

1998

## Flying Desert Rat: The Combat Career of Squadron Leader Bert Houle

Christopher Evans  
*Wilfrid Laurier University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Evans, Christopher "Flying Desert Rat: The Combat Career of Squadron Leader Bert Houle." Canadian Military History 7, 1 (1998)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).



# Flying Desert Rat

## The Combat Career of Squadron Leader Bert Houle

Christopher Evans

Albert Houle is a Canadian whose war, while not totally unique for a Canadian fighter pilot in World War Two, was certainly far from the norm. His entire combat career was fought in North Africa, Sicily and Italy. His first tour was with the Royal Air Force and his second with the Royal Canadian Air Force. Similar to another Canadian ace George Beurling, Houle's desire for combat and intemperate attitude to all those who stood in his way led to as many actions on the ground as in the air. Almost without exception, Houle viewed anyone not in combat or directly supporting it as so much administrative deadwood and this attitude would cost him on more than one occasion. However, unlike Beurling, Houle had the demeanour and desire to lead men in combat and bring them home again.

Born Albert Ulrich Houle on 24 March 1914 in Massey, Ontario. Bert Houle was shaped by his rural environment. With ancestry tracing back to both France and Ireland, Houle, along with three brothers and one sister, was raised as neither French or English but simply Canadian. Life on the farm was tough and the Canadian theme of survival in the wilderness was ever present.

Self-reliance was all important and by the age of 10 Houle learned to shoot a rifle. Hunting was a way of supplementing the dinner table and Houle focused on making the first shot count. It was a skill that would serve him well in the skies over North Africa and Italy years later. Having mastered the wild environs of Northern Canada Houle was to succeed equally well in academia. In 1932 Houle was accepted in to the Electrical Engineering program at the University of

Toronto. While studying he found, much like his earlier days in Massey, that getting into fights seemed a little too easy and he decided to learn how to get out of them just as easily. He chose not the debating team but the boxing and wrestling teams. Houle excelled at both winning the school boxing title in his second year and the Canadian intercollegiate wrestling championship in his graduation year.<sup>1</sup>

After graduation Houle worked as an electrician at a mine in Northern Ontario before it closed and he came back to U of T, accepting a teaching post. He stayed there until the spring of 1938 when he again went back to the mines. By this time war was looming on the horizon and Houle worried that his job as an engineer would disqualify him for active service so he promptly quit, had his tonsils removed and teeth checked so that the medical examiners would find no excuse to turn him down. With two of his brothers married and the third recovering from an operation Houle felt it was up to him to fight for the family. He, like many other young men of the time, was captivated by flying, especially after reading *Canada's Fighting Airmen* by Colonel George Drew. Names like Bishop, Barker, Collishaw, McLeod and McLaren still inspired in 1939 and Houle hoped to add his name among them. He began selection training for air crew in September of 1940 and with his engineering degree found it relatively easy.

In January 1941 at the age of 26 Houle was posted to No.32 Service Flying Training School at Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan to help fill out an RAF course. Eager to get in the fight neither he nor his fellow Canadians cared that it was RAF.

In fact, he later realized how fortunate he was to have trained with the RAF as many of his British instructors had at least one combat tour under their belts and so were able to impart more knowledge than their less experienced Canadian counterparts.

Finally, in April 1941 Houle was presented with his wings. Standing at parade he thought about previous wing parades where some notable like Billy Bishop arrived to personally pin the wings on your chest. Instead, he and his fellow pilots were grouped around as the chief ground instructor passed out their wings, tossing them to those in the back. Despite the lack of pomp and circumstance Houle and the others were now pilots and the resultant party made up for any hurt feelings.

Houle arrived in England in June. Canadianization of the RCAF was still struggling to assert itself so Houle along with many other Canadian pilots were posted to No.55 Operational Training Unit for familiarization on Hurricanes.<sup>2</sup> While there a Polish instructor gave Houle some advice which stuck, both because it made sense and it suited Houle's personality perfectly: "In a dog fight get right in the thick of

it and fast. The pilot that hangs around the edge stands a good chance of being singled out and shot down." Now in England and having listened to the stories of Battle of Britain veterans Houle and the others were more than eager to board the HMS *Furious* in August 1941 ferrying Hurricanes for God knew where. They reasoned, correctly as it turned out, that the fighters would be going where the action was.

They ferried their planes to Egypt at which point the new pilots were sent to RAF HQ, Mid East Command, Cairo to await posting. Canada's only fighter unit to serve in the Mediterranean theatre was 417 Squadron, which would not arrive until over one year later in June 1942. Therefore, it was merely routine that Pilot Officer Albert Houle, RCAF, was posted to 213 Squadron RAF, equipped with Hurricanes, in September 1941.

Houle's first taste of action happened on 30 October and was in fact a friendly fire incident. 213 was attached to 272 Squadron, a Beaufighter unit tasked with the defence of Alexandria. Several 213 pilots including Houle decided to hitch a ride during a training exercise with the Beaufighters making some practice runs

*Canadian pilots of 213 Squadron RAF during the summer of 1942 when flying patrols over the El Alamein line. (l. to r.): Mike Avis (American in RCAF); Lefty Steele; Harry Compton (bailed out on 18 November 1942 earning Caterpillar medal); Johnny Rebstock (killed while strafing near Agedabia, 18 November 1942); Houle (bandage from diving into slit trench); Freddy Wilson; Bill Stephenson (PoW 21 October 1942).*

*(Photo from Houle collection)*



*With the nonchalance that only a fighter ace can convey, Houle relaxes on the wing of his Spitfire Mk.Vb Trop. January 1943, near Tripoli, Libya. Houle was only stationed with 145 squadron for a short time until his promotion to lead 417 Squadron.*

*(Photo from Houle collection)*

on the Allied shipping about 30 miles off the coast. Despite being forewarned and having other 272 Squadron members on the ships the navy gunners opened up on the Beaufighters, bringing one down. Houle and the others made it back to base a sad and unforgiving group; the waste of life caused by his own side was a difficult baptism of fire.

The next six months were a frustrating and monotonous routine of remaining on readiness with only the occasional scramble. Even when scrambled the now seriously obsolete Hurricane had little chance of intercepting its target, invariably a high flying JU 88 performing reconnaissance. Houle's first contact with an enemy aircraft finally came in April 1942, while on a typical patrol over Alexandria. Nerves and excitement after so many months of boredom caused him to dive vertically on a JU 88 almost ramming the plane in his enthusiasm. The JU 88 got away. Encouraged despite his poor showing, Houle was devastated just a few days later when he was pulled off flying operations for crash landing his Hurricane after the forward windscreen had become fogged over causing him to misjudge his approach. The next two months were bitter indeed as he languished in the rear, disgusted by the "9 to 5 charlies" and their paper clips while he heard the stories of his friends fighting up at the front. He campaigned vigorously and was finally reinstated in July with 213 Squadron which was now performing defensive patrols over the El Alamein line.

Houle soon discovered that life in Alexandria had been palatial compared with his squadron's new home. Life in the desert consisted of sleeping in a tent with an obligatory slit trench near by. Water was rationed and often reused to the point that it was a toss up whether to shave with the extra tea water or make tea from the shaving water. There were no batmen in the desert squadrons, anything you wanted done you did it yourself. While hardly similar to Northern Ontario the rugged nature of living in the desert put the same demands on the individual and Houle adapted well to his surroundings.

A lot of hours were spent in the desert teaching the new pilots how to fly and fight as a



team. The so called defensive circle so often mentioned as a tactic used by the RAF in the desert was a misnomer according to Houle. It was never taught but rather was the outcome of flying a poor section formation, the rectangular six. When attacked out of the sun the tactic was to turn into the sun and the attack, to do otherwise was to invite almost certain destruction. After two or three such turn abouts it would become difficult to know who the section leader was with the result that each aircraft would follow the one in front of him until all were in a circle. While offering some defense a skilled German pilot flying a Messerschmitt 109 F or even E, could dive almost at will through the circle picking off the Hurricanes one by one. Houle also recalled that "the other guys I was flying with thought you just fire and all those bullets well, 'I must have got it' but at 300 to 400 miles an hour you couldn't be careless."<sup>3</sup>

Despite this, other lessons were learned. With just one mess for all the pilots the experienced ones socialized together with the newer pilots, regardless of rank. The knowledge they imparted while discussing the previous day's dogfight was invaluable and many important tips were learned that would otherwise have been lost. Houle saw

the value in this informal structure and would later emulate it with 417 Squadron.<sup>4</sup>

As with so many aces Houle struggled at the beginning of his career and his second encounter with enemy aircraft proved no better than the first. Sighting a formation of Stukas below Houle dove down. As he did he pulled open his hood a little for better visibility but in doing so the wind ripped the goggles off his face getting dust in his eyes. By the time he had the hood closed and his eyes clear he had dove right through the middle of the Stuka formation with the rest of his flight following behind. The famous "Houle attack" was to cause him considerable razzing until he claimed his first victory, a JU 88 on 1 September 1942. This time he attacked from dead astern sending the German bomber down after a short burst of cannon fire.

September and October would see 213 perform mostly in the ground attack role with Houle getting few chances at further air-to-air combat. On 26 October though, his luck would change. Leading one other Hurricane back to base at dusk after flying air cover over the El Alamein line, Houle spotted a formation of Stukas without escort. Taking his time Houle systematically lined up his Hurricane on one of the unsuspecting Stukas and fired from only 50 yards away. He was surprised to see his shells pass harmlessly to either side of the Stuka despite having the dot of his gun sight dead on. He quickly realized the problem. The Hurricane's cannons were set to harmonize at 250 yards. He gave his plane a little right rudder until one stream of shells began impacting on the Stuka which quickly poured smoke, flipped over and went straight in. Two more Stukas were hunted in this fashion in the growing dark and each one took hits. A fourth Stuka thinking perhaps a 109 had inadvertently attacked them flipped on his navigation lights to show he was friendly. Houle was not and the illuminated aircraft exploded as his shells ignited the Stuka's fuel tanks in a fire ball. A fifth opened fire on his Hurricane and he shot at it noting strikes before he broke off and headed for base. At the time he was credited with two destroyed, one probable and two damaged. Aviation historian Christopher Shores later confirmed that Houle had in fact shot down four Stukas with a fifth probable.<sup>5</sup> Regardless, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for this action. One of the Stuka pilots killed in

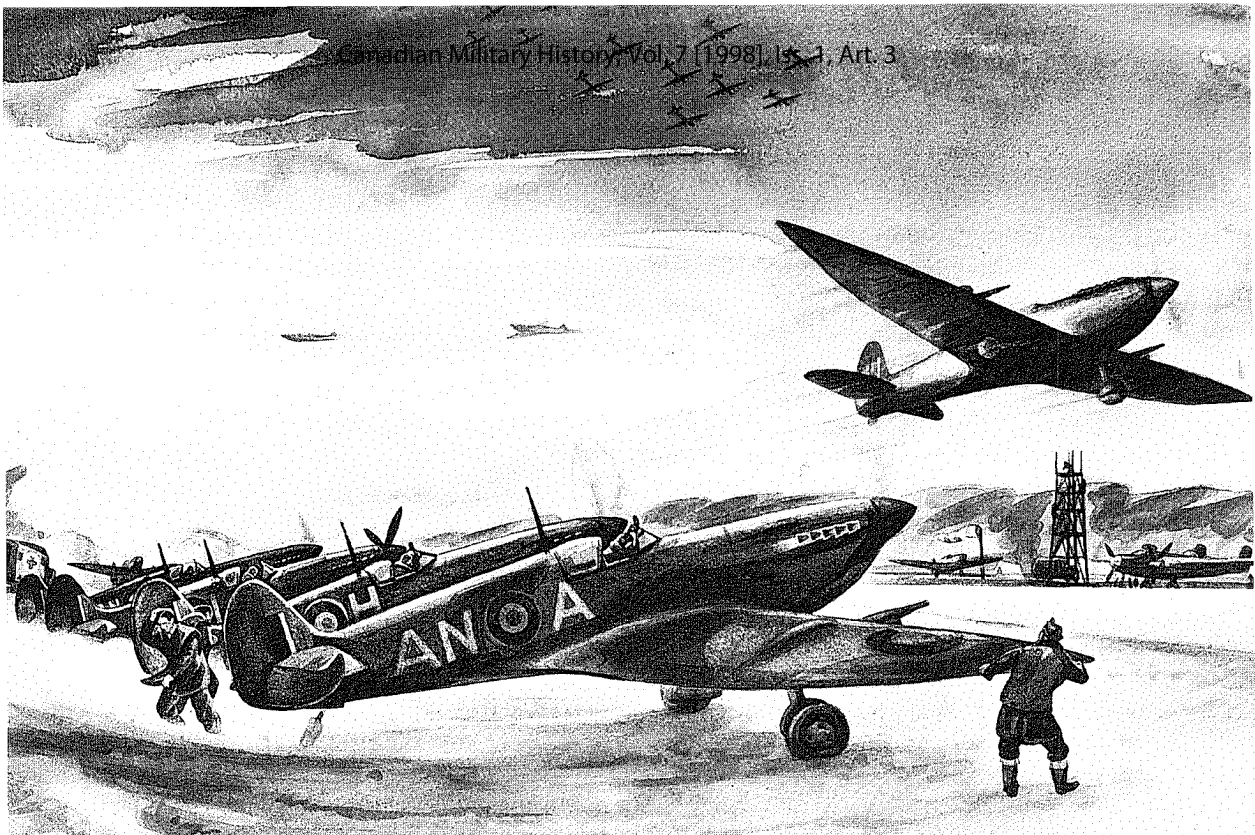
the attack was Kurt Walter who had sank the British cruiser *Coventry* just one month before.

Before the Japanese were to sear into memory the concept of Kamikaze, RAF were to try something that had many of pilots involved convinced they were embarking on a suicide mission of their own. Friday, November the 13th, 1942 was the beginning of "Operation Chocolate." Its objective was to harass retreating Axis forces by strafing deep behind their lines. Tasked with the assignment were 213 and 238 Squadrons. Flying their Hurricanes to an abandoned air strip 140 km behind the lines the two squadrons would for the next three days fly sortie after sortie strafing enemy ground forces. They pulled out just ahead of an Axis column coming to intercept them. The mission was a great success. One enemy aircraft destroyed during the operation was a Fiesler Storch, a slow, ungainly observation platform. Houle noted that "I shared an unarmed Feisler Storch – but never did count it in my score. It did not seem sporting"<sup>6</sup>

In December 1942 Houle was promoted to flight lieutenant and transferred to 145 Squadron RAF, home for part of the war to the "Polish Fighting Team" including aces Eugeniusz Horbaczewski and Stanislaw Skalski. 417 Squadron was now in the desert but the single squadron could in no way accommodate all the RCAF personnel spread about in RAF units in theatre. As such, Houle's promotion could only proceed through the RAF. Here he finally got the chance to fly Spitfires. Though he now had a more able fighter he could only find action on the ground. Longing for almost anything to break the monotony of bully beef and hard tack Houle found a new use for the hunting skills first learned in the bush around his family farm. This time the game were fleet-footed gazelle but they were not tracked on foot but by jeep. It is more a testimony to dumb luck than skill that Houle and other adventurous pilots did not kill themselves in trying to shoot down a running gazelle from a jeep careening across uneven desert at over 50 mph, all the while firing machine guns!

In January of 1943 Houle finished his first tour and was given one month's leave. Bored by the third week he forfeited his last and was sent to No.73 OTU at Abu Sueir. Having seen too





CFPU PL 47625

*Lineup of Spitfires, 417 Squadron by Paul Goranson*

many raw recruits come to the squadron with inadequate training Houle was determined to teach them how to survive in combat. The CO of the unit, however, preferred by the book instruction and so made a practice of checking out all instructors to see if they were qualified to teach. Houle and the other experienced pilots were angered by this attitude and decided to either make the CO see it their way or get posted somewhere else. On his certification flight Houle took off with the CO and having barely got the wheels off the ground wrenched the Harvard around with one wing tip almost on the deck with his apology already decided "Pardon me sir, but I thought I saw a 109 back there and, you know, its hard to get out of the habit."<sup>7</sup> Houle's joy at being considered unsuitable for instructing was marred when his transfer posted him to an engine repair unit that test flew repaired aircraft.

Tiring of inaction Houle began lobbying to get posted to the only RCAF fighter unit in the theatre, 417 Squadron. His reasons were many. In addition to his wish to see action again he had received a letter from Lefty Steele, a fellow Canadian pilot who he had flown with before and who was now in 417. Steele confirmed all the rumours about 417, the most damning being that when someone sought top cover and were given the choice of 12 planes from 417 or six planes from another squadron they would

choose the six.<sup>8</sup> Steele asked Houle to transfer because they needed good pilots. Being a Canadian and somewhat ashamed of the reputation 417 had thus far he put in his request and it was granted.

417 "City of Windsor" squadron came to be in the Middle East due to the Canadian political need to put the RCAF on the map.<sup>9</sup> The rationale, as noted in the official RCAF history, *The Crucible of War*, was that it would form a focal point for the many RCAF crews currently serving in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> It also illustrated what was to become a Canadian political trend of insisting on Canadian participation where it was not necessarily justified as evidenced by Dieppe and the Sicilian and Italian campaigns. The reality was that neither goal was adequately achieved, at least not at the start. 417's poor combat record was a source of derision and did not inspire. As 417 was the only Canadian fighter squadron in the Middle East its reputation reflected on all RCAF personnel there. Canadians took a lot of razzing from the Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans and British whose squadrons in theatre were performing much better than the lone and dismal Canadian effort.

This reputation changed dramatically with the arrival of Stan "Bull" Turner as the new squadron leader and Houle as a flight leader in

June 1943. Like minded, the two pilots set about cleaning up 417. However, they almost never had the chance as both were wounded by an exploding land mine while driving a truck in search of a new air field. Houle suffered two punctured ear drums and did not rejoin 417 until September 1943. On 4 October Houle shot down a FW 190 over Termoli, Italy and recorded 417's first victory since the beginning of the Sicilian campaign. Shortly thereafter he was posted back to 145 Squadron. The reasoning for it was that Turner was about to be promoted to Wing Commander and Houle was to take his place as squadron leader of 417. The thinking was that to avoid over familiarization Houle needed to distance himself from the pilots and so he was temporarily transferred back to an RAF squadron as there were, of course, no other RCAF fighter squadrons in theatre.

Houle rejoined 417 in November 1943 as its squadron leader and like Turner before him continued to mold 417 into a respected and successful unit. On 3 December 1943, 417 Squadron was tasked with flying patrols along the Sangro River where the Allies had forced a bridgehead. Leading the last patrol of the day, Houle was preparing to lead the flight back to base when a group of aircraft appeared. They were presumed to be a relief flight, but on closer inspection were found to be ME 109s. Coming in behind the enemy aircraft, Houle quickly shot down two of the German aircraft. "It's tail blew off and there was a long streak of flame from it. After I had overshot, I turned back and it was

still doing aerobatics, on fire with pieces falling off."<sup>11</sup> Three days later, Houle's exploits were written up in the Eighth Army news, a clear indication of the rise in stature and effectiveness of 417 Squadron.<sup>12</sup>

417's best day of the war came over the Anzio beachhead on Valentine's Day, 1944. It also marked the end of Houle's combat career. 417 was tasked with flying defensive air patrols over the tenuous Anzio beachhead. Opting to lead the second patrol over Anzio that morning Houle was shocked to find five new replacement pilots were slated to fly as number twos in the flight. Having yet to be briefed in the squadron's formations Houle would have normally scrubbed the mission but the beach head needed protection and there was no alternative but to go. Arriving on station at 1040 hours, 417 intercepted a group of FW 190 fighter-bombers. Houle dove his flight and quickly shot down one FW 190 and damaged another. As he began to line up a third, German cannon fire began hitting his aircraft and his cockpit disintegrated behind him. His number two had not followed Houle when they dove on the enemy planes and so Houle had been unprotected when the bomber's fighter escort dove on him. Houle describes what happened next:

I felt something hit my aircraft and thought it was ack-ack, so turned on to another and got good, damaging shots in at him leaving myself wide open. Just as I started to shoot again the cockpit disintegrated behind me. The armour plating protecting my head suddenly hit me in

CFPU PMR 77521



CFPU PMR 529



**Left:** S/L Stan Turner and F/L Bert Houle were almost killed when their truck drove over a German mine while reconnoitring sites for a new airfield in Sicily on 3 August 1943. Turner was trapped inside the truck by the blast while Houle was "catapulted through the skylight." Both survived the blast.

**Above:** Combat footage of ME 109G being shot down by Houle on 3 December 1943, one of two he shot down that day.





Houle collection

**Left:** Houle in the cockpit of his Spitfire. In January 1944 a 20 mm cannon shell hit the rear view mirror. The damage is visible at the top of the photo. The next time his aircraft was struck by cannon fire, over Anzio on 14 February 1944, he was not so lucky. A piece of the cockpit armour broke off and lodged near his carotid artery, resulting in the end of his brilliant combat career.

CFPU PL 18750

**Right:** A group of Canadian nurses pose in front of a Spitfire for an informal photo with the pilots of 417 Squadron. Bert Houle is crouching at the front of the group.



**Below:** A more formal portrait of the 417's pilots shortly after the squadron moved to Cassibile in Sicily. S/L Stan Turner is front and centre with a pipe while Houle (right) and F/L Bob Paterson are on either side of Turner.



CFPU PL 19363

the back of the neck driving me into the instrument panel. My neck was stiff and sore and the back of my shirt felt sticky.<sup>13</sup>

The piece of armour had lodged next to the carotid artery. Houle made it safely back to base where he was operated on and removed from flying operations. The squadron diarist recorded the events in a straightforward manner: "the C.O. – received a slug in the neck which put him in the hospital for a few days. But he will be O.K. In the evening most of the pilots went into Naples to a stag party and had one whale of an evening."<sup>14</sup> Their happiness was not out of place. Along with Houle's score of one destroyed and one damaged FW 190, one other FW 190 and one ME 109 were destroyed with two other FW 190s being damaged resulting in 417's most successful combat of the war.<sup>15</sup> It was to be Houle's last combat sortie for which he was to be awarded a bar to his DFC. His total for the Italian campaign was seven destroyed and four damaged making him the top scoring pilot of 417 and the leading Canadian ace in that campaign. With his six destroyed in the desert, Houle's final tally is 13 enemy aircraft destroyed.

Repatriated back to Canada from his second tour Houle pulled every string he could to be sent back overseas. Having once had the son of C.G. Power as his adjutant, Houle got an audience with the minister to plead his case. However, Power was unable to help. The much publicized death of Lloyd Chadburn at the beginning of his third tour had swayed many to feel that three tours was asking too much and almost guaranteed tragedy. Houle to this day remains angry at this decision. The experience and knowledge gained by veterans of two tours was invaluable and with it they could teach new pilots what was required to stay alive. Houle is convinced that had he and others like him been allowed to fly more than two tours the number of new Canadian pilots killed would have been much reduced. He is also unapologetic in noting that had he had another tour his total might have climbed to be one of the very highest.<sup>16</sup>

Resigned to the fact that he would not get overseas again Houle asked for and was granted his discharge. Houle rejoined the RCAF in 1946 and completed a Masters in Aeronautical Engineering. He finished his career with the rank of Group Captain at the Central Experimental

and Proving Establishment as the C.O. where he test flew Sabres and CF-100s. He lives today with his wife Margaret in Mannotick, Ontario.

Albert Houle had a tumultuous career first with the RAF and then the RCAF. His nature both helped and hindered him as he rose in rank and reputation as an aggressive fighter pilot and leader. He did not particularly care if officers liked him or not, only that the men he flew with respected him, which they did. His proudest boast is not the number of enemy planes he shot down but the fact that he never lost a pilot in any formation of Spitfires he led. Without his strong sense of Canadian patriotism, the war time achievements of 417 Squadron might not be the proud record that it is. A man of uncompromising values Bert Houle fought the only way he knew, honestly and with all his heart.

## Notes

1. Author interview with Bert Houle, 13 November 1995.
2. Brereton Greenhous *et al.*, *The Crucible of War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p.569.
3. Houle interview, 13 November 1995.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Letter to Bert Houle from Christopher Shores, 15 February 1984.
6. Bert Houle, *Flying Desert Rats*, unpublished manuscript, supplemental to p.253.
7. Houle interview, 13 November 1995.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Greenhouse, p.213.
10. *Ibid.* p.213.
11. Keith Robbins, ed. *417 Squadron History* (Stittsville, ON: Canada's Wings, Inc., 1983), p.19.
12. Operation Record Book 417 Squadron RCAF, 14 February 1944, National Archives of Canada, Microfilm reel C-12, frame 288.
13. Houle, *Flying Desert Rats*, p.255.
14. Operation Record Book 417 Squadron RCAF, 14 February 1944, National Archives of Canada, Microfilm reel C-12, frame 288.
15. Combat Reports of S/L Houle, F/L Everard, F/O Horricks, F/O Hale and W/O Johnson, 14 February 1944.
16. Houle interview, 13 November 1995.

Christopher Evans is an MA student in Military History at Wilfrid Laurier University. He was the historian on a yet-to-be televised documentary on Vimy Ridge. In 1996 Christopher participated in the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour.