



HONORARY RANKS

of the RCAF



By Major Mathias Joost, CD, MA



Many of the customs and traditions of today's Air Force originate with the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). The tradition of appointing honorary officers is no exception, and in fact has been expanded upon. Today, almost every squadron and unit has an honorary officer, with incumbents being of widely diverse backgrounds.

The RCAF used honorary ranks for various reasons. There were those who served in the regular force, but because of their occupation were given honorary ranks. As an example, during the Second World War, chaplains were given honorary ranks, with some maintaining this status after the war. There were also those individuals who, because of their position, were given an honorary rank, although they were not members of the RCAF. Royalty and viceregal personages fell into this category. The RCAF also continued the Militia custom of appointing honorary officers for auxiliary squadrons and units as a means of maintaining ties with the local community, as well as honoring individuals who had performed meritoriously. These last two categories of honoraries were not members of the RCAF and did not have any command or control over members of the service.

The granting of honorary ranks in Canada goes back to a Militia circular of 9 February 1857, in which units were encouraged to appoint honorary members who could wear a uniform if they so desired. The Militia Act of 1855 was aimed at having the Militia perform the role of riot control and policing as required, in the absence of British regular forces that had been withdrawn from Canada East and West. These honorary officers were expected to rally the troops when the Militia was called upon.

It was not, however, until November 1895 that the first such appointment was made, when Lieutenant-Colonel, the Honorable J. K. Gibson was appointed Lieutenant-Colonel of the 13th Battalion of Infantry. A General Order of December

1898 provided criteria for such appointments, namely: "This distinction will be conferred only upon individuals who become eligible by reason of high standing in the state; by honourable and faithful service to the country of an exceptional nature, or by distinguished service in the field."¹ The example of appointing a distinguished officer as exemplified by Gibson, and the criteria of the Militia General Order were to provide the basis of the RCAF's appointments.

The King's Regulations and Orders (KR&Os) for the RCAF (1924) allowed for the appointment of honorary officers. The requirements were similar to that of the Militia General Order of December 1898, with the exception that the only ranks that could be bestowed were group captain and wing commander. The conditions for appointment were fairly rigid in one case and yet had some flexibility in another. On the one hand, an officer could be appointed to an honorary rank of group captain if the individual had held the rank of wing commander or exercised command as such, had 25 years of service as an officer in the RCAF, and had performed an exceptional service. On the other hand, either of the honorary ranks could be bestowed on an individual, whether the individual had served in the RCAF or not, if the Minister believed that granting such a rank would promote the general efficiency of the RCAF from an administrative or educational perspective.² In 1938, the regulations were amended to reflect what had been the practice over the previous seven years. Perhaps because of the fact that few officers had retired as wing commanders, that criterion was changed to include that an individual had to have been a squadron leader or commanded a wing or squadron for at least three years, and have had 20 years service as a squadron leader in the Permanent Force.³ A new category was added for honoraries—those appointed to the Non-Permanent Active Air Force. No previous service was required of them, and the position had a time limit of five years, although this could be renewed.⁴

It was not until 1931 that the RCAF availed itself of the opportunity to appoint honorary officers. Why it took that long is unknown; the Militia, under whose command the RCAF remained until 1938, had many honorary appointments by this time. More significantly, as the RCAF modeled itself after the Royal Air Force (RAF), the RAF had appointed honorary officers in 1919, while Australia had appointed an honorary squadron leader as early as 1928.⁵ These officers were appointed to the respective air forces and not to any particular squadron.

In the RCAF, the first four honoraries, appointed with seniority as of 1 April 1931, were: Group Captain J. S. Scott (honorary air commodore); Group Captain R. K. Mulock (honorary air commodore); Wing Commander W. A. Bishop (honorary group captain); and Squadron Leader D. R. MacLaren (honorary wing commander).⁶ In all four cases, the honorary rank was higher than their substantive rank on the Reserve List, the equivalent of today's Supplementary Holding Reserve (SHR). More importantly, two were air commodores, a rank that was not authorized by the KR&Os. The four officers were each appointed simply to the RCAF and not to any specific unit, while each was appointed on the basis of his distinguished service and the length of service. Interestingly, while three remained at their honorary rank, Bishop was twice promoted in the honorary structure, finally being appointed air marshal on 4 August 1938. During the Second World War, while on active service, he held the substantive rank of air commodore, but wore the uniform of his honorary rank, being referred to as air marshal in RCAF releases.

In keeping with the Militia practice, the first squadrons to have honoraries were from the Non-Permanent Auxiliary Air Force, the forerunner of today's Air Reserve. The squadrons chose notable public figures with wide-ranging backgrounds, beginning the tradition of eclecticism. These appointees ranged from First World War pilots to businessmen to publishers.⁷

The first appointee came from Vancouver, where No. 11 Squadron nominated K. G. Nairn, an accountant and First World War Royal Flying Corps (RFC) pilot with 205 Squadron, as the first Auxiliary honorary effective 14 November 1934.⁸ He enlisted during the Second World War as an accounting officer, was the first director of accounts and member of the Air Council for Accounts and Finance. He attained the rank of air vice-marshal, and was bestowed the Order of Bath for his efforts.

In Regina, 20 Squadron selected J. C. Malone, barrister and city councillor, with an effective date of 13 January 1936. He enlisted in September 1939 as an administration officer and ended the war as a group captain. In both cases, Nairn and Malone were commissioned directly into the Permanent RCAF as officers, without having to start as aircraftmen.

James A. Richardson of Western Canada Airways was appointed to No. 12 Squadron in Winnipeg as of 1 December 1935. An interesting choice was made by 110 Squadron, Toronto, when they chose George C. McCullagh (1 November 1937), publisher of the *Globe and Mail*, as their honorary. McCullagh was known to be a political "independent," but was also well connected in the Toronto financial community, and, perhaps more importantly to 110 Squadron, he was a director of Maple Leaf Gardens. Montreal businessman V. M. Drury was even better connected when he was appointed to 115 Squadron (1 September 1938). Drury was President of Canadian Car and Foundry (which had an aircraft manufacturing plant in what is now Thunder Bay), and was associated with many financial institutions and transportation companies, including Canadian Airways. It appears that while Toronto's reservists went for hockey, those in Montreal went for money and future jobs in aviation.

Feats of aeronautical achievement were also recognized in the inter-war period. In November 1935, Herbert Hollick-Kenyon and J. H. Lymburner participated in American explorer Lincoln Ellsworth's Antarctic Expedition

as pilot and assistant pilot respectively. Hollick-Kenyon, with expedition leader Ellsworth, flew 3500 kilometres across Antarctica. For their efforts, Hollick-Kenyon was appointed an honorary air commodore and Lymburner an honorary group captain, both effective 1 June 1936. Lymburner returned to Antarctica in 1938 to join Ellsworth, this time as his chief pilot.

In the prelude to the Second World War, other honourees were appointed befitting their role. On 19 January 1939, A. W. Carter, a First World War ace who commanded the famous No. 10 Naval Squadron in the First World War, and was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (M.B.E.) and awarded a Distinguished Service Cross (D.S.C.) for his efforts, was made an honorary squadron leader in the RCAF. He was President of the Victoria Flying Club, and was appointed in part with the task of setting up the first air cadet squadron, in association with 111 Squadron in Vancouver. He was then called to Ottawa where he helped create the Air Cadet League. He was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) after the Second World War.⁹

A similar honorary was V. E. (Victor) Doré, Quebec Superintendent of Public Instruction, who was appointed an honorary squadron leader from 1 September 1940. This was conferred upon him when he became special advisor and assistant to Squadron Leader Adelard Raymond, the Commanding Officer of No. 4 Manning Depot. Doré's role was to advise on the teaching of English to French-Canadian recruits.¹⁰ In both cases, the individuals did not command RCAF members, and they remained civilians; however, their honorary rank indicated the level of respect that they were to be accorded.

Doré's appointment highlights that during the Second World War not all the honorary appointments were, as one would expect, largely political. H. A. Jones, CMG (Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George), M.C.

(Military Cross), was an unusual appointee as he was a British citizen serving as the Director of Public Relations at the Air Ministry in the United Kingdom. A First World War veteran of the RFC and RAF, and co-author of the official history *The War in the Air, 1914-1918*, he was appointed 18 January 1944, apparently for his service to the RCAF Overseas. He did not enjoy the fruits of his collaboration with Canada, however, as he died on 28 March 1945 in an air crash en route to Canada and the British Commonwealth Training Plan (BCATP) closing ceremony at RCAF Station Uplands.

The only female appointee to the list of RCAF honourees was the wife of the Governor-General, the Earl of Athlone. Princess Alice was appointed as the Honorary Air Commandant of the RCAF's Women's Division. A suitable rank was required for which she received honorary air commodore status effective 2 July 1941. She was the only viceregal personage to appear in the general pages of the RCAF Officers' List.

There were two appointees who apparently fit the suit of political appointee. J. S. Duncan was a civil service mandarin who served as Deputy Minister for Air and Civil Aviation from April 1940 to January 1941. For this brief service he was appointed an honorary air commodore effective 1 February 1941. He was also well connected industrially, being President and Chairman of Massey Harris Ferguson. Wilfred Gagnon, one of C. D. Howe's "dollar-a-year" men, employed at the Department of Munitions and Supply where he played a major role in the wartime mobilization of industry, was also given an appointment, as an honorary wing commander backdated to 1 October 1938.¹¹ Gagnon was a director of Canadian National Railways, and as the railway held all the stock of Trans-Canada Airlines prior to the war, he was also a director of the airline.

The RCAF emerged from the war with seven honourees, including the long-serving

Hollick-Kenyon and Lymburner, and Drury, the only honorary of a squadron to remain on the list in April 1945. Considering the size of the RCAF during the war and the amount of civil-industrial support required for the air war effort, the fact that only five individuals were granted honorary appointments is interesting. Why there were so few is not explained in any noted documents.

It would not be until 1949 that the RCAF began again appointing honoraries. By this time most were for specific units, of whom all but two were appointed to the RCAF auxiliary squadrons and units. It was not only to flying squadrons to which honoraries were appointed, but also to medical units and to aircraft control and warning units. The honour of being the first would go to No. 1 Radar and Communications Unit—a non-flying unit.

After the war, the nature of the appointments was as varied as before the war. Frank Mackenzie Ross, a businessman and director of Trans-Canada Airlines, was appointed honorary group captain of 19 Wing Headquarters on 1 July 1954.¹² He was named British Columbia's Lieutenant-Governor on 3 October 1955. Serving in the 8th Battalion during the First World War and receiving an MC for his valour, he aided the Canadian Government in providing supplies to the British Admiralty during the Second World War, for which he was appointed to the CMG.

A similarly distinguished appointee was Thomas Ingledow, a distinguished British Columbia engineer and inventor, and First World War RAF pilot, who was appointed honorary wing commander of 19 Wing Headquarters on 1 January 1959. Why he was only a wing commander while his predecessor was a group captain is unknown; however, the RCAF corrected the oversight. One year later, following in the footsteps of Billy Bishop, he was promoted to honorary group captain. He retained this position until 1 April 1964, when the headquarters was disbanded as a result of RCAF budget cuts.

Academics were also honoured, such as Adrien Pouliot, Dean of Laval University, and Henry G. Thode, renowned chemist and President and Vice-Chancellor of McMaster University. During the Second World War, the latter was on leave from the university to work with the National Research Council. Lennox Bell, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Manitoba and son of famed Winnipeg doctor Gordon Bell, was also an honorary. He served in the RCAF during the Second World War as a medical consultant attached to No. 2 Training Command.

Perhaps the most interesting honorary appointee after the war was Richard Loney, appointed honorary wing commander to the RCAF effective 17 July 1952. Loney was a retired Army major who had served in the Boer and First World War. Rejected by the Army for Second World War service because of his age, he was credited by the RCAF with recruiting “thousands of men and women for the Air Force” from all over Saskatchewan, and a further 300 post-war. At the age of 80 he was honoured for this service to the RCAF.¹³

In contrast to the non-flying units, auxiliary flying squadrons selected distinguished RCAF personnel as their honoraries. The longest history of honoraries after the war was from 418 Squadron, but only with two individuals. Air Vice-Marshal Ken Guthrie (Retired) was their honorary wing commander from 13 April 1950 to 9 September 1956, at which point the squadron's first post-war commanding officer, Group Captain D. R. Jacox (Retired) followed until 1964. The second longest history of honoraries goes to 401 Squadron with Group Captain G. R. McGregor (Retired) from 15 April 1950, Air Vice-Marshal A. L. James (Retired) from 15 July 1955, and then Air Vice-Marshal F. S. McGill (Retired) from 1 October 1961.

Air Vice-Marshal McGill has the distinction of being the only individual to be twice an honorary in the RCAF. He was first appointed on 1 February 1939 as honorary

wing commander to the RCAF on his retirement from active service. With the start of the war, McGill accepted active service and lost his honorary appointment. Interestingly, Billy Bishop retained his honorary rank in his listing on the RCAF Officers' List.

By February 1959, the RCAF had cancelled all honorary appointments for those individuals who were not associated with a unit. This ended the service of Hollick-Kenyon and Lymburner, the longest serving of the RCAF honoraries. This did not mean, however, that the RCAF was not prepared to appoint an honorary without association to a squadron. On 23 February 1959, J. A. D. McCurdy was appointed an honorary air commodore, only the third individual to be recognized by the RCAF for achievements in Canadian aviation. McCurdy remained an air commodore until his death on 25 June 1961.

The last RCAF honorary would be Air Marshal W. A. Curtis (Retired), appointed to 400 Squadron on 1 August 1964. He would only serve in this capacity for a short time as the RCAF disappeared as an organization not

much later. With the demise of the RCAF, these distinguished individuals also stopped being honoraries within the RCAF.

Throughout the period of the RCAF's existence, there were only 37 honoraries appointed to "promote the general efficiency of the RCAF from an administrative and educational perspective."¹⁴ They ranged from distinguished veterans to political appointees. Even among the academics and civilians, most had an aviation or military background.

The nature of the "general efficiency," that is, the reasons for their appointments, did vary. Jones and Loney were appointed on the basis of their service to the RCAF, although the case for Jones is less clear. Carter, Doré, and Rodgers also stand out as they were the lone squadron leaders; however, their rank was apparently required for status associated with their duties in the RCAF. There were two apparently political appointees, and one appointment, as honorary commandant, was in recognition of her status. Thus, the foundations for the current honorary system in the Air Force were clearly laid during the period of the RCAF. ■

Name	Rank	Unit	Effective
Bishop, W. A.	group captain	RCAF	1-Apr-31
Scott, J. S.	air commodore	RCAF	1-Apr-31
Mulock, R. H.	air commodore	RCAF	1-Apr-31
MacLaren, D. R.	wing commander	RCAF	1-Apr-31
Nairn, K. G.	wing commander	11 Sqn	14-Nov-34
Richardson, J. A.	wing commander	12 Sqn	1-Dec-35
Hollick-Kenyon, H.	air commodore	RCAF	1-Jun-36
Lymburner, J. H.	group captain	RCAF	1-Jun-36
McCullagh, G. C.	wing commander	110 Sqn	1-Nov-37
Malone, J. C.	wing commander	20 Sqn	13-Jan-37
Drury, V. M.	wing commander	115 Sqn	1-Sep-38
Gagnon, W.	wing commander	RCAF	1-Oct-38
Carter, A. W.	squadron leader	RCAF	19-Jan-39
McGill, F. S.	wing commander	RCAF	1-Feb-39
Burden, H. J.	wing commander	RCAF	1-Jul-39
Rodgers, G. R.	squadron leader	RCAF	18-Oct-39
Dore, V. E.	squadron leader	RCAF	1-Sep-40
Duncan, J. S.	air commodore	RCAF	1-Feb-41

Athlone, Countess of	air commodore	RCAF	2-Jul-41
Jones, H. A.	air commodore	RCAF	18-Jan-44
Langlois, J. A.	wing commander	1 Radar and Communications Unit (R&CU)	1-Oct-49
Guthrie, K. M.	wing commander	418 Sqn	13-Apr-50
McGregor, G. R.	wing commander	401 Sqn	15-Apr-50
Asselin, J. O.	wing commander	438 Sqn	1-Apr-50
Pouliot, A.	wing commander	2452 Air Control and Warning Unit (ACWU)	2-Apr-51
Webster, E. T.	wing commander	2450 ACWU	28-Mar-52
Loney, R.	wing commander	RCAF	17-Jul-52
Brewster, W. R.	wing commander	4000 Air Movement Unit (AMU)	1-Jul-53
Ross, F. M.	group captain	19 Wing HQ	1-Jul-54
James, A. L.	wing commander	401 Sqn	15-Jul-55
Jacox, D. R.	wing commander	418 Sqn	10-Sep-56
Bell, L. G.	wing commander	4003 Medical Unit	15-Aug-57
Taylor, C. D.	air commodore	Primary Reserve	20-Nov-58
McCurdy, J. A. D.	air commodore	RCAF	23-Feb-59
Ingleadow, T.	air commodore	19 Wing HQ	1-Jan-59
McGill, F. S.	wing commander	401 Sqn	1-Oct-61
Thode, H. G.	wing commander	4006 Medical Unit	1-Aug-61
Curtis, W. A.	wing commander	400 Sqn	1-Aug-64

Table 1 - Honorary Ranks in the RCAF

Major Mathias (Mat) Joost is a historian at the Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH). He joined the Canadian Forces in 1986, serving in the Navy and as a military police officer. Taking the Force Reduction Plan (FRP) in 1995, he went to South Korea where he taught English and met his future wife. Returning to Canada in 1998, he joined the Air Reserve, working in Winnipeg until joining DHH in 2003. Mat is currently working on a history of the Air Reserve and on Black Canadians in the RCAF.

List of Abbreviations

BCATP	British Commonwealth Training Plan
CD	Canadian decoration
CMG	Companion of the Order of Saint Michael and Saint George
D.S.C.	Distinguished Service Cross
DHH	Directorate of History and Heritage
KR&O	King's Regulations and Orders
M.B.E.	Member of the Order of the British Empire
MC	Military Cross
OBE	Officer of the Order of the British Empire
RAF	Royal Air Force
RCAF	Royal Canadian Air Force
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
SHR	Supplementary Holding Reserve

Notes

1. Major P. E. Lansey, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), "The Origins of Honorary Ranks," unpublished draft paper.
2. King's Regulations and Orders for the Royal Canadian Air Force (1924), paragraphs 216E and 216F.
3. King's Regulations and Orders for the Royal Canadian Air Force (1939), paragraph 216E(a) and (b).
4. *Ibid.*, paragraph 216.
5. In the case of the RAF, a transferee from the Royal Army Medical Corps was made a flight lieutenant with the honorary rank of squadron leader (Henry Beveridge Smith) and for Australia, Herbert John Louis Hinkler, a civilian aviator was appointed when he made the first solo flight from Britain to Australia in 1928. See Internet; www.carsonree.talktalk.net/Smiths/smith.htm (accessed 30 July 2009) and www.ctie.monash.edu.au/hargrave/bert_hinkler_bio.html (accessed 30 July 2009). Similarly to Smith, future Australian Chief of the Air Staff Stanley James Goble received a permanent commission as a squadron leader and was appointed an honorary wing commander at the same time. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_Goble (accessed 30 July 2009).
6. The names and ranks of the honoraries are found in the various editions of the RCAF Officers' List.
7. The list of all RCAF honoraries is included as Table 1.
8. Note that in 1936, Non-Permanent Active Air Force squadrons had "100" added to their number to allow the Permanent Active Air Force to expand. Thus, 11 Squadron became 111 Squadron.
9. DHH Biography File, Carter, A. W., and "History of 'Canada's First' Air Cadet Squadron," www.cadets.ca/lhq/111air/contents-contenu.aspx?id=35373&linkidentifier=id&itemid=35373 (accessed 8 August 2009).
10. There was one other honorary squadron leader, G. R. Rodgers, who later enlisted as an administration officer in the RCAF during the Second World War.
11. The term "dollar-a-year man" refers to business executives brought into the government to work primarily in the Department of Munitions and Supply and the Wartime Prices and Trade Board. Their wages were paid by their companies while the government paid their living expenses.
12. Biographies of many of the notables can be found in the *Canadian Who's Who* for the appropriate year of appointment.
13. RCAF Directorate of Public Relations Press Release No. 8095, 15 Aug 52, DHH Biography file – Loney, R.
14. King's Regulations and Orders for the Royal Canadian Air Force (1924), paragraphs 216E and 216F.