

Group Captain George Foot, O.B.E.; M.I.D. RAF (ret.)

Bill Cline - *George, tell me something about yourself.*

I was born in Winnipeg on 29 March 1913. On that same day a baby girl was born about one mile from me. We did not meet until we were 20 years old, but we were destined to marry each other!

After matriculation from high school, I worked in the grain exchange in Winnipeg. In the newspapers, one could read about the huge British Empire Flying Boats that flew passengers as far as Australia and back; and about the larger Boeing Pan Am Clippers, operating across the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. I dreamed about becoming a pilot on them—with little hope. In early 1937, while talking to a chap named George Sellers, I mentioned my hopeless dream. It turned out that he was a pilot in the RCAF and he told me the RAF was offering short service commissions of four years duration to those who could qualify, including colonials, from countries of the British Empire. He told me that the RAF had flying boat squadrons where, after four years service, one would have many hours as a captain on RAF flying boats and could then apply for a second pilot's position on the big commercial flying boats.

I joined the RCAF and George took me up in a Tutor. We did lots of aerobatics, two Sundays in a row. I loved it. Fortuitously, in October 1937, I was laid off from my job along with three others. It was during the depths of the Depression, and then too 1937 was a very bad year for crops. I decided to go to England to try for an RAF short service commission. In late November, after taking a bus to New York, I boarded a freighter bound for London. Once there, and having applied for a short service commission, I was interviewed and passed the stringent medical. I finally received instructions to report to a civilian EFTS on Apr.4, 1938. Our daily pay was 16 shillings of which 12 shillings were deducted for room and board. Our group trained on Tiger Moths, but it was essential to obtain a civil pilot's license in order to pass.

Upon passing this phase there followed a posting to RAF Station Uxbridge, an initiation center. There we received our commissions, with the rank of acting P/O on probation, in large letters. Our group was divided by surname initials. Those from A to K, which included me, received their complete made-to-measure uniform from Gieves, and a bank account at Lloyd's of London. In the RAF, our pay went straight into our bank account, even when we were abroad. We were given a copy of Kings



George Foot at BC Government House - 2005

Regulations and the Manual of Air Force Law complete with two inches thick of amendments. We were also given our first sample of mess etiquette. After two weeks, we were posted to RAF Station Ternhill, No. 10 FTS in Shropshire.

On arrival at FTS, we were sorted out for single or multiengine training. I opted for the latter. A Senior Squad-Commander was chosen, a South African, and I was one of the three Squad Commanders. After one month, I was appointed Senior Squad Commander, replacing the South African. My duties were to maintain discipline, lead parades and liaise between the Squadron Leader Flying, the Chief Ground Instructor, and at times with the Station Commander on behalf of our course. There were two course terms, the second being equivalent to what was called later during the war, an OTU.

The FTS had Hawker Harts for dual training and Hawker single seat Furies for solo flying by those who would later become fighter pilots. The school had Anson Mk I's for pilots destined for Bomber or Coastal Command. Ground school was more advanced than what was taught at EFTS involving studying Kings Regulations and Air Force Law. These latter subjects were requirements for those entering the General Duties branch of the RAF. I passed first in our course of 44

students, with an average of 82 percent. We were now Pilot Officers and were ready for conversion to the aircraft that we would fly operationally. Throughout our training, I continually talked about wanting to become a flying boat pilot. Lo and behold, when our selections were posted, indicating which command we were to join, against my name was flying boats. Of course, I was delighted, but I had worked my butt off to get it.

Life in the prewar RAF was delightful. At FTS, although discipline had to be maintained, it was in no way unpleasant. Dinners from Monday through Friday saw us in mess kit, with blue waistcoat—every night a formal dinner. Dinner jacket was essential for Saturday dinners, and a lounge suit on Sundays. Our black bow ties had to be hand tied. Woe betide anyone who might try to sneak by with a ‘ready-made’! Wednesday afternoons were devoted to sports. Once a month there would be a guest night, when we would wear a white waistcoat, white hand-tied bow ties and white gloves. Ladies and dignitaries were invited and dancing would follow dinner. We colonials were often invited to the homes of the English boys for the weekend, sometimes to huge estates and even a castle. Yes, life was wonderful.

Following FTS, I was posted to RAF Station Thorney Island, the RAF navigation school on the south coast of England. There I took the general reconnaissance course, over-sea navigation, coding, ship recognition, photography etc. From there, a posting to RAF Station Calshot, the flying boat conversion station. There I learned to fly the Stranraer, a different kettle of fish. Taxying was different; there were winds and tides to cope with, as well as learning how to approach and moor to buoys. The only way we could slow down was by the use of drogues, which could also help us turn on the water under difficult conditions. On completion of the course, I was posted to 202 Squadron, on flying boats, in Gibraltar. On September 3, 1939, when war was declared, the short service commission no longer existed—we were in for the duration.

202 Squadron in Gibraltar was flying Saunders Roe London aircraft, which nobody has ever heard of. It was a twin-engine sesqui plane—sesqui meaning that the upper main plane was longer than the lower one. It had twelve hours endurance. We worked with Force H of the Royal Navy, in the Mediterranean, but we also went out in the Atlantic and up the Spanish coast where the German freighters were holed up in their ports.

This was all coastal work then? No, it included some convoy escort. In March 1941, the air ministry advised that they were looking for qualified pilots to go to the USA and fly aircraft back and that Canadians in the RAF would be given preference. I applied, was accepted, and was posted to Loch Erne, Northern Ireland, where

I converted to the Catalina. Then, instead of sending me on ferrying, they put me on operations with 240 Squadron. Towards the end of May, however, I went across the Atlantic to Canada. The chaps I was with told the AVM that I had a girl in Winnipeg so he told me to take 10 days off to visit her. I went home, we got married—then they gave me a two-day extension. I went back to Montreal, on to Bermuda, and flew a Catalina back to Scotland, then I returned to operations with 240 Squadron.

In those days ‘*the early days*’ we did not have navigators. Second dickeys did the navigation, so I had a long experience navigating over the sea. In December 1941, I was taken off OPS and sent to RAF Station Port Albert in Ontario. There I did the Specialist Navigation Course so I became a specialist navigator as well as pilot.

So this was the SPEC N course? Yes, at that time it was the highest level of air navigation in the world. People used to come from the USA and other allied countries to do SPEC N’s with the RAF before the war.

Interesting. You mentioned your flights to Archangel of nineteen hours each way. I was curious as to what type of aircraft you flew. Catalinas. When the lend lease agreement was instituted, they set up a mission for the Soviets in London and the British in Moscow. It was too hazardous to fly with land planes over enemy territory with passengers. We had to go all the way around the North Cape of Norway. I took off in my Catalina with five British diplomats, no armament, chockablock with fuel, destination Archangel. Our first charts didn’t show any magnetic variation in northern latitudes. With a sun compass and a sextant, we took sun shots and added variation to the chart. We made a landfall at Tori Nos, Kola Peninsula close to 37 degrees east. We had to slow our speed to be at the agreed entry point exactly on time. There we gave the Soviet recognition signals. These were accepted and they finally let us fly into Archangel where we dropped off our diplomats.

A week later we picked up five Soviets and flew them back to Invergordon. That was in July of 1941. In August I got another call to take another group. I had a passenger called General Golikov, who insisted on sitting in the second dickey seat. We had a bit of French between us for communication. I wouldn’t let him sit there for take-off, but once we were up he sat there the whole trip. About midnight I had a call from one of my crew, “Skipper would you like some hot stew?” I said I would. He brought me some mutton stew with white sauce, it wasn’t very good but it was nourishing. When Gen. Golikov saw that, he indicated that he wanted some. I gave mine to him and he gave me his sandwiches—the General had this dreadful bloody awful mutton stew, and the lowly F/L had sandwiches stuffed with caviar.

That was an excellent exchange and your trip was quite a feat, a 19 hour flight with primitive navigation. It was routine as far as we were concerned. (We were used to going halfway across the Atlantic, escorting all day and coming back at night.) We went from Loch Erne to InverGordon, north across the Shetlands, then keeping 100 miles west of Norway avoiding German radar, 60 miles off Bear Island, over the Kola Peninsula and the White Sea to land at Archangel.

On my second trip with Gen. Golikov, we had diplomatic mail that had to be hand delivered to the British mission, so I spent a week in Moscow. I had a great time. They treated me like a king. An interpreter escort took me all over Moscow. Upon my return, we took off and ran into a hell of a cold front, God it was rough! Then, when we got up off the Norwegian coast, we ran into solid fog so we climbed above it. The winds were much stronger there than we thought, so we got a

bit too close to Norway. The crew member in the port blister said, "Skipper, there's an aircraft coming up on our port beam." It was a Heinkel 111 so we went back down into the fog. One and a half hours later we climbed above the fog again and made landfall on the highest elevation in the Shetlands. We sent a message giving our ETA InverGordon. They replied that we could not land because all bases in England were fogged in—Proceed to Gibraltar. We decided the hell with that, so we circled for a while. Our position was confirmed by the Shetland Islands pin-point. We turned out over the sea, descended through the fog, broke out at 150 feet, came in to base and landed.

Very good, I recall once using that same technique landing at Keflavik. Thank-you George, and we will stay tuned for the next stage of your interesting career. To be continued. Ed.

G/C George Foot OBE, MID RAF (ret.) Part 2

Following is the conclusion of Bill Cline's interview with George Foot. Part 1, in the April issue, covered the period from George's birth in 1913, to his youth in Winnipeg, working at the Grain Exchange, enlistment in the RAF, service in Coastal Command, and special assignments transporting Soviet and British officials between Scotland and Archangel, Russia.

"Because of my SPEC N qualification and practical knowledge of navigation, I was posted to 31 General Reconnaissance School (GRS) in Charlottetown, where I taught for two months. I became the Chief Instructor at East School where I was able to give lecturers the benefit of personal knowledge of actual navigation over the sea. Later, 31 GRS split in two; half of it went to Summerside and was built up again. In January 1944, 31 GRS closed down. We had flooded Coastal Command with navigators and pilots. However, I opened up 2 ANS for the RCAF in Charlottetown. In July, I was posted as Squadron Leader Operations with 202 Squadron, back in Ireland."

You spent a lot of time in the Far East after the war? Yes, on June 12, 1945, 202 Squadron was disbanded and I was posted to the Far East on Tiger Force. I reported to Air Vice Marshal Guest in New Delhi where he wanted me to take over 32 Staging Post, which was RAF Station Ratmalana, Ceylon, as Wing Commander. At that time, they were still building an RAF Station at Negombo.

Negombo, which was not finished by the end of the war, had the longest and widest runway of any station in the RAF. It was built for the Lincoln bomber, the RAF's largest bomber, destined to attack Tokyo. I got a call from Group saying we had to move from

Ratmalana to Negombo the first of December. This was in October. Although it had only the bare living essentials, I promised the airmen that if they would keep the aircraft serviceable and on time, I would do everything in my power to improve the amenities. We moved on December 1, 1945. Six days later, I was posted as Wing Commander Flying at Dum Dum airfield, Calcutta, which was a fighter station. Meanwhile, a Group Captain took over Negombo.

I came down with jaundice, was in hospital for three weeks and then went to Australia on leave. I got a signal ordering me to go back and take over Negombo. The airmen told me what happened in my absence. The Group Captain started building a house and a tennis court for himself instead of fixing their quarters. The airmen in Karachi were fed up and wanted to go back to England. The airmen in Dum Dum, a hell on earth, were fed up too. The men in Karachi were working to rule. At Dum Dum and Negombo they were going on strike.

I am sure that is unprecedented in the military.

That part has never been revealed, but it's quite true. I got a signal ordering me to go back and take over Negombo, now a Wing Commander station. A call came from SASO in New Delhi advising me that G/C Slee had been held responsible for the strike at Dum Dum and been demoted to Wing Commander. Rather than send him home they requested that he be allowed to take over Negombo, and in exchange, I could have any posting I wanted.

I said "Sure, why not", so Charlie Slee arrived, and said, "Look George, I haven't got a hat, and look at this,

my hat has scrambled eggs, have you got a spare hat?" I said I did—but will it fit you? It did.

That was one of the most important decisions I ever made, because I was then sent to take over 230 Squadron flying Sunderlands at Seletar, Singapore. The day after I arrived, a signal came from Air Ministry, London, directing that 230 Squadron fly back to England for disbandment. As a result, SASO offered to send me to Japan to take charge there. I got a flight to Hong Kong where I spent a couple of enjoyable weeks. I then joined a ship bringing the RAF occupation force to Iwakuni, Japan. We sailed to Iwakuni to set up 211 Staging Post and I became CO of the station. After two years in Japan, I was posted back to England to the Air Ministry.

One day I was at a pub in Covent Garden having my lunch. Charlie Slee came in, I said to him, "What are you doing, Charlie?"

He said, "I'm sort of in personnel, as a Wing Commander, still. I send people to university to learn Chinese, Japanese or Russian."

I said, "They learn Russian? I'd love to learn Russian."

He said, "I owe you for a hat, and I owe you for a station, so, when I get back, your name is going in the box and you will be on the next course."

I was sent to London University where I studied Russian, only Russian, for a year. Next, I lived with Russian émigrés in Paris for six months, with three tutors, and finally passed my civil service exam as a Russian interpreter.

In your résumé, you mentioned that period as a highlight. I assume this led to all kinds of assignments. That's right. I was slated to go to Budapest as Air Attaché in one year; meanwhile I was posted to the Deputy Directorate of Air, Foreign Liaison. I was aiding the Saudis, the Egyptians, Jordanians and the Israelis who were being trained in the RAF as pilots. There were four Saudi boys and they were having a hard time as their English was not quite good enough, nor was their math. In addition, they had pranged a couple of aircraft. I got them brushed up on English and math, and sorted them out academically. Later, one passed out as an average QFI, another was trained on bombers, the third on fighters and the fourth on Lysanders. They had a big mess dinner when the QFI graduated. You know, an average QFI is a pretty good rating. In the RAF, they don't rate people highly just for the fun of it. I took the Consul from the Saudi Embassy to this dinner and he presented me with a watch from King Ibn Saud. The Saudis are great for giving gifts.

I was sent to Hungary as the British Air Attaché for three years. My wife was with me, and was a great help at the Embassy. Subsequently I was awarded the OBE. When I returned to England, the Air Ministry asked me



for my choice of assignment. I replied that I would like to return to flying.

I was posted CO of Coastal Command Gunnery School, slated to close in one year. I did a refresher course on the Varsity, and then got my ticket on the Lincoln and flew it once. We had Vampires, so I said I'd like to fly the Vampire. The QFI said I was a bit old, but after a couple of circuits, I said I was ready. We filled in the hour, the maximum endurance of the aircraft. Later we flew another hour. From then on, every day, they wheeled the Vampire in front of my office; I got in, flew around for an hour, came back, and got on with my job. I had a year's great flying on the jet. It was the easiest aircraft I ever flew. I think everybody that converted from propellers to jets found that. It was like flying a surfboard.

I was promoted to the rank of Group Captain and assigned to be the first RAF Deputy Chief of the British Commanders-in-Chief Mission to the Soviets in Germany. Upon reporting to the Assistant Chief of Air Staff Intelligence, AVM McDonald, I was given my assignment. It was to provide the best technical intelligence possible of the Soviet aircraft in East Germany.

You spoke to the Sidney Branch about this? I seem to remember the occasion.

Yes, about BRIXMIS. While I was there, I was called to London and was told that a high-ranking group of Russian officers including the C-in-C of Soviet Aviation Chief Marshal Zhigarev, Mikoyan the Mig builder, and Kuznetsov who invented contra-rotating propellers on the Bear aircraft were coming. I met them when they arrived and escorted them around England for two weeks. I took Chief Marshal Zhigarev to Farnborough. He sat on my right and Air Chief Marshal Sir Tom Pike who had been my squadron leader flying at flying training school, on my left. I interpreted for those two for two hours.

That gave you lots of practice.

Oh, I tell you, at that level, it was quite something.

So you got out of Hungary before the revolution. Yes, I left there in late 1954.

Let's talk a little bit about your post-military career. It is incredible to me that you were the Head of Attaché Services for the Canadian Forces.

What happened was, I had met the Deputy Director of Intelligence for the RCAF at a conference, behind the iron curtain and he offered me a job. At the time, the Air Ministry was offering the "Golden Bowler" tax-free, as an incentive for surplus senior officers to retire. It was a lot of money.

My wife wanted to come home and I wanted the kids to be brought up as Canadians, so we took the job and returned to Canada. I took the lowest paid civilian job in the whole of RCAF intelligence. I was senior to the director but I was the junior civil servant so I had to work my way up. I managed the collection of intelligence for the RCAF and trained the air attachés. After integration,

I took over as Head of the Attaché Services. My job was to manage, administer, and train the Air Attachés, of all three services. I was there eleven years. In 1968, I won a position as Director of Administration Indian Affairs and Northern Development. It involved a reorganization of the whole department. I held that job for five years.

Meanwhile we had bought a small trailer park between Deseronto and Napanee. My wife and I ran the trailer park, expanding it from 25 units to 150. I retired from the government job at age 60 and have just enjoyed life ever since.

That's great, George. I guess then you devoted full time to your trailer park?

Yes, I owned it two years before retirement and had a lad helping us. He was there full time and I used to go there every weekend, as we built it up. I retired completely and utterly in 1976.

Is that when you moved to this area?

No, we moved to Sandpoint, Brockville and Kingston. We came here October 29, 1997.

George, you served Great Britain, the Commonwealth, and Canada from 1938 until 1973, were mentioned in dispatches and awarded the OBE, a most distinguished record. You mentioned Mrs. Foot earlier. I gather that she was very much a part of your career.

Sue was with me in Charlottetown followed by three years of separation. She joined me in Japan where she was a great help to me. We went to Budapest and Sue was included in my commendation from the Embassy for the OBE. Then, of course, she was with me in Germany and Ottawa. Our 65th wedding anniversary was the 5th of June 2006. She died on the twenty ninth of September.

That was quite a career; thank you for sharing it with us..