

# No. 425 SQUADRON

## Part One

BY FLIGHT LIEUTENANT A.P. HEATHCOTE,  
Air Historical Branch  
(Reference: The Roundel, Vol. 9, No. 3, April 1957)



ON 22 June 1942 an organization order was issued authorizing the formation of a fifth R.C.A.F. heavy-bomber squadron. The order carried unprecedented significance in that its heading included, after the squadron number, the words "French-Canadian". This made the unit unique in R.C.A.F. history. Designated No. 425, it actually came into existence three days later at R.A.F. Station Dishforth, Yorkshire, as a unit of No. 4 Group, Bomber Command.

Within a matter of days an advance party of officers and airmen were busying themselves with all the unavoidable necessary evils usually attendant upon a flying unit's formative stages. Chief among the early arrivals were Wing Commander J. M. W. St. Pierre, 425's first C.O., and Squadron Leaders G. A. Roy and J. L. Savard, the Flight Commanders. While the officers concerned themselves mostly with minutiae of administrative and organizational problems, which, by the squadron's very nature, were more numerous and complex than usual, the airmen wrestled with maintenance and modification of aircraft (*Wellingtons Mark III*). Flying began in August, attention being given to all phases of operational training permitted by the weather, plus testing of aircraft.

In October Wing Cdr. St. Pierre accepted on the squadron's behalf a name to go with "425", and how completely fitting it was! Many centuries before, the *alouette*, or skylark, had been the tribal bird and official emblem of the French-Canadian's ancestors, the Gauls, who engraved its image on their battle-helmets. More recently, the strains of "*Alouette, gentille alouette*" had identified French-Canada to the world perhaps more than anything else. Specially significant to a flying squadron, however, were the characteristics of the lark, which always flies at great heights and seldom comes to rest. Thus, a word, which to French-Canadians has long borne the triple connotation of symbol, song, and skylark, now connoted a heavy-bomber squadron. As the unit's official motto, what could have been more appropriate than the familiar refrain, "*Je te plumerai*"?

Although the French-Canadian strain predominated among the unit's air and ground personnel, the nominal roll was to carry a long list of names whose owners were descended from other racial stocks. While so many Alouettes hailed from Quebec, the Ottawa Valley area, and other French-Canadian centres across the Dominion, others came from Toronto and Texas; London, Ontario, and London, England; Newfoundland and New York; Saskatoon and South Africa; Calgary and California; Dalhousie and Dundee . . . But, regardless of geographical or racial origin, all shared a strong unit pride. All were, first and foremost, Alouettes.

\* \* \*

Comprising the squadron's original aircrew strength were twenty 5-man crews. At roughly 1830 hours on 5 October 1942, eight of those crews began taking off for 425's first operational assignment, a bombing attack on Aachen, Germany. One *Wellington* crashed in Essex *en route* to the objective, and its crew perished. Two more, encountering heavy icing, returned early. Concerning the actual

bombing of Aachen, no comments were given by any of the successful crews other than that the target was found and bombed. One captain did, however, come up with a masterpiece of understatement when he volunteered that the flak over the continent was "annoyingly persistent". Other annoyances with which the raiders had to contend were a violent electrical storm and its habitual accompaniment, icing. Thus the Aachen raid was, for the Alouettes, a baptism by fire and water.

Bigger and more formidable targets were then given to the eager young squadron. Though more than two thirds of the next 31-day period were rendered unfeasible for operations by foul weather, the unit managed to send delegations to Osnabruck, Kiel, Cologne, Krefeld, Emden, and Wilhelmshaven, the first three bombed by night, the last three by day. Kiel took its heaviest pounding to date, whereas Cologne absorbed its first major punishment since the 1000-bomber raid of the previous May. It should be noted that, at this stage of the war, heavy-bomber attacks were largely strategical and nocturnal, aimed at "destroying the industrial capacity and the will of the German people to continue the struggle." It should also be noted that radar aids to navigation did not come into general use in Bomber Command until 1943. The Alouettes' *Wellingtons* did carry a radio aid, but, being in its comparatively early stages of development, it was not completely reliable and was easily jammed. In these circumstances, when it came to finding the target, so much therefore depended on the skill and co-operation of the pilot-navigator team. A heavy load was shouldered by the navigator, who had to rely on basic navigational techniques, including astro-navigation, assisted perhaps by the odd radio-bearing from the wireless operator or tip from the gunner. Unfavourable weather, in which was usually incorporated the impediment of industrial haze, all too often proved a major obstacle. Under these conditions, day or night, it was no easy task to find the objective, let alone bomb it accurately.

By far the toughest problem of Command was, of course, the enemy himself, who naturally had much to say when it came to the bombing of his Fatherland or acquired *Raum*. His *Luftwaffe*, assisted by an efficient radar screen, was fast becoming well organized against the incursions of Harris' marauders; and the high quality of his flak-purveyors had long been realized. It was on 425's third successive daylight operation (against Wilhelmshaven, on 6 November) that an Alouette crew first sampled the full fury of those defences. Thanks to a low overcast, the two crews representing this squadron had to bomb the hotly defended naval base from a height of less than 2,000 feet, which would put them within range of every flak gun and fire-arm imaginable. But, for one of the crews, trouble began well before the target was reached. *Wellington* "V"-Victor, manned by the first French-Canadian bomber crew organized overseas, was jumped from the cloud and given a going-over by three distinctly hostile fighters. In the course of one of the attacks, the wireless operator, Sergeant G. J. R. Bruyere, sustained a smashed leg and wounds in the chest, arms, forehead, and left hand. While going to his aid, Pilot Officer J. L. Desroches (nav.) happened to step on the escape hatch, which opened. He would have fallen completely through but for the prompt action of Bruyere, who, despite his wounds, caught him and hauled him to safety. All the while, the skipper, Pilot Officer A. T. (Ted) Doucette, was wrestling with "Victor" in evasive action, and Sgt. P. P. Trudeau was potting at the tormenters from his rear turret. After shaking off the fighters, Doucette took "Victor" on to bomb the primary objective. Throughout the remainder of the flight the seriously wounded Bruyere stood by his position and coached his companions on the operation of the wireless set until the *Wimpy* made it safely home. Upon being decorated in December, Doucette with the D.F.C. and Bruyere with the D.F.M., both were cited for their "indomitable courage and unswerving devotion to duty under extremely difficult conditions". They were the squadron's first to be so honoured. Four months later, Doucette, Desroches, and Trudeau did not return from a raid on Stuttgart.

\* \* \*

If aircrew of Bomber Command or the U.S.A.A.F.'s Eighth Air Force could have been polled on the question of what were the toughest targets in Europe, while the capital city of Berlin would doubtless have topped the list, the port city of Hamburg would probably have run a close second. The latter was to be one of 425's two most-bombed objectives. One of eight crews delivering the squadron's first raid on Hamburg (9/10 November) was its first to be listed as missing. A second, landing at a diversionary 'drome, crashed with fatal consequences.

Throughout the next nine weeks or so, the emphasis was on mine-laying, or "gardening", mostly in the areas of Brest and the Frisians. In that time, (discounting one single-plane reconnaissance operation) the Alouettes sallied out on 21 operations, and on only five occasions did their business lead them elsewhere than enemy harbour approaches or shipping lanes. During November and December theirs was one of the only two Canadian heavy-bomber squadrons which were fully operational.

Inasmuch as their gardening attempts were not overly successful, this was a particularly frustrating period for the Alouettes. The chief spoilers were the weather (which, more often than not, was "impossible") and technical troubles. Only 68 out of 101 sorties were considered even marginally successful, but at least there were no casualties. Another difficulty arose from the fact that mines still had to be dropped from a low altitude, often from only a few hundred feet above the wave-tops.

During this predominantly maritime interlude the unit managed to include in its operational output five bombing attacks. These involved Turin (twice), Stuttgart, Mannheim, and Duisburg. From the point of view of opposition encountered, both Turin trips were little more than scenic jaunts over the Alps. On both occasions the Italian centre of heavy industry was bombed under almost ideal conditions, and two concentrated attacks resulted. Turin was the most distant target attacked by the squadron while it was based in England. By virtue of its subsequent raids on Italy from bases in North Africa, it was one of only two Canadian heavy-bomber units that attacked that country through both the front and back doors.

The Duisburg operation was 425's introduction to the infamous Ruhr. Added to the weight of high explosives and incendiaries that were released on the city was the weight of words written on many thousands of leaflets, or "nickels". Each of the Duisburg and Mannheim raids saw the loss of an Alouette crew. The former case showed how important to survival was the element of luck when a crew was shot down on operations. Shortly after bombing, *Wellington* "T"-Tare was attacked by a fighter and hit by cannon fire. The *Wimpy* immediately dived, and the captain, Flight Sergeant L. F. Causley (R.A.F.), yanked hard on the controls without appreciable results. When "Tare" had dropped about 2,000 feet, the fighter attacked again, setting the port engine and wing root afire. Efforts to quell the blaze were in vain, and Causley, at an indicated height of 4,000 feet, gave the order to bail out. He had barely clipped on one hook of his 'chute when the *Wellington* rolled over, precipitating him on to the ceiling of the cockpit. The pilot then blacked out, his next hazy sensation being that of falling through space. Pulling his 'chute cord more by instinct than by anything else, he landed within a few seconds in the Dutch village of Bruneval, near Eindhoven. The only other crew member to get out was Sgt. Mohin. After the second fighter attack, he had left his position and was proceeding toward the rear hatch when he fell into the front hatch, which, because of smoke, he did not notice was open. Barely stopping himself from falling completely through, he hauled himself up to a half-in, half-out position, then struggled to reach his parachute which was lying nearby. In so doing he managed to pull the rip-cord, but succeeded in keeping the precious silk reasonably compact even while fastening it to his harness. He then dropped out, and was quite surprised to find that the 'chute fulfilled its intended function. He was quickly captured, as was his skipper. They were the crew's only survivors.

\* \* \*

On 1 January 1943 the squadron inherited a new formation. It then came under the jurisdiction of the newly-formed No. 6 (R.C.A.F.) Group.

Early in 1943, Bomber Command lent part of its growing might to the task of helping to keep open the precious lines of supply from America to Britain, which were then being so gravely threatened. From mid-January until near the end of April, Alouette bombing energy was directed largely against coastal centres that were directly concerned with the U-boat, either in the building or the sheltering thereof. Further extending the maritime theme, the Alouettes also made several mining expeditions to enemy shipping-routes in the North Sea. All in all, they were given ample opportunity to vent their spleen against things marine.

Bearing the brunt of 425's blows against the submarine was the port of Lorient, which boasted U-boat pens with roofs twelve feet thick. In their seven raids thereon, while the Alouettes may not have breached a single roof (their bombs, many being the incendiary type, were not intended for that purpose), they did assist in the destruction of submarine fuel, ammunition, and supplies stocked along the quayside, and they did create considerable disruption of harbour facilities. Time and again each shore of the River Scorff in the target area was left a vivid streak of fire, visible up to 150 miles away. On two occasions crews were sure they had seen ammunition dumps blow up. No less impressive were results obtained on three attempts at St. Nazaire, two at Wilhelmshaven, and one at Kiel. On the latter target the squadron put on its biggest show of all while on *Wellingtons*, seventeen of its crews taking part.

The Kiel raid was the Alouettes' final contribution to the Battle of the Atlantic, 1942-43. In the period from mid-October 1942 to 4 April 1943, they had made 16 raids on submarine production. In so doing they had flown 151 sorties and suffered no casualties. Though they sunk not a single submarine at sea, shepherded not a single convoy, and flew not a single reconnaissance mission over the North Atlantic, they did, through these many raids, figure prominently, albeit indirectly, in the campaign against an undersea menace that then posed perhaps the biggest threat to the war's successful conclusion.

Still constituting the chief responsibility of heavy-bomber squadrons, however, was the ruination of German industry. To this end the Alouettes interspersed among their raids on U-boat bases fifteen raids on some of the leading industrial cities of the Ruhr and Rhine regions. At this stage of the bombing campaign, with Germany's defences at or near their peak of efficiency, to bomb the Fatherland by day might have been considered the essence of audacity. Alouette crews successfully pulled off such a stunt more than once, and without a loss. Their tactics during intrusion and withdrawal were based on a technique that employed the maximum use of cloud cover. It was known as "moling". Late in January two crews (captains, Pilot Officers S. L. Murrell and R. A. Stutt), taking every advantage of low cloud with ragged edges hanging as low as 700 feet "indicated", moled their way to the town of Esens, and bombed their targets from roughly 1,000 feet. Both got away with it, one bomb-aimer, Fit. Sgt. J. H. Lemieux, scoring a bull-eye on a fat marshalling-yard.

A week later it was not as easy for four crews briefed for Oldenburg. Three turned back because of insufficient cloud-cover. Sid Murrell, an Alouette who had migrated all the way from Bainsville, Texas, got around the difficulty simply by decreeing that if the cloud wouldn't come to him, he'd go to it. He wound up bombing Westerstede, fifteen miles northwest of the primary, along the approaches to which there lay a cooperative cloud bank. Tearing home, throttles wide open, through a block of space that was annoyingly free of cloud, he was accosted by two Me. 109-Fs that first made cross-over attacks from opposite rear quarters, then switched to curve-of-pursuit. On the twelfth attack,

fifteen or twenty minutes later, Murrell's manoeuvring enabled his two gunners, Sgts. R. L. Robinson (rear) and B. B. Gray (nose), to score with their Brownings. One of the Messerschmitts finally peeled off with white smoke pouring from its engine. It didn't come back for more, nor did the other. All had not been in the *Wimpy's* favour, however, for about mid-way through the scrap, a cannon shell pierced the fuselage behind the navigator, and fire broke' out. Prompt action brought it under control, and one more bomber and its crew got home to fight another day. Thereby did Murrell, for his keenness, determination, and fine fighting spirit, earn a D.F.C.

\* \* \*

Hamburg twice, Cologne twice, Essen twice, Duisburg three times, Bochum, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Mannheim — so did 425's strategical list lengthen during February, March, and April of 1943. But so also did its casualty list. In one eight-day stretch in April, five crews were listed as missing by a squadron that, during the previous six months, had posted only six in that category.

In two cases a combination of cool heads, good crew-drill, and again, luck, enabled crews to avoid casualties. Essen had been the objective of one 425 *Wellington* which, having successfully bombed, was going all-out for home. Over the one-time Dutch border, it was attacked from below and behind by an unidentified night-fighter. Flt. Sgt. J. A. V. Gauthier, bomb-aimer, rushed forward to see if his skipper, Sgt. J. G. G. C. Lamontagne, was all right. He was unhurt and still had control. Gauthier then set about extinguishing a fire in the cockpit and at the bomb-aimer's position. A second attack started a new fire amidships. This time the extinguisher-fluid ran out, but he managed to beat out the fire with his hands. The enemy then administered the *coup de grace* with a third attack which left the *Wellington* blazing furiously amidships and with crippled elevator controls. Lamontagne ordered a bail-out. As all too often happened, the escape hatch jammed, and Flt. Sgt. A. W. Brown, the navigator, had to hack it open with an axe. Nevertheless, the entire crew bailed out without a further hitch, and all were apprehended the next day. Lamontagne, Brown and Gauthier remained fellow prisoners for more than two years. Flt. Sgt. M. J. A. J. Aumond, gunner, and Sgt. J. R. A. Goulet, wireless operator, who had both been severely wounded, were repatriated before the war's end.

Shortly after "Bombs away" over Stuttgart, Sgt. G. A. F. Griffin checked his wireless equipment and the fuel supply of "S"-Sugar. Unbelievably he saw that the port tank fuel-gauge read almost zero and the starboard only a quarter full. Seconds after he had informed the pilot, Sgt. R. B. Ding-man, the port engine began to grumble and kick up a fuss, finally catching fire. Dingman cut the engine and the flames subsided. After more than an hour of single-engine flying, during which time height was gradually lost, the starboard engine began to over-rev, the tachometer showing 2800 r.p.m. The captain brought it back under control, but it was a ticklish business, as it was the *Wellington's* only means of remaining airborne above an earth that was now a scant 1200 feet below. Approximately an hour and a half after time-on-target, the starboard engine cut completely. Judging the altitude to be insufficient for a safe bail-out, the skipper ordered the crew to their crash positions, then concentrated on riding the kite down to a dead-stick landing. During the descent, part of the rear turret was knocked off by what was believed to be a church spire, but its occupant, Sgt. E. G. Guyatt, stayed with the aircraft and suffered only a broken ankle. "Sugar" belly-landed reasonably smoothly in a swamp area, and its forward progress was more or less gradually halted by a group of saplings. All the crew emerged safely, and, except for Guyatt, unhurt. Their capture followed soon after.

As April 1943 neared its end, the Alouettes concentrated on preparations for a move to another theatre of war. Over Duisburg on 26 April they had bidden adieu to the Reich for a period of nearly eight months. Now they were to operate against one of the junior Axis partners, Italy, and that meant their wholesale transfer to North Africa. Their preparations for the move involved, among other things, outfitting with tropical kit and, in a flying way, acceptance-tests of 20 *Wellingtons Mark X* (Tropical). After a short embarkation leave, a ground party consisting of five officers and 312 airmen entrained at Thirsk station on the first leg of the long trip to the Middle East. Not included in the draft were No. 425's original flight commanders, Squadron Leaders Georges Roy, D.F.C., and Logan Savard, both of whom had recently been posted, the former to No. 424 (Tiger) Squadron, the latter to No. 429 (Bison) Squadron. Savard was lost during a raid on Mulheim in June, three weeks after taking command of the Bisons. Roy eventually took over the Tigers. He became a prisoner-of-war after being brought down during a raid on Bochum in October 1944.

The sea voyage of the ground party was interrupted by sporadic attacks by German bombers in the Bay of Biscay area, attacks which, except for livening up the trip somewhat, were inconsequential, there being no casualties. The same could not be said for the aerial part of the transfer. Twenty aircraft left Portreath on 4 June and nineteen reached Telergma, Tunisia, the same day. The lone exception encountered trouble over the same Biscay area, trouble in the form of the airborne enemy. Its crew and two groundcrew passengers were eventually obliged to hit the silk when over Portugal. All were interned in that country for the remainder of hostilities.

By mid-June most of the personnel and equipment had reached the new airfield-home at Kairouan. Now started all over again the arduous process of establishing themselves in the business of carrying bombs to enemy places. For this phase of operations the squadron formed part of No. 331 Wing, in No. 205 Group.

The Alouettes soon became aware of the physical and meteorological nature of their environment. There was eternal sand; there was eternal heat; there were periodical torrential rains that transformed the airfield into what looked more like a swamp minus the bulrushes; there were the sand-laden breezes of the sirocco, fresh from the desert, which seared the eyes, dust-draped everything in sight, and finally dried everything up, making it possible for the miserable cycle to start all over again. The Alouettes had traded the mud, wind, and rain of Yorkshire for the mud, wind, and rain of Tunisia, with heat thrown into the bargain. Just when they were getting reasonably adjusted to this sort of thing, they were called upon to attack their first target in this theatre.

Their immediate concern was the softening-up of Sicily in preparation for the invasion of that island. One of many key points selected for high-explosive treatment was the port town of Sciacca, a pre-designated landing-point. The Alouettes re-donned operational harness by bombing it on the night of 26 June. The operation's general success was marred in one way, augmented in another. One crew was lost, one enemy aircraft destroyed. At least one Ju. 88 was prowling in the Sciacca area that night. When almost directly over the town, *Wellington* "R"-Roger (captain, Flt. Lt. C. M. Blakeney, who, though in the R.A.F., hailed from Texas) was attacked by a Junkers whose presence was realized only when it opened fire. Gunner Flight Sergeant J. P. Goyette was so startled that his thumbs automatically hit the firing buttons and froze there for fully six seconds. The range throughout most of the long burst was practically point blank. He couldn't miss. The German fell away, and moments later an aircraft was seen

blazing on the Mediterranean. Claimed as destroyed, the Ju. 88 was No. 425's aerial victim number one.

Two cracks at Messina on successive nights resulted in casualties, one crew failing to return and one member of another being lost at sea during a ditching. Thereafter No. 425's losses in this theatre were limited to one crew in 721 sorties.

The Italian brand of anti-aircraft fire, while comparing unfavourably in accuracy and intensity to its German counterpart, did occasionally achieve some measure of success. *Wellington* "E"-Easy, on the point of making its bombing run on a 'drome at Catania, was sprayed by some well predicted flak to the extent that its hydraulics were perforated (whereupon the flaps and one wheel came down and stayed down, and the bomb doors opened) and, as was learned later, its tires were riddled. Although "Easy" was mushing noticeably and responding poorly to controls, its pilot, Flt. Lt. J. C. H. Delisle, pushed it on to the proper target, bombed as briefed, and laboured it back to base. Despite two punctured tires and the unquestionable difficulty of controlling the kite generally, he made a masterly landing and prevented injury to his crew and further damage to the aircraft. Reference to his courage and skill on this and many other operations was made in the official citation that accompanied his award of the D.F.C.

\* \* \*

The Alouette offensive continued against ports in Sicily and Sardinia and also against Sicilian airfields that were considered most likely sources of embarrassment to the Allies in the invasion which was now imminent. Perhaps the hardest-hit air base in Sicily was Gerbini, springboard for so many attacks on Malta during its time of trial. With the shoe now on the other foot, Gerbini was taking a liberal dose of its own medicine.

Four days after the Allies hit the beaches of Sicily, the Alouettes began to deliver a series of good swift kicks on the shin and toe of Italy. They went after docks, rail yards, and airfields in the Naples area, and ports bordering the Strait of Messina. The war in the Mediterranean was a different sort of war from that to which they had become accustomed. Much the greater part of their work was tactical or semi-tactical in nature, rather than strategical. Airborne interference with it was limited largely to sporadic and half-hearted passes by the *Luftwaffe*. (Only twice were agents of the *Regia Aeronautica* sighted by the Alouettes, one sighting being of a Macchi 202, the other of a Ju. 88 with Italian markings). As heretofore implied, Italian anti-aircraft fire, both in point of accuracy and intensity, was not on a par with the German variety. On the other hand, our Africa-based crews had no navigation aids like "Gee" or "H2S" to guide them. Navigators plotted their positions by means of visual pin-points, flak positions, star shots, and quite often by the glow of Mounts Vesuvius and Etna. There was no Pathfinder Force to mark the aiming-point. On every night-operation each squadron sent one or more flare-dropping crews to light up the target for the bombing crews. Another difference was that ops. in the Mediterranean zone required no deep penetration of enemy territory, though they did involve considerably long periods over water. Possibly the biggest difference was in the pace of operations, which was much more intensive than ever before. (The Alouettes, during the Tunisian period, completed 88 operations in 101 days). Finally, and most important of all, casualties were much lower.

By August, the situation for the defenders of Sicily was no longer tenable. The Nazis were being chased across and out of the island. For them the port of Messina became a miniature

Dunkirk in reverse. Thirteen times in fourteen nights the Alouettes combed the evacuation beaches or the sandy strip on the mainland directly across the narrow strait. Attempting to hinder as much as possible the shuttle of German troops and supplies to the Italian toe, they aimed at barges and ships in harbour and in open water, stockpiles of war materials spread over the shoreline between Messina and Cape Peloro, roads and railways in the Messina area, and likely-looking targets in the city itself. Once they caught a convoy of 25 or more vehicles, all with head-lights co-operatively aglow. On these forays they toted incendiaries along with high explosive, intending to burn up, as well as blow up, the enemy's fuel and transport that were undoubtedly cached, albeit camouflaged, along the beaches. Messina was one of the fatter targets in this theatre. Naples was another. Both were quite consistently flakky, and occasionally put on searchlight displays that called to mind operations in the so-called "big league" of the European war. It was while returning from Naples in early August that the squadron sustained its final loss of the Tunisian period. Approaching to land, one *Wellington* dived into the sea near base and went down with its crew.

After the beaches came the railways and the airfields. The squaddron's work in the latter half of August and most of September traced a clear-cut pre-invasion, invasion-support pattern. Marshalling-yards, roads, key road and rail junctions, and airfields from Taranto in the south to Pisa in the north, all so vital to the now-regrouping enemy in matters of supply and troop movements and defence, were attacked with very good results. It was, in fact, the obviously great contribution made by these raids to the successful outcome of the invasion of Italy that prompted the Allies to adopt similar methods by way of preparation for D-Day.

Fog, a phenomenon relatively rare for this region, complicated the landing for eleven crews returning from a rail-ripping job on Foggia. Two *Wellingtons* crashed, but only one serious injury resulted.

In more than one respect August of 1943 was a record month for the Alouettes. It saw them fly 267 sorties to bomb 26 targets and "nickel" six others. It saw them operate on all but five days. (Over one stretch they operated on 14 successive days, certainly a period of "intensive operations" in the most cogent sense.) It saw them make a flight which, in point of elapsed time, was probably their longest ever. The flight, involving the dropping of not an ounce of high explosive, entailing not even the slightest hostile gesture, was made by Wing Commander St. Pierre and crew, who were airborne for 10 hours, 40 minutes. Their payload was 250,000 leaflets, which were duly distributed over the city of Modena. Only a few days later the Alouette leader was decorated personally by Lt.-Gen. Carl Spaatz, Commanding General, North-West African Air Forces, who pinned on the wing commander's breast the American D.F.C.

August was notable also for having seen the completion of tours by a goodly number of Alouettes. Included were two of the four teams which still remained of the original twenty that were available for duty on the night of 5 October 1942. One consisted of Pilot Officers C. L. ("Court") Spooner, Jim Leigh, Flt. Sgts. "Scotty" MacKay, Ferdinand LeDressay, and Sgt. Stewart Blackert; the other of Pilot Officers R. A. Stutt, J. R. G. Dube, H. R. Manning, E. C. Hodgson, and W. D. Pettit. The screened list also mentioned several who had joined the squadron only weeks, or, in some cases, days, after that first operation, among them being Flt. Lt. J. C. H. Delisle, with Pilot Officers L. M. Halladay and A. G. DeBeer, both R.A.F.; Pilot Officer J. J. P. Michaud, with Pilot Officers J. L. Lymburner, J. E. Lago, J. H. Woodrow, and J. M. D'Aoust; Pilot Officer D. J. Turenne, with Pilot Officers H. F.

Williamson, J. A. F. Meilleur, and J. E. Stillings; Pilot Officer J. N. Brousseau, with Flying Officer D. B. Hodgetts, R.A.F.; and Pilot Officer J. H. Marcotte, D.F.C., with Pilot Officers W. R. Spackman, J. W. Hobson, and W. J. Young. Many of the above were soon to be decorated.

The bombing tempo was maintained throughout September, when practically all of No. 425's raids were made for the direct or indirect benefit of our ground forces that stormed the Italian mainland on the 3rd. The squadron kept operating at full pace even while engaged in a move to another aerodrome, at Hani East, begun on the 29th.

Included in these tactical attacks were four in four nights on key junctions around Salerno, intended to help the Allies maintain their toe-hold on the strategic strip of beach recently acquired. Another was directed against the San Giusto airfield at Pisa, terminus of the air evacuation of Corsica. The weight of the Alouette attack was apportioned among aircraft, hangars, buildings, and runways. Hangars and buildings took direct hits. Fires raged in that fierce, all-consuming way, giving off the heavy black smoke which typifies an oil blaze. Estimates of aircraft blown to bits or seen burning on the ground ranged from ten to twenty. The latter figure was probably nearer the truth, for one crew saw their stick of h.e. straddle five, a second destroyed four, a third got one, and six other crews swore that their 500s and 250s had dropped among the Germans' poorly dispersed *Flugzeugen*. It was against another airfield, at Grosseto, that the Alouettes, on 5/6 October, carried out their last offensive action in the Mediterranean. Less than 48 hours later, news was received that the unit was to cease operations and return to the U. K. The Middle East phase of No. 425's aerial saga was therewith ended.

\* \* \*

By truck to Tunis, by train to Algiers, by the S.S. *Samaria* to Liverpool, the squadron returned to England, disembarking on 6 November. Thenceforth they were once more to come under the administrative and operational jurisdiction of No. 6 (R.C.A.F.) Group, Bomber Command. Wing Cdr. Joe St. Pierre, their leader for more than 15 months, was no longer one of them. Posted on 1 October, he was to be repatriated. His successor was Wing Cdr. J. A. D. B. (Baxter) Richer.

Followed a week of resettlement activity at Dishforth, then sixteen days disembarkation leave. After leave, 59 screened personnel said their good-byes to No. 425 and proceeded to various training units to do their tours of instruction. Their departure reduced the squadron's aircrew strength by more than 50 per cent.

In the meantime, those remaining in 425's decimated ranks had a war to fight. But they had to have new aircraft, and, since their soon-to-be-acquired four-engined bombers carried crews of seven or eight instead of five or six, their strength had to be brought up to and increased well beyond the former establishment. The aircraft (*Halifax IIIs*) were obtained, and conversion was begun early in December. Setting in at the same time was the complication of yet another move, to Tholthorpe, the unit's last overseas home. After Christmas, with the injection of new blood in the form of fresh seven-man crews, the squadron had swelled almost to operational size. Before regaining the status of operational readiness, however, the Alouettes had to complete the long process of conversion and do considerable training with their new battle-wagons and the new or modified equipment that they carried. Toward the end of the non-operational interlude the name of the Squadron Commander appeared in the London Gazette for the award of the D.F.C.

By 18 February the squadron announced itself ready to begin bombing Germany all over again, if only in partial strength. Now listed as high-priority targets were those centres of production connected with the German aircraft industry. Accordingly, ten crews were briefed the next evening to assist in the bombing of the "World Fair" city of Leipzig, a leading manufacture and repair centre of the Junkers organization. A comparatively rare occurrence prevented eight from even getting airborne. Three aircraft of No. 420 (Snowy Owl) Squadron became bogged in the mud in such a position that access to the runway was blocked. Before they could be hauled free it was long past time of "last possible take-off". Eight frustrated crews returned to dispersals, thence to crew-room, billets, and beds. Two other crews qualified for "Duty carried out" in the unit flying record. As was its wont, the weather over the continent that night was ten-tenths and troublesome. Nevertheless, the luxury of P.F.F. was once more available, and the target's position was well marked by sky-markers. The enemy was dropping decoy red markers, but all to no avail, as the attackers had been briefed for a different colour. A distinct red glow, visible 100 miles away, tinted the overcast as No. 425's twosome headed homeward, one extensively flak-damaged and with only three fans turning. Its pilot, Flt. Lt. J.Y.A. ("Pop") Cote, for whom this operation was the first with his crew, earned himself a D.F.C. The following December he was to become the first Alouette to win a second such decoration.

In the course of bombing Stuttgart the following night, No. 425 took its first operational loss in more than 6½ months. Five of the missing crew survived, however, and two of them, Flt. Sgt. E.A. Powell and Sgt. H.T. Gammon, earned the distinction of being the first Alouettes to evade. Evading independently, each contacted the Organization very quickly and reached England via Gibraltar, Gammon early in May, Powell a month later.

Twice more within the next three weeks or so the Alouettes pounded Stuttgart without loss. Before the end of March they also hit the aircraft and aircraft-component centres of Schweinfurt, Augsburg, Frankfurt (twice), and Nuremberg, all of them tough targets deep in enemy territory.

BECAUSE of their absence overseas and their conversion to new aircraft types, the Alouettes had all but missed the Battle of Berlin. They were able to join Bomber Command's final grand gesture to the Nazi capital, on the night of 24/25 March 1944. They saw unmistakable earmarks of bombing success—fires merging into a fierce, concentrated holocaust around the markers; smoke already risen to 10,000 feet though the raid was still young; an awesome red glow visible more than 150 miles away.

Notwithstanding the successes of Bomber Command, the period of February and March, 1944, was, from the viewpoint of losses, a black one. Beginning with the Leipzig raid in February, the *Luftwaffe*, to give it its due, had been running up some impressive scores. These included 78 bombers downed on Leipzig, 72 on Berlin, 37 on Stuttgart, and 33 on each of Schweinfurt and Frankfurt. Command's most grievous setback of all came at the very end of the period, for it was Nuremberg, a name that ex-bomber crews would prefer to forget, that came to be linked with the loss of 94 crews after the raid of 30/31 March. No. 425 Squadron, which took part in all the above operations, lost five crews in the period.

With the arrival of March, the time had come to divert the heavy bomber from its appointed strategical task to something more in the nature of the tactical. Bearing in mind the invaluable assistance rendered by the air forces in their anti-communications work before the invasion of Italy, the top brass eventually agreed that before the European fortress could be breached with any great hope of success, its grey-clad occupants would have to be deprived, above all else, of transportation to

forward areas during the critical time of initial assault and establishment. Nearly four score railway centres in north-west France and Belgium were then carefully designated for destruction, and the responsibility for roughly half the task fell to Bomber Command. From early March till the middle of June more rail-smashing forays were made by the crews of the *Lancs* and *Hallies* than in any previous or following period of similar duration.

The Alouettes, old-timers at working on the railway, joined the heavy bombers' first rail-ripping demonstration, put on at the Trappes marshalling yard, near Paris, on 6 March. Striking results were achieved. Such thorough damage was done to tracks, engine sheds, and rolling stock that the yard was out of action for more than a month. Before the month was out, the squadron took aim at three more railway targets. Then, in April and May, eleven of its fifteen tactical operations were directed at further rail disruption. What may have been the most successful anti-railway operation in which it ever participated was that on the yard at Aulnoye on 27/28 April. Unmistakable evidence of the raid's accuracy and pulverising effect is graphically presented in the post-bombing recce photo, a picture that speaks for itself.

April had seen the departure of No. 425's second C.O. Wing Commander Richer, who, having served with the squadron for approximately a year, was the senior Alouette in point of service with the unit as well as of rank, was posted on the 4th upon completion of a tour. He was succeeded by Wing Cdr. R. A. McLernon, who stepped up from the position of flight commander.

In April, Command did not entirely abandon its strategical speciality as it was to in May and June. Over a four-day period the Alouettes gave the high-explosive-incendiary treatment to Dusseldorf, Karlsruhe, and Essen, and lost three crews. Of two crews missing on Karlsruhe, all but three members became either prisoners-of-war or successful evaders. Sergeants J. J. Michaud and A. Best effected a hair-raising evasion as a team. Contacting the Organization in Echalzer, Luxembourg, they remained there for three weeks, then moved on to Echternach. The day after their arrival there, two Gestapo agents entered the room where they were sleeping. One barked at them briefly in German, then went to investigate in the next room. There he was greeted by two shots in the head from a gun wielded by the son of the airmen's host. The dying Nazi staggered from the room, pursued by the young Luxembourger, who at this point was cut down by a burst of submachine-gun bullets from the second agent. This German then swung his fire toward the airmen, but missed. The unarmed pair scurried out of there fast, Michaud carrying a splinter in his head as a souvenir of the gunplay. After hiding out for a while, they moved along to Trois Verges and thence to an Underground camp in the Ardennes, which they were forced to evacuate during an enemy attack on it. They were finally sheltered in camps near Villance and Jehonville until their liberation.

In this pre-D-Day period the *Luftwaffe* was not having things all its own way *vis-a-vis les Alouettes*. Kills number two, three, and four were scored by Alouette gunners in just over a month. The marksmen were Sgt. J. M. Croteau, who knocked down a Ju. 88, and Sgt. L. S. Owen, R.A.F., joint victor with Sgt. A. E. Ashford and Pilot Officer O. R. Collins, respectively, over a Junkers 88 and an Me. 109. All three of the downed enemies were "flamers"; there was not a particle of doubt as to their complete destruction. Croteau, Owen, and Collins were soon to be decorated. Owen was an especially alert and gimlet-eyed gunner. Time and again he would be first to spot the enemy; time and again he would beat the enemy to the punch. Invariably manning the mid-under turret (many *Halifax III*s carried the extra gun position), he was a living advertisement for that single Browning .5 that he handled so well. Much was still to be heard from him and Collins in a gunnery way.

\* \* \*

Having a target priority second only to that of railway centres in the month or so before D-Day were the heavy gun batteries and radio and radar stations spread along the coastal areas of France and the Lowlands. As their targets among these, the Alouettes drew mostly guns. They hammered batteries at St. Valery-en-Caux, Calais, Merville-Franceville, Neufchatel, and Houlgate, the latter being bombed only a few hours before the start of Operation "Overlord", the greatest combined assault in history. Their lone radio target was a station at Au Fevre, which, because of conditions beyond its control, was forced to go off the air after the raid.

On Victoria Day the Alouette leadership underwent its third change. Wing Cdr. J. H. L. Lecomte took over from Wing Cdr. McLernon, the latter being posted to No. 408 (Goose) Squadron, of which he eventually took command. His award of the D.F.C. was promulgated some three weeks later.

From D-Day until the middle of June the Alouettes kept up their work in indirect support of the invading forces, pounding six railway targets, one airfield, and E-boat pens at Boulogne. *En route* to a marshalling-yard at Versailles-Matelots, one of their *Halifaxes* ran into a barrage of heavy flak. The airspeed indicator, D. R. compass, and wireless aerial were put out of commission; damage was done to the rigging of a wing, markedly affecting the bomber's flying characteristics; a big hole was smashed in the nose near the bomb-aimer's position; but the crew were unharmed. The captain, Flight Lieutenant L. R. Brochu, flew on to the target, bombed as briefed, and took the *Halifax* home, anything but a routine chore under the circumstances. He put up a gong before the summer was out, and his navigator, Pilot Officer J. J. P. Camire, was soon to follow suit.

The squadron found the month of June one of unprecedented night-fighter activity. It scuffled thirteen times with the German air force, and its gunners destroyed three aircraft in five nights. At precisely 0412 hours on 8 June, the firm of Owen, Collins, and McEvoy, gunnery experts, began to dispense business from Flying Officer E. E. Kirk's "Q"-Queen. The introductory part of the transaction was handled by Owen, who first saw a potential customer (an F.W. 190) at a range of 600 yards on the port quarter down. Uttering the opening remarks, "Corkscrew port, go", he greeted the Focke-Wulf with 30-odd rounds of .5. As it broke away and vanished, he handed the case over to his mid-upper colleague, Sgt. D. E. McEvoy, a new partner in the organization, who, almost simultaneously with the former's sighting, had spotted a second likely client (also a 190) approaching on the opposite quarter. This F. W. stated its case clearly and succinctly with a burst of tracer that passed just over the weaving "Queen". McEvoy's reply was in accordance with the business' best traditions — a burst of 500 rounds of .303. Contact was registered, and the Focke Wulf broke away in flames. Seeing an excellent opportunity to wrap up the deal, Collins now threw in an additional' two hundred rounds. Client number two was seen to fall to earth in flames, then to explode. Client number one having taken his business elsewhere, the transaction was closed. For his finesse in the operation McEvoy was recommended for a D.F.M.

Owen and McEvoy were also much to the fore on the night of 12/13 June, notable for producing a double Alouette victory. This time they collaborated on a Ju. 88. The second kill of the night went to Sgt. J. Howell, who despatched an Me. 110 that had obligingly dropped a fighter flare when sitting almost on his doorstep, thereby illuminating itself long enough for Howell to take swift and sure action. The twin-engine fighter, a type dubbed "destroyer" by its users, was itself destroyed, being seen to crash and explode in a matter of seconds after stopping a torrent of .303. As in the case of the aforementioned Junkers, the enemy's annihilation was effected without his being allowed the satisfaction of firing a single shot.

\* \* \*

On the evening of 15 June (target, Boulogne) the *Hally* that had so recently seen three of the enemy go down under its blazing guns was itself brought down. The end of "Q"-Queen was brought about not by fighters, but by a single well-placed burst of flak, presumably from a flak ship, about ten miles short of the aiming-point. An abandonment was ordered over the French coast. As Flying Officer F. D. Hagen picked up his parachute, the ripcord caught somewhere and out billowed the silk on the fuselage floor. He gathered it up as best he could, attached it to his harness, then hurried to join the queue at the front escape hatch. At this critical point he and his captain, Flying Officer Kirk, proceeded to put on an Alphonse-Gaston act that ended with both trying to leave via the same hatch at the same time. The jam soon straightened out, and they departed the bomber at the 12,000-foot level. They left none too soon, for, only moments later, "Queen" practically disintegrated in an explosion. On the ground Kirk teamed up with Pilot Officer Collins and the pair evaded successfully, despite the fact that the former's left arm was paralyzed for a month and the latter was partially incapacitated for a like period by a foot injury. Also successful in evading were Flying Officer Hagen and Flt. Sgt. R. U. Furneaux. Flt. Sgt. Don McEvoy was fatally injured in an excessively heavy parachute landing.

A further half-dozen raids before the month's end were directed at a new German offensive weapon that had recently been unleashed on England. The V-1, which had any number of aliases, was a potential menace not only to millions of English civilians, but also to the success of "Overlord". The best method of combating it was to attack its launching-places, or, even better, its sources of supply. The tiny, deftly concealed launching-ramps were extremely difficult to find, let alone hit. Between 16 June and 28 August the Alouettes went after twenty-one flying-bomb sites and also managed to fulfil their other tactical and strategical commitments seventeen times.

They entered the buzz-bomb battle by setting their bombsights on a V-1 supply depot at Sautrecourt. This was the occasion for plucky performances by Flying Officer E. L. Vawter and Sgt. C. A. Matthews, bomb-aimer and flight engineer of *Halifax* "G"-George. Three minutes after bombing-time, tracer bullets, originating from above, pierced the fuselage in several places, one striking the pilot, Flying Officer H. M. Romuld. Called to assist his captain, Vawter took over the controls, while Matthews gave his wounded skipper every available medical assistance. Vawter flew above the overcast until well over the English coast, then descended through a break to a level below the cloud base. He headed for Woodbridge emergency field. Before attempting to land, he was instructed by Matthews on approach, landing, and stalling speeds, and also, as a precaution, on undercarriage and flap operation. With the engineer handling the throttles, flaps, and undercarriage, the bomb-aimer managed to get "George" down on his third try. On touchdown the *Halifax* swung violently, skidded a considerable distance, and finally stopped almost on a reciprocal heading to that of the landing run. The captain had died of wounds some time before, but the others sustained no injuries during the landing and "George" was serviceable for operations the next day. Vawter and Matthews were gonged within the month for showing bravery, resourcefulness and determination in bringing home safely six valuable air crew and their aircraft.

Another combined decoration-winning effort by No. 425's personnel took place eleven days later on the ground. Having returned from the bombing of Foret D'Eawy, *Halifax* "A"-Able was executing a three-engine go-around when it crashed into bombed-up "U"-Uncle, parked in dispersal. Both aircraft immediately caught fire. The Base Commander, Air Commodore A. D. Ross, accompanied by Flt. Sgt. R. J. St. Germain (a bomb-aimer whose aircraft had just landed), Corporal M. Marquet, of 425's groundcrew, and two Station personnel, rushed to the assistance of the endangered crew. Air Cdre. Ross and Cpl. Marquet had barely extricated the seriously injured pilot when 500-pounders in the bomb-bay exploded, throwing everyone to the ground. Ignoring the fire that was extending farther and farther back along the fuselage, the rescuers now concentrated on the rear turret with an axe in an

effort to free the trapped gunner, Sgt. G. C. Rochon. The blows of St. Germain and Marquet finally smashed and bent the turret's frame enough to allow the pair to haul the gunner out. Almost at the moment of rescue another explosion occurred, again precipitating everyone to the ground. St. Germain threw himself on an injured crew member to protect him from flying debris. Air Cdre. Ross, hit in the right arm and with his wrist almost severed by the blast, was taken to hospital, where an emergency amputation was performed. Meanwhile, the crew of "Able" having been removed to safety, Marquet dutifully superintended the removal from the danger zone of two adjacent aircraft. The prompt action of Air Cdre. Ross, Flt. Sgt. St. Germain, and Cpl. Marquet was largely instrumental in saving the lives of at least two aircrew, the only dangerously injured member eventually recovering. Four months later, to the day, were gazetted awards of the George Cross to Air Cdre. Ross and of the George Medal to St. Germain and Marquet. Before the year was out, St. Germain had to move his G.M. to make room for a D.F.C.

\* \* \*

In the course of No. 425's twelfth swipe at the doodlebug, on Bastille Day, one of its aircraft delivered something in addition to bombs. It dropped a French flag to which was attached a message to the people of Nucourt, a town near which was situated a V-1 supply depot that was even then being bombed. The message appears in an accompanying illustration.

“14 Juillet 1944 - France Combattante vous envoie par les Canadiens – Français de L'Escadrille 'ALOUETTE' ce symbole de LIBERATION.”

The squadron's only aircraft loss in 330 "Crossbow" sorties (in point of fact, its only loss in 568 sorties from 30 July till 12 October) occurred early in August during a day raid on a supply depot at St. Leu d'Esserent. Five of the crew (which manned the only aircraft lost by Command on the raid) survived, one of them being Squadron Leader G. B. (Gerry) Philbin, "B"-Flight Commander, who was back in England soon after seeing the liberation of Paris from a hospital bed. Only four sorties aimed at doodlebug extermination were truly abortive, all through unserviceability. The Alouettes' part in "Crossbow" ended on 28 August with a daylight attempt on a ramp at Ferfay.

Three times in July and three times in August the Alouettes gave direct assistance to the ground forces. Four of these attacks were designed to loosen the *Wehrmacht's* tenacious hold around Caen. Although one of the attacks was made a virtual washout by the presence of marker-obscuring low cloud, the rest were excellent examples of the "carpet bombing" (to quote General Von Rundstedt) that the enemy came to dread so much. The squadron's specific aiming-point in a post-dawn smash on 18 July was a steelworks at Mondeville, two miles south-east of Caen. Assisted no little by a master bomber who directed traffic with admirable aplomb and efficiency, No. 425's seventeen attacking teams put their stuff down well within the pre-designated safe bombing limit. Such an accurate bombing pattern developed that the normal life expectancy of the markers was practically in no case being achieved, and the Pathfinders were kept hustling as seldom before. The steelworks, visible on the edge of a churning cauldron of smoke and flame, took a frightful mauling. Though none save those of the *Wehrmacht* who survived the ordeal will ever know its true effect, one could easily gather from the shouting in the crew-room and the remarks at interrogation that this was no ordinary raid. Unofficial assessments like "Target fini" and "The best prang yet" were heard again and again.

The unit's other two close-support missions took it to the Falaise area in August. Its other non-strategical targets in July and August included oil dumps and storage depots, an airfield at Brussels, a

heavy anti-aircraft battery, and an isolated island fort off St. Malo, all of which it bombed without loss.

Four strategical objectives were attacked during the period. The bombing of Wesseling, entailing the unit's first penetration of the Reich in nearly three months, saw Command lose but one crew. It belonged to this squadron. Stuttgart and Kiel were hit without a loss by 425, but not so Hamburg, from which two Alouette crews never returned. That was on the night of 28/29 July, the blackest of all for the Canadian Group, from which came 23 of Command's 24 missing crews. The captain of one of No. 425's missing aircraft was making his 35th operational flight. The circumstances of the non-return of his crew and the other may never be determined, but it was known that the *Luftwaffe* was unusually aggressive in the Hamburg area that night.

\* \* \*

On 21 August the Alouettes saw the departure of their fourth Commanding Officer. Wing Cdr. J. H. L. Lecomte was posted on that date to Wombleton, there to take over No. 415 (Swordfish) Squadron. Early in the fall he was to put up a D.F.C. (Sometime later he became C.O. of Station Tholthorpe, and it was during that period that he became affectionately known as "Joe the C.O.") His successor was Wing Cdr. H. C. Ledoux, who had been with the squadron for several weeks.

On 3 September, airfields in the Low Countries were objects of a concerted assault by Allied bomber forces. The Alouettes drew one at Volkel, Holland, on which, without a doubt, they contributed to an outstanding bombing success. The field and everything associated with its operation were deluged with 1000-and 500-pounders, and excellent bombing pictures attested to 425's accuracy. There were so many craters on the 'drome that it might have been a section of the moon. One remarkably clear shot showed at least 42 holes along the length of one runway, at least 32 along the other, and hundreds of bomb pits distributed over the rest of the landing-ground. Administration buildings and barracks, the perimeter track, and dispersal areas were not spared either. One building and a fuel dump were burning furiously, and in time both became airborne.

Next, the by-passed Channel ports, the bombing of which called for the greatest accuracy in flying, navigation, and bombing, in order not to jeopardize the safety of the ground attackers. Timed runs from a pre-established pin-point, positive target identification, and the use of a master bomber to superintend the bombing from beginning to end proved sufficient safeguards to prevent casualties to our own troops. The first attempt at Le Havre was a virtual washout, the master-bomber having ordered the bomb-carrying crews to abandon the mission. Each of fourteen Alouette crews returned to base and landed with sixteen 500-pounders still aboard. They tried it again on the 10th, this time twenty of them, and this time meeting with success. A week later came a blow at Boulogne, then, after eight days of bad weather, two cracks at Calais on successive days. A smash at Cap Griz Nez on the 28th wound up the highly successful series. Bomber crews had a personal stake in the bombing of these coastal strongholds which had for so long menaced aircraft that chanced to stray off track to within range of their formidable flak batteries. Now the only big worry in that respect was Dunkirk.

Even while heavily committed to supporting the armies in the field and bombing lines of communication and V-1 installations, Bomber Command had not completely overlooked those "common denominator" synthetic oil plants so vital to practically every department of Germany's war effort. Now, with nearly all V-1 sites either destroyed or under new management, the heavy bomber could fulfil its primary role of strategical bludgeon even while still engaged in tactical duties. Accordingly, in the late summer and early fall of 1944, attacks on oil targets were stepped up. Synthetic oil plants at Castrop Rauxel, Wanne Eickel, and Bottrop all received daylight attacks by the

Alouettes in September before the last Channel strongpoint had fallen. Also attacked were Osnabruck by day and Kiel by night.

All aircraft of No. 425 Squadron came home from Kiel, but one belonging to No 420 Squadron, with which the Alouettes shared facilities at Tholthorpe, was reported down in the North Sea. Out to look for it the next afternoon went Flying Officer J. L. A. Marcotte and his veteran team. Locating the missing crew, they dropped them another dinghy, watched them scramble safely aboard, circled the area while transmitting the position to Air-Sea Rescue, and set course for base only after seeing the actual rescue effected.

At this stage the squadron was more heavily stocked with that most self-satisfied of all aircrew categories, the screened type, than ever before. To illustrate the effect on the screening rate of the summer's intensive operational pace, there were, on 29 September, 112 aircrew awaiting posting. Many refused indefinite leave in favour of remaining on the Station and availing themselves of every opportunity to pass on "the gen" to new crews. The turnover was practically twice that of nearly a year previous, when screenings had decimated unit strength at the conclusion of the Mediterranean phase.

SEPTEMBER, 1944, was one of the extremely few months in which the Alouettes did not have to battle with the *Luftwaffe* at least once. The dearth of fighter encounters was attributable mostly to the fact that all but one of their thirteen operations were executed in broad daylight under cover of *Spitfires* and *Mustangs*. Of their last 31 operations, in fact, 23 had been logged under "Day Flying".

With Cap Gris Nez taken care of, the bombing of French targets by the Alouettes was over. Once again the time had come for an all-out offensive on Germany itself. Though terribly battered and scarred, the Valley of the Rhur still typified the industrial might of the Reich. Seventeen of twenty-six operations in the next eleven-to-twelve weeks took the Alouettes to that yet formidably defended area. Five others led them to a secondary manufacturing heartland along the Rhine. Their bombing fare was a steady diet of old and established "hot targets", the stuff that aircrews' bad dreams were made of. Some of the most flak-infested were Dortmund, Bochum (twice), Duisburg (four times), Wilhelmshaven, Essen, Cologne (twice), and Duesseldorf. Operations against smaller targets such as Sterkrade, Homberg, Oberhausen, Gelsenkirchen, Castrop Rauxel, Hagen, and Wanne Eickel, all producers of *ersatz* lubrication, were no milk runs either. Flak in the daytime, flak and fighters at night — such enemy offerings were invariably present in considerable quantity and numbers. It was flak that accounted for No. 425's four crews posted missing in this period. On the other hand there were unmistakable signs that Germany's harried and overworked air defenders were losing their effectiveness. As the strength of the bombing forces increased, the score of the *Luftwaffe*, based on percentage, showed a down-trend. In October alone, a night attack on Cologne was carried out by more than 900 bombers without a loss, and large-scale night raids on Dortmund, Bochum, Duisburg, and Essen brought losses in the order of only one per cent. What a far cry from Nuremberg, Leipzig, and Berlin, only seven or eight months before! Clearly the handwriting was on the wall for the super-race of the air, and the chief defacers were the tireless aircrews of Bomber Command.

The Oberhausen raid saw a good example of that unbeatable "press on" spirit in the conduct of Pilot Officer S. G. E. Chabot, skipper of "E"-Easy. Early in the operation (over the North Sea), both inner engines began to give trouble, but the pilot kept "Easy" heading in an easterly direction and finally bombed the objective as briefed. Encountering a heavy barrage during the bombing run, the kite absorbed enough German metal to be severely damaged. The main oxygen line was ripped open (at a critical height of 21,000 feet), the bomb-bay doors would not close, the starboard elevator was

practically shredded, and the H2S and other navigational aids were knocked out of action. "Easy" made it back to England, but, because of her damaged condition and a fuel shortage, her skipper elected to land at Horsham. He and his navigator, Flight Sergeant J. A. R. Guilbault, were subsequently gonged.

The squadron lost a crew on Oberhausen, and one of eight survivors was Flt. Sgt. J. Federico, who had two very close calls. As he was descending from his mid-upper turret after the order to prepare to abandon, an explosion occurred between him and the mid-under position, in other words, within a very few feet of him. His only souvenir of the blast was "a small bit of flak through the tip of one finger". When it came time to bail out, he left by the front hatch without difficulty. Then trouble developed. Nothing happened when he pulled the ripcord. The shroud lines were entangled, and he tugged at them frantically until limp with exhaustion. As he plummeted through a cloud layer (later learned to have been at a level of 1500-2000 feet), the 'chute finally opened of its own accord. He sprained his ankle on landing, and was promptly apprehended by soldiers from a nearby A. A. battery.

For another crew operating on Duesseldorf the following evening, things were warm enough without the enemy. Only a few minutes after take-off the starboard inner of "B"-Baker sprang an oil leak. The captain, Flight Lieutenant R.D.K. Hemphill, decided to continue the mission. When the target was practically in sight, the port inner exploded and was instantly aflame. At this point the flight engineer, Sgt. E.A. McAbendroth (R.A.F.), went to work. To prevent the fire's spreading and possibly reaching the escaping oil, he strove unremittingly, finally succeeding in extinguishing the flames. Meanwhile Hemphill held an accurate course, and "Baker", on three engines, successfully bombed the primary target from 13,500 feet, or 6,000 feet below briefed height. With one engine already useless and another not giving full power, there now arose a new cause for misgiving, that old bogey, fuel shortage. The skipper turned for the nearest point of England. During an anxious period before a safe landing at Manston emergency 'drome, McAbendroth applied all the tricks of the f/e's trade in order to achieve the vital maximum of fuel economy. His expert engine-tending aided the captain no end in bringing "Baker" home. For this action Hemphill received a D.F.C., McAbendroth a D.F.M. The former was soon to add a Bar to his decoration. After this crippling thousand-bomber attack of 2 November 1944, Command closed the file on Duesseldorf and marked it "Dead". Now 70 per cent destroyed, it was not again to be attacked in strength.

The daylight half of Command's mammoth mid-October smash at Duisburg finished a tour for Squadron Leader L.P.J. Dupuis, D.F.C., who, having begun his operational tour the previous February as a warrant officer, had risen to command a flight within 3 ½ months. His opposite number, Sqn. Ldr. W.G. Phelan, D.F.C., was posted in November to the other side of the field, to No. 420 Squadron, which he was soon to command. He was the sixth Alouette alumnus to take over another squadron.

An aftermath of a late-October mission to Cologne was the screening of another veteran. Having been posted to the squadron on Easter Sunday, this particular Alouette had been taken on strength as an Airwoman 2nd Class, immediately promoted to temporary sergeant, and placed on the unit's operational establishment. Though her official trade was "operational overseer", her function was not really to oversee anything, but just to be aboard. Her name was Vickie, and she was a stuffed bunny. Wearing a holy medal blessed by a Montreal priest, she was adopted by the Alouettes as a good-luck mascot. In this capacity she had performed to perfection, having, on practically each of her 37 trips, seen a different crew safely through an operation.

Between the end of September and the middle of December, the squadron also pranged a U-boat base at Bergen, Norway, clobbered a few marshalling-yards in Westphalia and the Rhineland, and witnessed the death of a German town called Julich.

\* \* \*

The weather had been decidedly dull for ten days when, one morning in mid-December, the Air Officer Commanding 6 Group, Air Vice-Marshal C.M. McEwen, M.C., D.F.C., presented No. 425 Squadron with its fourth Base Efficiency Trophy in six months. He also delivered a short address, paying special tribute to the groundcrew for their splendid work since the unit's inception.

Even as Air Vice-Marshal McEwen, speaking on a parade square in Yorkshire, was exhorting the Alouettes to continue all-out effort, Gerd von Rundstedt was urging his men in a do-or-die push on the Ardennes sector of the western front, 400 or so miles away. By reason of this, the last large-scale German ground offensive, much of Command's work during the rest of 1944 and in the first two-to-three weeks of 1945 was semi-tactical and semi-strategical. Most of the Alouettes' nine targets in the period were marshalling-yards in cities and towns situated on the approaches to the battle area. It was while carrying out its sole purely strategical operation (Hanover) in this period that the squadron suffered the only triple loss of the twenty-four months or so during which it was actually engaged on operations. Fatalities among the three crews were, however, gratifyingly low. Four aircrew were lost on the operation itself and one was killed while attempting to escape his captors. Sixteen resigned themselves to the confined life of a prison camp.

The work of the Alouette Squadron after the middle of January was predominantly strategical. Discounting three tactical operations that were washed out by order of the master bomber, they participated thereafter in thirty-seven attacks, only four of which were not aimed primarily at the destruction of industry. In their last fourteen weeks of operations they revisited many of their old targets and introduced themselves to several new ones. They roamed from Heide in north Germany to Stuttgart in the south; from Goch, near the "bomb line", to Chemnitz, scarcely more than twenty miles from the Czechoslovakian border. They bombed in broad daylight, at dusk, and in the black of night. Many times they operated in weather conditions anything but ideal for finding and bombing a target. "Bombed through ten-tenths cloud on skymarkers checked by Gee" — more often than not, these words would appear in raid descriptions. The last half of January was a meteorologist's nightmare, allowing the squadron but two chances to get operational, on Madgeburg and Stuttgart. The former raid was noteworthy for seeing the unit's first and only official "probable", an Me. 210 chalked up by Flt. Sgt. J. E. G. Marcil and Sgt. J. B. R. Pare. Both gunners were eventually gonged.

Statistics for abbreviated February looked much better. The Alouettes doubled their seven-target performance of January, and it was no fault of theirs that two army-support operations were scrubbed by the master bomber. (Again, blame the weather). Their sortie total was 193, their highest ever for a winter month. Their losses on operations were nil, apart from a crew that bailed out safely over Belgium and returned to operations within a month. The month also saw their last air-to-air victory over the German air force. The operation, on Goch (7/8 February), was one of the two mentioned above as having been washed out. Our crews had packed up for the night and were on their way home. But the *Luftwaffe's* night-shift was still operating, and over the area from Goch all the way to the Wash its Ju. 88s, Me. 210s, and F.W. 190s were showing surprising audacity. *Halifax* "E"-Easy (Flying Officer A. R. Lowe, captain) tangled four times with a Focke Wulf and came out on top. During the third attack strikes were seen on the F.W. before the breakaway at 300 yards, and during the fourth attack "Easy's" tracers were again seen pouring into it. The enemy disappeared for a second or two, then was seen to fall to earth in flames. The victorious gunners were Flying Officer P. J. Hall and Flt. Sgt. J. W. Hyde.

In the four months between 22 October and 23 February the Alouettes had been largely nocturnal in habit, having delivered only eight daylight raids. From the latter date until the war's end the reverse was true, as they bombed only eight targets at night. In most of those daylight excursions they were tucked in "gaggle" formation.

While the great majority of No. 425's targets in February were new to the squadron (Mainz, Osterfeld, Bonn, Goch, Bohlen, Chemnitz, Wesel, Monheim, Worms, and Kamen, for example), those of March and April were old established "four-pointers". They included Mannheim, Cologne, Hamburg (four times), Essen, Dortmund, Wuppertal, Hagen, Mimster, Leipzig, Kiel, and Bremen, as impressive a lineup of targets as any old bomber type would care to forget. Lesser objectives were the Ruhr towns of Witten, Rheine, Dorsten, and Gladbeck, all attacked in support of Operation "Plunder", the crossing of the Rhine; and Hemmingstedt, an oil centre in Schleswig-Holstein.

March, although a strong third for the squadron with regard to number of sorties (236), was its blackest-ever in point of losses. Nine aircraft went down over England and the Continent while on operations, and 31 fatal casualties resulted. The bad-luck string began on the ill-fated night of 5/6 March, one of those occasions when the elements proved more formidable than the enemy. One of 425's *Halifaxes*, undoubtedly encountering the severe icing that lurked that night even in very low cloud, crashed shortly after take-off. A second collided in cloud with a bomber of another squadron, and a third failed to return from the target, Chemnitz. Two nights later a highly experienced crew was missing on Hemmingstedt. A week after that, one did not return from Hagen, while another bailed out over Belgium, incurring a single fatality. On the Witten raid one aircraft was missing and a second was involved in a mid-air collision that was fatal for all but one of its crew. The squadron's final loss came in daylight over Hamburg on the 31st. On the favourable side, there were 28 survivors among the nine crews, only four of whom reached prison camp. Among the survivors was Pilot Officer C.B. Racicot, one of two Alouettes who earned themselves "escaper" badges. Unfortunately the details of his escape are not available.

The Hagen operation, of 15/16 March, was the finest hour of Flt. Lt. J. R. ("Roly") Laporte, skipper of "G"-George, and his engineer, Sgt. J. R. Arcand. About forty-five minutes after bombing the objective, the *Hally* had its nose blasted off and its starboard inner engine set on fire by tracer from an unseen night-fighter. Fire also broke out at the engineer's position, and Sgt. Arcand set about the task of putting it out. A second attack came soon after, setting the starboard outer on fire. During the second attack Laporte was struck by a bullet that pierced both elbows; yet, somehow or other, he managed to carry out feathering and fire-extinguishing procedures for both engines. Meanwhile Arcand was succeeding in his attempt to extinguish the fuselage fire. But with two engines gone on one side, the *Hally* would no longer maintain height or stay on an even keel. The captain ordered his crew to abandon, all the while staying at the controls in spite of his painful wounds. When it came his turn to leave, he realized that his harness had become caught in the windscreen de-icer pump handle. He disentangled it and proceeded to the escape hatch. Before getting there he was thrown violently to the floor, and his left foot became jammed between the "Window" 'chute and the wireless panel. Using his right leg as a lever, he managed to push himself to the hatch, and the forces of nature did the rest for him. He was sucked out of the *Halifax* and out of his boots, which stayed behind in the aircraft. For reasons unknown, Sgt. Arcand went down with the aircraft, but Laporte landed safely in Belgium with the others of his crew. He soon had a Bar to go with the D.F.C. earned earlier in March by flying all but a small fraction of the long way to Chemnitz and back on three engines. The six survivors were able to operate together twice more before the war's end. Great spirit was shown on the same operation by a former United States Marine, Flt. Lt. J. B. MacHale, who flew the whole trip

on three engines, his port outer having cut on take-off. Back home with him to Seattle he took a D.F.C.

Although no conclusive facts are available, it is thought that the last of 425's missing aircraft may have been one of eight 6 Group bombers that fell before the onslaught of Me. 262 jet fighters over Hamburg around 0900 hours on 31 March. If such was the case, the squadron may have exacted some measure of revenge on 10 April, in the course of its deepest daylight penetration into Germany. Mention was made of a single "squirt" (Me. 163 rocket fighter) that had tried its luck on a gaggle bombing Leipzig early that evening. While attacking a *Lancaster* it came within .303 range of 425's *Halifax* "T"-Tare. Flt. Sgt. J.J. Charbonneau opened fire on it from his mid-upper turret and presently saw it stall, flip on to its back, and fall away in a steep dive. The gunner claimed a probable. His were the last shots fired in anger by gunners of this squadron.

A few hours before the start of another operation on Hamburg, on 4 April, the squadron had received a cable from the mayor of Quebec City proclaiming the adoption of the Alouettes by the capital of French Canada.

The Alouettes' parting fling at the foe was a daylight crack at gun batteries on Wangerooge in the late afternoon of 25 April, which came a week after a similar and even more satisfying blow at Heligoland, that flak and fighter outpost which had for so long been shown a hateful respect by bomber crews. When Command had done its deadly work, both islands were little more than cratered shambles. No 425's last crew to bomb *Festung Europa* was led by Flt. Lt. L.R. Paquette, whose bomb-aimer, Flying Officer L.J. Mallette, pressed the bomb-release button at 1720 hours. The last to land after a flight over enemy territory was captained by Flying Officer J.E. Marcoux. When he eased "T"-Tare on to the Tholthorpe runway at precisely 1950 hours, the Alouette show in the heavy bombing campaign of the Second World War was a *fait accompli*.

\* \* \*

To express statistically the Alouettes' aerial accomplishments, in a span of just over 2 ½ years they participated in 287 bombing attacks (44 on the Ruhr), 24 sea-mining missions, 11 leaflet raids, 6 sea searches, and 1 reconnaissance operation. All this added up to 3665 sorties and more than 20,000 hours in the air. Their most-bombed objectives in the Reich were Hamburg and Essen, each of which they punished eight times. But the target that had entered most often into their offensive plans lay in another theatre of war, and, in a global sense, was almost obscure by comparison. It was Messina, Italy, which, after nine visitations, they had come to know rather well. Their mine-laying responsibilities, confined to the first six months of their operations on *Wellingtons*, took them to such well seeded garden patches as the Frisian Islands, Brest, Wangerooge, and Heligoland areas. Complete figures on bomb and mine tonnages are not available, but it is known that in their 2263 sorties on *Halifaxes* alone they distributed 9000-plus tons of high explosives and incendiaries over targets in north-west Europe. Total operational casualties were 338 (292 R.C.A.F., 44 R.A.F., 1 U.S.A.A.F., and 1 R.A.A.F.), of whom 190 were either killed or presumed dead. Of the survivors among those who failed to return from operations, 90 were prisoners-of-war, 54 evaded, escaped, or were otherwise safe, and 4 (all R.A.F.) were listed under "fate unknown", their final particulars being unavailable. Accidents arising out of non-operational flying took the lives of 61 aircrew and two groundcrew personnel. In addition, one officer succumbed in an accident not associated with aircraft, one airman was fatally injured through occupational hazard, and another airman died of natural causes. Finally, five aircrew and two groundcrew were lost to the squadron through internment in a neutral country in the course of a non-operational (transport) flight.

While on operations, 43 crews went down in or near enemy territory, 5 crashed with fatal consequences in England, and 1 was known to have gone down in the Mediterranean. On the other hand, Alouette gunners exacted a not inconsiderable toll of their own, claiming eight enemy aircraft destroyed, 1 probably destroyed (another was unofficial), and three damaged.

The Alouettes won 190 decorations in addition to other honours. These included 4 Bars to the D.F.C., 163 D.F.C.s, 2 G.M.s, 18 D.F.M.s, 2 M.B.E.S, 1 American D.F.C., and several Mentions-in-Despatches.

\* \* \*

The most important of all developments in the 12-day span between No. 425's last op and the formal ending of hostilities was the commencement of its conversion to *Lancaster X* aircraft, in which type it was to fly back to Canada. Behind this was the selection of the unit with seven other Canadian squadrons for service with the proposed Tiger Force in the East. Ground courses for aircrew began even before the end of April, and the first *Lanc* reached Tholthorpe on 1 May. The first week of victory month was one of intensified training, as many as seventeen aircraft in a single day being airborne on various exercises. Since it was wished that aircrew keep in constant touch with the skills of their respective trades, the *Halifax*, in the first half of the month, was still very much alive at Tholthorpe. But with an increase in the unit's *Lancaster* establishment, and as more crews completed the ground part of their conversion, it was gradually edged out of the picture. The good old *Hally* had served the squadron well, but it had now to give way to the superior range and load-carrying ability of the *Lanc*. Before the end of May the unit held on its charge 20 *Lancasters*; there was scarcely a *Halifax* to be seen.

\* \* \*

After two days of victory hysteria, the squadron soberly realized that, several thousand miles away, the third Axis partner was still in business. There was still work to be done. Normality therefore returned as personnel resumed their duties and all aircrew on leave were recalled for training. Preparations for the trans-Atlantic jump again swung into high gear, special emphasis being placed on astronavigation.

On 14 June, after more than six weeks of conversion and special training, the Alouettes, led by Sqn. Ldr. Dupuis, made their final take-off from their Tholthorpe home-away-from-home. Their last flight as a unit took them via St. Mawgan, the Azores, and Gander, to Debert, Nova Scotia. Once home, they were sent on leave to await the reorganization, re-equipment, and commencement of training of Tiger Force. Before they could be reformed, however, the hopes of the Land of the Rising Sun had been lost in the atomic dust over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There was no longer a need for Tiger Force. On 22 August an order was issued authorizing the squadron's disbandment. It was accordingly dissolved on 5 September 1945, at the age of three years, two months, and ten days.

\* \* \*

A little more than nine years later, the long-hibernating Alouette preened its feathers, stretched its wings, and made ready once more to take to the air. On 1 October 1954, No. 425 Squadron was officially reborn at St. Hubert. This time its official designation carried the added letters "A.W. (F.)", standing for "All Weather (Fighter)". In order to perform a function entirely new to it — defence — the unit had undergone a marked mechanical metamorphosis. Replacing the bludgeon-like, seven-

man *Halifax* as its standard equipment was the rapier-like, twin-jet-powered CF-100, manned by only a pilot and a radio navigator. Thus the Alouettes of 1954 were far fewer in number than their war-time counterparts.

Once a deadly instrument of war, this squadron is now an equally deadly guardian of the peace, poised on a round-the-clock *qui vive*, ready and able to administer swift and sure punishment to unwelcome aerial visitors. It is ironic that a one-time bomber unit now finds itself existing solely to prevent the visitation on this country of a type of devastation infinitely more frightful than that which it once helped to wreak on enemy-held Europe. Even as it was formerly hunted and opposed in the skies over Europe, so will it now hunt down and pluck from the sky any intruder upon our aerial realm, be the weather fair or foul. Now is there truly a maximum of meaning in the words that have come to be identified with No. 425 Squadron —

***"Je te plumerai."***

**End**