

# Bed and Breakfast

## A Canadian Airman Reflects on Food and Quarters during the Second World War

Bill McRae

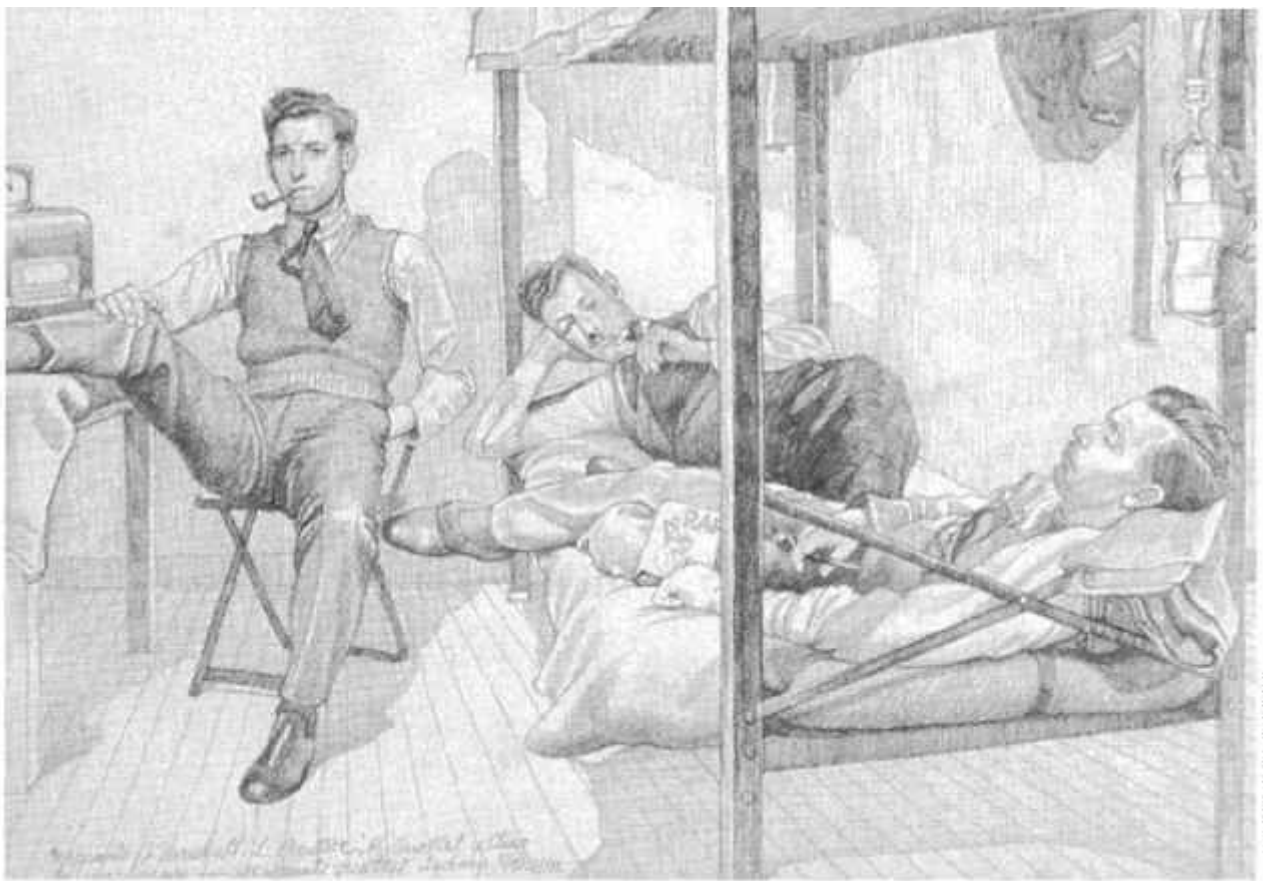
Hollywood's stereotyped version of an RAF fighter pilot - lounging about in a comfortable leather chair with a pint in one hand and *Punch* in the other - is not quite as I remember it. But what were "typical" conditions? Using my log book and wartime letters as references, with war art to serve as illustrations, this is how I recollect RAF/RCAF living conditions during the Second World War.

When I first reported to RCAF Manning Depot No.2 in Brandon, Manitoba in August 1940, I certainly did not consider myself a man of the world, having never been farther than 200 miles from my home in Port Arthur. I did naively believe that I was reasonably familiar with rough life and danger, having slept on the ground under the stars on canoe trips, and in a tent at -20°F during ski outings. In addition, I was well on the way to becoming an experienced explosives technician. None of this was sufficient to overcome the shock I had when first viewing my new temporary bedroom/home in Brandon. It was a former equestrian exhibition hall about the size of a hockey rink, the floor of which was now covered by at least 500 double-bunk beds. At the rear of the hall, separated from the rest by a rope, was a single row of the same beds which was the "isolation ward" for those unfortunates who had not yet had childhood contagious diseases and might contract them here. The ablutions consisted of a long trough of galvanized metal which was the communal wash basin [Image 1]. Beyond that was a line of toilet cubicles, without doors. At Brandon, I was always up before the bugle, to ensure getting washed and shaved

before the stampede began. Then it was off for a mile run to the fair grounds where we did calisthenics, including pushups on the frost-covered ground before the run back for breakfast and a day of square bashing. Meals here were quite good and the construction-camp style in the dining room nothing new for me.

Having been indoctrinated into the discipline of military life at Brandon, I was posted to Portage la Prairie on 10 October 1940, together with about forty of my peers. We were to serve as "guards" at the airfield, still under construction, while awaiting an opening for the next phase of our training. Taking up residence in an unfinished H-hut, sleeping in the standard double-bunk beds, and with little in the way of supervision, life here was quite good. We took turns walking around with our Ross rifles, which we never did have a chance to fire, and while I had lots of experience with rifles many of our group had never seen one. Excellent meals were supplied by the construction contractor's caterer, Crawley McCracken, in a construction-style hut [Image 2].

On 10 November 1940 our little group moved to Regina, where No. 2 Initial Training School (ITS) was housed in the former Regina Normal School. About two hundred of us were crammed into former classrooms, each filled with the standard double bunks. It was here that we were first exposed to a series of tests which would determine which path our subsequent training would take; pilot, navigator or air gunner. The Army Service Corps supplied and served the reasonable meals, but the cutlery was missing



(CWM CN 11315)

*Image 3: Barrack Scene by Paul Goranson shows double-bunks, like those found at No. 1 SFTS, Camp Borden.*

most of its plating, leaving rough and ragged edges which called for extreme care in use to prevent lacerations to the user's face.

On 28 November 1940, about forty of us, including many but not all of our guard duty group, were posted back to Portage la Prairie as the first course at what was now designated as No. 14 Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS). Here we learned to fly the de Havilland Tiger Moth. We lived in the same H-hut we had occupied a few weeks earlier, but now there was a proper dining hall in which the food was still being provided by a contractor. On Christmas Eve we were given a 36-hour pass and rail chits home for anyone who could get home and back in the time allowed. I spent twelve hours on the train getting home, twelve hours at home on Christmas Day, and another twelve hours getting back to the station.

On 19 January 1941, those of us who had passed the Elementary course moved on by train to No. 1 Service Flying Training School (SFTS) at Camp Borden, where we would fly Yales and Harvards. Here we were housed in ancient WW I barracks [**Image 3**], taking our meals in an equally ancient mess hall in which cockroaches outnumbered diners ten to one. The airfield

adjoined the Army camp and one of my memories of this place was of the Army requesting that we do our night flying elsewhere because we were disturbing their sleep! Another recollection is of being sentenced by Group Captain Grandy to one week peeling potatoes in the Sergeants' Mess, after class of course. This was my punishment for being caught, along with others, taking a shortcut to the hangar by dropping off the end of the file one bitterly cold February morning. There was an upside to this; the sergeants sympathized with me and allowed me to have my evening meal in their kitchen, an improvement over our regular rations.

After a ten day embarkation leave, the final stop before going overseas was Halifax. I had never been on a train before enlisting, but after eight months in the service I had logged thousands of miles in crammed CPR coaches, catching snatches of sleep as best I could. [**Image 4**] Although we were all now commissioned officers, here at the "Y" Depot at Halifax we were still required to line up in front of our beds each morning for inspection, with our white towel draped over the foot of the bed. One of our number was the great Wally McLeod, who was destined to become the second highest scoring Canadian fighter pilot. Wally was four years older

than most of us, and more a man-of-the-world. As we lined up one morning, Wally, who had spent the night in the Lord Nelson Hotel, rushed in late to get into place. Unable to find his white towel, he hung in its place a hotel bath towel, displaying the words "LORD NELSON HOTEL" in large blue letters. The inspecting officer, stopping to stare at the towel in disbelief, said: "I trust you have taken this in error, McLeod?" We had a hard time keeping a straight face as Wally answered "Of course Sir," and promised to return it forthwith.

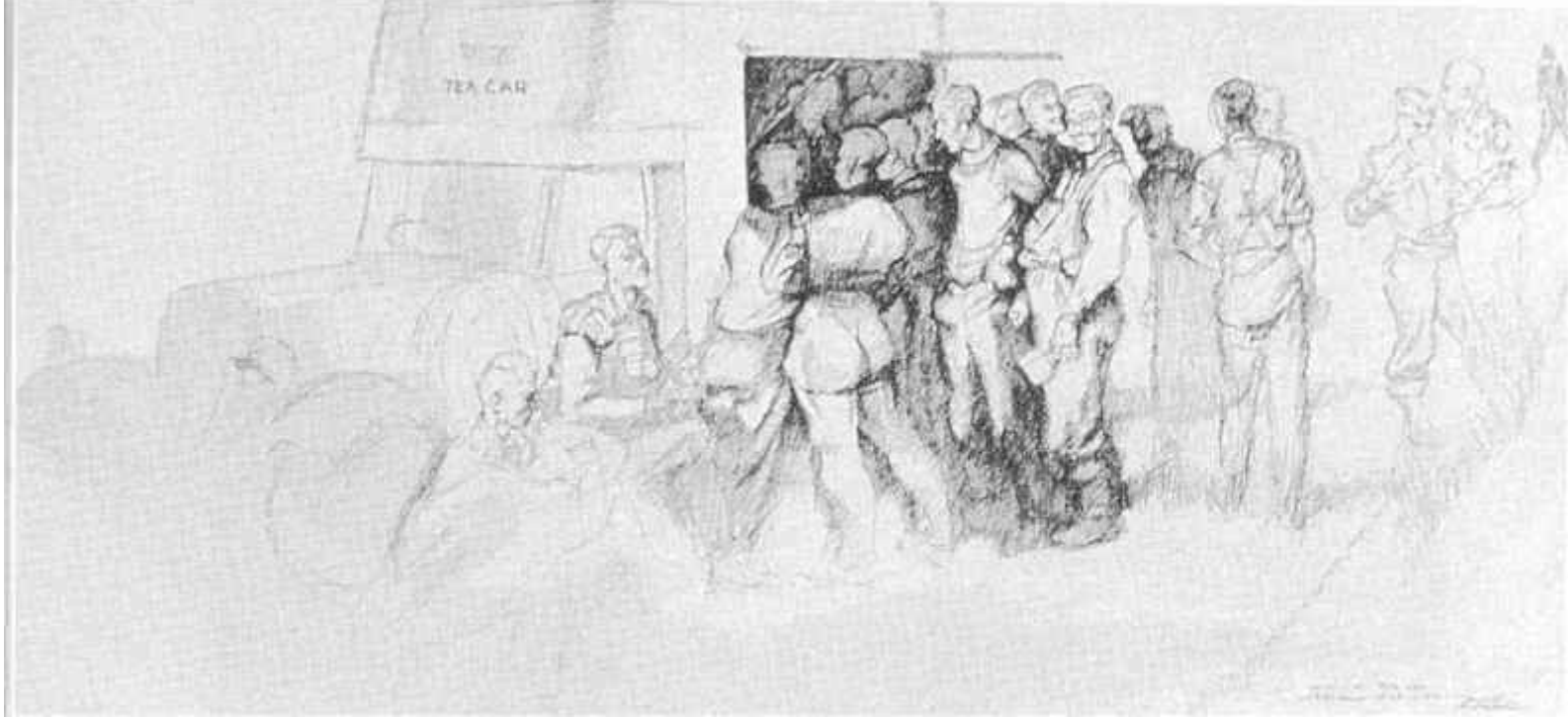
On 10 May 1941, I left for England, along with three others from my class, aboard the S.S. *Nicoya*, a small former banana boat, now part of 29-ship convoy HX 126. The first ten days of our sea journey were spent in first class comfort; the four of us sharing two cabins and eating our meals with *the* ship's officers. But *the* immediate threat of U-boats, after an attack costing one-third of our convoy, required us to spend an uncomfortable final ten days sleeping on the deck, fully clothed, within easier reach of the lifeboats.

On 1 June, when I reported to the RAF Reception Centre at Uxbridge, in north London, I thought perhaps the stories of life in the RAF were true after all. I had a room of my own, no more double bunk, and of all things a batman. This did not last long, but my next stop, at No.57 Spitfire Operation Training Unit (OTU) at Hawarden, Wales, was just as pleasant. Here I was billeted in the home of a former Prime Minister of Britain, Gladstone. Once again I had my own room, no batman but great surroundings and reasonably good meals considering wartime rationing. But this was too good to last.

Having successfully completed my Spitfire training, I was posted to a newly forming RAF Spitfire squadron, No. 132, on 20 July 1941. In company with another pilot from the course, I travelled by train to Peterhead, Scotland. It was on this train trip that I was first exposed to a disturbingly unfriendly attitude on the part of British Army personnel, almost hostile in some cases, towards anyone in an RAF uniform. No doubt many of these men were Dunkirk survivors, who perceived, incorrectly, that the

*Image 4:* Posted to Newfie by Paul Goranson is a typical scene aboard wartime rail.





*Image 5: Y.M.C.A. Tea Car by D.K. Anderson is also typical of the NAAFI queue. Tea was like dishwater with sugar.*

RAF had abandoned them to their fate. More than once we were challenged, threateningly, with "Where were you at Dunkirk?" Their bitterness was understandable; the deserved praise then being lavished on the RAF for their work in the Battle of Britain was like rubbing salt into the wounds of the Dunkirk survivors. Still, it was pointless for us to explain that we were on the other side of the Atlantic at that time.

On arrival at Peterhead, we found the station quarters as yet unfinished, so for a period we were billeted in a private home in town. Obviously new at the business and worried about losing it if incompetent, the owners were constantly peering around the corner at us while we ate. When I finally moved onto the station, I again had my own room but had not been in it long before my flight of twelve pilots was detached to Montrose, on the North Sea coast of Scotland. Montrose was the first operational airfield in Britain, dating back to the First World War. Here we were jammed into a WWI barrack hut, four to a damp and miserably cold room, without heat, and this continued until after Christmas. I returned to Peterhead just in time for the beginning of Scotland's worst winter in years, according to the locals. Our living quarters were not Nissen huts (or Quonset huts) but standard construction with peaked roofs. The roofs had not been designed to take the load of wet snow now building up on them and before long they sagged, then cracked, and the rooms filled with water to a depth of about six inches. Each night

I approached my bed in Wellingtons, stepping out of the boots into bed; in the morning I repeated the process in reverse. No one went hungry, as long as they didn't mind mutton and brussel sprouts. Breakfasts were almost always a whole sheep's kidney on a piece of soggy fried bread, the sight of which was more than most "Colonials" could take.

In February 1942, the squadron moved to treeless Orkney where there was no snow, just rain and mud. I was now quartered in a cold and damp Nissen hut, without heat of course; despite it being more suitable to the conditions than the Peterhead hut had been, it still constantly creaked and groaned against the incessant gales, either from the Atlantic or the North Sea. My only memory of food here was the extra ration of toast and grease-like margarine; the "treat" after night flying.

In May, I was posted to the Desert Air Force. After a short stay at a Reception Depot near Liverpool, I boarded a very large troop train, on which the Army had already occupied all the seats. The fifty airmen, of which I was one, made the long journey to the Clyde sitting on our kit bags in the spaces between the cars. Here again we were subjected to insults from some of the troops continually passing back and forth. At Greenock, I boarded the battleship HMS *Nelson*, where we were all accommodated in the Petty Officers' quarters, in bunks, not hammocks. The next two weeks would be the only time I felt safe



*Image 6: Officer's Quarters Aboard Troopship by D.K. Anderson.  
A five-day trip wasn't too bad, but 30 days could be pretty grim.*

during my eleven weeks at sea during wartime; with a foot of solid steel between me and the waterline and with nine sixteen-inch guns over my head. Here, replacing the NAAFI "oop" [Image 5] call on the airfields, there was a bell signifying lime-juice time, when everyone received a cup of the fruit juice that I believe was the source of "Limey" as the description for an Englishman.

In Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa, I transferred to a battered old coaster which was already packed with soldiers of a native African regiment. They slept wherever they could find a spot, in the corridors or on the deck. We airmen slept nine to a cabin, bunks three high, with water turned on one hour per day. [Image 6] While still in the harbour I watched as two native sailors loaded meat into our ship. They had a small diesel launch, at the stern of which was a cockpit area with about six inches of oily water sloshing around. In this water lay the sides of beef, already turning blue. The off loading was a two-stage affair; getting a good grip with their bare toes on the pile of meat, they first hoisted a side up to rest it on the short diesel stack, with oily smoke billowing out all around it, then changing their footing they heaved it into our ship. When it

appeared on the table, I opted for the bully beef. The bread contained so many weevils (I presume they were weevils), that we had daily contests to see who could find the most. The first night when the lights were turned off my bunk was invaded by a horde of insects, they looked like small yellow ants. I removed myself to spend that night and every night for the next week sleeping on the open top deck, with life jackets for a mattress.

Although it was not my planned destination, I was taken off the ship (shanghaied would be more descriptive) at Takoradi, on the Gold Coast (now Ghana). Only five degrees north of the equator, the airfield was steaming hot, bordered on one side by a swamp teeming with malarial mosquitoes, and the other three sides by jungle housing scorpions, and deadly black and green Mamba snakes. Officially I was attached to the Defence of Takoradi Flight, but my actual duties included everything from aircraft testing, meteorological flights, mosquito spraying to long range photo reconnaissance. Takoradi would be my base of operations for the next eleven months, but in practice I would be at other lesser locations across Africa for about a third of the time. Whether it was in my relatively conventional hut



*Image 7: Desert Camp by Paul Goranson. In Gambia it was a bell tent.*

in Takoradi, a bell tent in the sand in Gambia, a thatched lean-to in southern Nigeria remarkably similar to the prisoners' hut in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, or an adobe hut with a tin roof at other locations, I would sleep each night on my narrow, uncomfortable, folding canvas bed, naked under a mosquito net and bathed in perspiration. **[Image 7]** Unlike the desert to the north, where the nights were cold, in West Africa the wind died and the humidity increased after nightfall and if anything the nights felt hotter than the days. The water was so heavily chlorinated that it smelled like Javex and few could drink it. Fortunately, beer seemed to be available everywhere, although it was never cold except at Takoradi. In Gambia it was Belgian beer, presumably from the Belgian Congo, at Takoradi it was Quebec beer in the old quart bottles, in the Sudan the warm beer came in a can looking like a recycled Brasso container.

Meals varied widely, with Takoradi again better-off being a large base. We were once served canned bananas in Gambia, with real bananas hanging on the trees not far away! The staples were still bully beef and M & V (canned stew) but we often had curried chicken or fish from the local village with side dishes of coconut, peanuts and paw paw. On rare occasions there would be

beef, from the local native abattoir. To ensure all parasites were killed they boiled the stuff and when it came to the table it looked and smelled like a very old gray sock. I never ate it. Paw paw was used both as a fruit and a substitute for potatoes. I never saw a potato in Africa except at the American staging base at Accra, where they had most of their normal lifestyle maintained directly from the US via Liberator aircraft. My greatest advantage at having Takoradi as a base was in having my daily dosage of quinine in tablet form, whereas at every other base I visited the pilots were drinking an egg-cup full of the bitter liquid every morning as a precaution against malaria. I carried a good supply of tablets in an aspirin tin everywhere I flew. At most of the locations showers were an adaption of the usual field variety, a gas or oil drum rigged up to release cold water when a rope was pulled. **[Image 8]**

There was one glorious break in this dismal existence, the last week of February 1943 in Cairo. I had my own cabin in a houseboat on the Nile, the quarters for transient pilots of Ferry Command, with feather bed and running water, but still the mosquito net. This came to an abrupt end when the CO of the boat, discovering I was not one of his ferry pilots, kicked me out and shipped me back to Takoradi.

Early in April 1943, I was posted back to England. Given the choice of remaining in Africa or sharing a cabin for two over the screws of a Dutch registered ship (and I mean directly over them), I replied that I had slept on the deck getting here and would sleep on the deck getting away from the place if that was what it took. In rough seas, when the screws would come partially out of the water, the stern shook like a dog trying to rid itself of water. Outside our cabin a small group of Ghanian students en route to university in London slept on the deck, and cooked their own food on the deck with small kerosene burners. Byway of consolation, this ship had a seemingly endless supply of Dutch draft beer, probably from South Africa.

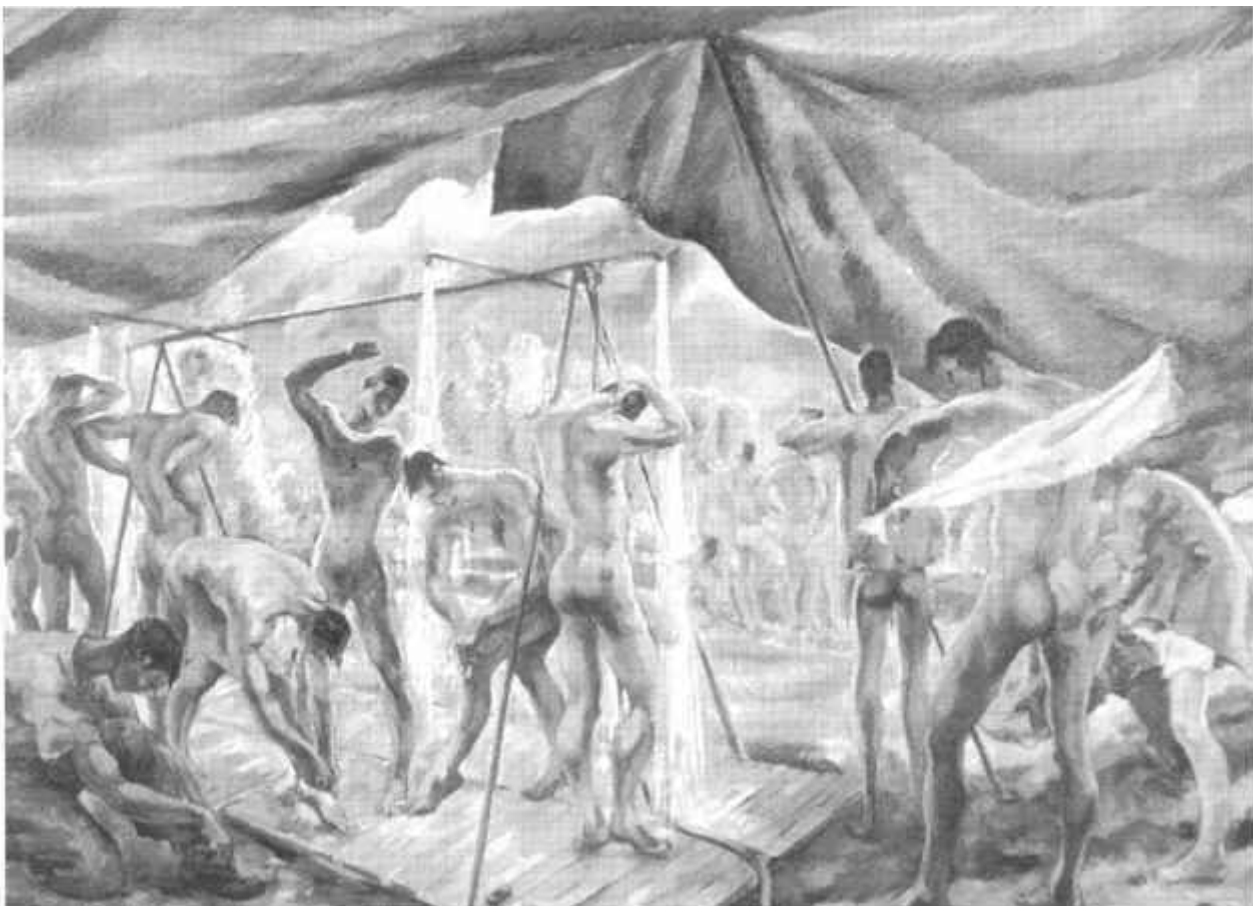
Landing at Liverpool in early May 1943, I was posted to a Canadian Spitfire squadron, No.401, then at Catterick in Yorkshire, where I may actually have sat in an armchair and read *Punch*, while I had a pint. But soon the squadron was off to Redhill, south of London, where I took up residence in an aging wooden hut right on the field, four to a room. The mess was some distance away, uphill, linked by a cinder path over which we commuted by bicycle. Most of us had learned to ride a bike using the North American coaster brakes, which worked on the rear wheel only.

Here they were English machines with the two-cable brake system. I remember one of our number, with the unenviable nickname of "Fartin John," returning from the mess one night after one too many. Feeling his speed was a bit high he applied the brake, but the front brake only, and went flying over the handlebars for a three point landing on the cinders, both palms and his chin!

After only a month or so the squadron moved 20 miles east to a field carved out of an apple orchard near Staplehurst, Kent. Here we lived in ridge-pole tents, four to a tent and took our meals from a typical outdoor field kitchen. Still here three months later, it was often necessary to break ice on our canvas wash basin in order to shave in the morning, but we were close enough to Maidstone to get away occasionally for a luxurious soak in the gigantic English public baths.

In mid-October 1943, the squadron moved once again, this time to Biggin Hill, near London. I took up residence in one of the station's permanent living quarters, two to a room, eating our meals in the main mess. It appeared that we were to at least have a comfortable winter, but before Christmas someone on high must have felt we might soften up again, after our hardening

*Image 8: Mobile Bath by G. Pepper is more sophisticated than remembered.*





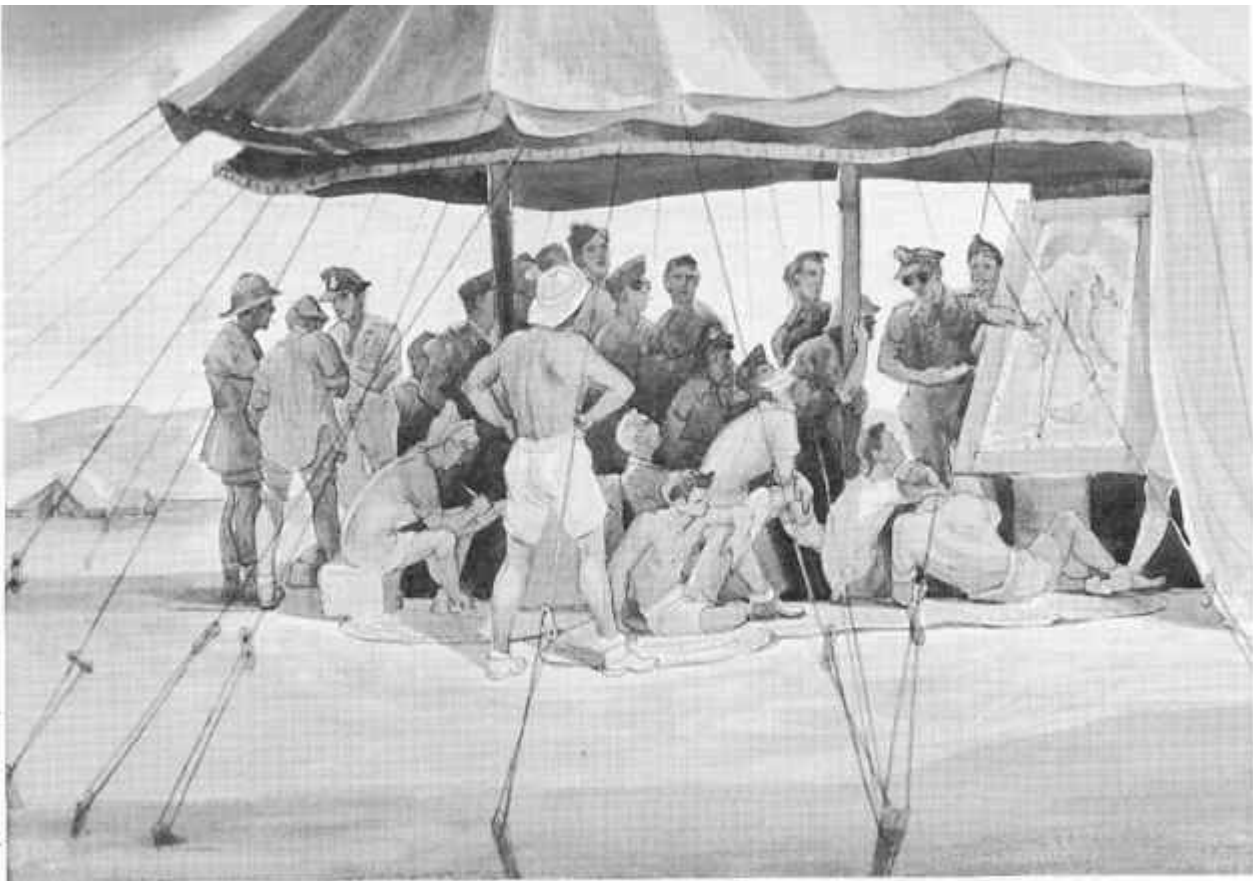
*Image 9: Moving Day by Paul Gorarison is typical of the routine as we prepared and then operated from France.*

process at Staplehurst, and moved our squadron to the opposite side of the field into an old barracks building with our own small mess. Here we slept four or five to a room, with a miniature Quebec-style heater for which we were allotted one scuttle of coal per room per week. I spent most of the winter of 1943-44 sleeping in my fleece-lined leather Irvin jacket. We had heard that bomber crews got an egg for breakfast following a trip, and they deserved it. But apart from the standard "cardboard" eggs, the powdered stuff, the only eggs I ever saw were those scrounged or bargained for by some of our crew from local farmers. One night our CO told us there was a rumour of eggs in the mess, which rumour he was going to investigate, and we were to accompany him. There were indeed real eggs, which he began to fry up despite the pleading of the Messing Officer who had arrived on the scene. We left only when there were no more eggs to eat. One of the fiendish plots seemingly dreamed up by this messing officer was to feed us beans just before an operation which could take us to 30,000 feet!

In mid-April 1944, 401 Squadron left for a one week dive-bombing and gunnery course at Fairwood Common in Wales, while our tents and gear were being trucked to Tangmere. [Image 9]

Following the course we flew to Tangmere, near the Channel coast, and once more moved into our tents. Shortly before D-Day all the pilots were temporarily moved into the permanent mess while our tents were being packed for transport to the Continent. I must confess that I again may have sat in an easy chair here once or twice, but with six squadrons, almost one hundred and fifty pilots on the field, people outnumbered chairs by ten to one. For about two weeks I had a comfortable bed and was in it when, at 3 a.m. on D-Day, I was awakened by a cheery WAAF bringing a cup of tea. We never got that service in our tents!

Although we had landed in France on D+4, it was not until 22 June that we moved in to stay. [Image 10] Our tents were lined up for us not far from the field and all we had to do was locate our folded bed and set it up, again four to a tent. Jerry was coming over the beachhead every night and we soon found that our own spent flak raining down could be injurious to our health. The pilot sharing my side of the tent and I took the Jeep to a former German radar site and brought back a number of 2" x 8" planks. We dug a slit trench inside the tent wide enough and long enough to accommodate two beds end to end. With the beds lowered into the trench, we laid



*Image 10: Briefing by Paul Goranson is also typical of operational accommodations.*

the planks over the opening, leaving just enough room for us to climb in. On top of the planks we piled a layer of sand bags. Lying head to head, with just our legs from the knees down exposed, we slept undisturbed by the racket of the ack-ack each night. Here I stayed until the first week of August 1944, when I became tour expired.

Our staple food was bully beef, which I happened to like, so I was happy. My curiosity was aroused one day when an American P-47 Thunderbolt pilot came in asking for a meal; he had heard we had bully beef and they couldn't get it in their mess. I thought, if they can't get even bully beef, what are they eating? Taking a couple of other pilots along, I flew the squadron Auster communication aircraft to the American pilot's field, at our supper time, and went to their mess to ask for a meal. The Sergeant we talked to was very apologetic, their meal hour was over, but he would try to round up some scraps for us. While we drank the coffee he served us, we waited until he reappeared with three plates of pork chops, apple sauce and pan fried potatoes, followed by apple pie. Some scraps!

A final word about France. In a limited way, I had worked closely with both the Royal Navy and

the British Army during my earlier postings, but the close support of all three services was never more evident to me than here in Normandy. In particular, the Typhoon boys provided excellent close support to the Army and their efforts were noticed and appreciated. Unfortunately, we Spitfire-types were usually engaged far behind enemy lines where our contribution was not obvious to the troops. Consequently, when we occasionally went into a cafe and were approached by Army personnel asking what we flew, we always answered "Typhoons" and the drinks were on the Army!

Probably the poorest food I experienced in Britain was at the very end of my stay, in the Repatriation Depot at Warrington, near Liverpool, while waiting for transport back to Canada. I firmly believe that, if the average stay here had not been short, there would have been a mutiny. Food was passed out singly through a single narrow opening with a guillotine door. There was a time limit on meals and when the time was up, whether you were an AC2 or a Wing Commander with the VC, if you had your hand in the window the guillotine would descend on it! The whole attitude at this station was confrontational, beginning with these exact words with which



[CWM 11240]

*Image 11: Cook in Officer's Mess by Charles Goldhamer shows a scene like that remembered in the Repatriation Deport at Warrington.*

everyone arriving here was greeted: "You will not be pampered here as you have been up to now!" [Image 11]

Unquestionably, I had it easy compared to the miserable conditions that the Army had to put up with at times, and indeed the Air Force as well, particularly in theatres such as the Mediterranean, Malta and Burma. Certainly we all fared better than the long suffering citizens of

the British Isles. I have tried to give the reader a condensed but accurate picture of our eating and sleeping lifestyle as fighter pilots in training and in service with the RAF/RCAF. I leave it to you to decide if we were in fact "a pampered bunch." Certainly I must have been adequately fed; I weighed 135 lb when I enlisted and on returning to Canada on Thanksgiving Day 1944, after more than four and a half years on Service grub, I still weighed the same.



Bill McRae served overseas from May 1941 to October 1944. His tours with 132 RAF Squadron, RAF Defence Flight Takoradi and 401 RCAF Squadron have been reported in *The Journal of the Canadian Aviation Historical Society*. Postwar he spent forty years in the commercial explosives field. In 1999, Bill was a member of the official Veterans' Pilgrimage to Normandy.