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"Bat Outta Hel"

CH146 Griffon Nose Art in Afghanistan

W.E. Storey

My article on CH147D Chinook nose art, published in the Winter 2011 issue of *Canadian Military History*, analysed the artwork applied to those heavy lift helicopters in Afghanistan. While collecting the images and information on the Chinook artwork I also gathered images of the artwork that was being painted on the CH146 Griffons. I was unable to include this material in the previous article until the Griffon nose art had been officially approved.

Perceptions have changed since the Second World War and artwork that had been acceptable for use on aircraft is no longer permitted. In fact the whole topic of nose art seems to be very contentious. While today's RCAF ground and flight crews want to have artwork on their aircraft, the military is very cautious about what images are used. In some cases artwork is banned altogether. The concern over content makes sense as the region in which these aircraft were operating, southern Afghanistan, is very conservative and ultra religious. Artwork that may be inspirational or motivational for Western military aircrew could be offensive to the people whom we were trying to protect and mentor. In the end, a balance appears to have been struck with six examples of artwork painted on the front battery cover of the CH146 Griffon helicopter.

The CH146 Griffon is a medium sized utility Bell model 412CF

Abstract: Aircraft nose art is an important component of a combat aircraft's markings and can help to boost crew morale, esprit de corps and instill pride in the service, as well as add a distinct character to the aircraft. This article builds upon the author's earlier study of Canadian Chinook nose art by examining the images which adorned CH146 Griffons in Afghanistan. While the art on the big twin engine helicopters largely reflected the transport role of those aircraft, the nose art of the Griffons was inspired by the fighting nature of the Griffons escort role.

helicopter with the capacity to lift a dozen troops. This aircraft can trace its lineage to the earlier Bell 212/UH-1N Twin Huey which was developed from the very successful Bell 205 UH-1 Iroquois. The model was purchased in 1992 to replace the CH118 Iroquois, CH135 Twin Huey and the CH136 Kiowa. The delivery of the hundred Canadian manufactured Griffons began in 1994. The acquisition of these new aircraft was not without controversy as it was reported that the standard tender process had been by-passed. The Griffon has seen service not only in Canada but in such diverse regions as The Former Yugoslavia, Central America and Haiti.

The Griffons serving with the Canadian Air Wing in Afghanistan were armed with the Dillon Aero M134D 7.62 mm Minigun, the finest small caliber, defence suppression

weapon available. It is an externally-powered, electrically-driven 6-barrelled, automatic machine gun (compared to conventional, gas-operated machine guns like the 7.62 mm C6 and 5.56 mm C9). The rotary action of the mini-gun allows for higher rates of fire and, because each barrel only fires one round in each cycle of six, the weapon remains relatively cool while firing up to 3,000 rounds per minute. The weapon is typically fed from a 3,000- or 4,000-round magazine and is capable of long periods of continuous fire without threat of damage to the weapon making it extremely effective for defensive suppression. A crew served weapon, the gun weighs just over 66 pounds. The M134D arrived in theatre in January 2009 and was operational a few weeks later. This weapon enhanced the Griffon's ability, when used as an escort, to suppress ground threats.

A typical configuration for the Griffon would be a Dillon mounted on one side and a C6 machine gun on the other, or just two C6s, if a serviceable Dillon was not available. The Griffon rarely mount two Dillons, as the weight of the guns, ammunition panniers, and several thousand rounds of ammunition seriously reduce the range and lifting capacity of the aircraft.

It is not surprising that the combat use of the Dillon minigun and the C6 have inspired much of the Griffon nose art. My previous article



Two Canadian Forces Griffon Helicopters approach Kandahar Airfield after a Chinook escort mission in Afghanistan, 31 January 2010.



described how the Chinook’s task of carrying and delivering troops and supplies to the outlying regions of the Panjwahi region of Afghanistan inspired the artwork on those aircraft. In the case of the Griffon, the nose art is more aggressive to reflect this helicopter’s use as a heavily armed escort aircraft.

“Ace of Spades” was the first Griffon nose art and was painted during Tactical Helicopter Roto 0 in early 2009. According to Master Corporal Gord Bennett who painted this first artwork, “It was developed and painted onto aircraft 414 after becoming a ‘double ace’ from a steady series of bird strikes, but

unfortunately it was felt that it was inappropriate and it had a relatively short lived life.” Following this first attempt at nose art, additional works were not authorized until 18 months later when the policy was changed.

The remainder of the artwork was painted by Corporal Richard Aucoin who has graciously provided the images of his work.

“Bat Outta Hel” was first shown to the CEFCOM Operation Keepsake¹ team during a collection visit to Kandahar Airfield in July 2010. At that time the Chinooks were already sporting their own artwork, so this was the first authorized artwork for the Griffon and was applied to aircraft 401. “Bat Outta Hel” was a large black bat with piercing red eyes. The bat was depicted swooping



Top: Griffon 492 carries “Falcon with a Spear and Canada Flag” on its front battery cover as it departs on an escort mission from Kandahar Air Field, 27 July 2011.

Inset: Master Corporal Gord Bennett holds “Ace of Spades,” the first Griffon noseart he painted for aircraft 414 in early 2009.

in, fully armed with machine guns. The weapons were painted in either light grey or off white to make them stand out against the olive green aircraft nose. The “Bat Outta Hel” lettering was accented by a subtle red highlight. “Bat Outta Hel” may have been inspired by the rock album “Bat Out of Hell,”² or the bat may have been chosen to represent the Griffon’s use in night operations in Afghanistan. Another possible connection could be drawn to the red bat symbol of the wartime RCAF 440 Fighter Bomber Squadron. The rendering of “Hell” as “Hel” may reference the military abbreviation for helicopter. Unfortunately this artwork was lost when the aircraft was returned to Canada to be refurbished.

“To the Finish” was painted on aircraft 414, the same aircraft that had sported the short-lived “Ace of Spades” a year earlier. “To the Finish” is a full colour painting of Popeye the Sailor, a fictional cartoon character created by Elzie Crisler Segar.³ Popeye has been a popular feature in military aircraft art because of his muscular, ready to fight persona. The character on Griffon 414 has been given some unique features: a black tactical Canadian flag tattoo on his right fore-arm and a black tactical RCAF roundel tattoo on his left.

The wording “To the Finish” is painted in blue and is taken from Popeye’s motto, “I fights to the finish because I eats me spinach.” Fighting to the finish can also be used to reflect how the RCAF, like the rest of the Canadian Forces, is ready and capable of fighting to the finish.

“Falcon with a Spear and Canada Flag” was painted on aircraft 492. The falcon is the symbol of 430e Escadron tactique d’hélicoptères, which is based at CFB Valcartier. With the phase out of the Twin Huey and Kiowa helicopters, the squadron acquired the Griffon helicopter in 1994. The RCAF website describes

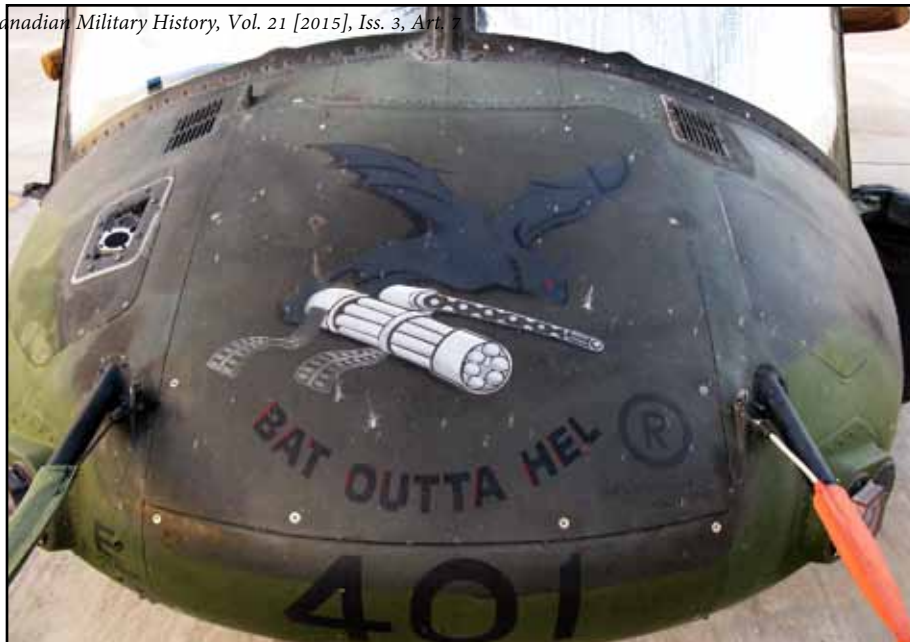


Photo courtesy Corporal Richard Aucoin

Above: Griffon 401 carries the art work “Bat Outta Hel.” The image shows a black bat with a red eye carrying two large machine guns, one of which is the 6-barrelled Dillon minigun.

Right: The squadron badge of 440 Squadron features a large red bat with wings extended.

Below: Popeye, the resourceful, capable sailor with superhuman strength, is featured in “To the Finish,” the nose art which adorns Griffon 414.



Photo courtesy Corporal Richard Aucoin



Door gunner, Corporal Michael Zebiere, provides security from a CH146 Griffon helicopter with the Dillon M134D small caliber defence suppression weapon during a reconnaissance of Task Force Kandahar (TFK) helicopter landing spots in the TFK area of operations, 13 January 2010.

Below: A Griffon armed with a Dillon minigun escorts a Chinook on a mission in Afghanistan, January 2010.



the 430 Squadron badge as depicting a “Gyrfalcon’s head in front of a sun in splendour. The Gyrfalcon, found in northern Canada, is noted for its exceptional and alert fighting ability. The sun in splendour is used to depict the squadron’s role of fighter reconnaissance. (The bringing of light or information to the troops).”⁴ This nose art features a maroon coloured falcon with a yellow beak and talons, accented with a red eye and claws, streaking down to attack an unseen foe. The falcon clutches in its talons a black spear that trails a red and white Canadian flag.

“Gun Slinger” features a full-colour gun fighter reminiscent of the American West of the 1870s as depicted in Hollywood cowboy movies. “Gun Slinger” was painted on aircraft 465 and refers to the Dillon six-barrel guns that were slung on the Griffon. This painted figure has captured in great detail the dress, stance and look of a seasoned gunfighter as he stares down his opponent prior to drawing his two six-shooter revolvers. This is the only figure to be painted facing the viewer and would appear to be advancing forward as the helicopter flew closer.

The final piece of nose art is “Dragon with Machine Guns,” which was painted on aircraft 425. A green fire-spitting dragon gripping two machine guns has been superimposed in an attacking stance over a red Canadian maple leaf. The dragon has been given brown, orange and red detail highlight colours and spits red flame from its mouth. This mythical and much feared creature holds what appears to be two M1914 air-cooled Browning machine guns which have been painted in light grey or white in order to stand out from the olive green colour of the helicopter. The two Second World War era machine guns may have been used in this artwork as a historical link to the weapons used on RCAF ground attack aircraft during that war.



Photo courtesy Corporal Richard Aucoin



Above: “Falcon with a Spear and Canada Flag” adorns Griffon 492.

Left: The badge of 430 Tactical Helicopter Squadron displays the falcon which is the totem of the unit.

Below left: The old west cowboy “Gun Slinger” from Griffon 465 is ready to draw his six-shooter revolvers which symbolize the Dillon miniguns carried by the helicopter.

Below: “Dragon with Machine Guns” shown on Griffon 425 was inspired by a Taliban’s characterization of the intense firepower brought down by the miniguns as the “Dragon’s Breath of Alla.”



Photo courtesy Corporal Richard Aucoin



Photo courtesy Corporal Richard Aucoin



A Canadian Forces Chinook lands in a dusty field outside the Daman District Centre to pickup Canadian Forces members Griffon provides security overwatch.

The dragon symbol was probably inspired by the Taliban's reported description of the intense firepower brought down by the miniguns as the "Dragon's Breath of Alla."

Notes

I would like to thank Corporal Richard Aucoin, Master Corporal Gord Bennett and Corporal Steve Forth for their help in preparing this article. Their talent as artists, their desire to preserve history, and their generosity in providing me with the background material and images has allowed me the unique opportunity to record their work.

1. In July 2010, Canadian Expeditionary Force Command (CEFCOM) Headquarters sent a two-person team under Operation KEEPSAKE into theatre in order to catalogue historical mementos for repatriation to Canada and to photograph the living conditions at Kandahar Airfield.

2. American rock musician Meatloaf's album "Bat Out of Hell" was first released in October 1977 and has since become the fifth bestselling album worldwide, having sold to date 43 million copies.
3. Popeye has been featured in comic strips and animated cartoons in the cinema as well as on television. He first appeared in the daily King Features comic strip *Thimble Theatre* on 17 January 1929. Although Segar's *Thimble Theatre* strip was in its tenth year when Popeye made his debut, the sailor quickly became the main focus of the strip and *Thimble Theatre* became one of King Features' most popular properties during the 1930s. *Thimble Theatre* was continued after Segar's death in 1938 by several writers and artists, most notably Segar's assistant Bud Sagendorf. The strip, now titled *Popeye*, continues to appear in first-run installments in its Sunday edition, written and drawn by Hy Eisman. The daily strips are reprints of old Sagendorf stories. In 1980 a Robert Altman's 1980 film "Popeye" starred comedian Robin Williams as the muscular sailor.

4. 430 Tactical Helicopter Squadron official website. <<http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/1w-1e/sqns-escs/page-eng.asp?id=379>>

Ed Storey is the Expeditionary Force Command (CEFCOM) Headquarters war diarist. Since 2008 Ed has served as a reserve engineer warrant officer following a 26-year career in the regular force. Following a trip into Afghanistan in July 2009, Ed initiated a plan called Operation Keepsake described in the article. In July 2010 he was back in Afghanistan to catalogue mementos, assess the memorials and to photograph the living and working conditions in theatre. October 2010 saw Ed as part of the Camp Mirage close-out team where he was tasked to collect the camp mementos and recover the memorial for repatriation back to Canada, and his work was highlighted in the Canadian Forces *Maple Leaf* Newspaper and *Frontline* Magazine. In April 2012 he was presented with the Commander CEFCOM Commendation for his Operation Keepsake work. Ed lives in Ottawa with his wife and two teenage children.