

406 Sqn Hosts Wartime CO

presented by Ernie Cable SAM Historian



Wing Commander Russ Bannock DSO, DFC and Bar CO 406 Nov 1944 - May 1945

Last spring Shearwater's 406 (Operational Training) Squadron (*406 Squadron was reformed at Shearwater in July 1972 with the amalgamation of the training functions of the former RCN squadrons, VU 32 & HU 21.*) had the honour of hosting retired Wing Commander (W/C) Russ Bannock DSO, DFC and Bar, one of the squadron's Commanding Officers during the Second World War. After meeting with 406 Squadron members and touring the Wing, including the Shearwater Aviation Museum, the squadron invited other Shearwater officers to hear a first hand account of a segment of their Air Force heritage and, in particular, W/C Bannock's wartime experiences on 406 Squadron. W/C Bannock recounted his experiences flying de Havilland Mosquitoes in the Night Intruder role, first with 418 Squadron and then as Commanding

Officer 406 Squadron. W/C Bannock was Canada's second highest scoring ace of the Second World War, shooting down 19 V1 rockets and 11 German night fighters for a total of 25 ½ aircraft destroyed.

Despite his outstanding contribution during the Second World War, Bannock is unheard of in Edmonton and even during the war he was unknown in Canada. There are no parks, or statues or other commemoration to remind Canadians of this superlative airman's achievements that are part of Canada's military heritage.

He was born Russ Bahnuk on 1 Nov. 1919 and grew up in Edmonton, Alberta. His Austrian father changed the family name to a quintessential Canadian name, Bannock, in 1939. This was a fortunate choice as a Germanic name could have caused problems during the war, especially with two cousins in the Luftwaffe.

Growing up in Edmonton Russ dreamt of becoming a pilot.

"I grew up in Edmonton and Edmonton was always known for aviation in those days. I was fascinated by the famous Canadian bush pilots Punch Dickens and Wop May. Wop May is actually the person who gave me my first reference to get into the Air Force. I went up to Yellowknife and got a job (prospecting) with an excavation crew. I came back to Edmonton for three months in the winter of 1938 and got my private pilot's license, and took a couple of mining courses at the university."

He qualified as a commercial pilot by the following April and flew with Yukon Southern Air Transport. In September, 1939 the war started.

"As the war rolled around, every commercial pilot in Canada received a telegram from the Minister of National Defence, inviting us to become RCAF pilot officers. That was the day war started and I promptly replied "yes". Three or four days later, I was sent to Vancouver to learn instrument-flying and aerobatics. I flew the Gypsy Moth, an open-cockpit biplane, and wore leather helmet and glasses. They were fun to fly, but I was sent from there to Trenton Officer School and then to Camp Borden, which was the only service flying school, flying Harvards and **Fairey Battles**."

Bannock earned his Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) wings and was posted to 112 Squadron, scheduled to deploy to Europe to support the First Canadian Division, but France was defeated and the Allies retreated from the continent at Dunkirk. Consequently, Bannock remained in Canada and became a flying instructor for the next three years eventually earning promotions to chief instructor and rank of Squadron Leader (S/L).

In 1943, he was posted to No. 36 Operational Training Unit at RCAF Station Greenwood, Nova Scotia to learn how to fly the new two-seat, twin engine de Havilland **Mosquito** fighter/bomber. Upon graduation he was posted to 418 (City of Edmonton) Squadron at Holmsley in southern England in June 1944. Shortly thereafter the Germans started what became known as the Second Battle of Britain, launching their new unmanned, unguided **V1** rocket or "Vergeltungswaffe" ("retaliation weapon") against London and other targets in southern England. The V1 had a pulse-jet engine that made an intermittent buzz, buzz sound, until the fuel ran out when it dove to earth and detonated. Each V1 buzz-bomb carried 2,000 pounds (1,000 kg) of high explosive and had only a rudimentary navigation system with a gyro to stabilize heading and range was determined by the amount of fuel carried. The most terrifying moment for those on the ground occurred when the engine became silent because it ran out of fuel and there was no indication of where the V1 would strike the ground, knowing only that it would impact nearby. Several hundred V1's were launched against cities in southern England each day with London being the prime target. On June 13, a single buzz-bomb destroyed

a church in the centre of London, killing 119 and injuring 141 more. Other cities were also heavily damaged by V1's with Croydon in Surrey being targeted by a total of 141 V1's.



Mosquito running up prior to take-off

No. 418 Squadron flew Mosquitoes which were one of the few aircraft with sufficient speed to intercept the buzz-bombs. The squadron was given the primary task of intercepting and destroying V1's. Crews were encouraged to shoot down the V1's over the English Channel to minimize collateral damage. Those who destroyed a buzz-bomb over the Channel were credited with a whole kill, whereas V1's knocked down over the English countryside counted only as a half kill. S/L Russ Bannock and Flight Lieutenant Don MacFadyen, two of the RCAF's most brilliant tacticians, developed tactics to combat the V1s at night. Since the V1's flew at 300 to 3,000 feet (100 – 1000 meters) at up to 370 miles per hour (615 kph), the Mosquitoes hunted for buzz-bomb's from 10,000 feet (3,000 meters). Once the V1 was spotted the pilot flew on the same heading as the buzz-bomb; when it passed abeam, the pilot dove on a vector that would bring the Mosquito behind and below the buzz-bomb at about a speed of 425 miles per hour (710 kph). A shot from directly astern was extremely dangerous as the fireball from the explosion could engulf the Mosquito. The pilot had 30 seconds to plan and set up a deflection shot. Bannock's keen eyes and reflexes gave him a distinct edge. He would close one eye to protect his night vision from the flash of the explosion. As soon as the highly flammable fuel exploded the pilot had to bank sharply down and away from the debris while at low altitude. MacFayden made the first "Diver" kill, Bannock followed closely after on 19 June for his second V1 kill.

When not hunting V1's, 418 Squadron resumed its night intruder role, roaming over continental Europe looking to harass German night fighters either before they took off from their bases or when they landed upon return. If little was happening at the selected airfields, crews would then strafe any other targets of opportunity, especially trains, bases and vehicular traffic. With the Mosquitoes' long endurance and heavy fire power (four .303 machine guns and four 20mm canons) it excelled in this role. The navigator would get the aircraft to the intended enemy airfield using the primitive radar and dead reckoning. Then the pilot would circle slowly in the dark while they both kept watch for aircraft. Bannock's first victory was a [Messerschmitt Bf 110](#) night fighter at Avord, France. Bannock had been quietly circling the airport in the dark waiting for an aircraft to show itself. The Bf 110 was returning from attacking the bomber stream and turned on his navigation lights. Bannock quickly banked and fired on the Bf 110 just as it was touching down, sending it to its doom.



A pair of Mosquitoes low over the North Sea en route to Germany.

Bannock believed the best way to stop V1s was to catch them at their launch pads. On 3 July 1944, he and his navigator, Flying Officer (F/O) R.R. Bruce, headed for Abbeville, France. They arrived to see a stream of V1s starting to take off. Despite heavy flak they repeatedly attacked the launch site destroying three of the buzz-bombs. Three days later they intercepted and destroyed four in one night. Two nights later Bannock shot down two more V1's. By mid-July, 418 squadron moved to Hurn and returned to the intruder role. On one mission Bannock and Bruce chased a night fighter they picked up on radar for 70 miles (115 km) before catching and destroying it. Later the same night they destroyed a second aircraft while it was landing.

"There was a lot of emotion to shooting down a German night-fighter. But all you were trying to do is bring down the machine. A lot of the emotion was getting there and getting back and getting the job done. The trouble was you were being shot at from the ground. We took a lot of fire and that gets your adrenalin up."

By 12 August, Bannock had downed nine more buzz-bombs. Shortly thereafter, the squadron moved to an area where there were few V1s, so they went back to hunting night fighters. He gave ample credit to the navigators

"It was teamwork, very much so. The navigator ran the radar and tried to pick out targets and that was difficult because, low down, two-thirds of the radar screen was blocked out" (by ground return).



Mosquito over English Countryside

On 29 August, circling above Vaerlose airfield near Copenhagen, he attacked a [Junkers Ju 88](#) and a Bf 110, destroying both of them. Four days later he received the [Distinguished Flying Cross \(DFC\)](#).

By this time he had completed his operational tour of 35 sorties and should have been rotated out of operational flying for a six month rest from combat. But Bannock applied for and was granted a second tour in consideration for having been an instructor back in Canada for three years prior to arriving in England.

In Sept 1944, the Germans began launching their latest weapon, the [V2 ballistic rocket](#). Bannock and Bruce spotted several being launched one night but because of the V2's extremely fast acceleration in the vertical they could do nothing about them. So, the majority of their activity was in support of the nightly bomber raids, attacking night fighter bases. These meticulously planned sorties were called "Flower" and "Ranger" patrols and when no night fighters could be found; crews were given a free hand to attack targets of opportunity. These operations literally ranged over most of continental Europe, from Norway to Italy to Poland.

In the pre-dawn of 27 Sept, Bannock and Bruce flew across Germany at 200 feet (120 meters); arriving over Parrow air base they saw six Bucker Bu 131 trainers. Bannock got on the tail of one but was easily out-maneuvred by the slower biplane. However, Bannock was able to quickly dispatch a Messerschmitt Bf 108 Taifun (Typhoon) that was landing and within a minute downed a second. Bannock soon realized that a third Bf 108 was on his tail and pulled away quickly. He then noticed that the port engine temperature was rising and when the engine started to smoke he feathered it, fired the extinguisher and made for home on the deck; a long and tense seven hours fifteen minutes away. After landing safely at their home airfield at Hunsden, Bannock found debris from one of his kills had damaged the radiator causing the engine to overheat. He was awarded a bar to his DFC for this work.

In October 1944, Bannock was promoted to W/C and took command of 418 Squadron. It was only for a short time, however; as 418 Squadron was transferred to the 2nd Tactical Air Force where it changed from the intruder to the ground support role for the allied armies advancing in Europe. Bannock was exceptionally well respected as a leader and as an intruder pilot resulting in him being transferred, on 23 November 1944, to command 406 Squadron which was being re-rolled from a night air defence squadron to an intruder squadron. To infuse intruder experience into 406 Squadron, W/C Bannock took a number of 418 Squadron crews with him along with "Hairless Joe" the cartoon character nose art for his Mosquito from the Li'l Abner comic strip. After overseeing the training of his new squadron in their new role, 406 flew their first intruder mission on 5 December 1944. Despite the additional command responsibilities, W/C Bannock set the example for his new squadron by downing a [Heinkel 111](#), a [Focke-Wulf 190](#), an unidentified aircraft and a Ju88 in the first four months of his command. Between 27 November 1944 and the end of the war in May 1945, 406 Squadron was the top RAF/RCAF intruder unit. *(No 418 Squadron was the top overall RAF/RCAF Intruder squadron for the duration of the war.)* In the intruder role 406 Squadron was credited with 64 enemy aircraft destroyed, seven probably destroyed and 47 damaged. The destruction on the ground included 88 locomotives, at least eight freight cars, 32 vehicles and seven small vessels. These victories came at a cost of 11 aircraft lost and 20 aircrew killed or missing.

Shortly after the war, W/C Bannock received the [Distinguished Service Order](#). The citation noted that he had destroyed at least 11 German planes and 19 V1 rockets while causing considerable disruption to the enemy's lines of communication. Under this officer's inspiring leadership his squadron has obtained a fine record of success".

In 1946, Russ Bannock returned to Canada and joined de Havilland Canada as a test pilot and sales director. He played a major part in the development of the famous de Havilland Chipmunk and the de Havilland Beaver. As the director of military sales Bannock was instrumental in the U.S. Army becoming the largest operator of de Havilland's Beaver, Otter, Caribou and Buffalo aircraft. He was president of de Havilland Canada from 1976 – 1978 after which he retired to form his own aircraft sales company.

