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A Calgarian's Experience In RCAF 417 Squadron

Stewart Egglestone is an RCAF World War Two Veteran and CMHS Lifetime member. He grew up in Calgary and attended Crescent Heights High School .

In July of 1942, he volunteered for the RCAF. He became a Leading Aircraftsman (Specialty Electrical) and worked on bombers and fighters while serving in England and Italy. In England, he met his future wife and his “war bride” came to Calgary after the war.

The following article is based on Stewart's research writings on his RCAF 417 Squadron and some excerpts from his oral history interview with the Military Museums (Calgary).

The Calgary Military History Society thanks you for your service Stu!

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Mr Wyley Lord's Armoured Bicycle

How do you defeat the “Boer's” in South Africa. Chase them with a Armoured Bicycle would be one way. Right?

The bicycle's basic premise, as stated by the inventor Mr. Wyley Lord, was that the front wheel should be made of a solid steel disc rather than the familiar spokes. This disc would incorporate a loop-hole through which the rider, when dismounted and taking advantage of the protection afforded by the disc, could fire at will against his attackers.

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Brief History of RCAF 417 Squadron

The Squadron was formed in England and after training was completed, 26 pilots, 4 ground crew officers, 244 RCAF ground crew, and 106 RAF ground crew for a total squadron strength of 380 men sailed from England in April 1942 via South Africa to future fighter operations in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. When V/E Day arrived in May 1945, the squadron had flown 12,116 sorties, destroyed 29 enemy aircraft, 8 probables and 22 damaged. Also, the squadron dropped 1,080 tons of bombs in its later utilization as a fighter-bomber squadron. Major awards were 1 Distinguished Service Order, 9 Distinguished Flying Crosses (DFC) and one bar to the DFC.

The Cost -32 aircraft were lost, 28 pilots lost of whom 8 were Prisoners of War and 2 evaded capture. Additionally, 2 pilots were lost in non-operational flying, and two ground crew died. One ground crew died after being assaulted by thugs and the second following a motorcycle accident. It was the low level bombing sorties that ran up the casualties, both men and Spitfires.

The Life - When operations intensified in the last months of the war the squadron set Wing Serviceability Standard Highs and Operational Records (938 Operational Hours, 723 sorties, and dropped 244 tons of bombs). In April 1945, the Squadron was lean and mean with 30 pilots and 244 ground crew – all RCAF. A total of approximately 166 pilots served in the squadron, many of whom were war experienced and some had DFC's, or DFM's and together formed a solid nucleus that eliminated the calamity of having an excess of rookie pilots. No doubt all of the 9 Squadron Commanders left some of their individual command style with the squadron, but our draft only served with David Goldberg and three months with the tenacious Kallio, an American in the RCAF, who previously was awarded the DFC and was now being awarded the Squadron's only Distinguished Service Order. We recall the extra early morning wake-ups to make ready pre-dawn take-offs of a "hot" 417 Spitfire. Another former Commander and in September 1944 the Wing Leader, the persistent Stan "Bull" Turner, who as a "Lone Ranger" was determined to get "The Mad Major". The Luftwaffe was down to its second last?? Messerschmitt and this German Major, outnumbered 100 or 500 to 1, had the "Mad" nerve to take a peak at the Allied Line positions every dawn. The Bull never got him!



Stewart at the World War II Memorial of Service at Crescent Heights High School in Calgary. The wall records his name for his war service and also lists the famous fighter pilot "Willie McKnight" who also graduated from the school.

Some Overseas Memories

Travel by Famous Ocean Liners -

Stewart left New York on the “Queen Mary” on October 8, 1943 and disembarked at Gourock, Scotland on October 16, 1943. On December 22, 1945 he left Gourock Scotland on the “Queen Elizabeth” and disembarked in New York on December 28, 1945. To this day, he still follows the history of these two ships.

Servicing Bombers in England-

He serviced Halifax and Lancaster bombers for RCAF 432 Squadron. Stewart remembered they were always checking for electrical problems, as the condensation would build up in the aircraft. They had few problems with the Lancasters but the Halifax bombers would have many returns from operations with glitches such as radios conking out.

Arrival In Wartime Italy-

Stewart remembers arriving in Naples, Italy in September 1944. From there, they were shipped out in boxcars to their base. “Anyway, there was this big fat Italian guy walking along the side and he was carrying a couple of bags. All of a sudden we heard a shot and we went out and the Italian was lying there dead. An American sentry had shot him because above the tracks was a sign in Italian that said “Forbidden”. I guess they were really worried about sabotage. That was an awakening about being in a war zone.”

Sand In Spitfire Engines

The airfield was on a beach less than one yard from the Adriatic Sea (near Bellaria, Italy). It was facing east of the sea. The prevailing winds blew from east to west. I believe the runway was made from wire mesh with canvas. (The Squadron War Diarist in the adjutant’s office wrote it was PSP that was Perforated Steel Plate.) It was here we began to lose aircraft. I didn’t see any of them crash but did see them searching for downed aircraft. After losing a number of planes and pilots, they were shut down for three days. For prevention, they came up with two ideas that seemed to fix the problem. **First**, they eventually made a wooden plug to go over the intake of the Spitfire while they were parked. There was a string on both sides of the plug that came up on either side of the cowling and tied onto the pilot’s cockpit mirror. This way the pilot could always see when the plug was in. **Second**, they would perform a maximum engines run up to prior to take off. The procedure was for 3 ground crew to hold the tail down, as the Spitfire was nose heavy. One crew each was on either side at the front edge of the horizontal stabilizer. They each faced forward towards the nose of the aircraft. A third crew straddled the fuselage and was facing backwards. The back two crew shoved their faces into the jerkin of the crewman straddling the fuselage to protect their faces from the sand blast. (Stewart also wore a toque on his head when he was straddling the fuselage.) The crewman with the jerkin would have the faces of other two in his armpits and covered with the jerkin. This stopped some of the sandblast from hitting the faces of the crew on the horizontal stabilizers.”



In Closing, here is some Ground Crew Humour

We would load the bombs also on the Spitfires. There is a picture of a guy holding a 500-pound bomb. His name was Tiny Lalonde. I am in the picture also. They placed the bomb on a metal barrel and Tiny had it resting on his hip. Then, out of sight of the camera, they jerked the barrel away so it looked like he was holding up a 500 pound bomb. These are the types of things guys do when they are together in our situation.”



In this photo collage, the larger picture shows Tiny Lalonde carrying a heavy bomb while Stewart (second from the right side of the picture and wearing a cap) grins as he watches this unfold. This “staged” photo is an example of a ground crew keeping morale high during wartime. Lower left shows Stewart in England on a Lancaster (1944) and lower right shows Stewart by a FW 190 in Austria (1945).

"This article was put together and submitted by member James Baldwin to thank Stu Egglestone for his on-going commitment to the study and the sharing of military history."

Strange Things— The Armoured Cycle

The City Engineering Company, of Great Charles X Street in Birmingham, England introduced a modern aspect to warfare as it was known at the dawn of the 20th century. This firm, which previously was involved in general industrial design and manufacturing, conceived of an armoured bicycle for use against the Boers in South Africa.

The bicycle's basic premise, as stated by the inventor Mr. Wyley Lord, was that the front wheel should be made of a solid steel disc rather than the familiar spokes. This disc would incorporate a loop-hole through which the rider, when dismounted and taking advantage of the protection afforded by the disc, could fire at will against his attackers. As implausible as the invention sounds, it nonetheless received a great deal of encouragement from the military fringe.

In his report to the Ordnance Department, Maj. Gen. Sir F. Maurice, GoC Brighton District, on the Cycling Manoeuvres held from the 4th to the 6th August, 1900, wrote;

This invention is intended to supply a defensive protection to the cyclist who uses it with a rifle. The front wheel consists of a plate of Herveyized Steel with a loop-hole for the rifle. Though necessarily heavier than the ordinary machine, it is of interest to note that Mr. Lord, who was riding it, acted as one of the special scouts, and in doing so, on Saturday rode 65 miles in a very hilly district. On Sunday and Monday, despite the bad conditions of the roads, he acted easily as Cyclist orderly. He did not appear to be more fatigued than the riders of the ordinary cycles. This point is of interest, as no doubt on a road, and in some positions, a body of cyclists protecting a defile would make a much more formidable defence if they were fully covered.

The protection offered by the front wheel did not come lightly. The wheel weighed 16 pounds more than a conventional wheel. The cycle was made even heavier by the addition of a mud-guard for the rear wheel. This was a deviation from the norm as rear mud-guards were seldom included on military cycles. This mud-guard however was also an ingeniously designed trenching spade! The cycle was put through a rigorous test in January, 1901 when a total of 56 rounds of .303 calibre Mk II Small Arms Ammunition were fired at it.



Mr. Lord, inventor, standing beside his armoured cycle. He believed that his cycle would bring defeat over the Boers in South Africa.

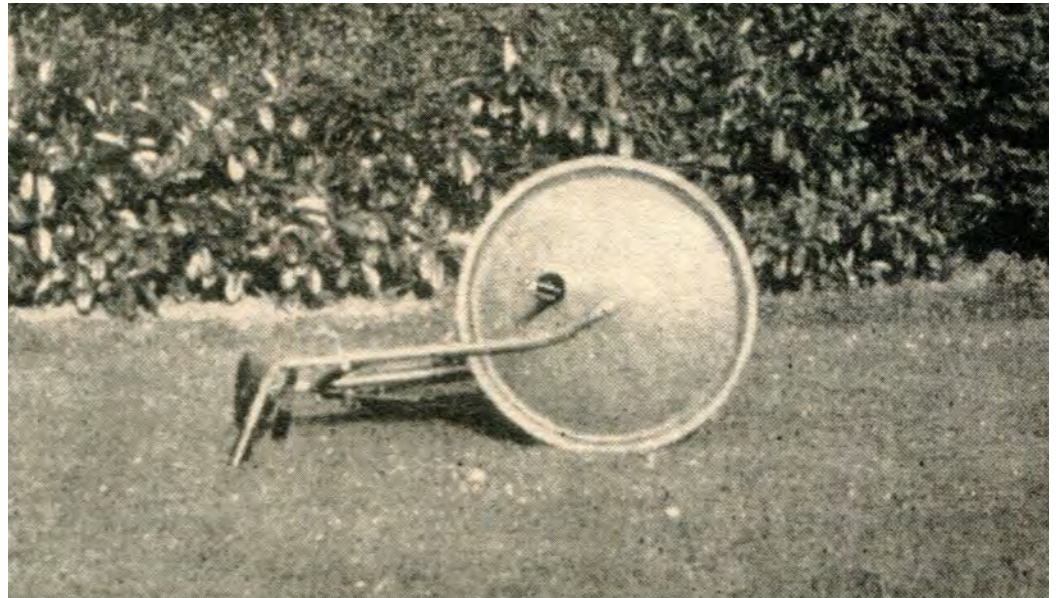
The range varied from 9 rounds fired at 1,000 yards, all of which missed to 15 rounds fired at 400 yards, of which 5 hit the cycle. Damage was reported slight with no visible cracking or penetration of the shield. The following morning. Col. Burgess, late of the Royal Artillery, fired 5 rounds from 400 yards. His comments were reported in the *Journal of the Royal United Service Institute*. Col. Burgess mentioned the . . . *difficulty of sighting and hitting, through invisibility at that range. I rode the cycle about half-a-mile just as it came from the butts firing. I can speak as to the fairness of the trial and correctness of the above report. As an indifferent rider, I found the weight of the shield (to) act as a fly-wheel, a positive advantage in overcoming obstacles, when moving across country, and confirms the riding over rough hilly district, about 65 miles by an amateur. I also attended experiments on the same range on 8th February, 1901, to test ordinary firing from the shield and through the loop-hole in lying-down position, which was found simple and easy by the marksman, though the first time he shot through it.*

The cycle appeared to have met every criteria for adoption by the British Army; a British invention of sound design, solid construction, well-tested and proven in trials. In addition the cycle had support at the highest levels of the British Military establishment.

And finally, the cycle was developed during a period of open warfare in South Africa, specifically with the Boer in mind. Nonetheless the cycle was not adopted and no more was ever heard of Mr. Lord or the Armoured Cycle again.

Notes;

National Archives, RG9 11
A 1, Vol. 342, File 20350



The rider has taken cover behind the steel disc and is aiming his rifle through the loophole

Financial Report from Treasurer Floyd S

“Based on the current COVID situation, decisions were made at the AGM that Members in good standing (membership renewed for the year 2020) will be granted a free membership for 2021. A reminder email was sent out to the entire membership with this proposition after the AGM.

Funding to cover this will be transferred from our Reserve account to cover the normal Operating budget.”

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The SOCIETY

is a non-profit registered society which fosters the study of the military and the police, and the heritage of Canada, the British Empire, and the world as well as the preservation of military artifacts and records. The CMHS meets once every calendar month at:

Petty Officers' Mess HMCS Tecumseh
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