

# “TURN BACK, TURN BACK”

## A black day for Canadian airmen trying to defend Dover

*Dean Summer*

From mid-August 1940 the Luftwaffe had launched sustained attacks against key RAF targets like airfields in southeast and eastern England. Fighter Command had fought hard to repel the raids but was under severe pressure, and as the last day of August dawned there would still be no rest from the enemy onslaught.

Dover had faced many raids since early July, and often in the sky overhead massed formations of Luftwaffe bombers and fighters crossed into England on their way to inland targets.

Shortly before 8am on Saturday 31st August, large raids were detected approaching areas of the Kent coastline, with one raid consisting of over 100 aircraft seemingly headed straight for Dover. Sensing this was an early strike to follow-up the devastating raids of preceding days on Sector airfields like Biggin Hill, the No.11 Group Controller

ordered up two squadrons of fighters. One of the squadrons receiving the order to “Scramble” was No.1 Royal Canadian Air Force Squadron based at Northolt in northwest London.

No.1 RCAF was Canada’s contribution towards defending the skies of Great Britain against Hitler’s war machine - equipped with the dependable Hawker Hurricane, the Canadian fighter pilots, though relatively inexperienced in combat, were nonetheless eager to get into the fight and thus far had suffered mixed fortunes with both losses and victories.

Departing Northolt and climbing hard, the Canadian Hurricanes had their vector. It was towards Dover and soon they were across London and racing into Kent, still trying to gain height. In Dover itself, observers spotted the raiders and endeavoured to identify them. The large formation looked a little ‘odd’. Indeed it



No1 RCAF Squadron Pilots



George Hyde



William Sprenger



Jean-Paul Desloges

was, as the Luftwaffe had pulled a trick and sent only Messerschmitt fighters across The Channel. A frantic signal was sent to Group Headquarters.

On receiving the message about the large numbers of enemy fighters and realising that the two RAF fighter squadrons heading to Dover were going to be at a distinct disadvantage, the Duty Controller sent a very urgent radio message insisting that they turn back. One of the squadrons received the call and turned around to head back to their home airfield, but the other squadron either failed to receive the message, or if they did, were slow to react.

The Canadian Hurricanes were now high over Cranbrook in the Weald of Kent oblivious to the danger ahead, but as events were quickly to prove, they were not going reach to Dover. Without warning cannon and machine-gun fire was ripping through the squadron of Hurricanes - Messerschmitts had dived out of the sun and caught the Canadians napping.

One of the first Hurricanes hit was P2971 with 26-year-old Flying Officer George Hyde at the controls. With his RAF fighter erupting in flames, F/O Hyde from Westmount in Montreal, now far

from home and with his life in peril, wasted little time baling out of his doomed machine. As the Hurricane fell away northwards, eventually to crash at Staplehurst, the Canadian drifted down in his parachute with burns to his face, hands and legs. Though wounded he would return to duty.

Another one of the surprised Canadian pilots who never saw his attacker diving on him was Flight Lieutenant Vaughan Corbett, also from Montreal, but born in Toronto in 1911.

His Hurricane P3869, like that of his colleague, caught fire. Suffering burns, Flt/Lt Corbett managed to make a hasty exit as the vanquished RAF fighter hurtled down to crash and burn out at Biddenden. The injured Canadian landed near a level crossing at Wittersham Road Station on the Kent & East Sussex Railway (now a preserved railway line). He too would fly in action again.

The well-aimed fire of the Luftwaffe fighters also riddled the Hurricane P3858 flown by 29-year-old William 'Bill' Sprenger from Ontario, but he was spared death or injury and baled out unscathed to land in his parachute at Ulcombe to the southeast of Maidstone. His stricken fighter fell to earth a short

distance away within sight of Leeds Castle.

The luckier members of the Canadian squadron twisted and turned through the sky to avoid their attackers and sought to return to Northolt as quickly as they could and reflect upon the disaster inflicted upon them, but the day of drama was far from over. During the afternoon a delegation from the squadron had the sombre task of attending the funeral at Brookwood of their first casualty, Flying Officer Robert 'Bob' Edwards who had been killed in action five days previously.

Back at Northolt, there was another scramble. In the late afternoon, the Canadians found a formation of Dornier bombers escorted by Messerschmitt fighters at 12,000 feet above Gravesend. Despite the presence of friendly anti-aircraft fire they attacked the Luftwaffe raiders and managed to inflict some revenge for the beating they had taken in the morning from the enemy.

As several Messerschmitts and Dorniers fell from the sky, Flying Officer Jean-Paul Desloges, a former 'Mountie', got in too close to one Dornier. His Hurricane received hits from defensive fire and

erupted in flames. Severely burned, the Canadian from Ottawa managed to bale out before his fighter crashed at Gravesend. Despite his wounds he would eventually return to active duty.

The day would prove the costliest for RAF Fighter Command in aircraft losses during the Battle of Britain with 39 fighters destroyed or written off in combat. Nine pilots were killed and a further 21 injured or wounded. Losses suffered by the enemy were comparable and with the damage being inflicted upon the airfields in southeast England, Fighter Command was under severe strain. However, and not for the first time, the Luftwaffe would soon and inexplicably change tactics and ultimately lose the battle for supremacy in the air.

Postscript: Though the four Canadian fighter pilots were lucky to survive that last August day in 1940, tragically none of them were to see the end of the Second World War.

Bill Sprenger, after escaping his doomed Hurricane went straight back on operations, but he sadly died on 26th November 1940 when his fighter crashed in unknown circumstances next to Loch



*Pilots Hyde, Christmas, Corbett, Beardmore, Edwards and Reynolds*

Lomond during an anti-aircraft co-operation flight. He was buried at the Vale of Leven Cemetery in Dunbartonshire, Scotland.

After recovering from his wounds, George Hyde went on to serve as a Flight Lieutenant with 402 RCAF Squadron, but was killed in a flying accident on 17th May 1941. He was laid to rest in Scopwick Church Burial Ground in Lincolnshire.

'Paul' Desloges rose through the ranks becoming a Wing Commander serving in North Africa only to lose his life in a flying accident on 8th May 1944. He was interred in the Dely Ibrahim War Cemetery, Algeria.

Vaughan Corbett returned to operational duty with No.2 RCAF Squadron in January 1941 as a Flight Commander. The Squadron was re-numbered 402 (Winnipeg Bears) RCAF Squadron in March and he took command the following month. Later in the year the squadron embarked on cross-Channel operations and after a successful tour he was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross in February 1942 and in July returned to Canada. The citation for his DFC read as follows:-

*"This officer has led his squadron on numerous bomber escorts over enemy occupied territory in France. Throughout, he has displayed great skill and leadership which have undoubtedly played a large part in the splendid protection afforded to the bomber formations. During these operations, Squadron Leader Corbett has destroyed at least one enemy aircraft and damaged several others. He has also*

*participated in numerous low flying attacks on enemy territory during which his tactical ability and fine fighting spirit have proved an inspiration. This officer, who fought in the Battle of Britain, has always displayed the greatest keenness."*

On 20th February 1945, with the rank of Group Captain, Vaughan Corbett lost his life in a flying accident and was buried at the city of his birthplace, Toronto (St. James') Cemetery.

#### **A poignant memory**

Buried with George Hyde at Scopwick is an American airman, who served with the RCAF; 19 year old Pilot Officer John Magee who was killed on 11th December 1941 in a mid-air collision. His poem 'High Flight' became widely known.

#### **"High Flight"**

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling  
mirth

of sun-split clouds, — and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared  
and swung

High in the sunlit silence. Hovering there,  
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung  
My eager craft through footless halls of air....

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue,  
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy  
grace.

Where never lark, or even eagle flew —  
And, while with silent lifting mind I have trod  
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
— Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

Pilot Officer John Magee