

points of interest

RAYMOND COLLISHAW:

THE ROYAL NAVAL AIR SERVICE'S LEAD ACE

By Second Lieutenant Nicolas Fortin



Raymond Collishaw in the cockpit, 1917
Source : <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Collisaw.JPG>

Raymond Collishaw had a magnificent career as a pilot in the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) and the Royal Air Force (RAF). He is the leading ace of the RNAS with 60 confirmed victories, second to Canadian Billy Bishop and third overall in Allied aces of WWI.

Collishaw was born in Nanaimo, British Columbia, in 1893. Having grown up next to the sea, he joined the Royal Navy on August 14, 1914. Realizing that he would see more action in the air and once again due to his affinity to the sea, he joined the Royal Naval Air Service in January 1916 instead of the preferred Royal Flying Corps.

With only eight and a half hours of training, Collishaw was cleared to fly solo. After receiving his wings, he was sent to Naval 3 Squadron. As a fighter pilot, he was initially involved in escorting long range bomber runs. One of these runs was the historic Oberndorf Raid¹ on the Mauser Works factory where he had at least one victory.

Collishaw is perhaps best remembered for the famous “Black Flight” when he was leader of B Flight at Naval 10 Squadron in 1917. The squadron was moved to Droglandt, directly across from Baron von Richtofen’s (the infamous Red Baron) “Flying Circus” squadron near the Belgian border. Collishaw and the other members of his flight, made up entirely of Canadians, painted their triplanes black in an open challenge to the Red Baron’s squadron, who adorned a bright red on their biplanes. The Red Baron’s squadron was feared by all, not only because of the leader himself, but also for his wingmen, who were equally as skilled in the air. It was during one of the many confrontations between the two squadrons that Collishaw managed to take down six enemy airplanes in a single day, the first pilot to achieve such a feat. The “Black Flight” had an

excellent leader in Collishaw and it was during this time that he was awarded one of his many decorations; the Distinguished Service Order “For conspicuous bravery and skill in successfully leading attacks against hostile aircraft.”² He concluded his time with Naval 10 with a total of 34 confirmed victories in four months.

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Collishaw clearly had a knack for flying and was an excellent tactician. His duties back at Naval 3 in November 1918 now included training and preparing new recruits for the harsh conditions of aerial combat. He trained them well and ensured that they were not rushed. Collishaw advised the recruits to observe the fight and learn the ways of dog fighting

before jumping in. When the recruits engaged in dog fighting, Collishaw watched over them and frequently gave them sole credit for shared victories. Thus, boosting their morale and further building their confidence. At the end of the war in 1918, he was flying with 203 Squadron and had achieved another 19 victories.

Although he fought many perilous battles in the skies over Europe, Collishaw described his experience during the Russian Revolution as being the more frightening of the two. In 1918, the Allies had opted to send a squadron to support General Denikin and the White Movement in their fight against the Bolsheviks. Collishaw joined the effort in 1919; his aerial combat was limited to an air-to-ground role because the Bolsheviks did not have much of an air force. He was credited with sinking a gunboat that was ferrying soldiers across the River Volga and shooting down one airplane. After recovering from a bout with typhus, Collishaw returned to the air. Missions involved strafing enemy soldiers on the ground, a tactic that was first employed at the end of WWI. Strafing missions were relentless and continued until the airplane ran out of ammunition. On one occasion, a flight of four Camels inflicted 1,600 casualties on the Bolshevik cavalry.

The Allies were not successful in Russia and, pursued by the Bolsheviks, retreated 500 miles by train to return to friendly territory in Crimea.³ The Allies feared that they would be castrated if they fell into enemy hands. In fact, there were a number of close calls when the Bolsheviks almost caught up with them. Out of his element and unable to defend his squadron, this was Collishaw's most frightful experience. In January 1920, now safe in Crimea, Collishaw assembled some planes for his squadron. They returned to the air and once again inflicted damage on the Bolsheviks. He was credited with derailing a train and damaging another.

During WWII, Collishaw rose to the rank of Air Commodore and was stationed in Egypt where he commanded the RAF in Northern Africa. The first major action his command undertook was the attacks on Italian bases in an attempt to neutralize the Italian Air Force. He developed key tactics such as building mock airplanes (in order to portray a much larger air force from the air) and conducting raids with one airplane. Under constant attack from the one plane raids, the superior Italian Air Force was weakened as a result of being spread thinly across North Africa.

Collishaw's squadrons were flying much outdated biplanes but had one Hawker Hurricane, which often led the attacks. He compensated for the outdated aircraft by teaching his pilots expert tactics and cunning manoeuvres. Eventually, the Italian Air Force fought its last battle in Africa in late October 1941. Collishaw felt that winning air superiority in Africa was the greatest achievement of his career.

During Operation Compass,⁴ Collishaw was tasked with harassing the Italians and making sure they were in the dark as to what the Allies were planning. On one occasion, Collishaw had a Bristol Bombay, a large and very noisy bomber, fly back and forth over Allied troops to disguise the sound of tanks that were preparing for an attack the following day.

After some disagreements with Air Marshal Tedder (RAF Middle East Command),

Collishaw was sent to Scotland in July 1942. This posting was used to let airmen wind down because it was out of the way of major action. The disagreements stemmed from Collishaw's experience in WWI. He was accustomed to a war where the pilots were their own boss. The lack of radio and radar in WWI meant that commanders did not have a tether on the planes and could not control them once they were in the air. Collishaw was reluctant to adapt to the new kind of war being fought in WWII, where, according to Air Marshal Tedder, extensive planning and preparations were key to success. Tedder saw Collishaw as an impulsive leader who would overlook the importance of proper administration. For this, he "was retired from the RAF"⁵ in 1943 at the rank of Air Vice Marshal. During his command, Collishaw's superior tactics and strategies shot down some 1,100 Italian aircraft and eliminated them as a threat in North Africa.

While Collishaw was nominated twice for a Victoria Cross, he never received the coveted military decoration. He was, however, awarded many others for his actions during WWI, the Russian Revolution and WWII. The list includes the Companionship of the Order of Bath; the Distinguished Service Order with bar; Officer of the British Empire; the Distinguished Service Cross; Distinguished Flying Cross; the Croix de Guerre; the Order of St. Anne, 2nd class; the Order of St. Stanislaus, 2nd class; the Order of St. Vladimir, 4th class; as well as mention in four despatches. He was awarded these decorations for not only his bravery and skill but mostly for his leadership during conflict. It is interesting to note that from the time that Collishaw was posted to Naval 10 Squadron until his retirement, he was continually in a position of leadership at the flight, squadron and command level.

He was inducted into Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame in 1974, two years before his death at the age of 82. He has also been inducted into the British Columbia Aviation Hall of Fame. In his birthplace (Nanaimo, British Columbia), he now has an airport and an Air Cadet Squadron named in his honour. ■

Second Lieutenant Nicolas Fortin joined the Canadian Forces in December 2007 and is currently completing on-job training at the Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre. He is awaiting training as an Air Navigator at Canadian Forces Air Navigation School in February 2009.

List of Abbreviations

RAF	Royal Air Force	WWI	World War I
RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service	WWII	World War II

Notes

1. Carried out on 12 October 1916, the Oberndorf Raid was the first large scale multinational strategic bombing run.
2. *The London Gazette*, Supplement no. 30227 (10 August, 1917), page 4 <http://www.gazettes-online.co.uk/ViewPDF.aspx?pdf=30227&geotype=London&gpn=8203&type=ArchivedSupplementPage&call=collishaw> (accessed September 15, 2008).
3. The Allies arrived in Crimea on 4 January, 1920.
4. Operation Compass ran from December 1940 until February 1941 and was a decisive Allied victory. It resulted in the Allies advancing far into Libya and capturing over 100,000 prisoners of war while suffering only minor losses. The entire Italian Tenth Army was defeated.
5. Miles Constable, "Raymond Collishaw: World War I Fighter Ace." Miles Constable, <http://www.constable.ca/caah/collishaw.htm> (accessed September 15, 2008).

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Collishaw's Sopwith Triplane, 'Black Maria', 1917.
Source : <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:SopTri.jpg>