, as the battle front again drew out of range, moved ahead to Poix (B.44), and thence, on 7 September, to Evere (B.56) on the north-eastern outskirts of Brussels. From this base the pilots carried out missions in support of the airborne landings at Eindhoven and Arnhem. During this period of rapid advance Flying Officer J. C. Younge was lost while strafing barges near Ghent and Flying Officer J. W. H. McEachern was killed in the crash of his Spitfire. After a fortnight at Evere, the squadron moved again to Blakenberg (B.66), near Diest, where it rejoined No. 39 Wing after three weeks' separation. While operating from this field, the pilots destroyed another F.W.I90 and also had

their first views of the new enemy jets with which, in the weeks that followed, they had a few inconclusive brushes.

Blakenberg proved to be a mudhole in the damp autumn weather, and on 2 October the Wing pulled out to settle down at Eindhoven (B.78) for a long five-month stay, ending a mobile life, which had seen six moves in seven weeks. Sqn. Ldr. Hutchinson completed his tour at this time and was succeeded by Sqn. Ldr. Gordon Wonnacott. The battle lines had now become stabilized along the line of the Maas, and the pilots spent the long weeks of autumn and winter reconnoitring over the front from Cleve to Roermond to report on enemy defensive activities, road and rail traffic, the condition of bridges, etc.— in brief, to gather the information which the Army required to ascertain the enemy's intentions. Repeatedly the Army expressed its appreciation of the pilots' work. Artillery reconnaissances, or "shoots", against hostile batteries became more frequent now as the battle again became static along the Maas front. Beyond the lines the pilots kept close check on enemy freight yards and recorded the progress of the campaign to strangle all rail traffic to the battle area. Persistent fog and rain greatly hampered the work of reconnaissance during these months. Increased opposition was also encountered from the flak defences, which had got well dug in, and Flying Officers H. J. S. O'Brien and G. G. McLean were victims of the enemy's accurate fire.

In mid-December the enemy, shielded by the heavy fog, which restricted aerial observation, launched a counter-offensive, which drove a deep bulge in the Allied lines in the Ardennes. On the rare occasions when the weather permitted, Sqn. Ldr. Wonnacott and his pilots flew reconnaissances over the battle area to the south of their base in addition to the usual missions to the east. On 24 December, an exceptionally fine day, enemy aircraft appeared in some numbers, giving the Spitfires several combats in which they destroyed five of their opponents and damaged two more. In one action near Krefeld, Flt. Lt. D. I. Hall shot down two Me.109s (and won the D.F.C.) when he and his companion were attacked by fifteen fighters. Later in the day, Flt. Lt. W. Sawers, who already had damaged an Me. 109 on a previous sortie, engaged twelve of the enemy and added three 109s destroyed and another damaged to his score, a feat for which he too was decorated.

On New Year's Day, 1945, the Luftwaffe again came out in strength to attack Allied airfields in the Low Countries. At Eindhoven considerable damage was done to the aircraft of No. 39 Wing, but casualties to personnel were surprisingly light. LACs G. R. Bell and J. L. B. Williams, two airmen in 414's servicing echelon, were killed on the airfield, and two of the squadron's pilots and five airmen were included among the wounded. Sqn. Ldr. Wonnacott was returning to base from a sortie when the attack was at its height, and he at once engaged the enemy, single-handed, destroying two and damaging, if not destroying, one more, thereby adding a Bar to the D.F.C. which he had won earlier. Flying Officer L. Woloschuk also encountered some of the enemy as they were flying home, shot down one and damaged another. Despite the damage and confusion caused by the attack, in which five of No. 414's Spitfires were shot up on the ground, the squadron continued operations with the available aircraft and was soon functioning again normally — when the weather permitted.

For several weeks fog, haze, snow, and drizzle restricted operations, but the opening of the Battle of the Rhineland, on 8 February, to clear the enemy from the area between the Maas and the Rhine, was the beginning of a much more active period. A month later, when Montgomery's Army Group was drawn up along the left bank of the Rhine, No. 39 Wing moved from Eindhoven to Petit Brogel (B.90), in north-eastern Belgium, to prepare for the assault across the river at Wesel. At the same time Sqn. Ldr. F. S. Gilbertson replaced Gordie Wonnacott, who was tour-expired, in command of No. 414 Squadron. On the first day of operations from the new base, Flt. Lt. R. J. Cutting destroyed one F.W.190 and damaged another when he and his companion were attacked by twenty hostile fighters. One pilot was lost temporarily when Flying Officer W. A. Glaister was forced down behind the

enemy lines by engine trouble and was taken prisoner. For a fortnight the squadron was busily engaged taking photographs required for the attack across the Rhine and reconnoitring the roads and rail lines running eastward from Wesel. For days the area around Bocholt, Coesfeld, and Dorsten was shrouded with smoke from fires started by our bombers as they pounded freight yards and other objectives. On 24 March, the day the airborne landings were made near Wesel, the pilots flew 46 sorties on anti-flak patrols, artillery shoots, tactical and contact reconnaissance. In the days that followed, they reconnoitred ahead of our troops as they advanced north-eastward from the Rhine, driving deeper and deeper into the crumbling Reich.

Leaving Petit Brogel on 10 April, the squadron began a series of rapid moves which carried it across the German frontier to Rheine (B.108), 50 miles north-east of Wesel, then (on 16 April) to Wunstorf (B.116), near Hanover, and finally (on 28 April) to Soltau (B.154), where operations ended with the surrender of the Nazi forces in north-western Germany on 4 May. While changing bases, No. 414 also changed commanders and equipment. When Sqn. Ldr. Gilbertson completed his tour early in April, Flt. Lt. L. T. Banner took temporary command until Sqn. Ldr. J. B. Prendergast, D.F.C., a veteran of fighter-recce operations with No. 430 Squadron in the same wing, arrived on 18 April as No. 414's last C.O. About the same time, the pilots began flying Spitfire XIVs in lieu of the Mark IXs on which they had been operating since August 1944.

During these last weeks of hostilities, while the Second Army was driving across the Weser and Aller to the Elbe and on to the shores of the Baltic Sea, the recce pilots brought back vivid reports of chaos behind the enemy lines as refugees fled from the advancing Allied and Russian forces. Around Schwerin, in particular, the roads were writhing in the death throes of Hitler's Third Reich. On a mission near Hamburg on 24 April, Flying Officer F. R. Loveless was forced to parachute from his damaged Spitfire and was a prisoner of war for a few days. For No. 414 Squadron the campaign reached a final climax on 2 May. While on a reconnaissance near Neustadt, Flt. Lt. Doug Hall came upon a group of F.W.190s orbiting in line astern and, going down the line, he crashed three of the Focke-Wulfs and damaged one more; then, attacking a pair of Me. 108s, he destroyed one and damaged the other. This coup, which brought his total score to seven destroyed and two damaged, won Hall a Bar to the D.F.C. Later in the day, Sqn. Ldr. Prendergast shot down two F.W.190s on a recce over Wismar, and, about the same time, four pilots scouting around Goldberg reported the first sighting of the advancing Red Army when they saw three Russian tanks rumbling through the streets of the town. Two days later operations ceased.

On V-E Day (8 May 1945) the squadron moved to Luneburg (B.156), where it settled down to a peace-time routine of flying training and sports. Towards the end of June it journeyed to England for a fortnight's air firing course, returning to Luneburg early in July. On the flight back to base, Flt. Lt. R. W. C. Davis and Flying Officer W. J. Hanna were lost when the Spitfires encountered bad weather over the Rhine valley. A month later, on 7 August 1945, No. 414 Squadron was disbanded at Luneburg, ending a tour, which had started at Croydon four years previously.

In those four years, 28 members of the squadron and its servicing echelon had given their lives. Nineteen pilots had been killed on operations and three had lost their lives in flying accidents; two airmen had been killed on the ground by enemy action and four had died from accidents or other causes. Four pilots forced down behind the enemy lines had baled out safely and were prisoners of war for a time.

Sixteen Distinguished Flying Crosses, two Bars, and three Mentions in Despatches, had been awarded to the squadron, the recipients being Sqn. Ldr. G. Wonnacott* and Flt. Lt. D. I. Hall, both of whom twice won the D.F.C.; Sqn. Ldrs. C. H. Stover, F. S. Gilbertson, Flt. Lts. R. T. Hutchinson, G. W. Burroughs, J. M. Robb, W. Sawyer, J. P. M. A. Brunelle, J. L. A. Roussell, J. H. Donovan, F. R.

Bartlett, L. Woloschuk, W. T. Blakeney, R. J. Cutting, and Flying Officer L. F. May (all D.F.C.s); and Flt. Lt. L. T. Banner, Flying Officers H. H. Hills and R. C. MacQuoid (Mentions in Despatches).

*Ranks shown as at time of award.

In the course of 7700 hours' flying on 6087 sorties the Mustangs and Spitfires of No. 414 had destroyed 29 enemy aircraft, probably destroyed one and damaged eleven, the leading pilots being Doug Hall (seven destroyed and two damaged), Gordie Wonnacott (four destroyed, one damaged), and Bill Sawers (three destroyed, two damaged). On "rhubarbs" they had tallied 76 locomotives, 13 assorted vessels, 30 pylons and a score of other ground targets, with top honours going to R. T. Hutchinson, G. W. Burroughs, L. F. May, B. B. Mossing, and J. H. Donovan. But these statistics represent only one part — the secondary part — of their role as a fighter-recce unit. Their primary function — reconnaissance — cannot be summed up statistically, but it won repeated tributes from the Army units with which the squadron operated. After V-E Day, the G.O.C. of the Second Army sent his troops' thanks to No. 39 Wing for "its consistently splendid work". "In all weathers and in all conditions you have flown for us on your reconnaissance and photographic missions. The results you have achieved have enabled us to set about our business as fully equipped with information of the enemy as we could ever hope to be."