

# No. 6 BOMBER GROUP

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*"We in Bomber Command have always regarded our Canadian Group and Canadian crews outside the Group as among the very best."*

*Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, KCB, QBE, AFC.*

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THOUSANDS of Canadians who served in the RCAF during World War II remember with nostalgic pride No. 6 Bomber Group, the largest RCAF formation overseas. Hundreds of currently-serving officers and men fought with the group, and many of them later rose to very senior positions. Among these are Air Chief Marshal F. R. Miller and Air Marshals C. R. Slemmon and C. R. Dunlap, now chairman of the chiefs of staff, NORAD deputy commander, and chief of the air staff, respectively. So highly regarded did the group become that the Royal Air Force reserved the designation "No. 6 Group" for Canada, should another, similar organization ever be established.

The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan Agreement, signed in December 1939, provided for the establishment of Canadian units to be formed overseas under RAF operational control, and a number of bomber, fighter and coastal patrol squadrons were so formed. By 1942 there were enough RCAF bomber squadrons to warrant the establishment of a separate Canadian group. During the summer and autumn of that year these squadrons were relocated in Yorkshire, the northern area of No. 4 Group, RAF. Allerton Hall was selected as a headquarters and the rambling old mansion became known to Canadians as "Castle Dismal".

The group headquarters was formed on 25 October 1942. For a time it was a head without a body, while communications systems were established and administrative arrangements made. The formation became operational on New Year's Day 1943, when the Canadian squadrons ceased to take orders from No. 4 Group HQ, and were placed under No. 6 Group HQ, which reported directly to RAF Bomber Command HQ.

Originally, No. 6 Group consisted of eight squadrons (Nos. 408, 419, 420, 424, 425, 426, 427 and 428) equipped with *Wellingtons* and *Halifaxes*. By the end of the war, six more squadrons had been added and the force, flying improved *Halifaxes* and Canadian-built *Lancasters*, was capable of lifting a formidable tonnage of high explosives.

The names of the bases evoke memories for many — East Moor, Leeming, Linton-on-Ouse, Tholthorpe, Skipton-on-Swale, Middleton St. George, Croft, Topcliffe, Dishforth, Dalton. Every station had its peculiar features, and certainly its share of mascots. They ranged from stuffed rabbits and moose heads to live nanny goats. No. 427 Sqn. had a lion cub, which was in keeping with the squadron's "adoption" by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Then, too, there was Mrs. Mudd, the self-appointed "fairy godmother" of the Canadians at Tholthorpe. Every station had her counterpart — a gentle, elderly English lady who went to great pains to lavish hospitality on the young men from far-off Canada. Mrs. Mudd even indulged in poaching to obtain fresh meat for "her boys". When the law finally frowned, the Canadians took up a collection to pay her fines.

New crews quickly determined which bases in northern England served the best food, and stations were ranked as "one egg" and "two egg" bases. It was not uncommon for the bomber crews, returning from a raid and with fuel running low, to put down at the nearest field. Some veterans claim that "two egg" bases received more aircraft on such occasions than their "one egg" counterparts; and that the USAAF fields, where delicacies such as ice cream and canned peaches abounded, were the most favoured of all.

Life on the RCAF stations was sometimes as eventful as the actual raids over Germany. One day at Tholthorpe a 1000-pound bomb fell off a trolley. It was assumed to be fused and cautiously taken to a near-by sand pit. The following afternoon the camp was shaken as the bomb voluntarily exploded, but apart from some smashed crockery, no damage was done.

Periods of leave broke the operational routine when the boys headed for London, Edinburgh and other favoured relaxing points. A good deal of excellent staff work was often done as crews worked out complicated schedules involving buses, trains, and any other available means of transport. Nevertheless, it was commonly said that no matter where you headed for, the trip always took eight hours. The men of No. 6 Group were a select crowd, liberally sprinkled with personalities. There was F/L Joseph "Chazz" Chasenoff, No. 427 Sqn.'s adjutant, who once got a room in a crowded London hotel by claiming to be a Russian flyer, newly landed in England. There was R. S. Turnbull (now G/C), who rose from sergeant to wing commander in 11 months, and Lionel Dupuis, who went from sergeant to squadron leader in 13 months. And there was F/L Vaughn Ganderton, who bailed out of his crippled *Halifax* over England and made a perfect parachute descent — landing safely astride a startled cow.

To gain admittance to this world, one had to go through a form of initiation. It differed from station to station, sometimes one merely being spun around, and sometimes being ordered to down a specified number of drinks. It was made tougher for Westerners, who were recognized as especially hardy men. Pubs were a source of continuing interest. To Canadians the English names seemed descriptive and pleasant —such as the "Punch Bowl", "Black Bull", "Shoulder of Mutton" and the "White Swan", irreverently called the "Mucky Duck".

The pubs weren't the only things with peculiar names. Crews often racked their brains for hours, thinking of appropriate titles for their aircraft. The range of names was impressive - "X-Terminator", "Block Buzzer", "The Champ", and "P-Poison" with its four engines christened "Cyanide", "Arsenic", "Iodine", and "NAAFI Tea" (see also title illustration). Crews often argued about the relative merits of *Lancasters* and *Halifaxes*. Various planes would be cited in defence of its type, like the unnamed *Halifax* that completed two tours and 65 missions, or "Cowan's Cowards" which flew 60 missions.

The first Air Officer Commanding No. 6 Group was A/V/M G. E. Brookes, CB, OBE, a veteran of the Royal Flying Corps and a member of the RCAF since its formation. Away from Allerton Hall, he lived in rooms over a public house and once remarked that he had been living in pubs for over a year. He was succeeded by A/V/M C. M. McEwen, CB, OBE, MC, DFC, on 29 Feb. '44. "Black Mike" McEwen occasionally flew on operations over Europe, despite superstitions about "brass" on aircraft and instructions from superior officers. With his row of ribbons and impressive moustache, he was one of the more colourful of the RCAF's senior officers.

At the outset, No. 6 Group drew a large proportion of its men from the RAF, as Canadian flight engineers and ground crew were then comparatively scarce. Nevertheless, it was about 60 per cent Canadian in January 1943, and this increased as time went on. By April 1945 the group comprised 95 per cent Canadian personnel.

## OPERATIONS BEGIN

Group operations opened on the night of 3/4 Jan. '43, when No. 427 Sqn. despatched six *Wellingtons* to lay mines off the Frisian Islands. In another mining operation on the night of 9/10 Jan. a *Wellington* of No. 419 Sqn., piloted by Sgt. F. H. Barker, failed to return —the group's first loss. The first bombing sorties were on the night of 13/14 Jan., when 14 aircraft took off to attack Lorient. Eleven bombed the primary target, two returned early and one was missing. No. 6 Group had been given its baptism of fire.

The group was in a state of flux during 1943. In March it added No. 405 Sqn. to its strength, only to lose that unit to No. 8 (Pathfinder) Group in April. In mid-May Nos. 420, 424, and 425 Sqns. moved to North Africa, where they constituted No. 331 Wing commanded by G/C (now A/M) C. R. Dunlap. From Tunisia they assisted in the bombing of Sicily and Italy, before returning to No. 6 Group in November.

On the night of 26/27 March the group despatched 116 bombers. Of these, 101 attacked the primary target, Duisberg — the first time that more than 100 aircraft had been sent out. The century mark was passed again on 4/5 April in a raid on Kiel, when 108 aircraft attacked the primary target. Subsequent squadron moves made this the record for several months.

In the meantime, the UK-based squadrons continued to hammer away at Germany. Following a series of raids known as the Battle of the Ruhr, the Allied air forces turned on Hamburg, principal hatching ground for Nazi U-boats, and the city was blasted by four attacks which were milestones in the history of Bomber Command.

The Peenemunde raid on 17/18 August was a particularly hard-fought battle. The target — German V-1 laboratories and V-weapon technicians — was so secret that not even the aircrews attacking were told the truth about what they were to bomb. At the time, they were told that Peenemunde was manufacturing improved radar for enemy night fighters, and that the target would be visited for as many nights as it took to destroy it, regardless of casualties. The raid marked the operational debut of the *Lancaster* in No. 6 Group. Twelve of the group's 63 bombers despatched failed to return.

In November a famous airplane made its appearance — "Ruhr Express" — first of the Canadian-built *Lancasters*. It was probably the most-photographed craft ever flown by the RCAF, but made few operational sorties, being used mainly for familiarization purposes.

As the old year went out, the headquarters checked the figures for the previous 12 months. Over 6,200 successful sorties had been flown, and more than 13,600 tons of bombs and mines dropped. Aircraft in the group had destroyed 19 enemy fighters. The price that had been paid was 340 bombers with their crews. It was a fine record, but few persons on operations took note of it. They were too busy. The Battle of Berlin was then raging. Statistics fail to give an idea of the fury of that battle. It was waged with every weapon available to each side, and assumed epic proportions. As the capital of the Reich and a vital manufacturing centre, it was of great importance to both the attackers and the defenders. Between 18/19 Nov. '43 and 15/16 Feb. '44, No. 6 Group alone visited the city 14 times. More than 8,300 aircraft were sent to bomb Berlin; of these, 974 came from the Canadian group, 52 of which did not return.

As the invasion of Europe approached, the group began attacking the railway network in western Europe. The list of targets reads like a gazetteer of the continent. Success, however, was not always to be gained. Many veterans will remember the tragic night of 30/31 Mar. '44, when Nuremberg was the target. In that raid, Bomber Command lost 94 bombers — 13 from No. 6 Group.

Bombing was not the only task carried out. The group had begun operations by laying mines, and this job was continued. While some of the hazards of bombing were diminished, such as heavy flak, there were other problems. Until the beginning of 1944, mining had to be done at 6,000 feet or less, which complicated navigation and dimmed prospects of getting home if a night fighter or light flak put an engine out of order. The development of new mines finally made it feasible to carry out these missions from 15,000 feet. The use of these mines was pioneered by the Middleton-based squadrons, Nos. 419 and 428. The introduction of H2S radar simplified navigation and aiming. In these operations, the *Halifaxes* were used, as it was RAF policy to use only the *Lancasters* of Nos. 1 and 5 Groups when *Lancs* were required for mining.

## PATHFINDER OPERATIONS

On 24 Feb. '44, as No. 8 Pathfinder Group was unable to spare any marking aircraft, the Canadian group was detailed to supply markers for an experimental mining operation in Kiel Bay by Nos. 3, 4, and 6 Groups. Numbers 419 and 428 Sqns. dropped these markers and the mission was so successfully carried out that for the next three months these two squadrons supplied markers for nearly all the large-scale operations carried out by the non-H2S equipped aircraft of these groups. The largest "gardening" effort by No. 6 Group was made on 22/23 Mar. '44, when 74 aircraft took off for minelaying in Kiel Bay. The average total size of the large minelaying forces was between 150 and 200 aircraft.

The year 1944 was indeed an outstanding one. "Crossbow" (attacking flying bomb sites), "Overlord" (the invasion of Europe) and other operations went on, and the results became apparent as the German armies reeled back. Bomb loads were increasing and so were the actual bombs themselves. The development of explosives made the weapons even more deadly, while the proportion of explosives to bomb casing increased. Moreover, there were fewer "dud" bombs. Thus, while a *Halifax* or a *Lancaster* carried about three times the weight of bombs that a *Wellington* did, in destructive power the newer aircraft packed much more than three times the wallop of their predecessors.

The most striking thing of all, though, was courage. Some of it was recognized by decorations. Mostly, however, it was the steady, unspectacular bravery of going out, night after night, to face the flak and the fighters,

and sometimes the sea itself. Arrival back at base gave no security, for even there the enemy might have an intruder lurking in the approach paths. By 8 May '45 members of the group had received 2,230 awards for gallantry, and many more were honoured in the following months, including the late P/O Andrew Mynarski, VC.

All the courage wasn't exhibited over Europe. Early in the morning of 28 Jun. '44, a bomber of No. 425 Sqn., returning on three engines from a raid, crashed into a parked aircraft at Tholthorpe. Air Commodore A. D. Ross, the base commander, risked death by fire and exploding bombs to rescue the pilot and the rear gunner. A blast threw him to the ground and so injured him that his right arm had to be amputated below the elbow. For his heroism, A/C Ross received the George Cross.

As time went on the size of the forces despatched increased. On 28/29 July '44, 209 aircraft poured 903 tons of high explosives into Hamburg, the largest raid by the group to that date. It was also the most costly — 22 bombers did not return, many of them flown by veteran crews on their second tours.

Even this was topped. On the night of 6/7 Oct. '44 No. 6 Group despatched 293 aircraft. Of these, 276 bombed the primary target, Dortmund, and three bombed secondary targets. It was a milestone for the group, being the biggest single raid ever mounted on one target. The losses were two bombers. Remarkable as was this achievement, the group's largest effort was still to come.

Inland water transportation plays a major part in the industry of Europe. An elaborate system of canals links rivers and cities, and barges ply this network loaded with coal and ore, gas and finished products. The development of this system has given rise to several cities, the most important being Duisburg, on the Rhine River. In 1944 this was the largest inland port in Europe, a key unit in the manufacturing complex of the Ruhr, and therefore a high priority target. Thus it was that No. 6 Group's maximum effort was directed against this city.

On 14 Oct. '44, in broad daylight, a heavy attack was launched in which 239 aircraft from the group bombed the primary target. That night the bombers returned to stoke the fires. In the second attack, 225 bombers from the Canadian group blasted the main target. In 16 hours the group poured 2,125 tons of high explosives and incendiaries into the port, and returning crews reported the glow of fires being visible from the Dutch coast. In 36 hours the allied air forces dropped more than 10,000 tons on Duisburg. Total RCAF losses were four bombers.

None of this could have been possible without the whole-hearted support of the ground-crews. The group, being located in northern England, was farther away than other groups from all targets except those in Norway. The aircraft had to take off sooner and land later than their brethren farther south. That meant less time for servicing, fueling and bombing up.

To meet these conditions No. 6 Group turned cooks into mechanics and clerks into armourers. They worked in the shadows, doing a job that was unglamorous but vital. By day and by night, in sweltering heat and pouring rain, often only with a wrench and a flashlight, they kept the bombers going. It wasn't easy and the bane of the armourers was the anonymous someone who kept changing the load.

During 1944 No. 6 Group flew more than three times as many sorties as in 1943, and increased the tonnage of bombs and mines by more than 630 per cent. Yet losses were only 377 aircraft. The loss ratio, in other words, had fallen from 4.6 per cent to less than 1.5 per cent.

As 1945 began the constant hammering was almost at an end. Yet in the four months remaining in the European war, the formation despatched more aircraft than it had done in the whole of the first year. Everything improved — serviceability, results, loss ratio (down to 1.2 per cent), and even the percentage of aircraft reaching primary targets. Some problems had declined in importance. The advance of the allied armies enabled a similar extension of navigational aids into the continent. German flak and fighters still fought back, however, and on several occasions the bombers of the group had brushes with ME-262 jets.

The most dramatic of these encounters came on the afternoon of 31 Mar. '45 during a raid on Hamburg. A gaggle of about 30 German jet fighters intercepted the bomber stream, shooting down several aircraft. The Canadian gunners hit back and destroyed four of the enemy, probably destroyed three and damaged three.

The last raid was on 25 April, when 184 bombers from No. 6 Group, with more than 160 from No. 4 Group, blasted the German coastal batteries of Wangerooge Island in the Frisian chain, not far from where the *Wellingtons* of No. 427 Sqn. had laid their mines in January 1943.

The Canadian group remained in readiness and was several times alerted for operations, but the rapid collapse of the enemy made this unnecessary. The 8th of May brought victory in Europe and celebrations throughout the group.

On the following day the diarist for RCAF Station Linton noted, with a great deal of understanding:

"A survey of the station revealed that the only damage sustained from the exuberant celebrations of the evening were two broken windows in Beningbrough Hall. These were on the ground floor and it is presumed that the incident was purely accidental — someone no doubt mistook the windows for doors."

Though the men of No. 6 Group did not know it, for them the war was over. Eight squadrons, equipped with *Lancasters*, flew home in May and June to prepare for service in the Pacific with the "Tiger Force", but Japan collapsed before the tiger was ready to spring and the squadrons disbanded.

No. 6 Group continued to function, but now it was moving repatriated prisoners of war to England. Gradually the stations were transferred to other commands, and on 1 Nov. '45, the group headquarters disbanded. The RCAF evacuated "Castle Dismal" for the last time.

The record of the group had been outstanding. Until 8 May '45 it had dropped 126,122 tons of bombs and destroyed 116 enemy aircraft. It had also lost 814 aircraft and more than 3,500 men had paid the supreme sacrifice.

In October 1946 His Majesty King George VI approved the badge of No. 6 Group. It depicted a maple leaf superimposed on a York rose, emblematic of the land where the group had been. The proud motto was "Sollertia et Ingenium"— Initiative and Skill. These qualities the group had certainly shown. By valour, work and self-sacrifice the goal had been attained — victory over the Third Reich.