

Navigator Doc Gordon saw much of the world from the sky

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Flying Officer Hedley "Doc" Gordon saw his fair share of adventures with Ferry Command and the Royal Mail Squadron in the Royal Canadian Air Force.

After taking a year in medicine at Queen's University, Gordon enlisted in Hamilton in June, 1941 when he was 19.

"This opportunity for adventure came up and I never went back," said Gordon, who instead went into pharmaceutical medicine and took over the pharmacy that still holds his name on Kincardine's Queen Street.

First stationed in Toronto, he took on guard duty in Brantford before heading to pilot and navigator training. Wanting to be a pilot, his one year of university put him into navigator training, while two of his friends were trained as pilots; they never returned home, he said.

One instance during his bombing training saw them drop bags of flour over Lake Erie to see where they would hit. Their commanding officer became so irritated by their bombing inaccuracy, he sat in a raft out in the lake and fished as "incentive" for them to hit on target.

"And he did and nobody hit him," said Gordon.

His first few missions saw him navigate while ferrying Lockheed Hudson light bombers across from Montreal, to Newfoundland and landing them in Preswick, Scotland.

While it was routine for him to be sent back by airplane, his first and only trip back by ship took nine days.

"There were 16 of us, four men deep," he said. "It was pretty rough. Guys were puking all over."

His second trip saw him as the only passenger aboard a Lancaster bomber. He also helped ferry across the B24 Liberator and was always happy to fly aboard a Douglas DC3 Dakota.

"Every third trip they would give us a rest," he said. "They were a beautiful airplane. You could put it on autopilot and sit and play cards."



Submitted photo
Flying Officer Hedley "Doc" Gordon is seen here at age 19. He served in both Ferry Command transporting aircraft to Europe and Africa, as well as with the Mail Squadron.

He once was the navigator with a French pilot, whom he said only joined the air force to get a plane and give it away. He followed the pilot's orders, which took them to a grass strip in the Belgian Congo in West Africa, where they met up with a number of other French comrades.

He then gave the plane to them and asked Gordon to give them his navigation information, which he refused as he was charged with keeping it.

"While he was 'stranded' in the Congo there were many parties and he was treated to all the splendour that was afforded to them, with necklaces at their door and thousands of Francs given to them.

"We couldn't pay for anything," he said.

Once they made it back to North America, Washington had charged him \$250,000 for the aircraft, as the pilot had disappeared. The charges were quickly dropped.

He was then transferred to the Mail Squadron in October, 1945, which saw him delivering mail all over the North Atlantic and South Atlantic to Iceland, Morocco, Southern France, Italy, Gibraltar, the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Brazil and Ascension Island, which is only 20 square miles.

"We didn't have the navigation equipment they have today, so if we missed it, we were dead," said Gordon. "It was a good chance to see a lot of the world."

While in Egypt he had a chance to tour the pyramids, but was spit on by the locals, who favoured the Germans. They received similar treatment in some parts of France who "appreciated" the Germans, he said. But in most cases they were welcomed and waited on by pretty women and had a chance to relax, flirt and enjoy a drink or two. He held one situation in France, where he and a friend were told to stay after hours by the owner of the establishment.

"He brought out his two daughters and was convinced we were going to marry them," he said.

The girls weren't exactly what they were

looking for, so when Gordon went to the bathroom, he found an escape route. He then said to his friend, "we'll both go to the bathroom together and climb out the window," which is what they proceeded to do.

During his missions he also had a couple close calls in mid-flight. In one case a New Year's Eve trip from Gander, Newfoundland to the Azores was cut short when two of the four engines failed while they were laded with mail and an hour out above the ocean. "They were able to keep enough thrust and the third engine operating enough to get back to base.

"When we got back, that was a good New Year's Eve," he said.

Another situation saw them spilling gas from an open gas can or taking oil on a trip from Goose Bay to Iceland, with 24 soldiers on board.

"We could've used the radio or anything in case of a spark," said Gordon, which forced them to turn around in a wide arc to avoid the fumes from the fuel. "Everyone was told not to be on board. You could see it and smell it."

"They were able to return safely, to the relief of all on board."

"Luck" was also a factor in two incidents on the ground where Gordon chose one way and his friends made decisions that would see them meet their fate.

In one instance when he was in Morocco, a



Doc Gordon remembers the friends he lost in the Royal Canadian Air Force every Remembrance Day.

al," he said. "Luck played a big part."

Weather conditions, getting lost and running out of fuel were just a few of the many other things that could go wrong.

These are the men close to Gordon's heart on Remembrance Day. Looking back at their sacrifices, he "can see that it was all worthwhile."

He said the services at the cenotaph, though similar to those at the end of the war, may be even more important now and remind people of the sacrifices made by those involved, both the living and the dead.

pilot offered him and his two friends a chance to fly back to Canada, since he had one spot remaining on the plane. They chose to cut cards; he drew a three, one friend drew an ace, and the other a 10 and earned the trip home.

"They didn't even make it to the Azores (off Portugal)," he said. "They were sabotaged by the Arabs and just blew up."

In the other case, he and his best friend were stationed in Tennessee and planned on taking the train back to Galt (Cambridge). His friend said they could be even faster if they hopped on the flight heading back to Canada that day.

Gordon wanted to take the train and saw his friend off aboard a Hudson. With 14 people aboard, he watched as it took off and then crashed, killing everyone.

"I went to visit his funeral," he said. "Luck played a big part."

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D-Day Remembered

They came from farms and villages and from the city street
And formed into an army that would never know defeat.
They left their homes and families and went across the sea
And joined with other nations in the fight for liberty.
They gathered there on Britain's shore and waited for a break
In early June of forty-four with everything at stake

The fifth of June was scheduled, but weather God said no:
Then on the sixth the weather broke and Ike would say, "Let's Go."
Five thousand ships would take them to the beach of Normandy
Where they would make invasion to set fortress Europe free.
They broke upon the Juno Beach, a vast avenging wave;
The young men of our nation were both valorous and brave.
They gave their lives for liberty and counted not the cost
And those who lived to victory would find their youth was lost.
Now fifty years beyond the date we celebrate that they
Gave of themselves for freedom here in Canada today.
So let us not forget them now and loud their praises sing;
Their deeds will never die because of our remembering.

Golden Memories

They gathered there at Omaha to mark this special day
With drumhead ceremony for the ones who passed this way.
The heads of state were gathered there in Canada today.
And kings and queens were there as well to lend their dignity.
The grizzled veterans were there in ever thinning ranks
And Frenchmen from the villages who came to give their thanks.
They spoke about their memories, they spoke to one another
They spoke about the time they knew, they called each other brother.
The hushed drums rolled, The Last Post played, the flags stood at half
mast

And ghostly lines of khaki clad looked on from out of the past.
This ceremony let them know they hadn't died in vain
Like armies clashing ignorant on Arnold's Darkling Plain.
We who remain still bear the torch they passed to you and me
And we are free and living in our great democracy.
Let us remember how it was, the triumphs and the tears;
And let us all be thankful we have had these golden years.

Poems written by Jackson Tovell of Kincardine on June 6, 1994
From the Nov. 9, 1994, edition of The Independent



Kincardine News photo - 1939
Canadian Air Marshall (and First World War Ace) W.A. (Billy) Bishop says Canada's new crop of airmen are better pilots because they know the machines they are flying. Bishop is shown here with Air Chief Marshall Sir Robert Brooke-Popham of the Royal Air Force, who came from England to join the conferences on the Empire air training plan.