

Beating the Odds at #2 ANS Winnipeg

by Willis A. (Bill) Cline

Number 2 A.N.S. Winnipeg was a busy place during the '50s. The cold war was raging, and the RCAF was committed through its NATO obligations, to train navigators from the member nations forces, the skills of navigation, astro nav, map reading, use of radio aids, and, of course the Morse code, the latter taught by staff Radio Officers. I would guess that we had about one hundred pilots stationed there, organized into flights of 25 pilots each. There was also a standards flight, and a search and rescue flight. There were, in addition to the large number of Expeditors, or C-45s, or Beachcraft



18s, the designation depending on the mood of the tale teller, some B-25 Mitchell, high performance aircraft, I suppose to teach the navigators how to function successfully at the higher ground speeds.

The station commanding officer was a wartime navigator, Wing Commander Freddie Craig. Freddie was a likeable chap, a somewhat frustrated wannabe pilot. His antics at trying to check out on the C-45, were a continuing supply of mirth for the line pilots, and, I'm sure, a real challenge to the standards flight instructors. I'm not certain if Freddie ever did go solo.

I was posted there in Aug '52, as a staff pilot. There was a period of indoctrination consisting of the usual ground school, dual instruction, mutual practice, co-pilot trips and eventual solo check out. We were then assigned to a flight section, A, B, or C, to be scheduled for the 3 and 5 hour solo navigator training flights, typically with 2 or 3 nav students.

Most of the pilots lacked the required "green ticket" to fly in accordance with Transport Canada's rules for instrument flight. Transport Canada, together with the RCAF devolved an ingenious plan around the problem. It was agreed that block airspace over a predetermined route would be filed on the green ticket held by the pilot of the lead aircraft. The remaining non-instrument ticket pilots would fly in accordance with the Visual flight rules,

to a radio beacon BM, on the edge of the Winnipeg control zone. They would then set course and climb to the block airspace altitude. The block was of sufficient scope to permit aircraft to conform with quadrantal rules for altitude, east bound odd, west bound even. Aircraft would depart with a minute or so separation, and other aircraft were seldom sighted enroute, except at the prescribed turning points, where there could be some congestion, but nothing like that experienced on the war time bomber raids over Germany! Upon return to the BM beacon, aircraft would again be under the control of Winnipeg air traffic control, for descent and approach to the airport. In inclement weather, we were allowed "special VFR" allowing us to approach VFR in what would normally be considered to be Instrument flight conditions.

Morale and esprit de corps were generally quite good amongst the pilots, a mix of war veterans and we post war types. There was ribbing of our youthful flight commander by some of the "retreads" but it was always accepted for what it was, good-natured humour.

At completion of the night flights, we would all go to the airmen's mess, where a full breakfast would be served. Following day flights, we would sometimes congregate at the St. James tavern, to "lift a few". Then of course there were the usual mess dinners, and Sunday evening do's where wives and girl friends could partake.

The Officers quarters were shared accommodation, two to a room. My roommate was John McDowell, from Montreal, who was on my course at FTS Centralia as well as AFS at McDonald/Portage La Prairie. John was a rather flamboyant type, extremely unhappy with the posting to Winnipeg rather than Chatham to fly Sabres. He was a great admirer of Buzz Beurling, and other Aces, and wished to emulate them in some manner. He disdained the issue battledress, and opted instead for a tailor made Eisenhower type jacket from the best barathea cloth. Replete with top button undone, and ascot, he was a striking figure with his slim 6'4" frame.

Pilots were allowed to draw certain articles from base stores. There were the familiar E6-B computer, topographical maps, bulky fleece lined flying boots, and the much-maligned "14 piece flying suit". The suit consisted of an outer three-piece shell of heavy canvas duck material, and a corresponding three-piece fleece lining. The thing was put together by means of dome fasteners, and donned with much pulling and stretching, finally to be closed up with more dome fasteners. How we envied the Americans their sleek fleece lined bomber

type suits, but, hey, this was the RCAF. The one item coveted by all staff pilots, but seemingly possessed only by staff navigators, was the Omega stainless steel wristwatch. Naturally we all placed our names on the waiting list for one of these, and luckily, I got one issued in November.

My roommate John was not so lucky, so when I moved off the base following my marriage, and having received a gold watch from my wife as a Christmas gift, I turned my issue watch over to John, with the proviso that we would go to stores together sometime and have it transferred to his loan card. Well, we never did get to stores. In February John crashed while returning from a night navigation trip, near the BM beacon north of Winnipeg. It was a bad night for flying, with moderate clear icing in cloud, which was a contributing factor to the cause of the crash. Both John and the two navigation students were killed.

All of John's friends, and his girlfriend Lynn were devastated by the loss. John's remains were sent back to his home in Montreal for interment, and we all tried to pick up the pieces and move on, but I believe we all became more wary of the hazards of flight in icing conditions.

Some time later, I went to base stores to advise them that John had been wearing the Omega watch issued to me. To my surprise, I was informed that John had a watch on loan, and they produced his loan card as proof. My suspicion was aroused immediately, because there were NO blank spaces on the card. It seemed as though John had every bit of useless gear available in stores.

I relayed my suspicion to my flight commander, F/L Andy Rewakowsky that John's untimely death had provided stores with the opportunity to account for shortages in inventory, at the least, and at the worst, outright theft. Andy was sympathetic, but said there was nothing he could do on my word alone. He said that I would need some additional proof to substantiate my claim.

Two hundred bucks was almost a month's pay in those days. The money for my watch would not be due and payable until signing off the station on posting. Nonetheless, I decided I should attempt to prove my story. With this in mind, I decided to visit the crash site after the spring thaw had melted all the snow. The odds of finding the watch were slim to non-existent, but I had always been lucky, so why not give it a try? Not having wheels as yet, I hitched a ride to Balmoral, and knocked on the door of a farm house to inquire as to the exact location of the crash. A nice lady answered the door, and said she knew the location, not far from their house and further, that her son a lad of 10 or 12 years, would take me there.

As we walked to the site, I explained to the lad what we would be searching for. The wreck site had been cleaned up fairly well, except for bits of metal and fabric that had been too small to appear on the snow covered ground, but now were plainly visible. I was able to discern from the accident report and the still deep imprints, the point of impact of the two engines. Armed each with a stick, we began poking about, and after a short while the boy picked something up and asked if that was what I was looking for. It was the back of a watch, somewhat oily and bent, but the serial number was clearly legible, A 139 and matched that of the watch on my loan card. I thanked the boy profusely, and probably gave him some monetary reward.

I was expecting some sort of punishment being meted out to the stores people over their apparent duplicity, after giving the proof to my flight commander, but nothing to my knowledge ever occurred. The watch was taken off my loan card, and I was happy not to pursue it further. I assumed that what had taken place was common practice in stores. It was a lesson for me about human nature, and the callousness of those who would stoop to profit from the death of fine young airmen.

I have since been informed by a former senior Supply Officer, that to his knowledge, the foregoing was not common practice in base stores. I'm satisfied that this was probably an isolated incident. It may have aided my career in the air force. I was sent to instrument training school Centralia for my Green Ticket, and one year later was posted to 426 Thunderbird Squadron, a posting highly sought after by most of the staff pilots on the Winnipeg base, once again, beating the odds!