

**The Story Of Operational Unit 31, RCAF Station Debert ,
Under The British Commonwealth Training Plan**

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Disclaimer

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author cultivated in the freedom of expression and of an academic environment.

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Introduction

In the hurly burly of early World War II, Canada helped lay the foundation of ultimate victory. Canada's greatest contribution in that war was arguably the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP). But really it was just one of three efforts; the others being the build up of the Royal Canadian Navy to the third largest in the world and the fielding of a Canadian Army in Western Europe and Italy. Canada's war effort was therefore a triad of Canadian military power that greatly contributed to an Allied victory in World War II. Canadians often underrate that contribution. But it was a great sacrifice of national treasure in the cost of lives and money that was disproportionate to our population, geography, and economy at the time.

Building the BCATP

Central to this story, and one of many that could be told, is that of Operational Unit (OUT) 31, a Royal Air Force (RAF) unit that was a designate of the plan. Its story began with the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) that was signed on 17 December 1939, three and a half months after Canada entered the Second World War, on notably, Prime Minister Mackenzie King's birthday. King attached great importance to the BCATP as Canada's great contribution to the war effort.¹

Little known was the consideration of a form of the "BCATP" predated 1939. The Royal Air Force (RAF) had earlier set its sights on Canada as a possible training area in the event of war. Canada was considered a safe haven for pilot training. Negotiations for such a program began in 1936. But its implementation was delayed for many nagging issues and ponderous negotiations. The reasons are as familiar then as today; money, contributions, control, resources, and Canadian content.² The discussion played out between Canada and Great Britain between 1936 and 1939 but went no where. The issues were largely set aside and became redundant in the reality of war when Canada finally agreed to play a major training role.

The reality was that Canada had only 235 pilots on the air forces' strength in August 1939 when Canada signed the agreement in December.³ Mackenzie King knew that a great build up of staff and facilities was required. In time though it was done and some 130000 personnel would be trained as pilots, navigators, flight engineers as well as sundry flight crew under the BCATP.⁴ But in December 1939 that outcome was doubtful as the "Plan" was schedule to start only a few short months away in April 1940.

From these humble beginnings in December 1939, a great enterprise grew. The organization was built from the ground up. Stating intent in December 1939 was all well and fine but it stretched the bounds of reason, practicality, and reality. Getting there would be a monumental effort. No less than thirty-three thousand air force personnel plus six thousand civilians would be required to make the plan fully functional, with its own administrative infrastructure, sundry buildings, airfields, classrooms, impedimenta, and

other paraphernalia required to properly conduct the training.⁵ None of this existed in December 1939. There was nothing really on the ground to start with.

The RCAF had no administrative structure prior to 1939. It relied on the Army to provide many of its requirements in the pre-war period. But the scope of the plan demanded that the RCAF needed its own, separate, and independent support structure if it was to get on with the execution of the plan under very these very short deadlines. In quick time, the RCAF engaged its own administrative, pay, medical, dental, and most importantly, its own constructing engineering support from scratch.

Given the looming start date of 29 April 1940, the winter was spent preparing and excavating new airfields for spring construction. The task of building the airfields was left to the Department of Munitions and Supply who contracted the construction by private building firms. These contractors were able to achieve quite simply, the impossible. Work was done and projects completed within eight weeks once sites were made ready by heavy machinery.

Aerodromes were built including all buildings, hangars, barracks and workshops, and hard surfaced runways. Runways were built on the standard pattern of one hundred feet (30 m) wide and twenty-five hundred feet (750 m) long laid out in triangular form.⁶ The fact that construction of these facilities was made possible within the incredibly short space of eight weeks was a testament to Canadian ingenuity, skill, tenacity, determination, but most importantly, it was made possible by standardization.

Canada was able to meet the start date of 29 April 1940 by receiving its first arrivals to the plan. It seemed miraculous but it was achieved through the dint of hard work and determination. The BCATP training did commence 29 April 1940. Indeed all the schools were fully operational by April 1942.⁷

Debert Selected as a BCATP site for Operational Training Unit 31 (OTU 31)

Where the various schools were located was left to the Aerodrome Committee of the RCAF. Several relevant factors were taken into consideration for the final decision. Situational geography was important. Sites within five miles of the American border were out of bounds as well as those in mountainous terrain. Sites nearer urban centres were preferred for economic benefits and potential civilian conversion for post war use. But the requirements of bombing and gunnery schools demanded large safe training areas. School ranges of approximately one hundred miles square were selected that negated close proximity to built up areas in order to reduce the risk and potential damage to civil life and property. Navigation schools were chosen near locations where trainees would get practical experience over various types of terrain and large bodies of water.⁸

Debert was an ideal location that met the criteria for the committee's site selection. Debert provided a wide range of challenging terrain and features and was near major centres and logistic points. The Bay of Fundy and Northumberland Straits were at hand. It was near Halifax, and located near a major rail junction in Central Nova Scotia at

Truro. It was also a site selected by the Army as a major training centre providing an economy of scale to the construction by reducing costs and sharing some infrastructure.

Donald Davidson, a long time resident, recalls Debert as a small rural town located in central Nova Scotia in the 1930`s. The village of Debert`s population numbered no more than 500-600 people at any one time. The local residents survived on mixed farming and lumbering. The village had a permanent lumber mill and factory located near the local train station.

The village by the standards of the day was large. Debert supported three stores, a post office, a barber shop, a two-room school, a community hall, and a blacksmith shop at the outset of the war.⁹ But the start of World War II really put Debert on the map. The RCAF purchased land for the construction of an aerodrome in the fall of 1938 that predated the BCATP, which possibly foretold the expansion of Canada`s own air force, hinting at the security and defence policy considerations of the day and possibly the progress of the earlier Canada/ Great Britain negotiations.¹⁰

Debert became a hive of activity with the construction of a BCATP airfield and a training centre Camp/embarkation point for the Army. Debert`s population exploded! It had a resounding economic expansion over the next few years. Approximately 6000 civilian personnel were involved in construction of the facilities that supported both the RCAF Station and Camp Debert, the nearby army base. Eventually the two military training camps at Debert Nova Scotia were completed. Debert`s civilian military population rose to 22000. The airfield would eventually support 30000 air force personnel of many nations who were trained at OTU 31 under the aegis of the BCATP.¹¹

The village of Debert had changed for ever. It grew immensely. The town now supported 10 restaurants; two drug stores with lunch counters; two meat markets; an additional grocery store; a hotel with telephones and running water; two barber shops; a telephone office; a bank; three taxi services; a laundry service; a bus line service to Truro; and a charter service to meet a growing demand for services.¹²

Yes the sites were quickly constructed but the initial facilities were often barebones basic at best at the outset. Despite the rapid construction, many of the sites were still left without some basic and rudimentary necessities. Many airfields looked like a moonscapes. The buildings may have been up and running, but they often lacked the creature comforts of heat and basic plumbing. Robert Wilson Harris remembered his arrival at the opening of the airfield as the “R.C.A.F. Debert was under construction. The drill hall, barracks and mess hall had already been built and large earth-movers were busily dumping a hill into a bog to build the airfield.There was mud everywhere and yawning gulfs where sewers and drains were being installed.”¹³ The initial batch of BCATP students thus began their training under very appalling conditions. The facilities were there, but were very rudimentary and only barely able to support the training process.¹⁴

RCAF Station Debert – The Purpose for being

The construction of the Debert airfield was built at a time when the BCATP plan was also growing in scope. There was a Canadian request for and the inclusion of some Operational Training Units from Great Britain in 1939. Operational Training Units (OTU) were created as a part of the Royal Air Force (RAF) training system in 1938. These special units specifically existed to conduct the final training in preparation of operational flying duties. The graduates of this system would be streamed to fighter, bomber, and maritime air squadrons on completion of training as needed. This system was designed to remove the training burden from RAF front-line operational squadrons. They were officially designated as Operational Training Units (OTU) in April 1940.

Why an OTU at Debert?

OTUs in Britain were thus closely tied to their operational squadrons so there was little thought of moving them to Canada under the BCATP. But an appeal from Canadian Air Vice-Marshal Breadner in December 1940 for their inclusion as part of the RAF contribution to the BCATP led to the eventual movement of four OTUs. The scope of the BCATP was thus being expanded.

Breadner and others thought that the operational scope of these OTUs would be strategically valuable assets. BCATP graduates would also be trained to fly operational aircraft across the North Atlantic to the United Kingdom thereby speeding up the delivery of crucial aircraft into the fray.¹⁵ Britain also faced critical aircraft shortages and space and time for this training in 1940, so Canada's offer was appealing and eagerly accepted. Unbeknownst to Breadner, the OTUs would also come to play another invaluable operational role in Canada and lead to a very personal tragedy!

Debert – Operational Training

Four OTUs eventually were moved to Canada. OTU No. 31 was one of the first to embark. The unit and equipment was moved across the North Atlantic in three echelons in May 1941 to the airfield at Debert, N.S. to begin its "operational" training.¹⁶ But that training was delayed until August of that year because clearly the airfield was in an unfinished state.¹⁷

OTU 31 was equipped with Lockheed Hudson bombers. Its task was to conduct training over long distances, in marginal flying conditions, to train men who had rarely flown out of the sight of land, under realistic conditions.¹⁸

Operational training according to official records began December 1940. The syllabus for operational training proper was designed for a course of twelve weeks for pilots and wireless operator/air gunners and eight weeks for observers. Training of each group was conducted separately until the final stages. The crews, consisting of one pilot, one observer and two wireless operator/air gunners, were joined together as a crew.

Additional training was then provided to those pilots who were deemed capable of and selected for the trans-Atlantic crossing. These pilots received an additional eight weeks of training before being sent to Ferry Command. Those who were not selected were either sent to home defence squadrons of the RCAF or made their way by sea-travel to the United Kingdom for additional training before joining their operational units.¹⁹

Debert Training – the Reality

Ernest E Allen, then a young pilot officer, remembers his training at Debert. He was one amongst a group of 20 pilots who were posted to Debert August 1941.²⁰ His training began immediately. Allen's instructors were tour expired RAF pilots rested from operations. Most of these instructors had done an operational tour in England on Avro Ansons. The Lockheed Hudson was new to the instructors and, according to Allen; most instructors were frightened by its flying characteristics.²¹

The basic training philosophy was a case of "sink or swim". Training was indeed minimal. Allen and his pool were given three hours dual, then sent off on their own, solo. They were on their own after that.

Early training consisted of a series of cross country flights over terrain and distance of ever increasing difficulty that was often conducted under adverse and extreme weather conditions. Allen's opinion of his instructors was not very favourable, "The instructors were all RAF tour expired pilots "on rest" and were the best lineshooters I ever ran into... The instructors had been giving us the line that there would be a lot of bad weather flying when we got to England, so this must be part of the training."

In the instructors' defence the training syllabus at Debert and other units was rudimentary at best and was still under development at the commencement of the plan. This was not surprising given the expediency at which the plan was being rolled out, which was under great duress, given the exigencies of war. They were required to train qualified crew and get aircraft into operations, expediently. The country's and allied needs were urgent and shortcuts would have to be taken. In the end, this sense of urgency cost lives.

The prevailing attitudes within the system had a cost. Allen's course was an example. In late October 1941 they were tasked with a local long distance cross country exercise. This was to prepare them for a long distance trip over the "pond". In reality they only had two months of flying experience at the time on the Hudson. Collectively they had very little military experience to question orders. Orders were orders and not to be questioned.

An order for a training exercise was put in the evening before. On the next morning, the day of the exercise, the crews found the airfield fogged in. There were no flight instructors anywhere to be found to cancel the order. As the flight was authorized, and as, "orders were orders", they proceeded with the launch of their aircraft. They assumed that as "The instructors had been giving us the line that there would be a lot of bad weather flying when we got to England, so this must be part of the training."²²

The take off was harrowing according to Allen. One aircraft crashed and another almost hit the tower. Allen got away with it but not without some concern. He could barely make out the runway but was able to keep his aircraft straight on line by “by watching the line between grass and asphalt” on the take off run. The weather cleared on their return five hours later. “The instructors were severely criticized for not getting up in the morning to make the decision for us as to whether the weather was fit for flying.”²³

And there were casualties in the doing. A laconic remark of an aircraft and the loss of four RAF lives at Great Village, NS on 23 October 1941 were marked by a mere three small paragraphs in sundry newspapers.²⁴ The news reports of the day do not always put a face to the loss. The casualties were not just officers or RAF.²⁵

What of the casualties?

One of the casualties on that fateful day was Sergeant Leonard Hornsey (RAF). Hornsey led an interesting life prior to his arrival at Debert. Norman Leonard Hornsey like many of his peers was born in the early 1920s. He was a schoolboy in September 1931. He joined the Staff of the Wellingborough Co-operative Society in December 1935 at a very early age of 16 or 17. He was eventually apprenticed at the Wireless School at Cranwell with the RAF in January 1937.

Sergeant Leonard Hornsey was subsequently posted to Coastal Command in Scotland after completion of this training in September 1939. He then took part in many flying operations over the Atlantic, Iceland and Norway. Hornsey was noted for spotting the prison ship Altmark, which was subsequently captured by the Royal Navy.

Hornsey was then promoted to Sergeant and posted to Nova Scotia as a Wireless Instructor where he met his end on 23rd October 1941. Hudson aircraft AM896, on a final long distance exercise prior to it being ferried across the Atlantic flew into the ground disintegrating at Great Village, Nova Scotia.

Hornsey’s remains were never repatriated to his grieving family in Bristol England. The late Sergeant Norman Leonard Hornsey is buried at Terrace Hill Cemetery, in Truro, Nova Scotia.²⁶ The loss for that night along with Hornsey in Hudson #AM896 were Pilot Officer R.A. Luard (RCAF), Sergeant R.F. Kelley(RCAF), and one unnamed RAF Airman. ²⁷

A repeat?

It would seem little was learned from the Great Village experience. The exercise began with preparations on the afternoon of 22 October 1941. Allen, then in company with 12 aircraft and crew, was tasked with a cross-country flight to Windsor, Ontario. On this occasion a night time exercise with a fully loaded and fuelled aircraft was ordered. The exercise was daunting even for the most experienced flyer.

The air crew were to flight test their aircraft the afternoon before departure. Allen found his compass was out by 30 degrees on a westerly heading. He requested a new aircraft. Instead of acceding to this reasonable request, his moral integrity was challenged. Allen finally agreed to fly the craft with the proviso, “that if I couldn't maintain visual contact with the ground I would turn around and come back.”²⁸ He should have never been allowed to leave the ground with a defective piece of equipment in the first place, but he did. He was lucky to survive to tell the tale. Others on that fateful trip were not so fortunate.

Allen recounts “My roommate Beech O'Hanley was the first aircraft to take off just after 1 a.m. on 23 October 1941. He climbed to about 2000 feet and then something went wrong and the aircraft turned upside down and went straight into the ground – ‘all killed’”²⁹, so ended the night exercise for that day. It was subsequently rescheduled for the following morning.

The rescheduled flight was uneventful to a point. The weather held until the flight was within 50 miles west of Montreal. The weather then deteriorated because of heavy rain. The flight was forced to divert to what it thought was St Hubert. With little forward visibility and unknown to them, a radio direction finder compass to St Hubert had been re-located to Dorval a week earlier.

The flight took a harrowing diversion into Dorval but not without cost. All but two aircraft eventually landed at Dorval. Two tried but were unable to locate the airport and crash landed in the attempt. In all, the expenditure of the total exercise was “three of the aircraft and crews had been wiped out and a fourth crew had safely landed in the bush, three hundred miles east of Montreal.”³⁰

Assumptions

There was an assumption of calculated risk behind this training of inexperienced crews to make an Atlantic crossing. Most of the civilian and military pilots who worked for Ferry Command and who would be augmented by this cadre had a dim view of the BCATP training experience. Most Ferry Command crews had already accumulated thousands of hours in their logbooks. They already had careers and experience before the war that was devoted to flying and had accumulated many flying hours. The OTU candidates had neither this luxury nor level of experience.

Many of the more experienced Ferry Command flyers were inclined to shake their heads in disbelief at the process. They were being augmented by ‘kids’ in their late teens and early twenties, with a maximum of 350 hours flying time to their credit. A trans-Atlantic air crossing in that day and age was a foreboding experience. It was new and unknown. Few experienced crews had actually ever undertaken the challenge prior to the war. It was both equally dangerous and demanding as there were few external navigational aids to guide the intrepid in the task.³¹ A safe crossing would all boil down to training, skill and luck to arrive there safely. For some luck would run out before they ever took the trip.

Debert Operations – The Unknown Triumph

There were also triumphs despite the tragedies inherent in training. Operational Training Units were just that, “operational”. Although training was a primary function, the trainees could also be tasked in a pinch with operational sorties. Debert and Greenwood became a part of a coast watcher chain in early 1942. Two nine-meter wooden towers were constructed at Greenwood and Economy Nova Scotia. These structures had two purposes. They functioned as a bomb ranging and gunnery exercise observation platforms. Aircraft from Greenwood and Debert were despatched under the control of range safety officers who would assess their performance.³²

The Debert and Greenwood aircraft were fully bomb loaded and armed. They could be easily diverted to more profitable targets when presented and which would add an air of realism to their duties, even when proceeding to the ranges! There was a definite necessity for incorporating these towers into a coast watcher plan. The coast watcher plan was instigated by the threat of U-boat activities to the convoy system of the North Atlantic out of Sydney and Halifax. This activity necessitated that all approaches be protected by all available naval and air resources.³³

These air assets first came to bear in the spring of 1942. Canada felt the sting of war in its littoral waters, the first naval attacks since the War of 1812.³⁴ U-boats approached the Gulf of St Lawrence and patrolled the estuary. U-boats actually came within 600 km of Quebec City. This activity caused a certain amount of consternation amongst the Canadian citizenry, an event for which they were grossly unprepared.

An assault on Canadian territory began proper by the arrival of U-553 in the Gulf of St Lawrence. U-553 sunk two ships in close order that brought the attention of the importance of the St Lawrence estuary to both the German Admiralty and Canadian Government in May 1942. The Gulf of St Lawrence suddenly became a true theatre of war!³⁵ All of Canada’s military assets were brought to bear on this looming threat. Debert played a role as well.

The German Navy had made no real plans for incursions into the St Lawrence. Their first incursions were merely accidental. U -553 came to the Gulf to make repairs before returning to its patrol line in the Atlantic because the Gulf was considered a calm safe sector. However the opportunity quickly presented itself that the Gulf, hinted at striking the Canadian heartland. They quickly proceeded to target in-land shipping with great success.

The OTUs came to play an important role in providing air cover in the approaches of Gulf of St Lawrence, Atlantic and elsewhere. They augmented Canadian naval and RCAF Eastern Air Command resources. Still conditions were more favourable toward the enemy. Air attack was very weather dependent. U- Boats had to be surfaced and seen by air resources to be attacked in that day and age.

The Gulf's estuarine conditions also provided U-boats with a cloak of subsurface invisibility that shielded them from sonar-ascid contact by the navy. The Asdic system of the day was limited by the bathyscaphe effect, which provided a virtual cloak of electronic distortion by the mix of saline, fresh, hot and cold water in an estuarine environment.³⁶ But there was considerable Canadian action despite these difficulties.

The intensity of the action in the Gulf can be illustrated by the experience of U-517 which was on the receiving end of considerable Canadian attention. U-517 was severely damaged while on patrol before it departed for home base at Lorient on 5 October 1942. This damage left a lasting impression on the crew of that boat as well as that of the Commander of the German U-boat Headquarters. The U-517's commander calculated that he was on the receiving end of at least 27 bombs and 118 depth charges since his arrival in the Gulf. This ordnance had been dropped near enough to cause him considerable discomfort.³⁷

Not one U-boat was sunk in the Gulf of St Lawrence during the campaign of 1942. But this does not mean that the U-boat got away scot-free! Their collective experience of U-boat commanders operating in the Gulf of St Lawrence, made a deep impression on Admiral Dönitz. He was impressed by both the number and intensity of the RCN and RCAF attacks. Despite the fact that not one of his submarines was sunk by Canadian pilots or the RCN, he concluded the very presence of air cover and the presence of the RCN was a great deterrent. His decision to refrain from pursuing a campaign in the inland waters of the Gulf in 1943 was made because of this fear.³⁸ U-boats only returned to Canadian waters in 1944 with the introduction of the `snorkel` which afforded them protection, to re-charge their batteries, while submerged.³⁹ Until then, the threat of air cover contributed to keeping the Gulf free of the U-boat threat.

Unbeknownst to Canada and its allies, a great victory had been won in 1942. The U-boat fleet was denied access to the Gulf of St Lawrence because of combined operations and because of air power in particular. It was a battle that was won in part because of the efforts of Eastern Coastal Command. Eastern Coastal Command was largely augmented by aircraft from its OTUs in the heat of battle. It was the virtual presence of aircraft, whether they were fully operational or under operational training, that kept many a U-boat at bay and submerged during the spring-fall 1942 to 1944.

Debert Operational Sorties

Debert and other training units in maritime Canada operated in the Bay of Fundy, the Gulf of St Lawrence and well into the Atlantic to the extreme limits of their aircrafts' endurance to provide this maritime protection and to project power. It was not a cushy jammy posting. There was danger involved both in the training and in the operation!

According to Hudson plane historian Bill Walker, of London, Ontario, "The instructors also used the school's aircraft to search for German U-boats in Canadian waters when the U-boats moved into the western Atlantic in 1942 and 1943".⁴⁰ Part of the mission was training, but more importantly, they served an operational function as well. They placed

the fear of God into German submariners who were forced to keep their heads down in the presence of these aircraft.

Debert began operations on 23 May 1941 equipped with its Hudson aircraft in its role as a General Reconnaissance training unit. It undertook many anti-submarine patrols from Dartmouth over the Western Atlantic.⁴¹ Mr. Walker's records document that the Debert School flew 1,041 operational missions. In the course of these missions they sighted seven U-boats, attacked two and were known to have damaged one on July 4, 1943, about 160 kilometres south of Halifax.⁴²

Little did he know it but Air Vice-Marshal Breadner's December 1940 request for the OTUs was paid in spades. The OTUs augmented Breadner's thin resources and provided the RCAF with much needed depth just by their presence alone! U-boat captains were unable to discern between air threats, "Was this particular training or operational unit?" It did not matter for aircraft were the eyes on and threat to Admiral Dönitz's U-boat fleet. Thus the OTUs contributed greatly to the efforts of RCAF's Eastern Air Command.

The battle in the Gulf of St Lawrence reminds us that there were casualties on Canadian soil during World War II. Our memory is most often drawn to the battlefields on foreign soil, leaving us with a collective sense that there were no significant battles on Canadian soil. Duty on Canadian shores was often considered benign. This false perception tends to denigrate the sacrifice of those souls lost here. It was anything but benign as the records so often show. The Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence shows us both operational tempo and intensity. It demonstrates the tactics employed, air action, and combined operations and cooperation that were necessary to protect Canada's maritime approaches.

The End of OTU 31 and the beginning of RCAF Station No. 7

After the surrender of Germany in May 1945, OTU 31 was quickly closed and the facility transferred to the RCAF. The draw down of the BCATP had already begun by 1944. BCATP training was being curtailed. The plan was finally terminated 31 Mar 1945.⁴³ The British government requested in light of the curtailment of the BCATP that RAF schools be closed first.⁴⁴ Those British units that were considered essential to Canadian defence though were taken over by Canada and given RCAF designations. On the east coast, No. 31 Operational Training Unit at Debert and No. 36 at Greenwood, NS, both were redesignated as No. 7 and No. 8 respectively and staffed with RCAF personnel.⁴⁵

RCAF Station Debert had a second life. It was spared closure and forces were transferred there for the final preparations for the invasion of Japan. A tiger force was assembled consisting of Mosquito and Lancaster Aircraft under No. 7 Squadron of the RCAF in preparation for Canada's bomber contingent of 141 Lancaster Mk.X's for the final push on Japan.⁴⁶ The tiger force never made it there as the dropping of the atom bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki forced Japan's surrender.

The war was finally over! But up until that time, training continued in earnest with the cost of additional lives. On 30 November 1944, Pilot Officer Breadner and Flying Officer

K.B. Bennett were both killed when their Mosquito aircraft #KB278 struck a hill three miles north of Westchester, Nova Scotia. Pilot Officer Breadner was only 20 years old when he met his end. He left behind to grieve, like any other Canadian family who lost a loved one at the time, his father, and Canada's Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Lloyd S. Breadner, and his mother, Mary Evelyn of Ottawa, Ontario.⁴⁷ It was ironic that Breadner's request to bring the OTUs to Canada, and the construction of a station at Debert, would lead to a very deep personal loss and tragedy.

The BCATP's True Cost

We tend to measure our war success in costs either in dollars and cents or as benefits/costs. However the true cost of war is truly measured by the lives lost for the liberty gained. There were some 856 deaths in the training of 131553 aircrew who were employed in the BCATP in Canada. It was estimated that 70% of these may have been due to youthful exuberance nominally known as disobedience, carelessness, and pilot error.⁴⁸ Debert incurred some 110 of these 856 fatal casualties (13%).⁴⁹ However we tend to hide the true cost of war in the margins of a slight casualty rate. Total losses measured less than one percent of the total under training from October 1940 to March 1945. But it does not convey the fact much more was lost in the way of intangibles; the human potential, the relationships, and the shortened lives. A fine web of humanity was expended leaving a hole in the fabric of many nations.

Closing Remarks – “Lest we forget”

Debert was finally paid off in 1946. Like so many facilities and assets, Crown assets disposed of or managed its civil conversion. Debert itself reverted back to its pastoral setting with a greatly reduced population. The airfield was abandoned and facilities stripped. Where there was once great activity, there was now only silence.

The silence may give one pause and the time to reflect. There was a small cost in lives in the training plan. But this loss of life was a linchpin and a key to ultimate victory. Canadians should never forget that there is a debt owed to these brave souls. Our attention would be tragically misplaced if we do not consider their sacrifice and the part they played in the greater war effort. For some, like OTU 31 Debert, it was not just training. Some days it was very real and very operational. Lives were tragically lost. The graves of many are yet unknown, and others do lie in perpetual rest on Canadian soil. It is only for us to go out and see for ourselves, “lest we forget”.

¹ F.J. Hatch, **Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945**, Department Of National Defence Directorate Of History, Monograph Series No. 1, © Minister of Supply and Services Canada , 1983, pg 1-2

² *ibid* Hatch, 1983 pg 7-15

³ *ibid* Hatch, 1983, pg 5

⁴ *ibid* Hatch, 1983, pg 1-2

⁵ *ibid* Hatch, 1983, pg 33

⁶ *ibid* Hatch, 1983, pg 64

⁷ ibid Hatch, 1983, pg 33

⁸ ibid Hatch, pg 41

⁹ Mr. William Langille, Chairman, Standing Committee On Veterans Affairs **Testimony - Debert Military History Society to Standing Committee On Veterans Affairs**, Halifax, Thursday, March 1, 2001, 9:00 A.M.

Source: <http://www.gov.ns.ca/legislature/hansard/comm/va/va010301.htm>

Accessed: 13 August 2010

Pg 6 personal recollections of. Don Davidson, a young businessman at that time, operating Davidson's Store. Mr Davidson lived in Debert all his life. He grew up there when the war came as a teenager of 15 or 16 years of age

¹⁰ Air Force, **CFS / RCAF Station Debert Nova Scotia Canada**, www.RCAF.com,

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Source: <http://www.rcaf.com/Stations/stationsDetail.php?CFS-RCAF-Station-Debert-66>

Accessed: 13 December 2010

¹¹ Ibid Langille, SCONDAV 2001, pg 5-6

¹² Ibid Langille, SCONDAV 2001, pg 6-7

¹³ Sergeant R. W. Harris, **Memories of Debert, N.S.**, undated

Written account in Debert Military Museum Archives

Source: <http://www.debertmilitarymuseum.org/harris.htm>

Accessed: 5 October 2010

¹⁴ Spencer Dunmore and William Carter, Ph.D., **Reap The Whirlwind – The Untold Story of 6 Group, Canada's Bomber Force of World War II**, McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1991, Pg 43

¹⁵ ibid Hatch, 1983, pg 74

¹⁶ ibid Hatch, 1983, pg 74

¹⁷ ibid Hatch, 1983, pg 74 -75

¹⁸ Bob Ingraham, **Sergeant. Joe Hick's War: In April 1942, Royal Canadian Air Force No.420 Squadron Makes A Fateful Raid On Rostok, Germany**, Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, Papers and Records, Volume XXXV (2007), pg 6-7

¹⁹ Ibid Hatch ,pg 75

²⁰ Ibid Hatch, pg 75

²¹ Ernest E. Allen, **An RCAF Pilot's Story 1939-1945 from the memoirs of Ernest E Allen**, 1996, Part One - Pilot Training

Source: <http://www.seawaymall.com/eallen/>

Accessed: 13 August 2010

²² Ibid, Ernest E. Allen, 1996, Part One - Pilot Training

²³ Ibid, Ernest E. Allen, 1996, Part One - Pilot Training

²⁴ The Calgary Herald, **Four RAF Fliers killed in N.S.**, October 23, 1941

Source:

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=0yBkAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=SHsNAAAAIIBAJ&pg=5019,2458176&dq=rcaf+debert&hl=en>

Accessed: 13 January 2011

²⁵ Ibid, Ernest E. Allen, 1996, Part One - Pilot Training

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³⁰ Ibid, Ernest E. Allen, 1996, Part One - Pilot Training

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³³ Ibid Greenwood Military Aviation Museum,2009, Page 5.1 Rev. 0

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³⁵ Ibid, Mosseray, 29 Mar 2002

³⁶ Nathan M. Greenfield, **The Battle of the St Lawrence – The Second World War in Canada**, Harpers-Collins Publishers Ltd., 2004, pg 60:

Bathyscaphe effect the blending of fresh and salt, cold and warm water in an Estuary system.

³⁷ A.R. Byers (Ed.), **The Canadians at War 1939-1945 Second Edition**, The Reader's Digest Association (Canada) Ltd, 1986, pg 129

³⁸David Andrews, **The Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence**, Royal Canadian Legion Branch # 98 © 2008 All Rights Reserved, pg 9

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