

BRITAIN'S FIRST STRATEGIC BOMBING FORCE:

NO. 3 (NAVAL) WING

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THE famed No. 6 (RCAF) Group, which played such a vital strategic bombing role during World War II, (* ROUNDDEL, Apr. '63.) was not the first Canadian bomber force. More than a quarter-century previously a long-range bomber formation, most of whose pilots were Canadian, was attacking German industrial targets.

The force was No. 3 (Naval) Wing, part of the Royal Naval Air Service, and it operated from fields near Nancy in northeastern France during late 1916 and early 1917. It was the first British air component formed for long-range strategic bombing and its main targets were the German steel works in the Saarland region.

The two British flying services, the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service, had carried out bombing operations from the very early days of the war, and the development of weapons and techniques had been rapid. Practically all the bombing, though, had been against tactical targets and until the formation of No. 3 Wing, the British had no force, even on a small scale, comparable to the strategic bomber forces of World War II.

There is little doubt that the German airship raids on Britain, begun in early 1915, played a part in the decision to form Three Wing and hit back at targets within Germany. With one exception, though, the wing's attacks were against selected industrial plants or other targets such as air fields and rail junctions. The exception was a double raid on the German town of Freiburg, openly announced as a reprisal for a submarine attack on a British hospital ship.

ORGANIZATION

The wing was assembled at Maidstone in Kent during the spring of 1916 and arrangements were made with the French for it to operate from a field at Luxeuil-les-Bains, in the Vosges region northwest of Belfort, within easy flying range of the heavily-industrialized Saar area and northern Lorraine, where much of the German iron and steel production was concentrated. The senior officers, including the flight commanders, were all British, as were the air gunners and ground crew, but most of the pilots were Canadian. This was not by accident. The wing's commander, Captain W. L. Elder, had been in Canada during 1915 and had then recruited more than 150 young Canadians for the RNAS. Many of these recruits were finishing their service training in England and it was decided to keep them together as a group. The first Canadian casualty came before the wing left England. Flight Sub-Lieutenant George K. Williams of Toronto was killed on 10 June when his aircraft collided with another in the air.

Most of the headquarters staff and ground crew went out to Luxeuil in June and in early July the pilots began ferrying their aircraft to the base. The wing was to have 55 or 60 machines by the end of July and plans called for an eventual buildup to 100. It never did reach this ultimate figure, though, and its buildup to a point where it could begin regular operations at all was much delayed. Aircraft intended for the wing were diverted to the hard-pressed RFC on the western front, and by the end of August the wing had only 29 aircraft.

The wing was initially equipped with *Sopwith 1½-Strutters* in bomber and fighter versions. This was a machine that had already made a name for itself. The fighter version was a two-seater and was the first British plane to enter service with synchronizing gear that permitted a fixed machine-gun to fire through the propeller arc. In addition to the pilot's synchronized Vickers, the rear gunner had a Lewis mounted on a bracket in the rear cockpit. The bomber version was structurally identical, but without the rear cockpit, its place being taken by a bomb compartment. The bomb load, consisting of four 65-lb. bombs, was stowed internally. Freed of its bombs, the single-seater bomber version became a fighter on its own, for it carried a forward-firing Vickers. The bomber version, with a 130-h.p. Clerget engine, had a speed of just under 100 m.p.h. at 10,000 ft. Both types were fitted with extra fuel tanks that gave them an endurance of more than seven hours.

FIRST OPERATIONS

The wing's first operation was on July 30, when three of its *Sopwiths* joined forces with six aircraft of the French 4th Bomber Group, also based at Luxeuil, and attacked gasoline stores at Mulheim, to the east just across the Rhine. Two of the aircraft were flown by Canadians. F/S/L J. A. Glen of Enderby, B.C., was the pilot of a *Sopwith* bomber which unloaded 260 lbs. of bombs on the target and F/S/L Ernest Potter of Winnipeg flew one of the two-seater fighters. All the raiding aircraft returned safely and French intelligence reported "considerable damage" in the target area.

Elder received orders, however, not to carry out further raids until he had enough aircraft to enable large-scale operations, and the next raid did not take place until October. As a stop-gap for the $1\frac{1}{2}$ -*Strutters* that the wing should have had, the Admiralty provided a number of French *Breguet* bombers. These pusher biplanes arrived in August or September, and with the *Sopwiths* were used on the wing's first large scale attack, made on 12 October.

The raid was again a joint effort, made with the French, and the target was the Mauser arms works at Oberndorf, on the Neckar river more than 100 miles to the northeast of Luxeuil. The French bombers, nine *Breguet Michelins*, took off first, followed by the Three Wing bombers and fighters, which were airborne just after lunchtime. Twenty-six RNAS aircraft took off, although several were forced to return and another crashed on its way to the target. Twenty-one Three Wing planes are officially listed as having carried out the attack; nine *Sopwith* bombers, six *Breguet* bombers, and six $1\frac{1}{2}$ -*Strutter* fighters, although some of these did not bomb the intended target.

The French bombers flew under a handicap. Their fighter escort was provided by the famed Lafayette Squadron, whose pilots were American volunteers, and their *Nieuports* lacked the range to accompany their *Breguets* to the target. Instead, they flew escort as far as possible, then returned to base to refuel and take off again to rendezvous with the bombers on their return. The *Sopwith* fighters, however, were able to accompany the RNAS bombers to the target and back.

The RNAS force was made up of four flights, divided into what were known as the Red and Blue squadrons, and the *Sopwiths* bore distinctive colour markings for identification in the air. Things went smoothly for the Red Squadron, made up of two *Sopwith* flights of bombers with protective fighters. They located and bombed the target without undue difficulty, despite anti-aircraft fire and some enemy fighter opposition as they crossed the Rhine, and they returned to base without loss. One of the Red Squadron pilots was F/S/L Stearne Edwards from Carleton Place, near Ottawa. He flew a $1\frac{1}{2}$ *Strutter* bomber and his log book shows that his formation flew at 10,000 feet, going down to a lower altitude to bomb. He was airborne for 10 minutes short of four hours and he logged the distance to target as 108 miles. As did most of the Canadians who flew with Three Wing, Edwards became a fighter pilot, winning the DSC and Bar and being credited with downing 12 enemy aircraft.

The Blue Squadron had more difficulty. It consisted of a flight of $1\frac{1}{2}$ *Strutter* bombers and fighters, and another flight of six *Breguets*, with two $1\frac{1}{2}$ -*Strutter* fighter escorts. Three of the Blue Squadron *Sopwiths* failed to make their rendezvous after breaking through cloud, and returned to base as ordered. Another crashed, leaving the squadron with only its *Breguets* and their escorts. Flying with the *Breguets* was W/C R. Bell Davies, the wing's operations officer, who had won the VC at the Dardanelles in late 1915. He has explained that the Flight had difficulty gaining altitude to cross the German lines, which put it behind schedule. Then, preoccupied with German fighter attacks, it was not able to pay full attention to navigation, and found itself over the Black Forest, with no recognizable landmarks. Approaching a town which the lead bomber pilots took to be Oberndorf (the escort fighters flew in the rear of a "Vee" formation) the flight formed into single line and went down to attack. Davies was doubtful that they had found the proper target and he was right. They found out later that they had bombed Donau-Eschingen, some distance to the south.

HOMEWARD BOUND

Reforming, the flight turned to the southwest for home but it had drifted far to the south and was in danger of finding itself over Switzerland. Davies, in the rear, realized the navigational error and had visions of the whole formation being forced to land in neutral Switzerland and spending the rest of the war in internment. As he was wondering how

to draw the flight's attention to the danger one of the other *Sopwith* fighter pilots suddenly cut in front of the formation and turned sharply to starboard, the rest of the machines following. The pilot was F/S/L R. F. Redpath of Montreal, who in 1921 served briefly as Director of the Canadian Air Force.

The *Breguets* ran into heavy anti-aircraft fire and were again attacked by enemy fighters. Three planes were lost, two British-flown *Breguets* and a *Sopwith* bomber, piloted by F/S/L C. H. S. Butterworth of Ottawa. All managed to land safely, although they came down in enemy territory and the crews were taken prisoner.

By the time the *Breguets* neared base it was dark and not all found the Luxeuil field, where a flare path was laid out. Several made crash landings and one of the *Breguets* put down on a railway line, but there were no serious injuries.

The French losses were heavier than those of the RNAS. They found Oberndorf and bombed it but six of their nine bombers failed to return. This caused the French commander to abandon daylight operations in favour of night-time raids. The RNAS wing, though, with its long-range escorts, stuck to daylight attacks. The official RNAS report of the raid credited one of the British flight commanders with having shot down and destroyed an enemy plane and said that another *Sopwith* pilot, F/S/L L. E. Smith from Mystic, B.C., had damaged and had "probably brought down" another of the attackers. The French claimed four German aircraft. The Germans disclaimed any losses at all.

As for the target, the RNAS dropped 3,867 lbs. of bombs, although not all were released over Oberndorf. It is doubtful that the actual munitions factory was badly hit, if at all, although new unoccupied buildings being constructed for the works were badly damaged.

Of the 26 RNAS aircraft that took off, 17 were flown by Canadians and the percentage of Canadian pilots on most of the subsequent raids was even higher. In addition to those mentioned, F. C. Armstrong, Brockville, Ont.; P. G. McNeil, Toronto; G. R. S. Fleming, Toronto; G. G. MacLennan, Eugenia, Ont.; A. B. Shearer, Neepawa, Man.; J. E. Sharman, Oak Lake, Man.; C. E. Burden, Toronto, and Ernest Potter flew *1½-Strutter* bombers. Raymond Collishaw of Nanaimo, B.C., and J. A. Glen flew *1½-Strutter* fighters, and P. E. Beasley, Victoria, B.C.; L. H. Parker, Leeds Village, P.Q.; and J. H. Keens, Toronto, flew Breguet bombers. All held flight sub-lieutenant rank at the time.

While not a complete success, the Oberndorf raid established a number of "firsts". It was Three Wing's first large-scale operation, and it was the war's first big combined bombing raid, made by British and French forces. In fact it involved four national groups—Canadian, British, American and French.

MOVE TO OCHEY

During the latter part of October the French commander moved his squadrons to a field at Nancy and invited the RNAS wing to join him there. Because of overcrowding, in early November the RNAS *Sopwith* flights and the French moved to Ochey, between Nancy and Toul. The wing headquarters stayed at Luxeuil and handled administration, supply, transport, and major repair work and overhauls on the aircraft. Only the *Sopwiths* moved to the forward position at Ochey. The RNAS officers were not happy with the *Breguets*, and although they were still short of their complement of aircraft, more *Sopwiths* and crews were arriving, and they were expecting some of the big twin-engined Handley-Page bombers. The *Breguets* were little used, if at all, after the Oberndorf raid. The positioning of the operational flights at Ochey brought the wing even closer to the enemy's steel plants in the Saar basin and henceforth these comprised the majority of their targets, with the French hitting by night and the RNAS *Sopwiths* following by day.

While still based at Nancy, the *Sopwiths* made one raid. The French bombed the Thyssen steel works at Hagendingen on the night of 22 October, and the following day the Three Wing pilots hit the plant. Thirteen *Sopwith* bombers, escorted by seven fighters, attacked the works, and dropped just under 3,000 pounds of bombs. The bombers approached the target in formation and then formed into a single line, going down to bomb in succession. Direct hits on the blast furnaces were seen, adding to the damage done the night before by the French. Some anti-aircraft fire was encountered but there was no fighter opposition. There were no RNAS losses.

After moving to Ochey the RNAS Sopwiths visited the steel works at Volklingen, some 70 miles away, near Saarbrücken. Nine RNAS planes bombed the plant on 10 November and the next day 14 *Sopwiths* returned. No RNAS machines were lost, although the Germans sent up fighters. Five enemy fighters attacked the formation on the first raid, and were driven off, and three more made an ineffective attack during the second raid. The St. Ingbert blast furnaces, also close to Saarbrücken, were attacked on 12 November, again without loss. The last two raids of the year were against the Dillingen iron works, on 24 November and 27 December; nine RNAS bombers reached the target on each occasion and reported numerous direct hits. All the Three Wing planes returned from the two raids, and on the first one they reported shooting down one of the enemy attackers.

The Three Wing tactics were for the bombers to approach the target in close formation, escorted by the fighters, and to reform after bombing and return to base, still under close fighter escort. The Canadian bomber pilots soon realized that once freed of its bombload, the *Sopwith* bomber with its forward-firing Vickers was a formidable fighter on its own. They developed the habit of opening their throttles and going off on a series of individual hunts for German planes after having dropped their bombs, instead of reforming according to orders. Davies, in charge of flying operations, at first disapproved. "I gave up trying to stop it," he has recalled, "for it was resulting in quite a number of Germans getting shot down."

DINNER PARTY

Bad weather hampered operations during December and the RNAS officers took advantage of the lull to invite their French friends to dinner at Nancy. Amongst their guests were the French bomber group commander and his officers, as well as officers from a French regiment stationed near the Ochey field. The dinner party was a great success and numerous toasts were drunk. As the evening progressed and the wine flowed, the party became increasingly noisy, which caused the cafe's proprietor some apprehension. He was known to the Canadians as "Tirpitz" because of his luxuriant, flowing side whiskers, similar to those worn by the German admiral. The proprietor's worry stemmed from a recent tightening of discipline in the Nancy area, enforced by the Commandant de Ville, in the words of Davies a "sort of glorified provost marshal" who was a French colonel with "a ferocious reputation".

The party was at its noisiest when "Tirpitz" came rushing in, and wringing his hands in anguish explained that the Commandant de Ville, with his full "troupe", was outside, having been attracted by the din. Before anything could be done the Commandant de Ville strode into the dining-room. The French officers quailed under his glare, suddenly sobered.

"The situation was saved by the Canadians," Davies recounted. "Not realizing the awful majesty of a Commandant de Ville, they at once gave him three loud cheers. Hoisting him to their shoulders they carried him around the room and then set him on a table and demanded that he make a speech. He was somewhat taken aback at first, but rose splendidly to the occasion. He saluted the entire company, called out 'Vive la France et vive l'Angleterre!', accepted a drink and then departed, taking his 'posse' with him."

1917 OPERATIONS

Bad weather, including heavy snow, continued to hamper the wing's operations during the opening months of 1917. The hangars at Ochey were unheated and freezing weather made it difficult to keep the aircraft serviceable. Stearne Edwards' log book contains an entry during January concerning a test flight that he made in a *Sopwith* "to see if the oil would freeze" at altitude. The recorded ground temperature on this day was 20 degrees above zero, a definite problem in the days before cold-weather flying techniques were developed. In addition, the valleys in which many of the enemy's industrial targets were located were often shrouded in fog. Nevertheless, raids were flown at intervals. The majority of the targets continued to be those in the Saar basin, with the addition of some in the heavily-industrialized portion of northern Lorraine, annexed by Germany, with most of Alsace, after the War of 1870.

On 23 January the wing hit at the Burbach blast furnaces, near Saarbrücken. The cold at altitude was intense and out of 24 aircraft that took off, only 10 bombers and six fighters reached the target. They bombed from 7,000 feet,

scoring some direct hits. A bomb hung up in one of the *Sopwiths* and although the pilot landed safely, it fell off and exploded as the plane was being taxied to a hangar. Two naval mechanics who were holding the wing tips were killed outright and a third died later. The pilot, F/S/L M. H. Stephens of Toronto, lost a leg but survived to return to RNAS service in late 1917. An attack on the Brebach iron works in the Saar was made by 13 bombers on 25 February and one of the Canadians, L. E. Smith, the British Columbian previously mentioned, was killed during the raid. Brebach was struck again by 10 aircraft on 4 March and also on 22 March, by six *Sopwiths*. Other raids that month included an attack by six bombers on the German airfield at Morhange, 23 miles southeast of Metz, on the 16th.

NIGHT RAIDS

Sometime during this period the wing received at least two Handley-Page 0/100 bombers, big machines that could carry up to sixteen 112-lb. bombs. Whereas the wing's *Sopwiths* flew on daylight raids, the *Handley-Page* attacks were made at night, the first being on the night of 16/17 March against the railway station at Moulin-les-Metz, just outside Metz itself. During April several more night raids were flown by single Handley-Pages. The railway junction at Arnaville was bombed on the 5th and blast furnaces at Hagendingen were struck on the 14th. The German depot and airfield at Chambley, to the west of Metz, were also bombed. F/S/L's E. B. Waller of Toronto and L. A. Sands of Moncton, N.B., both served with the wing as *Handley-Page* pilots.

The only organized daylight raids during April were made on the 14th. Two attacks were made on the same day, in conjunction with the French. They combined to send a total of 21 bombers, escorted by 17 fighters, over the German town of Freiburg, just over the Rhine to the east of Luxeuil. Fifteen of the bombers and eight of the fighters were RNAS. They dropped just under two tons of bombs, with leaflets announcing that the two attacks were reprisals for the torpedoing of the British hospital ship "Asturias" by a German submarine. Many of the bombs hit in the most thickly populated quarter of the town.

The first raid was flown in the morning, followed by the second in the afternoon, and opposition from anti-aircraft and fighters was encountered. All the French bombers returned safely but three of the RNAS two-seater fighters were lost. The three gunners, all British, were killed, and the pilot of one of the *Sopwiths*, George Fleming, was taken prisoner and died of wounds three days after the raid. Another Canadian pilot, F/S/L Harold Edwards from New Aberdeen, N.S., (during World War II Air Marshal "Gus" Edwards, Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, RCAF Overseas) was also taken prisoner, after being forced down in German territory. He remained a prisoner until the war's end but saw further service after the armistice in South Russia, flying in Collishaw's squadron in support of Denikin's White Russian forces. The third pilot lost, also taken prisoner, was one of the British flight commanders.

One of the Canadians, Sharman, flew on both attacks as a flight commander. Other Canadians believed to have flown on the Freiburg raids were McNeil, A. B. Shearer, Parker, Keens, and Beasley, all previously identified, and F/S/L's J. A. Page, Leeds Village, P.Q.; A. C. Dissette, Toronto; G. S. Harrower, Montreal; C. E. Pattison, Winona, Ont; W. R. Walker, Kildonan West, Man.; W. E. Flett, Toronto; C. B. T. Drummond, Montreal; W. M. Alexander, Toronto; A. W. Carter, Calgary; E. V. Reid, Toronto; and H. S. Murton, Toronto.

DISBANDMENT

The 14 April raids were the last operations of the wing, as by this time additional fighter squadrons were desperately needed on the western front. No. 3 (N) Wing represented the main source of experienced RNAS pilots. The Admiralty drew upon it to man several fighter squadrons being formed to help the RFC, and this meant the end of Three Wing. Five of the Canadian pilots were posted away in early February. Others followed during March and April and the wing was disbanded in May 1917.

The Admiralty was possibly influenced by the views of Sir Douglas Haig, the British commander in France. Haig felt strongly that bombing should be confined to tactical attacks, in direct support of the ground forces. Long distance bombing, he said, was entirely secondary to more squadrons on the battle line.

It may well be that the desperate position of the RFC in France in early 1917 justified the withdrawal of the Three Wing pilots, and the eventual dissolution of the wing. A considerable amount of damage was done to the enemy's steel works and to other targets, but no crippling blows were struck. There is strong evidence, though, to indicate that civilian morale was lowered and that output was affected, far beyond the direct physical results of the bomb damage itself. In addition, the wing's operations, combined with those of the French squadrons, compelled the Germans to divert aircraft, skilled personnel, materiel and labour to the building up of a home defence organization, necessarily at the expense of the German forces in the field.

Despite the opposition to strategic bombing from Haig and others, Three Wing was followed by other long-range bomber forces, capable of striking much heavier blows at strategic targets. They operated from the same area as had Three Wing, from late 1917 until the war's end, and although their Canadian pilot content did not match that of Three Wing, many of the pilots and observers were Canadian.

In all, 47 Canadians are recorded as having served with the wing. Many of these have been identified in connection with specific raids. Others included F/S/L's G. B. Anderson, Ottawa; W. H. Chisham, Toronto; G. D. Kirkpatrick, Toronto; J. J. Malone, Regina; D. H. Masson, Ottawa; K. G. MacDonald, Victoria, B.C.; G. E. Nash, Stoney Creek, Ont.; J. D. Scott, Montreal; T. R. Shearer, Calgary; Q. S. Shirriff, Toronto; A. T. Whealy, Toronto; H. D. N. Wallace, Blind River, Ont.; M. R. Kingsford, Toronto, and J. S. T. Fall, Cowichan, B.C.

Almost all of the Canadians who left Three Wing went on to highly distinguished careers with the RNAS and RAF, and many of them, headed by Collishaw, won wide acclaim as fighter "aces" and commanders. Roughly a third were killed before the war's end.

Nearly 35 years after the days of Three Wing, Canadian airmen returned to the area, when the RCAF's NATO Air Division formed in France and Germany. Metz, the division's headquarters site, is not far from the Ochey field, and many of the targets of Three Wing were at points well-known to division members. Nancy, where the Canadian RNAS flyers had their adventure with the Commandant de Ville, is but 30 miles to the south of Metz, and is a favourite Sunday afternoon visiting spot for many Canadians and their families now with the Air Division.