

Time Capsule

July/August 2022

Group Captain Robert “Buck” McNair



Most Royal Canadian Airforce (RCAF) veterans are familiar with the names Bishop, Barker, Mynarski, Hornell, all of whom were awarded the Victoria Cross and brought glory to the RCAF at war. Very little is written or known of those Air force veterans who survived war with notable accomplishments. Many of these veterans went on to peace time careers in the RCAF during the Cold War. One of these airmen was Robert Wendell “Buck” McNair. A highly decorated RCAF pilot and an ace.

The post war RCAF was a fraction of its wartime establishment and experience was needed to carry the RCAF through the many challenges the Cold War presented. This was challenging for the RCAF as it struggled to define its role in the nuclear age.

Three main areas were where the air force would focus on. The mapping of Canada, Defence of Canada and Commitments to NATO. To address these areas the RCAF had to increase in size, as a result of that growth major recruiting took place in the early fifties. The Pine tree radar stations were established, RCAF squadrons were formed and dedicated to mapping of Canada and RCAF fighter wings were operational in Europe. Entre Robert Wendell "Buck" McNair, DSO, DFC and two Bars.

Robert Wendell "Buck" McNair was born 15 May 1919, Springfield NS. However his family moved to North Battleford Saskatchewan during the great depression where he graduated high school and for a while worked in the provincial forestry department.

At the outbreak of World War Two, Buck enlisted in the RCAF in June 1940 and graduated as a pilot 24 March 1941, at which time he was posted to No. 411 Sqn, RAF, Digby England. His first encounter with the enemy came on 27 September 1941 while escorting bombers. On 13 October 1941, Buck downed his first 109 and damaged another. In the process he was shot down and parachuted into the English channel where he was picked up by RAF rescue.

On 2 March 1942, McNair piloted one of seventeen Spitfires launched from British aircraft carrier HMS Beagle to re-enforce Malta. By 22 April, Buck was an ace with five kills. While on Malta, Buck served a short time along side fellow Canadians Bob Middlemiss and Buzz Beurling a fellow ace. Conditions on Malta were hazardous to both men and machines. Daily enemy bombing and strafing added to pilot

and ground crew stress. Equipment and parts were in short supply and resupply to the island was by ships constantly menaced by U-Boats . Many damaged aircraft were cannibalized to salvage parts. It was not uncommon for personnel to lose 30 to 40 pounds while suffering from poor diet and bouts of dysentery.

The air war over Malta and the surrounding area was up close and personal with many losses on both sides while struggling for control of the Mediterranean. Buck encountered many close calls and suffered the loss of friends. The impact and nature of their violent death would scar him physically and mentally the rest of his life.

On departure from Malta, Buck rejoined No. 411 Sqn and participated in the air battle over Dieppe 19 August 1942. It was the largest air battle over Europe to date and casualties amongst the allied pilots high.

So disturbing were the losses, the head of fighter command visited the RAF and RCAF units to find out what happened. According to Buck they had been outnumbered more than 3 to 1 by the Luftwaffe. Plain and simple as only Buck would respond. After Dieppe, Buck was sent back to Canada on War Bonds drive tour and a long overdue rest with a stop over to his hometown of North Battleford where he was given a hero's welcome.

Always anxious to get back to what he knew best and avoid any non-combat duty, Buck returned to air combat and briefly led No. 416 RCAF Sqn before being given command of No. 421 Sqn RCAF. As Squadron Commander his expectations were high and he did not suffer fools. All Squadron promotions were approved by him and he often clashed with higher over their recommendations. At this point in the war, Bucks Squadron was involved in patrolling, escorting bombers, strafing targets

and attempting to draw out German fighters. On 10 July 1943, his Spitfire had engine trouble during a mission and with flames in his cockpit Buck once again exited his aircraft and parachuted into the channel where again he was rescued. This time however, buck suffered eye damage and he was badly burned about his face. With his eyesight damaged specifically his left eye, Buck had to get closer to the enemy to engage them, this became a handicap and put himself and fellow pilots at risk. He kept his handicap to himself leading others to believe that he was being exceedingly reckless. Nonetheless, in 1943 he brought down four Fw190 s and an equal number of Bf109 s bringing his final total to 16 or 16.5 confirmed kills.

In 1944 McNair was promoted to Wing Commander of 126 Wing RAF Biggin Hill which meant he no longer flew combat missions at 25 years of age. After six months he was reassigned from operational to administrative duties.

Following the war, Buck stayed in the RCAF, and filled a number of postings. These included RCAF HQ, P Staff 1945-46, AFHQ DOR/ORF, Ottawa 1946-1950, OC Lachine, Training Command 1950-51, RCAF Air Attaché, Tokyo during the Korean War where he was recommended for a Bronze Star by the USA (declined by the RCAF), 1 ADCC, Lac St. Denis 1953-57, OC No. 4(F) Wing, Germany 1957-1961 which put him in his element, Duluth NORAD, sector HQ 1964-68, and finally the Canadian High Commission, London.

Throughout his service, Buck amassed a total flying time of 4,000 hours flying various aircraft such as North Stars, C47, T33, F86 Sabre, CF 100.

And if you think Buck's courage was solely in the air, you would be mistaken. On 30 December 1953 while flying in a North Star as a crew member in one of the crew rest positions, the North Star crash landed at Vancouver B.C. The aircraft ended its crash landing run in an

inverted position as a result, all crew and passengers found themselves suspended in mid-air in an upside down position. In the ensuing confusion, Buck took charge and assisted all passengers in evacuating the aircraft as quickly as possible, Buck knew the ever threat of fire. Still not content, Wing Commander McNair remained in the aircraft and personally searched through all the debris to ensure no one was left behind. Only then did he abandon the aircraft. Keep in mind at this point Buck was soaked in fuel from an overturned Herman Nelson heater, fortunately for Buck it did not ignite. Despite knowing from his burns in the war the risk he was taking Buck's action should not be allowed to detract in any way from the magnitude of his deeds in about the crash site. For his action he was awarded the Queen's Commendation for Brave Conduct on 7 August 1954.

While in London Buck had been suffering with back trouble for some time caused by his time in combat, bale-outs into the channel and the crash of the North Star in 53. As far back as 1956 he had been treated for spinal damage. He had been diagnosed with Mariestrumpell, a calcifying of the spinal column. At the time treatment consisted of painful radiation and cobalt in 1956. This in time produced a blood disorder. With this shattering news came the real blow, it was terminal and he could expect to survive a further two and a half to three years.

Robert Wendell "Buck" McNair beat the odds for some time, however illness forced him into hospital on 3 January 1971, he died on 15 January 1971 of leukemia, age 51 in London England and was buried at Brookwood Cemetery with full military honours.

On 8 June 1990, Buck was inducted into Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame.

Lest We Forget