

THE AIR HISTORIAN

BY HUGH HALLIDAY

PART II



Editor's Note: Part I of this article examined the role/position of the Air Historian for the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) during the Second World War and appeared in the Summer 2011 issue of The Canadian Air Force Journal. Part II picks up the story almost immediately after the war.

The following is adapted from a paper presented by Hugh A. Halliday at the joint meeting of the Air Force Historical Conference and the Canadian Aviation Historical Society annual meeting, Winnipeg, June 2006. Further insights on the subject may be gained by consulting a recent work by Tim Cook, *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars*, (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2006).

THE STRUGGLE IN THE WILDERNESS

The man who inherited this wreck was Wing Commander (W/C) F. H. Hitchins, and in 1946–47 even his position was uncertain. He had moved to Ottawa and bought a house, expecting that the position of Air Historian would be permanent. He even resigned a teaching position to take up the job. In 1946 he proposed that a proper RCAF history be compiled, consisting of at least eight volumes and including the First World War, interwar period, and the most recent conflict. Yet the annual *Report of the Department of National Defence for the Year Ending March 31, 1947* blithely noted completion of the third volume of *The RCAF Overseas*, then went on to say: "No official history of the RCAF will be published, although the final volume of a four-volume history under preparation by the Army Historical Section will include a survey of the administrative history of the RCAF."¹

Hitchins' hopes were further dashed when, in 1947, a ministerial edict declared that all historical work was to cease, effective 1 April 1948. The Minister of the day (Brooke Claxton) was convinced that no one would be interested in Canadian military history after 1948. Hitchins and his assistant, Squadron Leader H. H. Coulson, were to be let go as of September 1947, which led to both officers lodging grievances with

the department. The Chief of the Air Staff (Robert Leckie) was dismissive of the grievances raised by Coulson and Hitchins and said so to the Minister of National Defence. He agreed that they had been given certain assurances in 1946, that they had made important decisions based on those assurances (including resigning university teaching posts), and even went so far as to write, "I consider the grievance of these two officers to be one which merits consideration." He promptly declined to address the matter:

I feel that this is one of those cases where a change of policy has had an unfortunate sequel for the individuals concerned but that it would be wrong to change the policy as a means of satisfying the grievance. The request for an audience by these two officers is almost certainly inspired by the successful plea of the Army Historian for consideration of his case.²

Leckie's willingness to abandon the historians clearly encouraged the Minister to persist in his decision. On 20 June 1947, Claxton himself wrote a memo to his Deputy Minister:

With reference to the applications for redress of grievance of W/C Hitchins and S/L [Squadron Leader] Coulson, it would, I think, be quite out of the question to provide permanent posts for these officers. All the universities are short of historians. This being so, it seems to me that the best thing in their own interest for them to do would be to leave at some date to be agreed upon, either the 30th September 1947 or 31st March 1948.

First, however, they should complete the third volume of "The RCAF Overseas" and put all the other material they have in good shape for its being used by the Historical Section. If they got through

“The RCAF Overseas” in good time, they might work at the RCAF parts of the General History of the War, as well as at putting the material they have in the best possible shape.³

Coulson was let go in September 1947. Hitchins was also formally retired to the Class “E” Reserve, but he was permitted to remain as a “temporary civil servant.” This must have been a period of agonizing limbo. At least one senior officer recognized, in part, the folly of closing down the Air Historian’s office. Air Commodore R. C. Ripley (Assistant Chief of the Air Staff) argued for a re-establishment of the Air Historian, even if it meant disguising the move by changing the name of the office. Its role, however, was to be very limited.

It is felt that the Service should not be producing popular-type histories for public consumption but should be producing histories as texts for the RCAF or other services.⁴

The RCAF finally decided that, at least for training, it did need an Air Historian. Fred Hitchins was granted a permanent commission in the rank of Wing Commander (Administrative Branch), effective 1 April 1948, then left him to his own devices.

For years thereafter the office of Air Historian consisted of Hitchins alone and one clerk/typist. He began a long campaign to convince his superiors that history mattered. RCAF units still generated historical reports; Central Registry still kept files containing historical information—files that should be reviewed by the Air Historian before they were transferred or destroyed. There were still queries from other governments, from parliamentarians, and from the public. Finally, there were some 60 cabinets stuffed with documents (many of them hastily packed and shipped from overseas) that needed to be sorted and catalogued.

A proposal in August 1947 that the Department of National Defence establish an “Inter-Service Historical Section,” effective 1 April 1948, might have saved RCAF history, but a decision was repeatedly deferred. When it was finally considered by the Chiefs of Staff Committee (February 1948) it was concluded that a tri-service Historical Section would be deferred until such time as the Army histories had been completed. Until then, the Air Force and Navy were on their own.

Air Marshal W. A. Curtis (Leckie’s successor as Chief of the Air Staff) expressed a passing interest in RCAF history, but only so far as it could be taught in RCAF schools. Curtis, to his credit, acknowledged the need to catalogue existing records, and it was he who had confirmed Hitchins in his post. However, the new CAS showed no interest in compilation of an RCAF history, though he conceded that the Air Historian might “cooperate with and assist the Army Historical Section in the compilation of the RCAF material required for the official military history.”⁵ He clearly expected, well into 1948, that the Army Historical Section would still have substantial RCAF content in their military histories (up to one-third) and expected that Hitchins would “cooperate and assist the Army Historical Section.”⁶ Otherwise, he committed no RCAF resources—dollars or people—to an RCAF history.⁷

When the concept of a tri-service historical section collapsed, there was still time to introduce some discussion as to how RCAF history was going to be handled. Instead, there was a profound, even deafening, silence. Wing Commander Hitchins was given no further directives or instructions—he had to do what he could with what he had. Nobody seemed to care very much what happened.

The official, even wilful, ignorance about the Air Historian was reflected in several

ways. As of 1948, when the Air Historian was finally accepted in the post-war Air Force Headquarters (AFHQ), it reported to the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS). As of September 1951, this was changed to the Vice Chief of the Air Staff. In February 1956, the Air Historian was moved to the realm of the Air Member for Personnel. Each of these changes moved the Air Historian further away from the centre of AFHQ, further to the periphery of bureaucratic power. Administrative isolation was matched by physical seclusion, for while the most important functions of AFHQ were housed in sprawling “Temporary Buildings” on Elgin Street (Cartier Square) and Carling Avenue, the Air Historian was located (with other obscure units) on Victoria Island. Its most sympathetic neighbour was the two-man / one-typist office of *Roundel*.⁸

The nadir of the Air Historian was reached about 1951–1952. Air Vice-Marshal F. R. Miller admitted in writing that he could not compose an informed assessment of Hitchins because he did not know what work he did, much less how well he did it.

This silence was broken on 2 May 1953 when Hitchins himself addressed a long memo to the Assistant Vice-Chief of the Air Staff. It was evident that he was being overwhelmed with duties, yet his staff still consisted of a single clerk/typist. His two-man band had numerous tasks to perform, and he clearly was not able to keep up. These tasks fell under three general headings:

Records Management: The 60 cabinets of wartime documents remained uncatalogued; meanwhile, unit historical reports (of varying quality) were still arriving, having to be checked and filed. Files slated for destruction had to be reviewed to ensure that valuable documents were not mindlessly discarded—and the evidence is that, for all his intentions, Hitchins was unable to preserve many files from zealous Central Registry cleaners.

Historical Research: This included handling inquiries from parliamentarians, ministers, senior officers, and the Army Historical Section, responding to unit requests for “brief” histories, determination of unit battle honours, and revision and updating of study material for Training Command. In the course of this work, he had been compelled to concentrate on service requests, leaving many others (including aspiring authors) to fend for themselves.

Miscellaneous: This included approval, custody and photography of unit badges, lectures at Staff College and Reserve Schools, contributing to *Roundel* (established 1948), attendance on the Public Records Committee, and administration of his section.

In the period 1948 to 1953, Hitchins had been doing some remarkable work, yet assessments of his performance reflected the utter indifference of his superiors to his role. In 1949, he had produced, practically single-handedly, a chronology of the RCAF to that date, and he kept it up to date so that two mimeographed supplements were printed before he retired. He wrote *Among the Few*, the first study of Canadian and RCAF participation in the Battle of Britain. He drafted histories for use in officer candidate schools. He kept notes on interwar personnel and compiled handwritten drafts of pre-war squadron histories that never got to the stage of typing, but which are found to this day throughout air force history files.

Hitchins kept a candle burning for RCAF history when all about was darkness, and he was well aware of that darkness. Shy and quiet, lacking both the dynamics and the networks of a C. P. Stacey, he could not move mountains. The idea of a comprehensive RCAF history had vanished from sight—at a time when the Army Historical Section had some 60 personnel. Hitchins requested help—at least one more officer—and

AFHQ began looking at his request, but not at his mandate.

Hitchins again raised the need for a comprehensive RCAF history (11 December 1953) and put forward a plan for one (31 March 1954). On 4 June 1954, a memo from Directorate of Organization and Establishments declared, "The Air Members have approved the publication of an RCAF History."⁹ It was expected to take three years and the strength of the office of Air Historian was doubled—from one officer (Hitchins) to two (Hitchins and Flight Lieutenant A. P. Heathcote). That was all.

His superiors continued to have little or no appreciation of his work beyond what appeared in *Roundel*. Consider the following assessments, written three years apart:

Wing Commander Hitchins appears to be doing a satisfactory job and always seems to have the answer to any problems or questions raised in regard to Air Force history. He does not seem to have too much imagination and his writings are not very inspiring or colourful. However, in a historian this is probably a good thing.

Air Commodore C. H. Greenway, 11 July 1956

My contact with the Air Historian is relatively limited. However, I find him to be a sincere, intelligent and sensitive officer. He is quite capable of finding facts in research of material and writing them in an imaginative and logical manner.

Air Commodore J. G. Stephenson, 1 February 1959.¹⁰

At this point we find in the files a remarkable letter dated 5 October 1956. It was from Air Marshal Roy Slemon (CAS) to Lieutenant-General H. D. Graham (Chief of the General Staff), and it bears transcription in its entirety:

Dear Howard;

I am grateful to you for having made available to me a copy of Volume 2 of the Canadian Army's official history of the Second World War - "The Canadians in Italy".

In a spare moment the other evening I picked the book up with the intention of casually leafing through it but became so absorbed that I read far into the night, at the expense of some work which I had to do. I intend to continue the exploration whenever the opportunity permits.

Volume 1 - "Six Years of War" is also a masterly effort which I have enjoyed. I must congratulate the Canadian Army on the excellent way in which it has handled and is producing a worthwhile and interesting history of its Second World War efforts. You people have done exceptionally well in this matter whereas we, the RCAF, in my opinion have failed. For this, I am afraid that I must personally accept a fair share of the blame in that I didn't fight as hard as I should have for adequate support for the RCAF Historical Section. Obviously, your historical people have had the support they deserve for their important task.

Again, my sincerest thanks to you for your kind thought of presenting me with this fine history.

(signed by Roy Slemon)¹¹

It would be pleasant to record that Slemon, having seen the light and admitted his errors, would have been converted like Saul on the road to Damascus. In practical terms, his input may be described in three words: "Sweet Fanny Adams".

TOKEN EXPANSION

The "new boy," Flight Lieutenant (later Squadron Leader) Heathcote, was a

tremendous asset to Hitchens, enabling the Air Historian to start writing a scholarly history of the interwar RCAF and to assist other writers in their efforts to produce books. The peacetime history was never published by the Department of National Defence, although it was produced in 1969 by the Canadian War Museum under the title of *Air Board/CAF/RCAF, 1919–1939*. Cooperation with authors was most conspicuous as the 50th anniversary of Canadian flight approached, culminating in Leslie Roberts' survey history, *There Shall be Wings*, which owed much to assistance from the Air Historian.

Yet Heathcote was a man of limited outlook. He had been a Halifax bomber pilot during the war, had rejoined the force as a pilot in 1948, and been reclassified for non-flying duties in 1955. His specialty was writing squadron histories which appeared in *Roundel*, and the more he tackled these projects the longer they became. His talent lay in narrative, but not in analysis. In 1961, when the official history of Bomber Command appeared, he did not bother to read the volumes before condemning them as disrespectful of bomber crew sacrifices.¹² Heathcote, in short, had a blinkered view of history, shaped and warped by his own experiences and unwilling to abandon the orthodoxies of his youth.

It was about this time (1954–1955) that Air Historian staff were reclassified from “Special List” to “Pers/PI” (Personnel / Public Information), a trade that encompassed Public Relations (PR) staff. It happened that Air Force PR was a particularly dynamic organization, but it jealously guarded its own establishment and only grudgingly surrendered a body here or there to the Air Historian. In March 1957 another officer was brought in—Flight Lieutenant L. R. N. Ashley—but the Director of Public Relations (DPR) clearly intended him to replace Heathcote, not augment him. In the end, Ashley moved

on, Heathcote remained, but a former Education Officer was added to the section—Flight Lieutenant Fred Hatch.

THE MANNING YEARS

Hitchens had reached retirement age in 1955, but it was suddenly realized that he was not easily replaced. His service was extended repeatedly. In the spring of 1960, he finally retired, to be replaced by Wing Commander Ralph Manning, who asked for the job as far back as 1958 and had turned down a promotion so that he might become Air Historian. Manning held only a Bachelor of Arts (BA), and as a historian he was more an enthusiastic dilettante than a professional scholar. He nevertheless brought to the office a fresh face, some new ideas, and a determination to increase the staff of the office. In the next four years, he generated a series of memos and proposals outlining the need for an official history, the scope of such a history, and the staff required to bring it to fruition.

It is not clear why Wing Commander Manning had sought the post or what vision he may have had for the office. Once in the post, however, he became enamoured of the concept of an air force museum, and set about assembling one. Several Second World War aircraft that had been stored and forgotten at Chater, Manitoba, were rediscovered and brought to Ottawa. He began casting about for added machines, and was approached by one George Maude (Saltspring Island), who wrote saying that he had a Bolingbroke that the RCAF was welcome to have. An officer was sent west, examined the machine, pronounced it good, and arrangements were made to raft it off the island and bring it to Ottawa. Manning established contacts with Ken Molson (the National Aviation Museum), Lee Murray (Canadian War Museum) and Malcolm S. (Mac) Kuhring (National Research Council). These four could be considered the fathers of today's Canada Aviation Museum.

Meanwhile, the staff of the Air Historian's office grew slightly—almost accidentally. The first addition was Flight Cadet Hugh Halliday, who served in the section for two months in 1960 and wangled his way back (with Manning's connivance) in 1961. Flight Cadet Halliday became Flying Officer Halliday in July 1961, and plunged into various tasks, including writing *Roundel* articles and serving as secretary to a Museum Aircraft committee.

All this was gratifying, but it was NOT getting an RCAF history written. It was NOT getting those cabinets of documents catalogued. It was letting some things slip badly (notably monitoring of semi-annual historical reports).

Certainly, Ralph Manning was trying to enlarge his establishment; in January 1961, he proposed that Air Historian be enlarged to six officers, one civilian historian, one sergeant clerk, and two civilians for administration and typing. For a brief moment it looked as if he was going to win his point. The Air Member for Personnel (Air Commodore W. A. Orr) addressed a memo to the CAS (14 August 1961), suggesting adoption of Manning's plan, pointing out at the same time that the Naval Historian even then had 9 persons on staff, the Army Historical Section still had 32.

The existing AFHQ establishment was full, however. The enlarged Air Historian office could be accomplished by transferring people from other sections (but nobody was volunteering any bodies). Alternatively, AFHQ establishment could simply be increased by six persons. The word came down from the CAS on 31 August 1961: "The CAS has no objection to you [Orr] increasing the establishment of the Air Historian, but he **will not** authorize an increase in the AFHQ establishment to achieve this end."¹³⁷

This put-down did not end Manning's efforts; a memo dated 22 March 1963 was only one of many he signed. This one

recommended eleven, including three clerical staff. And not long afterwards he suggested a nine-volume history of the RCAF, which would have included one volume dedicated solely to No. 6 Group, one dedicated to the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP), one dealing with "The Lost Legions" (RCAF personnel serving with the Royal Air Force [RAF]) and one of post-war history ("Keeping the Peace"). At the same time, however, he was having to deal with new challenges. The prospect of integrating the three service historical sections was raised in March 1962 by an internal Manpower Study Group. This was soon followed by Glassco Commission on Government Organization—the first step in the road to service unification and integration. Manning had to spend much time explaining and justifying the existence of his section. The Glassco Commission was critical of all service historical sections, which as a body it considered bloated in comparison with the Public Archives of Canada. It scarcely mattered to the commission that one tree was stunted in what was otherwise deemed to be a congested forest.

The staff situation was one of flux. Early in 1962, the section acquired a civilian writer, Ronald V. Dodds, in peculiar circumstances. Dodds had, for many years, been Director of Public Relations at AFHQ, but in 1958 he had proceeded to No. 1 Air Division to assume PR direction there; during his NATO tour he held the rank of wing commander. Upon his return to Canada he reverted to civilian status, but his former post of DPR had now been occupied by a serving officer, Wing Commander (later Group Captain) William Lee. The question of what to do with Ron Dodds was resolved by sending him to the Air Historian.

The acquisition of Dodds was offset by the loss soon afterwards of Art Heathcote, who was reclaimed by DPR and assigned to PR duties. It was a most unhappy situation for Heathcote, who personally disliked many of

his new colleagues and considered himself a historian rather than a PR hack.

The curious thing is that neither Heathcote nor Dodds were historians in the true sense. Neither was Ralph Manning, while Flying Officer Halliday had only a general BA (though he was working towards a Master of Arts in Political Science). From the retirement of Hitchins (1960) to unification (1965) the only true historian on staff was Flight Lieutenant Fred Hatch.

DEMISE AND REBIRTH FROM AIR HISTORIAN TO DIRECTORATE OF HISTORY

Integration rushed forward in 1965. *Roundel* vanished that year (along with the *Canadian Army Journal* and *Crownsnest*), to be succeeded by the tri-service *Sentinel*. Wing Commander Manning retired, and the moving vans arrived at Victoria Island to transfer the personnel and files of the Air Historian to Besserer Street and incorporation into an integrated Directorate of History, headed by C. P. Stacey (brought out of retirement).

The new organization was soon busy at producing a military history of the Canadian forces for 1967 (Centennial year), and this came out on time as a particularly handsome book, *The Armed Forces of Canada, 1867–1967*, written by staff of all three former sections, but honed, refined and edited by Lieutenant-Colonel D. J. Goodspeed. Even as this went forward, however, attention turned to sorting and cataloguing RCAF records, the first step towards producing the long-delayed official Air Force history.

A draft of the first volume, covering the First World War, had been started in 1962 by Ron Dodds, and parts of it—dealing with the Royal Flying Corps / RAF training scheme in Canada and with the operations of No. 3 (Naval) Wing—had already appeared in *Roundel*. Nevertheless, Stacey looked at the draft and rejected it immediately as inadequate. It was the work

of a journalist, not a scholar. It failed to address issues of policy. It was derivative in outlook. It lacked footnotes and references. It was literate, entertaining, but not at all insightful. The process of writing Volume One would have to begin all over again.

The rejection of his manuscript was a devastating blow to Dodds, whose egotism was almost matched by his contempt of the scholarly approach. For the next five years he became a man waiting for his retirement and pension. His rejected draft would remain in a drawer until his retirement, when he published it under the title of *The Brave Young Wings*. Its deficiencies as an official history become evident when one compares it with S. F. Wise's *Canadian Airmen and the First World War*, which went back to historical roots and pointed the way to the next volumes of an official history that the pre-integration force had long needed and never really wanted.

With the false pride of a non-flying air force officer, Flight Lieutenant Halliday also felt initial resentment at integration, but he was quickly brought into the writing and production of *The Armed Forces of Canada* where he was tutored by Goodspeed. The cataloguing of RCAF documents proved tedious, and was to some degree obstructed by Dodds until S. F. Wise (Stacey's successor) pressed for its completion, at which point the process moved from excessive detail to excessive haste. First studies for *Canadian Airmen and the First World War* were well in hand by 1968, and Halliday himself was learning more about the historical process from Goodspeed and Wise than he had ever absorbed in his years with Air Historian. His departure from Directorate of History in July 1968 was motivated by complex reasons (some of them mistaken), but frustration was not among those reasons.

IN CONCLUSION

In reviewing the history of the Air Historian, one quickly concludes that the RCAF never took history or the office

seriously. If there is a major villain, it is Brooke Claxton, the Minister of National Defence who, as of 1947–48, was so dismissive of all military history. Yet he was abetted by four successive Chiefs of the Air Staff—Leckie, Curtis, Slemon and Campbell—who were equally indifferent to an independent history of the force, distinct from that of the Army and the RAF. When people complain that the Air Force history (by Wise, Douglas and Greenhouse) was 30 years too late, one can only recall the words of Pogo: “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

By the same token, the cause of air force history was better served by an integrated Directorate of History than by the office of Air Historian that AFHQ had hobbled and ignored. If there is a hero in the story of the Air Historian, it is the solitary F. H. Hitchins, quietly preserving and working to inspire, waiting for better days and enlightened leaders. If ever a man deserved posthumous recognition, it was he, and his induction into Canada’s Aviation Hall of Fame in 2007 was a worthy tribute to a scholar, officer, gentleman, and guardian of the history we honour today. ■

Hugh Halliday is a former member of the RCAF, a historian and author with numerous books and articles to his credit. One of his more recent works, entitled *Valour Reconsidered: Inquiries into the Victoria Cross and Other Awards for Bravery* (2006), examined how major gallantry awards were bestowed.

Abbreviations

AFHQ	Air Force Headquarters
BA	Bachelor of Arts
CAS	Chief of the Air Staff
DPR	Director of Public Relations
PR	public relations
RAF	Royal Air Force
RCAF	Royal Canadian Air Force
W/C	wing commander

Notes

1. Report of the Department of National Defence for the Year Ending March 31, 1947 (Ottawa, King’s Printer, 1947), p.57.
2. Leckie to Claxton, 4 June 1947, in RCAF file 19-15-37, “RCAF Historical Section – Organization and Establishment,” Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Record Group (RG) 24, Volume 5231.
3. Claxton to Deputy Minister, in RCAF service file of F. H. Hitchins.
4. Ripley to AMAP, AMOT and AMP, 23 February 1948; in RCAF file 19-15-37, “RCAF Historical Section – Organization and Establishment,” LAC, RG 24, Volume 5231.
5. Curtis to the Minister of National Defence, 6 March 1948, in RCAF file 895-DAFH, “Organization and Establishment, Director of Air Force History,” LAC, RG 24, Series E-1-c, Accession 1983–84/216, Volume 2967 (hereafter referred to as File 895-DAFH).
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. When this writer first encountered Air Historian offices they were in an H-Hut on Victoria Island. About 1963 the offices were relocated to a renovated former seaplane hangar on the eastern end of the island - not far from where a totem pole now stands. The *Roundel* offices were in a stone hut immediately east of what is now a fire-gutted mill; the mill itself had accommodated the RCAF personnel records and identification bureau.
9. Wing Commander H.G. Marriott to Director of Organization and Establishment, 4 June 1954, file 895-DAFH.
10. Both passages are from longer statements in Hitchins’ personal RCAF file.
11. Slemon to Graham, 5 October 1956, file 895-DAFH.
12. Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939-1945* (London, HMSO, 1961).
13. Memo, AMP to CAS, 14 August 1961 with minutes from CAS to AMP, 31 August 1961, file 895-DAFH.