



Canadians on Radar Background

In 1940, Great Britain stood alone against the Nazi horde. Her greatest need was for trained technicians to service and maintain her rapidly expanding radar defences. She appealed to Canada and Canada responded. From December 1940, to May 1943, five thousand trained Royal Canadian Air Force Radar Officers and Airmen Radar Mechanics passed through Pier 21 on their way overseas to serve with the Royal Air Force. Dispersed in penny packets from North Africa and Malta, from Sicily and Italy to



Northwest Europe, from the Murmansk Run to Australia, from Burma to Britain and "neutral" Turkey, these Canadian radar specialists provided over one third of the RAF's expertise in this critical, war-winning area. In all, over six thousand RCAF radar specialists were sent to serve with the Commonwealth and other Allied Air Forces.

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PRE-WAR YEARS

I was born in 1921 and raised and educated in Aurora, Ontario, where I obtained my Senior Matriculation at Aurora High School in 1939. In my first year of high school I joined the high school cadet corps and was a member for over four years until my graduation in 1939. Although I knew that the cadet corps was affiliated with the local militia unit, it was not until 1946 that I learned I had actually been enrolled in the local company of the York Rangers. We were given signaling training in both morse and semaphore flags, and in the more 'advanced' communication systems such as Aldis lamps and Heliographs. I still have the Army

Signaling Certificate which qualifies me as a Visual Telegrapher, Class 1. We, the high school cadet corps signaling section, also took part in the month-long annual training exercises of the local militia at what was then Military District 2 HQ at Long Branch, just west of Toronto.

In October 1946, when serving members of the RCAF were transferred from the wartime reserves to the peace time regular force, and to the new armed services pension plan, I recalled my experiences in the high school cadet corps and, thinking 'nothing ventured, nothing gained', inquired in



writing to see if I had any pensionable time from my cadet corps service. Somewhat to my surprise I found that I indeed had been enrolled in the York Rangers and had the equivalent of 10 months of full-time service which I was able to add to my wartime service for pension purposes. I still have the certificate showing that I served from February 1935 until February 1939 under Regimental Number 231.

Since I was born in August 1921, and was enrolled in the Army in February 1935, I was only about 13-1/2 years old when I started my pensionable military service. I have sometimes

thought that I should lay claim to being the youngest 'man' ever to join the army, but have never done so.

WARTIME

I enlisted in the RCAF as a Radio Mechanic in 1941 and began my service at No. 1 Manning Depot in Toronto on 10 April 1941. After a month of 'square bashing', I, and about 500 others, were sent to the University of Toronto Detachment for training in Radio Physics. After passing the 13 weeks of intense training at the university, I was ordered to report for overseas posting to 'Y' Depot in Halifax on 20 Sep 1941. With the thought in mind that I would give myself a few hours for sight-seeing before reporting for duty, I arrived by train a day early in Halifax somewhere around 11:00 PM on the evening of the 19th - along with 11 others with the same idea in mind. We were greeted on the railway station platform by a Sergeant who, despite our protestations that we still had a day of leave, hustled us off to the 'Y' Depot where we were processed overnight, transported to the harbour, and, by about 8:00 AM on the 20th of September, sent out by tender to board a small ship, the SS Bodegraven of Dutch registry, which was anchored in the harbour.

We were scarcely aboard when the ship got under way. And so it was that by the time that most of the several hundred airmen of the draft to which we had been assigned began reporting to 'Y' Depot, our group was already well at sea - and one of the few from our draft who did not embark at Pier 21 on the way to England.

However, compared to those who travelled in large troopships in crowded and uncomfortable conditions, we 12 did rather well. Our small vessel had accommodations for 40 passengers. About 25 or so aircrew officers and senior NCOs were in 1st and 2nd Class accommodations on the upper decks, while we 12 airmen were in 3rd Class on the main deck level. But, even in 3rd Class, we were accommodated in two-bunk cabins and had our own dining room with a steward to serve our meals and tidy up our cabins. One daring soul even left his shoes outside his cabin door one night and found them neatly polished the next morning. But, the NCO in charge of our 'draft' (not our steward) quickly forbade us to do that any more and it was back to air force do-it-yourself routine in that department. Our main duties consisted of manning the ship's machine gun posts on a shift basis, and assisting the Royal Navy-trained gunner on the 4-inch gun mounted on the stern.

My post was the twin Hispano-Suisa, 50-calibre machine guns mounted above the ship's bridge. The unnerving part of the crossing was that we were in a large, slow moving merchant convoy which had to fight through U-boat attacks for over a week during which time several of the ships in the convoy were torpedoed and sunk on a voyage that took more than 13 days at sea. We disembarked early on October 4th, again by tender, at the tiny port of Poolewe at the head of Loch Ewe on the northwest coast of Scotland. From there we were transported in the back of trucks through the highlands of northern

Scotland for an overnight stay at a YMCA in Inverness on the east coast - and thence by train via London to the reception centre at Bournemouth where we were taken on strength on 6 October 1941. We were glad to see the end of that journey.

After radar training at RAF Yatesbury, I was posted to the radar station at Prestatyn on the north coast of Wales. I also served at the GCI (Ground Controlled Intercept) radar station at Willsborough, near Ashton in Kent; at North Cairn, near Stranraer on the west coast of Scotland; and at Burifa Hill at the most northerly tip of northeast Scotland. In 1943 I was posted to RAF Renscombe Downs, near Swanage on the south coast of England, for training on mobile GCI radar and was then transferred to the staff of the school (21 Service Training Unit) as an instructor. In October 1944, I was transferred from the staff of 21 STU for training on Light Mobile GH, a radar navigational aid and blind

bombing system designed for operations in forward areas, and was subsequently assigned to the 15-man unit designated as AMES 132. After training at Renscombe Downs, and being issued with our equipment (in 5 vehicles) at RAF Cardington, near Bedford, we were posted to 72 Wing HQ in Mons Belgium for operational assignment.

We crossed the English channel on an LST from Dover to Boulogne in France and then by road to Mons. Between early February 1945 and VE Day on 8 May 1945 our unit operated at several sites in Western Europe ranging from Plombiere in the southern part of the Alsace region, and at Saverne in eastern France, to Tobarz and Wilsede (near Hanover) in Germany. While at Tobarz, we were 'asked' to visit the nearby Buchenwald concentration camp, which had been liberated by the US Army only a day or two before our arrival at Tobarz, as witnesses to the atrocities committed there. I have photos, which

were taken by myself and another Canadian on our unit (James Anderson of Ancaster Ontario), which attest to the unimaginably inhumane conditions we saw there.

After VE day AMES 132 was sent to Hvide Sande, on the west coast of Denmark, where we finished our service in Western Europe providing a navigational aid for transport aircraft flying into the newly liberated countries of north western Europe. In late July 1945, when AMES 132 was ordered to move from Denmark to Naples in Italy, I, and the two other Canadians on the unit (including the commanding officer, Flying Officer Robert R. Forrester of Emerson Manitoba) was returned to England for repatriation to Canada.

I sailed from Southampton aboard the Ile de France about 21 September and landed in Halifax, at Pier 21, about 26 September 1945 - a much faster and more peaceful crossing than the harrowing journey in 1941.

POST-WAR

I was released from the RCAF in November 1945 but, after a failed attempt to set up a business with my brother-in-law (times were tough in those days), re-enlisted in the RCAF in July 1946 at my old rank of Sergeant. As did most serving members at the time, I transferred to the permanent force in October 1946 at RCAF Station Clinton. At Clinton, I was an instructor first on ground radar and, in 1948, on Guided Weapons Systems until the spring of 1952. Then I was transferred on loan to CARDE (Canadian Armament Research and Development Establishment) at Valcartier, near Quebec City where I served as a lab technician for Dr. Hugh Quinn working on the radar guidance system for the Velvet Glove missile project. In September 1952, I was promoted to

WO2 (Warrant Officer Class 2) and posted to 314 Technical Services Unit at Langar, in England. From there I was assigned as the resident technical services representative to the plant of a civilian contractor (VICOM) doing radio/radar repair and overhaul work for the RCAF.

In 1954 I was transferred back to Canada and the radar station at Lac St. Denis as the radar Warrant Officer.

At Lac St. Denis, on October 10, 1955, I was commissioned from the ranks (CFR) and was sent to the Telecommunications Officer Training school at RCAF Clinton, graduating in November 1956. From January 1957 to August 1961 I was stationed at Air Materiel Command HQ, Rockcliffe, where, in 1958, I was assigned to the team which set up and implemented the NATO Cataloguing System in the RCAF. At AMCHQ, I was promoted to Flight Lieutenant in January 1961 and, in August 1961 was transferred to RCAF Uplands as the Senior Telecommunications Officer. Later, when the RCAF converted from the old AVRO CF100s to the MacDonnell-Douglas CF101 Voodoo fighters, I assumed the position of Senior Avionics Officer, with responsibility for the fire-control radar, armament systems (including atomic weapons capabilities) and instrument systems as well as the usual communications systems, both airborne and ground based, which were the responsibility of the STelO. On 30 June 1965, I was promoted to Squadron Leader and, being the senior technical officer on the hangar line at the time, assumed the role of Senior Aeronautical Engineering Officer (SAEO) with responsibility for all aspects of the maintenance and servicing of all aircraft assigned to the base. Previously it had been RCAF policy that a station SAEO had to be an aeronautical engineering officer. Thus, I was one of the first telecommunications officers in the RCAF to have held the position of SAEO on a major flying station.

In August 1965 I was transferred to the Pinetree Radar station at Sioux Lookout as the Chief Technical Services Officer until being transferred in July 1966 to 4th Allied Tactical Air Force (4 ATAF), as Chief of Maintenance, Communications Group, at Ramstein in Germany. My main responsibilities there were the installation, maintenance and operation of the NATO command and control communication networks across the southwest and southern part of Germany – including telephone, teletype, radio, microwave, and data systems.

POST-RCAF RETIREMENT

After retirement from the RCAF in 1970, I was a senior scientific writer/editor with Bell Northern Research for 17 years until my retirement from that career in 1986. This was the period when Bell/BNR/Northern Telecom developed and introduced the new family of high speed digital transmission systems that were the forerunners of today's digital world of communications - a very personally satisfying period working at the forefront of the technological developments in communications.



FAMILY

In England during the war years my home-away-from-home was in Leicester where I spent most of my leave and off-duty time at the home of one of my cousins. It was there that I met Betty

Chawner, my wife-to-be, who lived two doors up the street and was a friend of my cousin's daughter. Although we had dated a few times in 1944 and 1945, it was not until my repat leave in September of 1945 that I had the nerve to ask Betty to marry me. We became engaged with plans to marry in Canada as soon as she could arrange passage, which was not easy in those days. Eventually, she was able to arrange passage with Trans Canada Airways (as it was known then) and, in early December 1946 flew over in one of TCA's wartime Liberator bombers that had been converted for passenger travel a three-day journey with stopovers in the Azores and at Moncton before landing in Montreal - and then by overnight train on the last leg from Montreal to Toronto. We were married at the Anglican church in my hometown of Aurora on 21 December 1946. So, Betty is technically not a war bride - perhaps she could be called a war fiancée - and did not arrive in Canada through Pier 21 as did many war brides.

Both of our children were born in Goderich, Ontario, while I was stationed at Clinton after the war- son Robert (Bob) in 1948 and daughter Susan in 1951. After we were married, Betty never worked outside our home. This was mainly due to my career in the RCAF. From 1951 when Susan was born, until my retirement from the RCAF in 1970

- a period of about 20 years - we moved at least 10 times in at least three countries on both sides of the Atlantic. For example, daughter Susan was born in July 1951 in Goderich, but it was not until her seventh birthday in 1958 that we celebrated her birthday in the same place two years in a row. So Betty had her hands full enough with the kids and running the household, to say nothing of the frequent packing and unpacking of our belongings for our moves. But, we survived until the kids were married and began raising our grandchildren (we have three) and until I retired from my second career with BNR in 1986. Now, we just take it easy in the house in Ottawa where we have lived since 1970.

Albert R. MacGirr

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