

No. 438 SQUADRON

PREPARED BY THE Air Historical Section

(reference: The Roundel, Vol. 2, No. 10, September 1950)



THE HISTORY of No. 438 Squadron dates back to 1 September 1934, when the formation of No. 18 Bomber (Non-Permanent) Squadron at Montreal was authorised. It was not until the spring of 1936, however, that the unit was actually formed at St. Hubert under Sqn. Ldr. W. Dubuc, and arrangements were made to recruit and train personnel. Late in 1937 the squadron was renumbered 118, and two years later, after war had broken out, it moved to Halifax for training and operation as a Coast Artillery Co-Operation unit, using Atlas and Lysander aircraft. In August 1940, No. 118 was redesignated a fighter squadron but the actual transition did not occur until 1st December, when "A" Flight formed at Rockcliffe with Goblin two-seater fighters. In July 1941 this flight flew to Dartmouth as the nucleus of the new 118. Before the year ended the Goblins had been replaced by single-seater Kittyhawks. The highlight of the squadron's operations on the East Coast came on 16 January 1942, when two pilots on patrol outside Halifax Harbour sighted and attacked a submarine. The guns of one Kittyhawk refused to fire, but the other made a number of hits on the conning tower.

In June 1942, No. 118 was transferred to Annette Island (Alaska) on the Pacific Coast. The flying personnel made the 4,000 mile trip by air — the first unit to fly from coast to coast. Here, amid primitive conditions, it carried out routine patrols, submarine searches and various other tasks. After a year of operations from this isolated Station, the squadron moved to Sea Island in August 1943, whence it carried out dawn and dusk patrols and scrambles for two months. Then, in October, it returned to Nova Scotia, embarked at Halifax, and sailed for a new theatre of operations.

No. 118's first base in England was Digby, where it was re-numbered 438, re-equipped with Hurricanes, and began training for a new role as a fighter-bomber squadron. Several moves followed in quick succession, until it settled down, in March 1944, at Hurn, Hampshire, where it formed No. 143 Airfield together with Nos. 439 and 440 Squadrons. These three units were now equipped with Typhoon fighter-bombers, and, on March 20th, No. 438 had the honour of carrying out the Airfield's first operation — a fighter sweep by four pilots over the Cherbourg Peninsula. After two more "familiarization" sweeps, the squadron, on April 9th, embarked on its new role as a fighter-bomber unit with a successful dive-bombing attack on a V-1 site at Gorenflos. This was the first of a long series of such operations during the next two months. In addition to flying-bomb installations, the Typhoons dive-bombed bridges, gun posts, marshalling-yards, road and rail junctions, airfields and radar stations, as their contribution to the tactical preparation for D-Day. The usual bomb load on these missions was two 500-lb. bombs, but sometimes the Tiffies toted two 1,000-pounders each. On 24th April, the first occasion on which half-ton bombs were used operationally by Typhoons, No. 438 made direct hits on a bridge at St. Sauveur.

After D-Day the squadron worked in close support of the Army as it fought to establish the beach-heads and drive inland. The Typhoons bombed enemy strong-points, headquarters buildings, bridges, tank and troop concentrations; they scoured the roads behind the battle-lines, machine-gunning and bombing any enemy transport or armoured fighting vehicles that ventured abroad in daylight. Time

and again the Tiffies were "whistled up" to blast a Nazi stronghold and open the way for the troops on the ground — services for which the squadrons in No. 143 Wing repeatedly won the thanks of the Army.

On 27th June the squadron moved to France to an airstrip at Lantheuil. It shared in the heavy fighting around Caen, in the Nazi holocaust at Falaise, and in the pursuit of the Wehrmacht across northern France into Belgium and the Netherlands. After two months at Lantheuil, No. 438 began a series of rapid moves forward, which brought it, at the end of September, to Eindhoven in the Netherlands. Here the squadron remained until March 1945, when it returned to England for a fortnight, rejoining the Wing early in April at an airfield within the German border. V-E Day found No. 438 at Celle, north-east of Hanover. It remained in Germany until 26 August 1945, when it was disbanded at Flensburg.

In its ten years' career No. 438 had thirteen commanding officers. In Canada (1936 to 1943) they were Sqn. Ldr. M. C. Dubuc, Sqn. Ldr. A. Raymond, Flt. Lt. G. Vadboncoeur, Flt. Lt. E. W. Beardmore, Wing Cdr. E. A. McNab, D.F.C., Sqn. Ldr. H. de M. M Ison, Sqn. Ldr. A. M. Yuile and Sqn. Ldr. F. G. Grant, who took the unit overseas. (Ranks and decorations are those held at the time of command.) In Britain and on the Continent the Wildcats served under Sqn. Ldr.'s F. G. Grant, J. R. Beirnes, R. F. Reid, P. Wilson, J. E. Hogg and P. Bissky. Sqn. Ldr. Wilson was killed in the Luftwaffe strafe of the squadron's airfield on New Year's Day 1945; and Sqn. Ldr. Hogg and Beirnes lost their lives in flying accidents. The last-named officer had completed one tour with the squadron and had returned to No. 438 to serve again as commanding officer. In addition to the three officers named, four pilots were killed in accidents in Canada and another overseas, and 29 were killed or missing on operations over Europe. A number of those reported missing were subsequently listed as safe or prisoners of war.

Among the personnel decorated for their services with the Wildcats were Sqn. Ldrs. Grant, Beirnes and Hogg, Flt. Lts. D. W. Banting, R. E. Coffey and R. E. Spooner, and Flying Officer N. E. Dawber, all of whom received the D.F.C.; Beirnes also gained a Bar to his Cross. Grant later won the D.S.O. as wing commander leading the Typhoon Wing.

No complete tally can be made of the number of bridges, rocket sites, radar stations, rail lines, tanks and vehicles, trains, barges, ships, buildings, flak posts and enemy strong-points destroyed or battered by the Wildcat dive-bombers; but the list is a long and impressive one. It includes also one Me. 109 destroyed and another damaged in air combat, and an F.W. 190 shot down by two armourers who manned a Bren gun during the Luftwaffe attack on the airfield at Eindhoven on 1 January 1945. The squadron logged over 4,000 operational sorties and almost 4,000 hours' operational flying.

No. 438's badge depicts the head of a Wildcat, in recognition of its war-time nickname. The motto, "Going Down," is derived from the final instruction of the formation leader as he went into his bombing dive.

Within eight months of its disbandment in Germany, No. 438 Squadron was reformed as a fighter-bomber unit of the Auxiliary, based in its home city, Montreal. The effective date was 15 April 1946, ten years almost to the day from the date of its first formation. Once again, as in 1936, the squadron's flying operations were carried out from St. Hubert aerodrome. A year later it was re-organized as a fighter unit and subsequently received Vampire jet aircraft. Originally under the functional and administrative control of Training Command, No. 438 was transferred to the Air Defence Group in November 1949.

On May 1st of this year (1950) the war-time adoption of the squadron by the City of Montreal was made official, and it was designated No. 438 City of Montreal (F) Squadron (Reserve), joining Nos. 400 (City of Toronto) and 402 (City of Winnipeg) in enjoying this civic distinction.

Wing Cdr. Claude Hebert, D.F.C., war-time flight commander in the famed "Alouette" bomber squadron, was the first officer commanding of the post-war No. 438. He was succeeded recently by Wing Cdr. Andre Morrisette, A.F.C.

