

Tiger In Waiting

Legion Magazine

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It was called Tiger Force, but the Second World War ended before this new strategic bombing formation could roar off into the Pacific. Canadians—in the air and on the ground—were among the thousands of Commonwealth personnel who volunteered to serve against Japan.

In preparation for Royal Canadian Air Force participation in the 1945-46 air campaign against Japan, a number of Canadian officers were passing in and out of American units, ostensibly on liaison or observer duties.



An Avro Lincoln, as it would have been flown by Tiger Force.

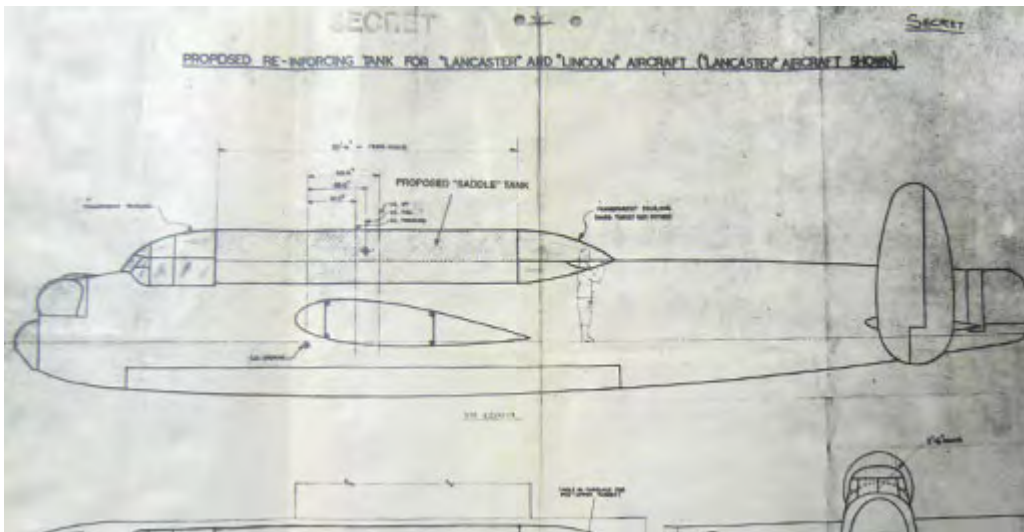
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Precisely how they did so outside the continental United States is uncertain, but at least one—probably more—took their job description to the limit.

In 1945, Group Captain Henry M. Carscallen, DFC (Distinguished Flying Cross), was commuting regularly between Ottawa and Washington, D.C., on staff duties. He was a veteran of Bomber Command operations, having commanded both a squadron and a station in No. 6 Group.

Late in June 1945, Carscallen was dispatched to the Pacific.

A memo dated July 5, 1945, stated he had been “placed on temporary duty with Headquarters, Deputy Commander, Twentieth Air Force, in an observer status with the mission of familiarization with operations of V.L.R. (Very Long Range) aircraft against Japan.”



A sketch shows how “saddle tanks” would have been fitted on top of a Lancaster

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We would know very little about his work there if it were not for a letter dated Sept. 10, 1947, by Brigadier General George W. Mundy of the United States Air Force. “Group Captain H.M. Carscallen spent approximately one month (July-August 1945) at North Field Guam as an observer of V.L.R. operations with the 39th Bomb Group V.H.B. (Very Heavy Bomber) which I commanded,” Mundy wrote. “In this capacity he didn’t limit his observations to ground activities alone, but voluntarily flew operational missions in order to gain first-hand information on the tactics of long-range bombardment.”

Carscallen almost certainly was the last RCAF officer to fly a bombing mission during the war. On Aug. 14, 1945—the day Emperor Hirohito announced Japan’s surrender—752 B-29s attacked seven different targets. Carscallen was on the raid to Isezaki which involved 86 Superfortresses dropping incendiaries. Whether he was piloting a B-29 or merely “observing” is not known.



Henry M. Carscallen, England, 1942.

PHOTO: DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE, PL-15470

These activities were different in concept and status from Tiger Force, which was planned as the Royal Air Force's return to strategic bombing in the Pacific with significant contributions from Commonwealth countries. The third volume of the official RCAF history, *The Crucible of War*, devotes 19 pages to this, in large measure because of the political evolution of a formation that started out as a big idea and actually shrank with every month that it lasted.

When Tiger Force was first discussed in January 1944, the final campaigns against Japan were expected to last well into 1946. The Canadian government was prepared to contribute,

but the scale of the effort was uncertain. Air Minister Charles Gavin “Chubby” Power considered 60 to 70 squadrons. He looked on the project as a means of creating a truly national Canadian air force which had been envisaged in the 1939 British Commonwealth Air Training Plan agreements, yet barely achieved when “Canadianization” of the RCAF units abroad proceeded at a snail’s pace.

Prime Minister Mackenzie King was dubious about the enterprise. His realistic view was that whatever Canada did, it would get little credit from either the Americans or the British. Moreover, King was reluctant to help Britain in recovering her colonies. He urged that Canadian air efforts be in the north Pacific—well clear of India or Malaya.

The British were not happy with this, but they wanted to demonstrate to the Americans that they could pull their weight against Japan. As of August 1944, the British suggested 40 heavy bomber squadrons (Lancasters) but half of these were to be aerial tankers, refuelling the other half until Avro Lincolns replaced the Lancs. It was further proposed that 18 of the tanker and bomber units be Canadian, plus 14 fighter squadrons, 10 transport squadrons, one or two air-sea rescue units and perhaps one air observation post squadron.

King was prepared to balk at such a large commitment, but it was not long before the British themselves had to rethink the plan. Tiger Force was going to be very ambitious, but where was it going to be based? The Pacific’s Mariana Islands were practically sinking under the weight of American concrete and their airfields were already jammed to capacity. It was suggested that the Miyako Islands, further to the west—bordering the East China Sea—might be used by Tiger Force, but they would have to be captured first.



A Lancaster from No. 428 Squadron at Yarmouth, N.S., after returning from service in Europe.

PHOTO: COURTESY HUGH A. HALLIDAY

Tiger Force had another problem. It had to take into account the endurance of its aircraft in a theatre every bit as vast as Europe and with a lot more water. Other than air-to-air refuelling, efforts to extend the Lancaster's range included removal of the mid-upper turret and fitting huge "saddle tanks" on top of the fuselage—as awkward a solution as one can imagine. Initial deployment of Tiger Force Lancasters was scheduled for November 1945, with Lincoln replacements beginning to arrive in January 1946.

In truth, the Americans regarded the final fight with Japan as pretty much their personal affair. From the logistical standpoint, an RAF presence was more a nuisance than a help. Nevertheless, in June 1945 they offered space on newly captured Okinawa Island for British and Commonwealth bases, which would ease the problems of aircraft range.

However, the RAF, RCAF and Royal Australian Air Force would have to build their own airfields, although airfield protection, including anti-aircraft guns, would be provided by U.S. forces. The United States Army Air Force also volunteered to provide fighter cover for Tiger Force, which allowed some reduction in its size. Even so, the realities of manpower, long supply lines and geography were forcing the British to cut the force further. As of May 1945 it looked as though the RCAF portion would be eight bomber squadrons, three long-range transport squadrons and one air-sea rescue outfit. Not all would be deployed at once.

The most immediate problem was airfield construction, and the RAF looked to Canada to provide 2,500 airfield engineers, out of a total of 15,000 needed. By mid-June the RCAF had canvassed 6,600 such men and garnered only 335 volunteers. The aircrew situation was not much better. Although hundreds of men were willing to take part in second-phase operations of the war, thousands with previous overseas service were anxious to be demobilized, having "done their bit."

The RCAF interviewed 103,402 men and women and only 21.5 per cent stepped forward for Tiger Force. Indeed, the only group that volunteered in disproportionate numbers were members of the Women's Division.

Meanwhile, with the cessation of hostilities in Europe, RCAF bomber squadrons were busy flying former prisoners of war from the Continent to Britain. This was followed by several weeks of intense training. The most obvious need was to convert Halifax crews to Lancasters, and there was much attention given at this time to navigation over long stretches of water. More and more it became clear that finding, training and dispatching aircraft and men for Tiger Force operations were going to be huge challenges.

Between May 31 and June 18, 1945, the RCAF repatriated eight bomber squadrons from Europe, flying to the Azores, then Gander, Nfld., and finally their designated Canadian bases. The transfer of units to Canada was not without incident. A total of 165 Lancasters were dispatched and 164 made the crossing.

On June 4, 1945, Lancaster KB764 of No. 428 Squadron departed St. Mawgan, England, bound for Lagens in the Azores. While flying through cumulus cloud, both port engines began to run erratically. The pilot, Flight Lieutenant Elihu Paul Acree, suspected icing and applied hot

air, which had the desired effect on the inner port engine. Half an hour later, the port outer engine again lost power and was eventually shut down. Soon after the port inner engine became erratic. As Acree approached Lagens, with at least 1,816 litres of fuel still aboard, the port inner engine cut entirely. Power was completely asymmetric and the bomber quickly swung out of control.



C.R. Slemon, the commander-designate of the RCAF part of Tiger Force.

PHOTO: COURTESY HUGH A. HALLIDAY

The aircraft cleared the cliffs, but crashed approximately three kilometres out to sea. The port wing struck first and broke off, as did the tail. "No trouble was experienced in leaving the aircraft," wrote Acree.

Another unfortunate incident occurred June 15 in the Azores when one bomber, taxiing for takeoff, ran into another. Both Lancs were damaged and Flight Sergeant W. Halloway, a rear gunner, was killed.

As the Lancasters reached Canada they were met by VIPs, bands and enthusiastic crowds. Veteran machines adorned with risqué cartoons and bombs recording dozens of sorties attracted special attention. Before training for the Pacific, air personnel were granted a month's leave. The training was expected to last approximately six weeks, after which they would be posted back to Britain—roughly two squadrons at a time—to undergo conversion to Lincolns. Given these moves back and forth across the Atlantic, it was expected that the first two RCAF Tiger Force squadrons would be operational in the Pacific no earlier than January 1946.

Personnel began trickling back from leave at the end of July, but their units were still being reorganized. Station Yarmouth, home to the intended No. 661 Wing, was still furnishing the quarters of the force in early August, and the training that commenced on the 8th consisted of preliminary lectures; there was still no flying practice.

Abruptly, two atomic bombs, the Russian invasion of Manchuria and the Japanese capitulation ended it all. On Aug. 15, 1945, Air Vice-Marshal C.R. Slemon, the designated leader of the RCAF component, reported to his headquarters in Greenwood, N.S., thanked the men for having volunteered, and wished them well. He then commenced a round of similar visits to Debert, Dartmouth and Yarmouth.

Slemon was in an anomalous position—the commander of a force which he had not actually commanded, saying farewell to personnel with whom he had not really been associated, except for No. 6 Group overseas. His was probably the shortest command experience in the RCAF. The four wings that had constituted the formation were disbanded on Sept. 5. Tiger Force ended not with a roar, but a whimper.