

THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH AIR TRAINING PLAN



Photo: DND RCAF PL 3730

INTRODUCTION

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, Canada was an ocean away from the scene of the fighting in Europe. But geographical distance did not mean that Canada would not play an important role in the struggle to restore peace.

One of the first and most important contributions our country would make to the war effort would be the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP). Under a deal signed in 1939, Canada agreed to provide facilities and training for airmen from every part of the Commonwealth. Canada was ideally suited for this program because our country was far from most of the active fighting and had lots of wide-open spaces and good flying conditions.

“THE AERODROME OF DEMOCRACY”

The BCATP was an enormous undertaking. In 1939, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) had only 4,000 personnel, less than a dozen airports of its own and training facilities for only 400 ground crew per year. Now the RCAF was expected to train thousands. It had to recruit instructors, build air bases, acquire aircraft and develop training schools for different specialties. By war's end, there were 151 training schools and every province had BCATP installations. Canada was, in U.S. President Roosevelt's words, “the aerodrome of democracy”.

- During the time of its operation, the BCATP employed 3,540 aircraft, 33,000 air force personnel, and 6,000 civilian employees.
- The government built 7,000 hangars, barracks and drill halls for the air bases and training schools.

- Most training schools had three runways, each 100 feet wide and 2,500 feet long. Enough concrete was used in creating the runways for all the BCATP air bases to build a 20-foot wide highway from Ottawa to Vancouver.
- Under the original agreement to establish the BCATP, Britain was to pay \$218 million, Canada \$313 million, Australia \$97 million and New Zealand \$21 million. Costs, however, escalated far beyond the 1939 estimates. In the end, Canada paid \$1.6 billion of the total cost of \$2.2 billion. In terms of today's money, that meant that each taxpayer living in Canada ended up contributing more than \$3,000 just to pay for the BCATP.

RIGOROUS TRAINING

Training in the BCATP was challenging and rigorous. Pilots, wireless operators, air gunners, air observers and flight engineers went through months of training at specialized schools.

- The pilot training was the longest and most difficult. From Initial Training School, they went to Elementary Flying Training School, where they got their first chance to fly, followed by Service Flying Training Schools where they were separated into fighter and bomber pilots. From there they went into Advanced Flying and Operational Training Units before going overseas.
- Of the Canadians trained in the BCATP, 25,747 would become pilots: 12,855 navigators; 6,659 air bombers; 12,744 wireless operators; 12,917 air gunners, and 1,913 flight engineers.
- The risks and sacrifices of those serving their country during the Second World War were not limited to



those who were engaged in active fighting. Training could be hazardous, as demonstrated by the 856 trainees who died in crashes during BCATP's five years of operation. As high as these figures may seem, it was to the credit of the plan that, by 1944, only one fatal accident was being recorded for each 22,388 hours of flying time.

EVERYONE PITCHES IN

Civilians played an important role in the BCATP, providing instructors for training schools and community support for airmen who were far away from home.

- Bush and commercial pilots joined as instructors, working side-by-side with military personnel.
- In the beginning, the government entrusted Canadian flying clubs with the organization and operation of the Elementary Flying Training Schools. Many of their members had served in the First World War and provided an immediate source of skilled manpower.
- Civilian instructors in Elementary Flying Training Schools emphasized safety, working under the maxim "There are old pilots and bold pilots; there are no old, bold pilots."
- Some flying clubs paid for the entire cost of a training school using private funds or community donations. In Vancouver, citizens paid for 14 training aircraft out of their own pockets.
- Women's organization ran canteens, sports organizations supplied athletic equipment and service clubs provided items like pianos for barracks halls.

- Many people invited trainees into their own homes for meals as a patriotic gesture and as a part of their personal involvement in the war effort.

AN OUTSTANDING SUCCESS

The BCATP was an outstanding success. By the end of the war, it had graduated 131,533 pilots, observers, flight engineers and other aircrew for the air forces of Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. While over half the BCATP graduates came from the North American continent, the plan trained personnel from all over the world including about 2,000 French, 900 Czechoslovakians, 680 Norwegians, 450 Poles and about the same number of Belgians and Dutch.

- 72,835 graduates joined the Royal Canadian Air Force
- 42,110 graduates joined the Royal Air Force
- 9,606 joined the Royal Australian Air Force
- 7,002 joined the Royal New Zealand Air Force

THE LEGACY

Knowing about our country's military history helps us to understand the Canada in which we live today and how we can build our future together. The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan helped create a legacy in Canada that continues to this day, demonstrating that our future is indeed built on our past. To learn more about Canada's role in the Second World War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada Web site at: www.vac-acc.gc.ca or call 1-877-604-8469 to obtain information on available publications.

