Canada's Yanks

Initially, the RCAF did not seek out Americans; there were more than enough Canadians volunteering. Moreover, with the United States still neutral, there would be diplomatic problems if American citizens were enlisted, much less courted. However, U.S. nationals began to arrive, motivated by everything from love of adventure to political convictions.

As more BCATP schools opened, the RCAF found itself short of trained pilots. It began looking for experienced Americans to perform non-combat duties. This led to the formation of the semi-secret Clayton Knight Committee, the brainchild of aviation artist Clayton Knight and the RCAF's Director of Recruiting, Air Marshal Billy Bishop VC.

The committee opened its first office in New York's Waldorf Astoria Hotel in the spring of 1940; other bureaus were established in Spokane, Wash., San Francisco, Los Angeles, Dallas, Kansas City, Cleveland, Atlanta, Memphis and San Antonio. Various devices were used to create the fiction that the Clayton Knight Committee was a private advisory unit. In practice it was recruiting Americans on American soil in violation of the Neutrality Act. Moreover, although its goal was to direct trained pilots to Canada, increasingly the committee gave information to untrained Americans who wanted to join the RCAF. These raw recruits constituted 85 per cent of the Americans ultimately enrolled in the RCAF.

One problem was the Oath of Allegiance to King George VI. An American taking the oath could be deemed to have forfeited his U.S. citizenship. In June 1940, Canada waived its Oath of Allegiance for foreign nationals, who henceforth were asked only to take an Oath of Obedience. In other words, they were to follow the rules of military discipline for the duration of their RCAF service.

Training centres began to resonate with American accents; some courses were comprised of 50 per cent of American students. Many more claimed to be Texans than was actually the case; girls who would not have been attracted to somebody from Rhode Island, might find a man from Texas more interesting.

As of Dec. 8, 1941, approximately 6,129 Americans were members of the RCAF. Just over half–3,883–were still undergoing training, but 667 were on operations overseas while others were engaged in flying duties in Canada itself, instructing, flying anti-submarine patrols, etc. With America's entry into the war, RCAF recruiting there ceased and American volunteers began heading for USAAF offices instead. Americans residing in Canada were still being enrolled, however. Ultimately, the RCAF calculated that more than 8,860 U.S. nationals joined that force.

Within a month of Pearl Harbor, talks were underway for the transfer of Americans from the RCAF to U.S. flying services. In May and June 1942, a board of Canadian and American officers travelled across Canada by special train, affecting the release of 1,759 Americans from the RCAF and enrolling them simultaneously in American forces. Transfers continued throughout the war. The RCAF calculated that 3,797 Americans switched back to their own national forces. That left 5,263 Americans who elected to stay with the RCAF throughout their service careers.

Many of the Americans had very distinguished battle records, but there is no question as to who gained the greatest fame. Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee, Jr., who was born in China of missionary parents, wrote the moving poem High Flight while training with the RCAF. He was killed Dec. 11, 1941, when his Spitfire collided with an Oxford aircraft in England. The original manuscript of High Flight is in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

An estimated 234 American members were decorated. The earliest of RCAF Americans to be honoured was Sergeant George E. Mitchell of Diamond Springs, Calif. He graduated as an air gunner in March 1941, and was promptly sent overseas where he joined 7 Sqdn., flying Stirlings. In June 1941, while serving as rear gunner, he shot down a Me.110 as it attacked his aircraft. Mitchell was awarded a Distinguished Flying Medal in November 1941; unhappily, he was killed in action on April 6, 1942

Some of the RCAF's most highly decorated aircrew were American nationals. These included Squadron Leader David C. Fairbanks of Ithaca, N.Y., who earned three Distinguished Flying Crosses while flying Spitfires and Tempests, shooting down 16 enemy aircraft in the process. Following the war, he threw in his lot with Canada, joined the Toronto branch of de Havilland and became an executive with that company.

Also much decorated was Russell E. Curtis from Albion, Pa. He enlisted at Niagara Falls, Ont., in October 1940, earned his wings the following July, and wound up flying Wellington bombers with 104 Sqdn. in North Africa. In December 1942, he was awarded the DFM in recognition of great skill and knowledge. The citation noted that on two occasions he brought aircraft safely back to base in spite of flak damage in one instance and engine failure coupled with bad weather in another.

Following his tour with 104 Sqdn., Curtis was commissioned and sent back to England. In July 1944, now a flight lieutenant, he began a second tour, this time with 428 Sqdn., flying Lancasters. In August 1944, he and his crew were detailed to attack Dortmund, Germany. During the bombing run the aircraft came under heavy anti-aircraft fire and was hit. Curtis sustained a compound skull fracture. Despite the severity of his injury, he bravely remained at the controls and pressed home his attack. Not until the task was accomplished did he ask for assistance. He afterwards collapsed and was placed in the rest position. Other members of the crew took over the task of flying the Lancaster home; eventually it was landed by the bomb aimer. Six members of the crew were decorated for their roles in the incident; Curtis received a Distinguished Service Order.

Nor was Curtis unique among Canada's Yanks. Flight Lieutenant John H. Stickell of Gilson, Ill., and Flt. Lt. William J. Senger of St. John, N.D., both earned the DSO and DFC. Stickell was also mentioned in dispatches. Both were bomber pilots flying Stirlings. Stickell began with 214 Sqdn. in May 1942 but was posted to 7 Sqdn. in August that year. Senger arrived at 7 Sqdn. in October 1942; his first operational sortie was flown as Stickell's co-pilot. Eventually, both transferred to the United States Army Air Force, Stickell in March 1943, Senger in October 1943.

Sergeant Charles E. McDonald of Shreveport, La., was one of a kind. He enlisted in the RCAF in September 1940, earned his wings in April 1941, and was duly posted overseas, flying Spitfires with 403 Sqdn. On Aug. 21 he was shot down over France and taken prisoner. Yet his war was

only beginning. On Aug. 11, 1942, with three other prisoners, McDonald escaped from Stalag Luft III. Aided by the Polish underground they assumed new identities that enabled them to cross Germany and occupied France, pass over the Pyrenees Mountains to Spain, and eventually reach Gibraltar. From there, they returned to England. During his long journey he witnessed Allied bombing raids on Berlin.

McDonald was awarded the Military Medal, a decoration normally associated with army personnel but awarded infrequently to airmen who escaped captivity. He was the only member of the RCAF ever to receive this honour. Late in the war he transferred to the USAAF, saw action in the Pacific, and went on to fly Sabres in Korea. Unhappily, McDonald was killed in a flying accident in November 1953.

Not all awards were for "gallantry in the face of the enemy." On Jan. 28, 1943, Sgt. Clinton L. Pudney of Buffalo, N.Y., was air gunner in a Halifax bomber engaged in a training flight in Yorkshire, England. The aircraft hit high ground, crashed and burst into flames. Three crewmen were killed; all others, except Pudney, were too badly injured to extricate themselves. Pudney had sustained lacerations and lost blood, but he returned several times to the burning wreck until he had rescued four comrades. He then struggled two miles over rough moors to summon help. Pudney was awarded a George Medal. Tragically, he died after his aircraft was hit by lightning on June 16, 1943.

Roughly 800 Americans were killed while serving with the RCAF, including 148 in Canada itself. Most of these–117–involved training accidents, but 31 were killed on operations such as transport, ferry work and anti-submarine patrols. The first of Canada's Yanks to die–on March 31, 1940–was Leading Aircraftman Edward E. Hood of New Bloomfield, Pa., killed in an automobile accident while on strength of RCAF Station Trenton, Ont. The second fatality (and first flying casualty) was LAC Chester M. Wood of New York City. He was under instruction at Trenton when his Fleet Finch went into a spin and crashed on June 16, 1940. Flt. Lt. James L. Mitchell of Venice, Calif., was the first to die on operations; his Hudson disappeared on a trans-Atlantic delivery flight on Jan. 9, 1941. At least two American members of the RCAF died in flying accidents in Britain before July 30, 1941, when Sgt. George R. Menish of Salina, Kansas, was killed in action flying a Blenheim light bomber with 139 Sqdn., the first of many combat casualties sustained by Americans in the RCAF.

Of the Americans killed in Canada, whether in training or on operations, most bodies were returned to their hometowns for burial. A few, however, were interred in cemeteries close to the places where they died, chiefly because of the presence of family or close friends in Canada. Those killed overseas and whose bodies were recovered were buried in the countries where they fell–Britain, France, Holland, Belgium, Germany–to name the most frequent nations. The men with no known graves are commemorated on the various memorials dedicated to those who vanished.

Most of the American fatalities were in their early 20s, but some were "old men" by aircrew standards. Flying Officer David F. Langmack of Lebanon, Ore., was 39 when he died in a Lysander crash at Suffield, Alta., Sept. 22, 1941. Flt. Lt. Charles Lesesne of Sumter, S.C., was 34 when he was killed in action with 425 Sqdn. on March 31, 1945.

Although Canadian authorities strove to keep RCAF personnel together in Canadian formations, approximately 50 per cent of RCAF strength overseas was scattered through RAF units, and the American members of the RCAF were similarly dispersed. Most saw action in the North African and European theatres, but some ended up on secondary fronts. Two Americans serving in the RCAF were killed in Burma; Flt. Lt. Lloyd D. Thomas of Detroit earned a DFC flying Hurricanes with 5 Sqdn. before being killed by Japanese ground fire on April 18, 1944. Pilot Officer O.A. Keech of Alexandria, N.Y., was killed March 4, 1944, while dive-bombing in a Vultee Vengence aircraft of 84 Sqdn. Others died in even more remote places and in unusual ways. Warrant Officer Charles R. Dixon of Mount Vernon, N.Y., was serving in a meteorological flight in the Sudan. On March 10, 1943, while taxiing an obsolete Gladiator biplane, he blundered into a fuel dump and touched off the fire that killed him.

Among those with unusual stories was John Harvey Curry of Dallas. He enlisted in the RCAF in August 1940, trained as a pilot, and wound up in North Africa with 601 Sqdn. In March 1943, as a flight lieutenant, he was awarded the DFC for having destroyed seven enemy aircraft; the citation described him as "a source of inspiration to his fellow pilots." However, his greatest exploit was still to come.

Curry was promoted to squadron leader and given command of 80 Sqdn. On March 2, 1944, while strafing enemy vehicles in Italy, he was shot down by ground fire. He force-landed in snow-covered mountains, but was unhurt. With the help of friendly Italians, he avoided capture and linked out with other Allied evaders. Curry and one soldier decided to strike south through rough terrain to reach Allied lines. They began their trek on March 12, suffering from hunger and cold along the route, and contacted Indian Army troops about noon on the 18th. For this feat of endurance and courage, Curry was made an Officer, Order of the British Empire.

Not all the Americans were aircrew nor were all the awards for flying duties. Flight Sergeant George F. Sullivan of Boston enlisted in Montreal in November 1940 as a mechanic. Late in 1941 he joined 409 Sqdn., an RCAF night-fighter unit in Britain. Sullivan remained with the unit throughout the war. In June 1945, he was awarded the British Empire Medal for his work in keeping the unit active by maintaining a minimum of six serviceable Mosquito aircraft even during the most intensive operations and under the most adverse conditions.

There is a scene in the movie Captains of the Clouds when Billy Bishop is presenting pilot's wings to a 1941 RCAF graduating class. One of the men is identified as Groves. As Bishop pins on the wings a short conversation ensues:

Bishop: "And where are you from, son?"

Groves: "Texas, sir."

Bishop: "One of our most loyal provinces."

Groves: "We think so, sir."

Bishop: "Well, I think so, too. And we thank you for coming up here and helping us."

The scene is a poignant reminder of a time when thousands of Americans joined a foreign air

force, determined to fight Hitler without waiting for the U.S. to become directly involved.