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Donald Kenneth Anderson

Official War Artist (1920-2009)

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Artistic circles may not reverberate with the name of Donald Kenneth Anderson but for nearly 60 years millions of people have viewed his work. Aircrew candidates passing through No.1 Initial Training School (No. 1 ITS), Toronto, often sat in a Link trainer surrounded by a landscape mural painted by Anderson. In the early 1980s, his artwork appeared on the record sleeves of *Spitfire Band*, a Canadian dance band, while *Maclean's* of 12 September 1983 had on its cover Anderson's representation of Soviet fighters shooting down Korean Airlines Flight 007. The Canadian War Museum (CWM) has custody of more than 100 of his artworks,

Abstract: In the early 1980s, Hugh Halliday, a former Curator of War Art at the Canadian War Museum, wrote an extensive account on Donald Anderson's wartime career. It was based on research he uncovered following correspondence and conversations with the artist, whom he had recently located. The article was never published and exists in typewritten and hand-edited form in the Canadian War Museum's (CWM) artist file for Anderson.¹ The edits appear to be in response to Anderson's own comments on the piece. This document forms the substance of this obituary for Canada's last surviving Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) official Second World War artist.

for during the Second World War Anderson was an official artist for the RCAF.²

Born in Toronto on 6 June 1920, he was educated in that city. At Danforth Technical School he took special art training, and from 1938 to 1940 he attended the Ontario College of Art. When not studying, he worked as a canoeing instructor, lifeguard, and swimming instructor. From September 1940 to January 1941 he worked as a commercial artist for a company that had few contracts. The only important ones he completed were for No. 1 ITS (discussed above) and for the main lobby of Toronto's YMCA.

Anderson enlisted in the RCAF in April 1941. Initially he underwent training as a radio mechanic. While showing no particular aptitude for that, he was recognized for his artistic skills. He therefore ceased training, went to RCAF Headquarters (AFHQ) in Ottawa (September 1941), and was reclassified to general duties (January 1942). On 1 February 1942, the RCAF promoted him from aircraftman second class to sergeant.

At AFHQ Anderson found his niche in the air force. He was assigned to the Art Section of the Directorate of Public Relations, working under Squadron leader H. H. Booth. In

November 1942, the National Gallery of Canada staged an exhibition of RCAF graphic art featuring illustrations, poster designs, crests, and cartoons done by Booth and his staff. The *Ottawa Citizen* of 17 November described this show in glowing terms; the article described Anderson's contributions as follows:

Sergeant Anderson does graphic illustrations that are crisp in colour and smoothly drawn and bring out the drama as well as the technical details of the airman's life. Among these are such items as "Last Minute Conference" and "Tail-End Charlie." But it is as a portraitist that this

Résumé : Au début des années 1980, Hugh Halliday, ancien conservateur d'art au Musée canadien de la guerre, rédigea un imposant compte-rendu des années de guerre de la carrière de Donald Anderson. Son essai s'appuyait sur la correspondance de l'artiste demeurée inédite et des entrevues qu'il avait eues avec lui et qu'il vient de retracer. Il n'a jamais été publié : il se trouve, sous forme manuscrite et en version dactylographiée, dans le dossier d'Anderson conservé au MCG.¹ Les annotations composent la substance de l'article nécrologique sur le dernier survivant des peintres de guerre membres de l'Aviation royale du Canada durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale.



Donald Kenneth Anderson – Dave Harling leader of No.416 Squadron
takes off with wide-open throttle - Jan. 1 1945, Evère, Belgium.



Donald Kenneth Anderson – After five years.

Clockwise from right:

Donald Kenneth Anderson – LAW K. Edmundson

Flying Officer J.H. Symons

Flight Lieutenant George Frederick Buzz Beurling, DSO,
DFC, DFM and bar

CWM 19850079-001



CWM 19710261-1327



CWM 19710261-1377



artist is at his best, and highly commendable are his characteristic portraits of Squadron Leader Booth, the drawings in charcoal of the Saarbrücken air crew, and a pastel portrait of Pilot Officer George Beurling.

The *Ottawa Journal* was equally generous in praising Anderson's contributions while describing paintings that have since disappeared. That paper reported:

Probably the autographed portrait of Pilot Officer George Beurling will receive the most attention of Sergeant Donald K. Anderson's work, the face with its high cheekbones and piercing eyes. "Last Minute Conference" shows a bomber crew pouring over a chart on the beam of a flash light, the big ship shadowy in the background. His presentation of the *Spad* single seater fighter will interest those who fought in the RAF from 1917 to 1918. He is responsible for a series of character studies of the crew which flew to Ottawa from Saarbrücken.

"Handley Page Hampdens over the Target" and "Tail-End Charlie Gets His Man" focus attention on the rear gunner of the crew, in the latter bringing down an enemy 'plane in the light of the prodding fingers of numerous searchlights.

The RCAF retained few of these works. *Handley-Page Hampdens over the Target* was found in 1978 and donated to the CWM.

During his stay at Public Relations, Anderson twice attempted to remuster to aircrew; both applications were turned down. The fact that he fell off a Link trainer may not have helped his cause. His superior, Squadron Leader Booth, valued him greatly. On 29

June 1942, he recommended the young man for a commission, noting that he was "an artist of real talent and shows promise." Again, on 26 October, he praised Anderson for his "willingness to do his part," and suggested that the RCAF employ his talents with an assignment to *Wings* magazine, or with a special tour of duty to Gander, Goose Bay, the Aleutians, or overseas.

Indeed, Anderson did draw a stretch of temporary duty at Gander from 27 December 1943 to 15 January 1944, and in March 1944 he was promoted to flight sergeant. In the spring of 1944, he was assigned to the air historian, Group Captain K.B. Conn. A visit to Camp Borden yielded several fine studies of air personnel and Harvard aircraft, plus a striking portrait of Leading Airwoman K. Edmundson.

Abruptly, service needs thrust him into new circumstances. On 8 July, Conn urged that Anderson be commissioned as an official war artist and be dispatched overseas immediately. With the western front opening up, RCAF activities rapidly were becoming more diverse. He was made a pilot officer (the position was backdated to 3 July), and on 13 July he was classified as administration (general, non-flying list), a category that included most air force artists. On 3 August, he sailed from Halifax, arriving in Britain on the 10th.

For the whole of his overseas posting, lasting until August 1945, Anderson was nominally on the strength of RCAF Overseas Headquarters. It was a location he seldom saw, for his duties encompassed much of the United Kingdom and into Europe.

He began in London with watercolours that reflected his recent travels (*Officers' Quarters aboard Troop Ship* and *Troop Ship Arrival, Port of Liverpool*) and present circumstances (*Robot Bomb over St. Paul's Cathedral*;

Last Train to Leicester Square, plus a portrait of Squadron Leader K. R. Sangster). In September, he was dispatched north to Banff, Scotland, there to do a series of watercolours illustrating the work of No. 404 Squadron then engaged in anti-shiping strikes. These works include *Collision in Circuit*, *Beaufighter*, *Return from a Strike off the Norwegian Coast*, *T for Tommy gets I D at No. 2 Hangar*, *YMCA Tea Car*, *Bomb Dumps*, and *Right After Breakfast*. He also did portraits of two pilots in No. 404 – Flying Officers J. R. Savard and J. H. Symons and of Corporal M. J. Gillman, a member of the squadron's photo section. He began some of these works on site, completing them on his return to London.

His next assignment was to No.64 Base, Croft, Yorkshire, the home of Nos.431 and 434 Squadrons. These units were part of No.6 Group, Bomber Command, mounting relentless attacks on German targets. He was attached to Croft from 23 October to 13 November 1944 during which time he painted portraits including *LAC Roger Lacroix*. To these were added operational subjects with a very human touch – *The Kibitzers*, *The Skonk Holler: Ground Mechanics Dispersal Hut*, *No Flying Today*, *Nissen Hut*, *Interior, Halifax Take- Off and Waiting for Bombers' Return*. Air Marshal C. M. McEwen, who commanded No.6 Group, vetoed his attempt to go on a raid.

Anderson's return to London was brief; on 11 December he was sent to Europe for attachment to No.127 Wing, a Spitfire formation consisting of Nos.403, 416, and 421 Squadrons. He would remain with that organization until June 1945, witnessing the static winter war, the crossing of the Rhine, and the final advance into Germany.

Of all the incidents witnessed by Anderson, the most spectacular was probably the German air attacks on



Clockwise from above:
 Donald Kenneth Anderson – Handley Page Hampdens over the Target
 The Day a Flying Fort Landed
 Last Train to Leicester Square
 Troop Ship Arrival, Port of Liverpool
 Non-Fraternization



CWM 19710261-1308



Clockwise from above:

Donald Kenneth Anderson – Beaufighter

Robot Bomb over St. Paul's Cathedral

Bomb Dumps

Nazi Pilot

The Last Days of the Third Reich No.1

CWM 19710261-1366



CWM 19710261-1345



CWM 19710261-1349



CWM 19710261-1310



Allied airfields at dawn on 1 January 1945 – the so-called “Hangover Raid.” He painted six works dealing with the aftermath – firefighters hosing down burning machines and the wrecks of German aircraft shot down that day.

Less famous, but equally dramatic was a 10 January 1945 incident. An American B-17 Flying Fortress crashed at Evère, Belgium, skidding into a hangar filled with Anson aircraft before exploding in a fireball as 3,000 pounds of bombs and hundreds of litres of gas went up in a thunderous “whoosh.” Anderson, standing feet away, was bowled over but unhurt. He subsequently captured the moment in *The Day a Flying Fort Landed*. One work completed at Diepholz, Germany on 21 April 1945 is particularly poignant. *After Five Years* shows former Allied prisoners of war waiting to be flown to Britain. Anderson wrote on the back of the painting:

They were a pathetic sight, some clad in lice-infested blankets, some with gangrenous wounds wrapped in dirty cloth, very few had their original uniforms. They wore German boots, German coats, hats made of discarded socks which were fashioned by toothbrushes cut down to make needles. Some were RCAF personnel shot down on the first bomber raids on Essen, Hamburg, veterans of the infamous Stettin camp, where the sadistic guards slashed at them with bayonets while they ran with packs shouldered and hands behind their backs. The whole feeling of these men can be seized up when an RAF Sergeant murmured to me, “Do I seem strange?”

Some time in April or May, he accompanied a truck that had been loaded with food parcels from No. 127 Wing personnel. The destination was the German concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen. Anderson’s sole

painting of that hell-hole is not particularly strong but it should be recalled that the camp had been liberated by that time and burials and improvements had to some degree moderated the impact its horrors might formerly have had on him.

Anderson did one work showing No. 127 Wing personnel watching a V-1 pass overhead, bracketed by anti-aircraft fire. He also executed two paintings dealing with the Rhine crossings of March 1945. Assorted watercolours depicted Spitfires at readiness, an anti-aircraft gun crew, and a wrecked 88 mm gun abandoned by the enemy during their retreat. His paintings show the litter around Evère airfield; war was a very untidy business.

Several portraits of No. 127 Wing personnel emerged as well from this period – Flying Officers Larry Spurr and Daniel Wegg, Squadron Leader H. Zary, and Leading Aircraftman H. Russel.

However, his most striking works with the wing dealt with the seemingly mundane subjects that meant a great deal to RCAF personnel of all ranks. As a mobile wing, No. 127 had to be able to pack all its equipment and be ready to move in two hours. Some paintings, like *Moving Day*, show the truck convoys used to transfer these formations. Others show the men cooking and eating in primitive field conditions – *Hard Living*, *After Tea*, and *Pig for Dinner*. *Church Service, Easter*, depicts a shivering little congregation in a bare hut.

Above all else, Anderson caught the sullen, resentful attitudes of Germans at war’s end, some still haughty, others resigned to defeat. *Nazi Pilot*, completed at No. 127 Wing’s detention centre on 6 February 1945, shows a defiant Ju. 88 pilot whom the artist described as being contemptuous of all things not German. *German Faces, Seen from a Convoy* is a study of blank stares

as an RCAF truck passes workmen repairing a road. *The Last Days of the Third Reich No. 1*, ironically pictures two brutish-looking Germans wearing Red Cross armbands while newly-liberated Russian slave labourers salute a Canadian road convoy. *War, Conquerors not Liberators*, and *Early Evening, Germany* vividly illustrate the physical and spiritual devastation of Germany. *Non-Fraternization* shows mutual hostility between Canadian airmen and German women; it contrasts sharply with *Dutch Refugees* where human relationships are being developed in a bleak landscape.

After the war Anderson worked as a commercial artist in Montreal for 20 years before relocating to Toronto where he worked largely in advertising. In 1990, the Canadian Association of Photographers and Illustrators in Communications gave him a lifetime achievement award. He retired to northern Ontario in chosen solitude leaving a witnessed war record of significance. He died near Toronto on 11 May 2009.

Notes

1. The material cited is also found in these files.
2. Works referred to in the main text are in the CWM’s collection.

Hugh Halliday served with the Air Historian and Directorate of History and Heritage (1961-68), taught at Niagara College of Applied Arts and Technology (1968-1974) and held various posts at the Canadian War Museum (1974-1995). Although best known for his aviation books and articles, he is also the author of *Wreck! Canada’s Worst Railway Accidents* (Robin Brass Studio, 1997) and *Murder Among Gentlemen: A History of Duelling in Canada* (Robin Brass Studio, 1999). His last book, *Valour Reconsidered* (Robin Brass Studio, 2006) examined the politics and procedures associated with awards of the Victoria Cross and other major gallantry awards.