RCAF Identity in Bomber Command: Squadron Names and Sponsors

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Canadian War Museum
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Royal Canadian Air Force bomber squadrons which served overseas during the Second World War were not only identified on the Commonwealth air forces order of battle by the customary squadron number but by a title or nickname as well. Additionally, Canadian squadrons received formal sponsorship and support, generally from Canadian communities or other organizations. In one instance the sponsor was a major Hollywood film studio which also mobilized its roster of movie stars to the cause. Needless to say, these practices were something of a departure from the general orthodoxy within the parent RAF, where the normal practice was to identify squadrons by a unit number only. Nor were they much observed within the other Dominion air forces. But for Canada they played a part in fostering the identity and esprit of the RCAF, publicizing the contributions of Canadian bomber crews and serving the policy of Canadianization.

Named squadrons existed prior to the outbreak of the Second World War in both the RAF and RCAF, but they were very few and far between, and most usually auxiliary (reserve) units from certain locales. More appeared after the war began, however, particularly during the Battle of Britain, where certain squadrons of Fighter Command had acquired nicknames which reflected the diverse mix of expatriate and Commonwealth nationalities who were included in the famous “Few.” Examples included the Americans of the much-heralded “Eagle” Squadron, as well as squadrons piloted by Poles, Free French, Dutch and many others. There was also the RAF’s 242 (Canadian) Squadron and, later, No.125 (Newfoundland) Squadron, a distinguished night-fighter unit with at least 44 enemy intruders to its credit. Some, but not all, of these names were adopted officially by the RAF.

More named squadrons appeared following the Battle of Britain with the decision advocated by the RAF’s leadership that the building of a massive bomber force was Britain’s best means of taking the war to Germany. Such names were adopted both to reflect substantial financial support and/or the presence of significant numbers of colonials or other nationals in certain units of Bomber Command. An Indian prince, the Nizam of Hyderabad, had paid for three bomber squadrons and one carried his state’s name. Among other early examples were No.44 (Rhodesia) Squadron, the bomber force’s first all-Lancaster unit, and No.75 (New Zealand) Squadron, where personnel from these Commonwealth members were concentrated. Three squadrons carried the name, if not necessarily the citizens, of Britain’s Gold Coast colony, and there were more than a dozen other squadrons named for locales in the far-flung Empire. Additional bomber units represented the air forces of Czechoslovakia, Poland, the Netherlands and Free France over their occupied homelands.

Perhaps the most unusual name was that given 692 Squadron, marking the sponsorship of the Fellowship of the Bellows in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Doubtless the growing number of named squadrons to the otherwise numbered order of battle added interest and colour for those who followed Bomber Command’s fortunes. It inspired a measure of public and service interest,
pride, and even recruits from these affiliations. It also tended to boost the image of an Imperial (and Allied) RAF, although there were those like Sir Arthur Harris, Commander of Bomber Command, who were very touchy about the perception that the so-called "coloured squadrons" evoked an image of a Bomber Command which was something less than a strictly British national force. The appearance of the RCAF in Bomber Command, however, heralded the arrival of an organization very much determined to make its own mark as a distinctive entity.

When the first bomber squadrons of the RCAF began their overseas service with the formation of No.405 Squadron in April 1941, Canadian officials were understandably eager to publicize their accomplishments in order to win public support at home and boost morale and recruiting. The semi-official RCAF overseas publication Wings Abroad was a particularly popular and visible manifestation of this effort—much quoted at home—and its early issues made publicity campaign roused British concerns over RCAF bomber squadrons. This Canadian publicist campaign roused British concerns over security from about the time of the disastrous Dieppe Raid (19 August 1942). The use of all squadron numbers heretofore found in the various feature articles and informal unit news columns of the newspaper was discontinued without explanation—but almost certainly at the behest of the nervous RAF censors. Also, the propensity of North American journalists for dramatic hyperbole had struck the more low key British as both crass and vulgar.

As much as it was necessary, the obvious need to protect unit identity information had the initial effect of frustrating the growing Canadian publicity campaign. Now the RCAF press releases were less explicit, focusing on the names of squadron and station commanders, "the squadron/station commanded by...". This was satisfactory enough in the case of units whose commanders were either popular or who lived long enough to become well known, but the results from a Canadianization standpoint did not always make for good copy. There was one instance, however, where the impact of the OC's presence and leadership was very inspirational indeed.

No.419 Squadron had been formed as the RCAF's third bomber squadron in December 1941 at Mildenhall, a No.3 Group station in Suffolk. The first officer commanding of the new unit was a young Canadian bomber veteran of the prewar RAF who had been a military flyer since 1935 and had been in the war since the beginning—Wing Commander John "The Moose" Fulton, of Kamloops, BC. As Jerrold Morris, one of the 419 originals to survive the war, remembered Fulton:

"We were well led. Moose and his two Flight Commanders...were all Canadians in the R.A.F. Moose already had as much experience as it was possible to have accumulated at that stage of the war. He had completed one tour of operations in "heavies," and had flown nearly every type of plane in the Air Force, and all the German aircraft that had fallen into our hands. He wore the D.F.C. and the A.F.C., the latter being awarded for flying Wellingtons through our balloon barrage to test the detonators installed on the leading edge of the wings to cut the cables, and for his testing of enemy aircraft. He was twenty-six years old; a big man with carroty hair, a different manner and an engaging smile. Moose was seldom heard on the subject of discipline, but was held in such respect and affection by everyone, that he had only to issue an appeal to gain immediate response."

The popular bomber leader was known to all as "The Moose." And it was not long before the members of the squadron referred to their unit as the "Moose" Squadron, and themselves as the "Moosemen." Soon the airmen were looking for a moose head for their mess and a picture of the animal from which to style a squadron badge. It was marvellous copy for the RCAF's overseas public relations staff. As one news release put it in June 1942:

"seldom does a man receive as much admiration as does Moose from his squadron. They admire his flying skill...he's a wizard pilot...they admire him as a man and it is no exaggeration to say they revere him. Pilots, observers, wireless operators, gunners, ground crew, office clerks, all think the Moose the greatest man on earth. At a sergeant's dance, the biggest crowd is around the Moose, at a dinner Officers' dance, he is the centre of attraction. The Group Captain commanding the station calls him Moose openly: the Grumpy Mechanic calls him "Slic" to his face and then tells his pals that he and Moose had a chat about the engines."

His squadron is one of the hardest working in Bomber Command. It has consistently taken part in the biggest and most dangerous raids of the war. Cologne, the Ruhr, Rostock, Emden, are only a few of the targets attacked by Moose and his men. But the men would follow their shy, smiling wingco into hell if need be."

This was hearty stuff despite the hyperbole. A popular and distinguished OC. high morale, a remarkably high Canadian Manning level (347 out of 545 overall in June 1942), and a growing record of efficiency, all combined to present an attractive, impressive and thoroughly Canadian picture, both within the RCAF and to the public at large. Shortly, the high profile Moose Squadron was formally honored and eventually officially adopted by Fulton's home town in a ceremony presided over by the Lord Mayor of London, Viscount Bennett. Air Marshal H. "Gus" Edwards—the RCAF's senior officer overseas—and a host of representatives of units from British Columbia.

It is sad to relate that Fulton died the night before the issue of Wings Abroad appeared bearing his picture accepting the honours from his home town. Fourteen of 419's Wellingtons had taken off from Mildenhall to attack Hamburg under what their war diary described as "horrible weather conditions," including heavy icing. Indeed, most of the aircraft detailed for what was to have been a major Bomber Command effort were either unable to take off at all or were recalled. No.3 Group attacked Hamburg alone; but the force was very scattered and many were forced to turn back. Only 68 aircraft reported attacking the target, nine of them from 419. But the aircraft piloted by Fulton appears to have fallen victim to a night fighter in the vicinity of the Frisian Islands, as remarked by a last terse message back to base, "fighter wounded 500." The rest of 419 had returned safely. But "Moose's" fabled luck had finally succumbed to the grim statistical probabilities. The effect on the squadron was devastating. As Jerrold Morris remembered:

"a rough fix had been obtained on the aircraft, that place it off the Frisians, but a thorough search right up to the enemy coast the next morning failed to find any trace of the plane, and none of the crew was ever heard of again. I thought of Moose fighting out there with a
damaged aircraft just above the water on a black night; if anyone could have brought her home he would. So passed one of the finest men who ever served in the Air Force, and a pair of gloom descended on his squadron. There were even tears. Three Group had lost five Wing Commanders in eight nights.

But the legacy of Fulton’s nickname lived on only to intensify, as it does to this day. Soon there would be squadron members proudly calling themselves “Moosemen,” the majority of whom had never met this courageous and determined young bomber leader.

No.419 was certainly by no means the first bomber squadron to foster a strong and cohesive unit spirit. But more significantly, its high public profile seems to have had the effect of transcending RAF censorship rules. That is to say, this was one RCAF unit whose Canadian identity was not masked by its immersion in the RAF organizational structure. This example inspired imitation by those concerned not only with instilling a stronger esprit de corps and Canadian identity among the sometimes reluctant aircrew being allocated to its current and new Canadian squadrons, but of furthering the wider ministerial and policy goals of Canadianization in general.

By the autumn of 1942, when preparations for the formation of No.6 (RCAF) Group, due for the new year, were well under way, other Canadian units had also begun to develop a slightly higher profile as visible manifestations of the RCAF overseas. Generally these tended to be the early arrivals which had the foresight not only to initiate the often lengthy proceedings involved in staffing a badge proposal through the Chester Herald (the ultimate bureaucratic authority for military heraldry) but which had also sought, as part of the process, to distinguish heraldic links with the Canadian homeland. Thus, in September 1942, the approved badge of No.401 (Fighter) Squadron had appeared featuring a Rocky Mountain sheep’s head caboshed. The first bomber squadron badge was approved a month later, in October. Air Commodore Nelles W. Timmerman, 408 (Goose) Squadron’s first CO, later recalled the events which had led up to this approval in an unofficial squadron history:

Soon after the formation of 408 Squadron, Mr. Handley Page, the manufacturer of the Hampden, sent a cheque for fifty pounds to all the Commanding Officers of Hampden squadrons to be spent on anything they saw fit. I was determined that 408 Squadron was going to be one of the first ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE squadrons to get an official insignia badge. The Station commander, Group Captain Taaffe, suggested that it was about time we went to London to “meet the Canadians,” and so we arrived at RCAF Overseas Headquarters, ensconced in an upper floor of Canada House, where we were welcomed by Air Commodore Hugh Stevenson and members of his small staff.

Among the matters discussed was my proposal to see the Chester Herald, the authority on matters heraldic, about a squadron badge. No objections were raised and indeed it was thought to be a good thing.

Next day, I found my way through rubble around St. Paul’s Cathedral and found the offices of the Chester Herald (the ultimate arbiter). I explained the purpose of my visit and suggested that the centre piece of the badge be a maple leaf in autumn colours, explaining that I had admired the badge of Number 5 Royal Air Force Squadron which had a golden Roman V on a green maple leaf, signifying their co-operation, in World War I, with the Canadian Army.

The Chester Herald regretted that this would not be possible because the wreath around RCAF badges was composed of maple leaves, unlike the laurel; and so maple leaf was allowable for them, but not for us. My next thought for something distinctly Canadian was a Canada Goose and this was settled on. The motto was simpler. I didn’t want a Latin tag but a simple statement of why we were fighting the war. “F OR F R E D O M” said it all.

I gave him my fifty pounds, to have the bird painted, and departed. The badge was finally approved by the King in October, 1942, a year or so later. What channels and red tape it had to go through to reach that goal, I hate to think, but I believe it was all worthwhile and that 408’s badge is the most distinctively Canadian badge of them all.

The badge can now be seen near the altar of St. Clement’s Danes Church in London, carved in slate and set in the floor, a very fitting tribute to a great squadron and many brave men.

The Goose was a fitting emblem for the bomber squadron. As a note affixed to the back of an official photo of the squadron badge (probably by Timmerman) explained, the Goose “is at home in Canada, England and Scotland. Its speed and powers of flight are indicative of the operational functions of the Sqn.” Somewhere along the line the squadron began to refer to it as the “Goose” Squadron, and the name stuck both in squadron social circles and in the realm of RCAF publicity and propaganda. Likewise the squadron’s “nesting” place, RCAF Station Linton-on-Ouse was favoured with the name “The Goosepool.” Indeed, this was the title given one of the columns dealing with events at Linton that ran for a time in the pages of W.W. Adams Abroad. Of course this nomenclature was not necessarily subscribed to by the air and ground crews from 426 (Thunderbird) Squadron who shared the facilities with 408, and who even employed such a newspaper column styled itself as “Thunder Flashers.”

It is difficult to determine at precisely what point the RCAF overseas authorities decided to take a policy approach to stimulating the momentum of this developing trend. Yet the adoption of names for each individual RCAF squadron almost certainly became a matter of policy, for as an immediate post-war historical review prepared by No.6 (RCAF) Group staff noted:

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Towards the end of 1943 there were few squadrons in No.6 (RCAF) Group which had not adopted a name. Likewise, most had been “adopted” by cities or organizations back in Canada which supplied them with gifts and comforts and assisted in the furnishing of their messes and huts.

Most, but by no means all, of the RCAF’s bomber squadrons adopted the name of an animal, whether indigenous to Canada or not. Thus 408’s Goose and the doubly-significant Moose of 419 had been joined by the Snowy Owl of 420 at Middleton St. George, the Tiger of 424 at Lerming, the French-Canadian Alouette of 425, the mythological Thunderbird of 426 at Dishforth, the Lion of 427 at Croft, the Bison of 429, the metaphorically misplaced Swordfish of 415 at East Moor (the unit had been transferred out of Coastal Command in July 1944), and the Porcupine of 433 at Skipton-on-Swale. It was not surprising that at least one wag referred to the RCAF’s order of battle as the “Flying Menagerie.”

Other bomber squadron names were chosen to reflect their adoption by specific communities in Canada, such as 405 (Vancouver) Squadron at Gmondsen Lodge, (the RCAF’s contribution to the Pathfinder Group, which was by and large sustained by contributions of elite crews from Six Group), 432 (Leaside, Ontario) at East Moor, and 434 (Bluenose) Squadron at Croft, whose name (and the sponsorship of the Halifax Rotary Club) reflected the maritime heritage of many of the squadron aircrew.

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By December 1943, only one RCAF bomber unit remained unnamed. Members of 428 Squadron possibly derived some satisfaction from this state, referring to themselves for a time as the "Nameless squadron. Eventually, however, probably after there had been some prodding from above, Wings Abroad reported on 15 December that:

this week the lads have got together and selected a name for themselves, and henceforth it will be the "Ghost" Squadron, an expression which seems apt, having in mind the will-o'-the-wispishness of night-bomber operations. All that remains is for some Canadian community to take the squadron under its wing and "adopt" the boys.28

Eventually the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire in Toronto emerged to adopt the "Ghosts" and to join the growing list of communities and organizations sponsoring RCAF bomber squadrons. Most of the sponsors were towns or cities, or, occasionally, various types of community service clubs.29 Perhaps the most unusual organization to sponsor an RCAF bomber squadron, however, was a Hollywood movie studio.

The idea appears to have originated with the public relations staff at the RCAF's Overseas Headquarters. On 11 February, a conference was held to determine which movie studio would be given the "honour of having their name affixed to 427 Squadron aircraft. He assured the Canadians that any one of the actors would be most honoured to be chosen to adopt a crew. There was one exception, however, in the case of the reclusive and publicity shy Greta Garbo, who might be better overlooked.30 Samuel Eckman, Jr., managing director of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, posting with a "Lion" Squadron Handley Page Halifax I.Mk.1.

The privilege of conferring the name of the lovely actress Lana Turner on their aircraft was won by the crew of Sergeant E.A. Johnson (believed to be pictured). No.427 Squadron at the time had just begun the process of converting from Wellingtons to the four-engined Halifax V. Thus the news that their new aircraft were to be "adopted" by Hollywood stars of the squadron's choosing was both timely and welcome. MGM had many of the great names of the silver screen of the 1940s's under contract, including such luminaries as Lionel Barrymore and Wallace Beery. But when squadron members gathered to vote on the preferred names for their new bombers, reverence for distinguished acting careers was not necessarily a priority. The top choices of the squadron for the seventeen names to be selected were the glamorous actresses Lana Turner, Greer Garson and Hedy Lamarr.31 Of course other stars were recognized, among them Spencer Tracy, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, Walter Pidgeon, George Murphy and Van Heflin.32 But when MGM officials subsequently visited the squadron for the widely publicized and photographed adoption ceremonies, a draw had to be held for the privilege of chalking Miss Turner's name on a squadron aircraft, an honour won by Sergeant E.A. Johnson's crew "amid an ovation from the Squadron."33

For the most part the whole thing appears to have been a mutually beneficial publicity exercise. Nevertheless, it is clear from the squadron war diary over the ensuing months that the adoption also proved a helpful focal point for squadron morale, sense of identity, and esprit de corps. To what extent the stars' names actually became a part of the "noise art" which distinguished operational aircraft is not known. The creators of such endeavour tended to have their own ideas and aircraft and crews often had to be changed. Yet there were exchanges of correspondence between crews and actors and the letters received from several of the stars suggested an interest in the squadron which went beyond the polite but transparent salutations which would have been dreamed up by a studio publicity department. For example, prayers and a Saint Christopher medal came from Greer Garson. Second Lieutenant Van Heflin, USA, writing under his real name of Emmet E. Heflin, promised his crew "a whale of a blow-out on me," when he came overseas with his field artillery unit. Future senator George Murphy also wanted to treat a crew to a night out in London even though he would be unable to be there himself. Unfortunately, his invitation in July 1943 to Pilot Officer A.M. Feltner's crew was not received; one of 427's original crews, and "all 'gen' men," they had been posted missing after an operation against Boc bcm on 12 June.34

Only one instance is known of a movie star actually visiting the squadron. The 427 Squadron War Diary entry on the subject was without an element of tongue-in-cheek humour:

The Station was favoured by a visit by one of the foremost English actors - Robert Donat. The cast of the Bernard Shaw fantasy "Heartbreak House" with Mr. Donat as the venerable Capt. Sholtover, which has currently had a successful run at the Cambridge Theatre in London, performed the play as part of an E.N.S.A. show, and brought the house of Canuckas down with tremendous rounds of applause. It was something new in the way of an E.N.S.A. contribution, and was very much appreciated. After the performance, Mr. Donat and the cast,
were entertained in the Officer’s Mess. After the performance, and was quite surprised to
learn and so were we, that a bomber of the
Lion Squadron proudly bears the name of the
M.G.M. film star. Donat was induced to return
to Leeming to mourn in order that photographs might be taken of himself
alongside the bomber and its crew – 5/L
Ganderton and mates.54
The foregoing suggests that some hasty “nose
art” may have been arranged overnight. But when
Donat faithfully returned the following day, he
won a warm endorsement from aircrew not
readily given to praising outsiders. Indeed,
reading between the lines, the older man must
have been very moved by the occasion.

W/C D.A. Burnside, CO of 427 (Lion) Squadron, accepts the Leo
the Lion mascot from MGM’s executive Samuel Eckman, Jr.

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The noted actor appeared to be quite an
unsuspecting type of gentleman, very unaffected
by his success and was very humble in his
thanks for the tribute of having a kite named
after himself.55

Other activities strengthened the squad-
ron’s association with their chosen animal. In
November 1943 after a long correspondence to
receive the personal permission of Winston
Churchill, the squadron adopted as mascot
“March,” a cub at the London Zoo which had
been seized by a lion earlier acquired by the
Prime Minister.56 Not surprisingly, the lion ram-
pant was also the prominent feature on the
squadron’s badge when it was approved by the
King and presented to the unit by Air Vice-Mar-
shal Brooke in December.57 By this time, how-
ever, their identity as “lions” was al-
ready quite firmly es-
ablished, although
the re-
sults were
some-
times
in
forms of
dioll
ary
that
had
probably
not
been
anticipat-
ed at the
time of adop-
tion.
Indeed,
one of the
key
notes
of
the
adoption cer-
emonies at
Leeming in May
1943 had been
the presentation
by MGM of a
bronze lion of
“eighteenth cen-
tury design – with
an inscription com-
memorating the oc-
casion” which the
studio had hoped
“would be worthy to
stand in the Officers’
Mest.”58 Stand it
did through good times and bad as an honoured
squadron totem. It may not have always re-
ceived the degree of veneration the squadron’s
sponsors might have expected, however. In-
deed, the brass lion’s personal participation in
one particularly undignified and raucous
squadron festivity is documented in the War
Diary as follows:

In one of the rowdiest mess whirls that has
ever been experienced by any officer, either liv-
ing or dead, members of the mess met last night to
celebrate P/L Ganderton’s award which also co-
incided with S/L Earthrow’s screening. Dur-
ing the course of the drenching, our Wnco was
instituted in the Royal Order of Leos as the
“Grand Lion,” and was duly initiated under the
revised policy in said Order, whereby all potential
nor would he likely have cared. It serves,
however, as a characteristic example of the
distinctive spirit growing within the RCAF’s
“lying menagere.” Each squadron had similar
sorts of focal points, totems, songs and rituals
and doubtless some squadrons were more
successful than others from the standpoints of
sustaining morale and spirit. Too many other
factors such as leadership, living conditions,
the ultimate horror of war, heavy casualties and
high stress were all far more decisive
determinants. Nevertheless, from the wider
standpoint of establishing the identity and
credibility of the RCAF overseas as a significant
and visible component of the Allied war effort
and fostering the identity of Canadian
servicemen, the policy of naming and
sponsoring squadrons was almost certainly
successful. So strong were these name
affiliations that they were employed extensively in the first popularized RCAF History which appeared in the war’s immediate aftermath.35 They were disdained by the more orthodox official history which appeared in the 1990s, however.36 That was unfortunate. Nevertheless, the squadrons of the current Air Command which carry the wartime numbers continue to observe much of this proud heritage passed from their predecessors.

Notes

1. The official history of No.125 (Newfoundland) Squadron is found within G.W.L. Nicholson, More Fighting Newfoundlanders (Government of Newfoundland, 1969), Chapter XIII, pp.398-446.
6. 419 Squadron Operational Record Book (ORB), 30 June 1942, DHH.
7. Wings Abroad, 29 July 1942.