

No. 443 (Hornet) Squadron

BY WING COMMANDER F. H. HITCHINS
Air Historian

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THE WAR HISTORY of No. 443 Squadron of the Royal Canadian Air Force covers a period of almost four years. It began at Dartmouth, N.S., in the last days of June 1942 and ended at Uetersen, Germany, in March 1946. For the first eighteen months of its career the squadron was engaged on uneventful defensive patrols over Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. Then it went overseas and flew with the Second Tactical Air Force from the beginning of the aerial preparation for "Overlord", in the spring of 1944, until the final defeat of the enemy in May 1945. By V-E Day, No. 443's tally of enemy aircraft destroyed in the air and on the ground had risen to 45, with 31 more counted as probably destroyed or damaged, while its total of enemy trains, vehicles, and vessels, had passed the 1200-mark. After hostilities ended, the squadron served with an R.C.A.F. wing in the British Air Force of Occupation in Germany until it was disbanded early in 1946.

No. 443 was originally known as No. 127 (F.) Squadron, one of several new fighter units formed in Canada as a result of Japan's entrance into the war and the extension of German U-boat operations to the western shores of the Atlantic. It was originally planned to form No. 127 in April 1942, but the unit did not actually come into existence until the end of June, when Flt. Lt. W. P. Roberts was named commanding officer. Equipped with Hurricanes and Harvards, the squadron carried out training at Dartmouth until the middle of August. Then it moved to its "war station" at Gander, Nfld., where it completed a one-year tour of routine patrols on fighter defence of the great air base. As enemy raiders never appeared, most of the time was devoted to operational training varied with occasional searches for missing aircraft.

While at Gander the squadron was re-equipped with Hurricane II's (or XII's) in lieu of the well-worn Mark I's which it had been flying. The change meant a great improvement in serviceability. Late in November 1942, Flt. Lt. (later Sqn. Ldr.) P. A. Gilbertson succeeded Roberts in Command of No. 127.

In July 1943 the squadron returned to Dartmouth, exchanging places with No. 126, and spent the next five months on another round of patrols and scrambles, much practice flying, and some fighter affiliation for Ventura crews in training at Pennfield Ridge. No. 127's only fatal accident occurred during this period, when Flt. Sgt. M. R. Sabourin crashed while making a dusk patrol over the base.

A blizzard put a stop to flying on December 14th and the squadron began active preparations for a move overseas as one of six units which the R.C.A.F. despatched to Britain in the winter of 1943-44. Originally No. 127's move had been scheduled for late March 1944, but the date was advanced to the third week in January to ensure that the squadron would be ready to participate in the invasion of Normandy. Just before leaving Canada, Sqn. Ldr. H. W. McLeod, D.F.C. and Bar, took over command of No. 127. A veteran of the Battle of Malta, Wally McLeod was one of the R.C.A.F.'s outstanding fighter pilots, with thirteen destroyed and many damaged to his credit.

The squadron moved out of Dartmouth on December 23rd (on embarkation and Christmas leave), reassembled at Lachine three weeks later, and sailed from Halifax on the "Pasteur" on January 20th. On arrival in Britain, No. 127 went first to the reception centre at Bournemouth where, in addition to the usual documentation and accounting, it was reorganized and redesignated No. 443 Squadron in the R.C.A.F. overseas sequence.

From Bournemouth the unit moved, on February 13th, to Digby in Lincolnshire, where it formed a new R.C.A.F. fighter wing (144) with Nos. 441 and 442 Squadrons which also had just arrived from Canada. The wing commander flying of this new formation was Wing Cdr. J. E. Johnson, D.S.O. and Bar, D.F.C. and Bar, the R.A.F.'s top "ace". After some preliminary training on Spitfire V-B's, the wing received more modern IX-B's, and a few days later moved south to Holmsley in Hampshire to begin operations.

No. 443, however, had to wait almost four weeks before making its initial sorties against the enemy. Hardly had the unit settled into its tents at Holmsley than it was sent back north to Yorkshire for an air-firing and bombing course. Early in April the squadron rejoined the wing, which in the interval had moved to Westhampnett, and, on the 13th, twelve pilots led by Sqn. Ldr. McLeod took part in No. 443's first operation, an uneventful escort for Boston's bombing a target at Dieppe.

The aerial preparation for D-Day was now in full course, and the next eight weeks were a very busy period for the pilots and their groundcrews. Between April 13th and June 5th, No. 443 made 487 sorties on 43 offensive operations. Sqn. Ldr. McLeod opened the squadron's victory book by destroying a DO. 217 near Louvain on April 19th. Two more were added by Flt. Lts. D. M. Walz and Hugh Russel on the 25th, when a wing formation led by Johnny Johnson caught six F.W.190's and destroyed all six. Another Focke-Wulf crashed in flames on May 5th, to give Wally McLeod his fifteenth confirmed victory.

Combats with the enemy were the exception, however, in this pre-D-Day period. On most of the fighter sweeps and bomber escorts the only opposition encountered was flak. But the Spitfires were no longer simply fighters to engage the enemy in the air; they had now become fighter-bombers to attack the enemy on the ground as well. On April 26th, No. 443 Squadron carried out its first dive-bombing mission against a flying-bomb site south of Dieppe. In the next six weeks there were many such operations against "Noballs" (the V-1 sites), bridges, rail junctions and yards, and radar posts. On most of the attacks the pilots had to run a gauntlet of intense flak and many of the Spits came home peppered with holes.

From Westhampnett the wing moved to Funtington on April 22nd, and thence to Ford three weeks later. Here the final preparations for the invasion were made. When the troops landed on the Norman coast on June 6th, Sqn. Ldr. McLeod's pilots made four patrols over the beaches between 0620 and 2145 hours. Again on the 7th they were out four times, destroying one Me. 109 and damaging another over Caen. But the day was marred by the squadron's first casualty, when Flt. Lt. I. R. MacLennan, D.F.C., was forced down behind the enemy lines by a glycol leak and was taken prisoner.

On June 10th the squadron made its first landing on the beach-head, five pilots putting down on one of the strips that were being hastily prepared, to rearm and refuel between sweeps. The last operation from Ford was an escort in the late evening of June 14th for Lancasters bombing Le Havre, in the course of which the Spitfires met some enemy bombers and destroyed two Do.217's. The next day the wing moved across the Channel to the landing strip at St. Croix-sur-Mer. (It was the first R.C.A.F. formation to begin operations from Normandy.) By day the field was blanketed with clouds of dust, and at night the incessant din of the flak barrage and enemy bombing made sleep almost impossible.

The first day's operations from B.3 (on June 16th) brought No. 443 two more victories (a pair of Me.109's) but inflicted the severe blow of four pilots missing from a combat against heavy odds. Sqn.

Ldr. J. D. Hall, Flt. Lt. Hugh Russel, and Flying Officer Luis Perez-Gomez (from Mexico) were killed, but the fourth pilot, Flt. Lt. Don Walz, was able to take to his parachute when his Spitfire blew up in the air. Evading German searchers, Walz made contact with the French underground and two months later rejoined his unit. One of the Messerschmitts shot down that day was Sqn. Ldr. McLeod's seventeenth enemy aircraft destroyed, a record which won him the D.S.O. In the last days of June the squadron added four more destroyed (including a double scored by McLeod) and three damaged to its total. The figures would probably have been considerably higher had it not been for cloud which frequently prevented the pilots from coming to grips with the enemy. Armed reconnaissances along the Nazi lines of communication in Normandy were now a regular feature of the operational programme in addition to front line patrols and fighter sweeps. By the middle of July the number of blazing, smoking or damaged vehicles had risen to 99, plus 4 locomotives or trains, 1 barge, and 1 railroad signal house.

On July 14th, when the fighter wings in Normandy were reorganized, 144 was broken up and Sqn. Ldr. McLeod's unit joined 127 Wing at Crepon. At the same time Group Capt. W. R. MacBrien became commanding officer and Wing Cdr. Johnny Johnson wing commander flying for 127 Wing, which included, in addition to No. 443, the Wolf (No. 403), Oshawa (No. 416), and Red Indian (No. 421) Squadrons.

Wally McLeod won his twentieth victory on July 20th when the pilot of an F.W.190 which he was about to attack baled out before the Spitfire leader could fire a shot. In the same engagement Flt. Lt. J. G. L. Robillard, D.F.M., destroyed another Focke-Wulf. A third F.W. was shot down by Flying Officer G. R. Stephen a few days later, and on the 30th, Sqn. Ldr. McLeod and Flying Officer W. J. Bentley each finished off an Me. 109, while Pilot Officer Rooney Hodgins made damaging strikes on one more. McLeod's unusual victory of July 20th was duplicated on August 8th by four of his pilots who gave chase to a lone Me. 109 and, when they were still 1000 yards distant, saw the enemy pilot take to his parachute. Discretion, apparently, was preferable to valour.

In addition to these seven enemy aircraft, No. 443 tallied 20 mechanized enemy transport "flamers", 21 "smokers", and 20 (plus a tank) damaged, in the period July 15th to August 13th. Many dive-bombing attacks were also made on bridges, rail lines and junctions, crossroads, canal locks, and similar targets. The Germans' flak was increasing in intensity as they sought to protect their vehicles and communications from this incessant strafing. Two pilots were lost on armed reces, either to flak or engine trouble. Flying Officer T. G. Munro was able to bale out safely behind the enemy lines and was captured, but Flying Officer W. J. Bentley went down with his aircraft and was killed.

The week of August 15th to 22nd was highlighted by the holocaust of the Falaise pocket, when the Nazi army, caught in an iron trap, tried to pull out eastwards through a narrow gap that was hammered day and night from the ground and air. From Trun to Orbec the roads and lanes were littered with the wreckage of an army in flight. Sqn. Ldr. McLeod's pilots counted 104 "flamers", 124 "smokers", and 142 damaged M.E.T., as well as 1 tank "smoker" and 5 damaged, as the result of their strafing during this period.

Rain gave the stricken Nazis some relief on the 20th and 21st, and by the time the skies cleared, the retreating forces were drawing out of range of the Spitfires based on the beach-head. On August 23rd, as a change from the long series of armed reces, Nos. 443 and 421, led by Wing Cdr. Johnny Johnson, made a fighter sweep around Paris. Near Senlis the twenty Spitfire pilots were amazed to see a force of 60 to 80 enemy fighters approaching them head-on. Johnson remarked that the Germans "seemed keen to engage but probably only because they outnumbered the wing by four to one." Nevertheless the R.C.A.F. Spitfires came out the victors, destroying twelve of their opponents against a loss of three of their own formation. The wing leader shot down two, Flying Officer G. F. Ockenden

accounted for two plus a damaged, and Flt. Lt. Larry Robillard and Flying Officer A. J. Horrell each destroyed one. Pilots of the Red Indian squadron brought down six more. One of the missing pilots was Flying Officer R. W. Dunn of No. 443 Squadron, who was heard to say that he had been hit in the dogfight and would have to bale out. He was later reported a prisoner of war.

Subsequent operations in the last days of August found little sign of the enemy in the air or on the ground. The Battle of Normandy was over, and the pursuit was now pressing eastward beyond the Seine, across the Somme and on through Belgium. Left far in the rear, the fighter wings began to move forward. From Crepon, 127 Wing advanced first to Illiers l'Eveque, near Dreux, where it remained for three quiet, uneventful weeks. The battle lines were still out of range. On September 21st the pilots flew up to Le Culot, a former Luftwaffe airfield in Belgium, where they arrived in time to participate in the heavy air fighting that followed the Allied airborne assault on Grave, Nijmegen, and Arnhem. For the next four weeks No. 443's major activity was patrolling over the Nijmegen area, where the Luftwaffe was endeavouring to destroy the bridges that had fallen into Allied hands.

On September 27th a squadron formation led by Wing Cdr. Johnson intercepted a group of nine Me.109's over Rees and in a general melee destroyed five, with two more counted as probables. In the dogfight Sqn. Ldr. H. W. McLeod, D.S.O., D.F.C., and Bar, was lost. Over Malta, France, and Belgium, he had shot down 21 enemy aircraft, 8 of them while leading No. 443 Squadron. Two days later twelve pilots led by Flt. Lt. G. W. A. Troke, D.F.C., engaged a group of more than 60 Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs over the bridges at Nijmegen, and, despite the handicap of numbers and shortage of petrol, won a brilliant success. Troke destroyed two 109's and damaged another; Flying Officer G. F. Ockenden and Rooney Hodgins also scored a double victory each, while Flying Officer A. J. Horrell crashed an F.W.190, to make the total seven destroyed, plus at least three damaged.

On one of these Nijmegen patrols in September a flak hit forced Flying Officer L. D. Sherwood down behind the enemy lines. His companions, seeing the aircraft crash and burst into flames, held little hope that the pilot could have survived. But Sherwood's only injury was a broken nose, for, unnoticed by his comrades, he had been able to bale out. Thanks to the Dutch underground, he regained our lines within a month.

It is of interest to note that between September 25th and 29th eight R.C.A.F. Spitfire squadrons in 83 Group of 2nd T.A.F. accounted for a grand total of 97 enemy aircraft destroyed, 3 probably destroyed, and 39 damaged. No. 443's contribution was 12-2-3; but this period of air fighting was almost the last in its career, for in the next seven months the pilots saw few enemy aircraft in the skies over Germany. Two destroyed and one damaged in air combat was the total for all these weeks of patrolling and hunting. Lacking targets in the air, the pilots went down to the ground to hunt the Luftwaffe on its airfields, and in strafing attacks wrote off at least six aircraft and sent 17 more to the repair shop.

From Le Culot the squadron moved up to Grave in the Netherlands on September 30th. The new airfield, on the banks of the Maas River near Nijmegen, was close to the lines and was frequently bombed by Me.262's. Some casualties were caused, including two pilots injured by flying fragments; and slit trenches and "twitch hats" became very popular. More serious, however, was heavy rain which made the field unserviceable and forced the wing to fall back to Melsbroek, near Brussels. Just before leaving Grave, the squadron lost two pilots under unusual circumstances. Flying Officers L. P. E. Piche and A. J. Horrell set out in an Auster to fly to Antwerp. They arrived there safely, took off again and vanished into the blue. Both pilots had been with the squadron since Gander days.

At Melsbroek, No. 443, now under the command of Sqn. Ldr. A. H. Sager, was employed for a time on escort for Mitchell bombers operating from the same base. Then, early in November, the wing

moved to Evere, somewhat closer to Brussels, where it remained until the beginning of March. The proximity of the Belgian capital afforded numerous amenities that had been lacking for months; parties, graced by C.W.A.C.'s, nurses, and Belgian demoiselles, made life more pleasant in the long dull winter months. It was at this time that No. 443 selected its badge, a hornet, with the warning motto "Our Sting is Death."

Operations from Evere consisted of patrols over the battlefield between Weert and Roermond, with frequent sweeps and armed recesses into Germany in search of air or ground targets. The weather was now a serious handicap, frequently grounding the Spitfires for days, and on the whole the first three months at Evere were a quiet period. Some of the squadron's patrols in December were along the Siegfried Line between Aachen and Trier where, on the 16th, von Rundstedt launched the counter-offensive that culminated in the "Battle of the Bulge." No. 443 had no part in the early stages of the battle, as it was sent to England on December 18th for an air firing course and did not return to Evere until January 3rd, 1945. The squadron also missed the spectacular Luftwaffe strafe on New Year's Day against Allied airfields in Belgium and the Netherlands.

The first operations after the pilots returned to Evere were armed reconnaissances over the battle area in south-eastern Belgium where the "bulge" in the Allied lines was being eliminated. Then the Spitfires returned to their usual hunting-grounds in the Koesfeld-Munster-Hamm-Dorsten sector east of the Rhine. Flying Officer T. C. Gamey was killed by the intense flak barrage over a German factory which the pilots attacked.

In February, despite persistent bad weather which stopped all flying on thirteen days and hampered it on many others, there was a sharp increase in operations. Reconnoitring in the Rheine-Munster area, the Hornets found numerous targets for their bullets and bombs, the month's total running to 52 vehicles, 20 freight cars and 6 locomotives, in addition to which rail lines were cut with bomb craters in at least five places, and a station house was destroyed. The flak sometimes appeared to be as dense as the clouds that blanketed the sky. One accurate burst hit Flt. Lt. D. M. Walz's aircraft, forcing him to take to his parachute. It was the second time Don had been brought down behind the enemy lines. On the first occasion he had been able to evade, but this time the Germans caught him. He had been with the squadron ever since its formation at Dartmouth in July 1942.

Early in March, No. 443 moved up to Petit Brogel, near the Belgian-Dutch border, in preparation for the airborne crossing of the Rhine at Wesel later that month. The three weeks which preceded the attack were busy, but comparatively quiet, for the pilots. The assault on March 24th, however, marked the beginning of a period of intense activity that continued without a break until the Nazi surrender on Luneburg heath. In March and April the Hornet squadron flew almost 2000 hours on 1446 operational sorties. There were occasional brushes with enemy aircraft, including some of the new Me.262's, but they usually got away in the clouds before the Spitfires could come to close quarters. One Me.109 was damaged — the squadron's first success in air combat since the Nijmegen battles six months previously. Attacks on enemy airfields were more fruitful—4 destroyed and 14 damaged; and armed recesses during these two months yielded at least 17 rail and road cuts, 85 mechanized vehicles, 23 horse-drawn transports, 8 railroad cars, 3 buildings, 2 guns and a petrol bowser destroyed, 173 vehicles, 27 freight cars, 8 locomotives and 13 buildings damaged.

Sqn. Ldr. Art Sager finished his second tour late in March and was succeeded by Sqn. Ldr. T. J. de Courcy, formerly a flight commander in No. 421 Squadron. On the last operation from Petit Brogel, on March 31st, Flying Officer G. A. McDonald had to bale out over Germany and became a prisoner of war. Later that day the squadron moved to Eindhoven, the first in a series of rapid advances that took the unit across the German border to Rheine (April 12th), on to Diepholz (April 13th), and

finally to Reinsehlen (April 28th.) Despite these frequent changes of base, 127 Wing had become so experienced and expert in mobility that operations continued without interruption.

While at Eindhoven, No. 443 lost another pilot, Flying Officer S. E. Messum, who crashed and was killed before he could abandon his flak-damaged aircraft. A fortnight later, on April 21st, two more pilots were reported missing. Flt. Lt. R. D. Marsh was winged by flak while strafing trains beyond the Elbe. Landing safely by parachute, he evaded capture and, after living on potatoes and wild ducks' eggs for a fortnight, made his way back to the squadron. The second pilot, Flying Officer H. R. Hanscom, disappeared following a brief engagement with some Focke-Wolfs. He was presumed dead.

While reconnoitring around Lubeck on the 25th, the pilots noted many aircraft parked on the airfield at Schwerin, and a few hours later Sqn. Ldr. de Courcy led a formation of eight Spitfires in a strafing attack on the attractive target. Flt. Lt. A. J. Dilworth set fire to a Ju.88 while the other pilots put damaging bursts into twelve other aircraft of various types. This attack was followed later in the day by another on the airfield at Neustadt, which resulted in the destruction of three F.W.190's and damage to two more. This time the Spitfires encountered vicious flak opposition and Dilworth crashed to his death on the airfield. The next morning two more casualties were suffered while strafing enemy vehicles: Flying Officer W. G. Conway and Flt. Lt. T. R. Watt had to land their damaged aircraft in enemy territory. Conway was a prisoner for a few days, but Terry Watt received severe injuries when his Spitfire broke up in the crash-landing.

By the end of April the British Second Army had established a bridge-head across the Elbe, and the Hornet squadron's last operations consisted of patrols over this bridge-head and armed reces in the rapidly diminishing area that was still in possession of the Nazis beyond the river. Everything was now so mixed up that the pilots were never sure whether they were flying over Russian-, British-, or German-held territory. There were only four days of operations in May, but they were very fruitful — 4 enemy aircraft, 64 M.E.T., 6 freight cars and a trawler destroyed; 2 aircraft, 104 M.E.T., 7 trawlers, 4 locomotives and 2 rail cars damaged. Five of the six aircraft were accounted for on May 2nd in a strafe of an airfield near Bad Segeberg. A Fieseler and a Heinkel were destroyed on the ground, and two more Heinkel III's were damaged. A few minutes later, when the pilots flew back over the airfield, they caught a Ju.88 in the air, which Flt. Lt. H. R. Finley and Flying Officer M. J. Clow crashed into the ground. The Junkers' rear gunner, however, hit Hart Finley's Spitfire, forcing the pilot to bale out. Hart was back home within three days, safe and sound.

On the 3rd, when the British Army made contact with the Russians at Grabow and drove on to the Baltic coast, the Hornet squadron reconnoitred over Schleswig and Kiel, strafing and bombing trains, vehicles, and ships. On the day's final operation, Sqn. Ldr. Tommy de Courcy and two companions won the squadron's last air victory of the war by destroying a Ju.88 near Kappeln. The next day several shipping strikes were carried out around Kiel and Eckernforde; then hostilities ceased.

No. 443 remained at Reinsehlen for two months after V-E Day. A tragic loss was suffered during this time when Sqn. Ldr. de Courcy was killed in a car accident near Hamburg. Hart Finley replaced him in command. Early in July the squadron moved to Uetersen to join 126 (R.C.A.F.) Wing in the British Air Forces of Occupation. Flying practice, exercises and sports, passed the time away while the old-timers awaited repatriation and new personnel were posted in. In September Sqn. Ldr. Finley left for Canada and Sqn. Ldr. C. D. J. Bricker, D.F.C., took charge of the Hornets until the unit was finally disbanded on March 15th, 1946.

No. 443's final tally showed 39 enemy aircraft destroyed, 2 probably destroyed and 12 damaged in air combat, 6 destroyed and 17 damaged on the ground. Sqn. Ldr. H. W. McLeod, D.S.O., D.F.C. and Bar, headed the list with 8 destroyed; Flying Officer G. F. Ockenden, D.F.C., had 4 1/2 destroyed and 1 damaged; Flying Officer R. A. Hodgins, D.F.C., 3 destroyed, 1 probable and 1 damaged; and Flt.

Lt. D. M. Walz, 3 destroyed. Wing Cdr. Johnny Johnson also had destroyed three while flying with the squadron. Its members won one D.S.O. (Sqn. Ldr. McLeod) and five D.F.C.'s (Sqn. Ldrs. A. H. Sager and T. J. de Courcy, Flt. Lts. H. R. Finley, Ockenden, and Hodgins). Twelve pilots were killed or presumed dead; eleven others, who were reported missing, eventually returned safely.

On September 1st, 1951, No. 443 Squadron was reformed at Vancouver as a fighter unit in the R.C.A.F. Auxiliary. For some months prior to its official creation, No. 442 Fighter Squadron (Auxiliary) at Vancouver had been recruiting and training personnel for the new unit, and one of No. 442's officers, Wing Cdr. R. B. Barker, D.F.C., was appointed commanding officer of No. 443 Squadron in October. During the war Wing Cdr. Barker had served overseas as a fighter pilot in Nos. 442 and 412 Squadrons and had achieved a score of 4 enemy aircraft destroyed and 2 damaged.

