



A Hurricane flying low over a farm building, somewhere in Canada.

THE GREAT CANADIAN AIR BATTLE: THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH AIR TRAINING PLAN AND RCAF FATALITIES DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

by Dr. Jean Martin

The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) was a major Canadian contribution to the Allied war effort during the Second World War. Between May 1940 and March 1945, more than 167,000 students¹ from Canada, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand, as well as from Belgium, Free France and Poland, were trained in the 107 schools established across Canada. The BCATP schools produced some 50,000 pilots during the course of the war, which is three times the number of aircraft built in Canadian factories in the same period. Consequently, the BCATP had a significant impact on air operations in Europe, Asia and Africa.

When contemplating this accomplishment and the enormous impact the war had on the Canadian landscape, readers might recall that when the war broke out, the Royal Canadian Air Force had scarcely fifty aircraft, most of which were civilian-model planes equipped mainly for surveillance missions. There were few civilian airports at that time, and the rare aircraft seen in Canadian skies were usually equipped with floats in order to land on the country's many lakes and rivers. As well, in practically all regions, farmers made

up a significant portion of the population, and horses were still used for most field work. Once the war commenced, aerodromes transformed much of Canada's quiet landscape.

A DANGEROUS AERODROME

While operational units of the RCAF were mainly concentrated in the eastern and western parts of the country for the protection of Canada's coasts, inauguration of the BCATP brought about the opening of a host of aerodromes further inland. Overnight, the roar of Wasp and Merlin engines of Harvard and Hurricane airplanes became a familiar sound throughout the countryside of Alberta, Manitoba and Quebec. Air Force activities were thus more widespread throughout the country, and also much more visible to the population than those of the Canadian Army or Navy. Given the intensity of air training in Canada during the war years, Canada was very appropriately called "the Aerodrome of Democracy".²

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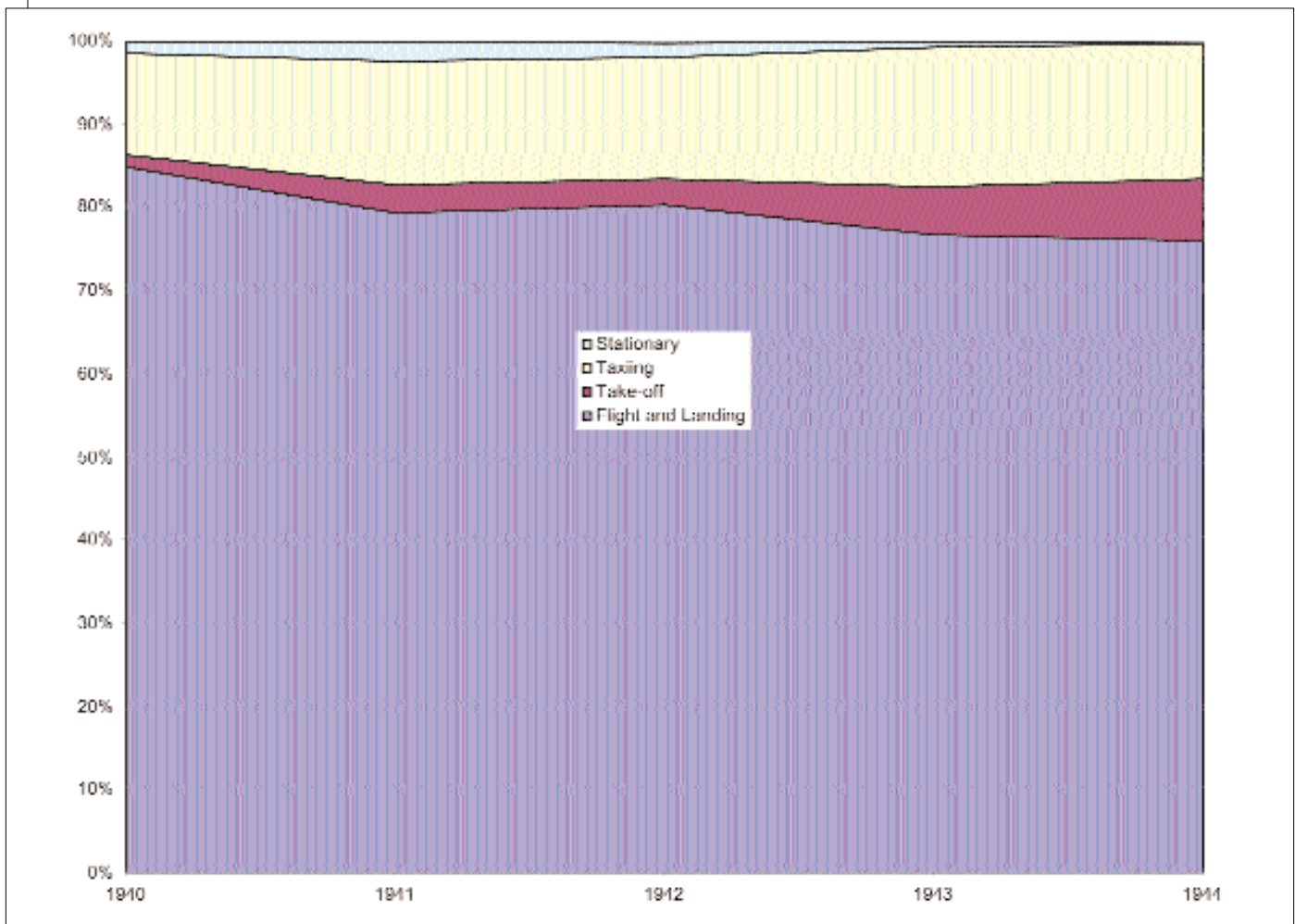


Figure 1: Distribution of BCATP Air Accidents according to the stages of flying, 1940-1944.

Some comparative statistics will serve to illustrate the magnitude of BCATP activity. Before the war, Royal Canadian Air Force airplanes logged only about 27,000 flying hours per year. In contrast, those of the BCATP logged four times more hours every week during the summer of 1942.³ Between October 1942 and September 1943⁴, when BCATP training reached its peak, the hundred schools spread across Canada logged on average 500,000 flying hours every month — the equivalent of seven airplanes flying 24 hours a day at each school. Almost 7,000 aircraft flew an average of 17 hours a week throughout 1943.

Inexperienced students piloted most of these aircraft, so take-offs, landings and flying manoeuvres were not always carried out with great success. During 1942 and 1943, BCATP aircraft averaged one accident for every 900 hours of flight, most of them, fortunately, having no serious consequences. There were over 6,000 accidents at BCATP schools between October 1942 and September 1943. Serious accidents, even if they represent a very small portion of the total, were nevertheless frequent: there were slightly more than 300 fatal accidents during this period. There was, however, a tendency to underestimate these losses, as well as those that occurred in Canada in general during the war. This underestimation comes from a misinterpretation of the data, coupled

with a general tendency to consider only casualties that occurred in foreign theatres. The defence of Canadian soil has never really captured the interest of military historians, who usually prefer to contrast the peaceful lives of those who remained in the country with the courage of those who left to face the dangers of combating the enemy abroad.

UNDERESTIMATED LOSSES

Examinations of BCATP losses are usually based on numbers given by F.J. Hatch in his book, *The Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the BCATP, 1939-1945*, published by the Department of National Defence in 1983. These figures come from the final report produced by the BCATP (DHH, 73/1558, Vol. 10), an entirely credible source. This report reveals that 856 students were killed during their training in Canada, of which more than half (469) belonged to the RCAF. These losses of life, however regrettable, constitute only a very small part of the RCAF's roughly 17,000 fatal casualties during the Second World War.

However, these 856 deaths are in fact far fewer than the total number of airmen who lost their lives in Canada during the war. Hatch was not mistaken: there were indeed 856 students killed during the five years of the BCATP, but the total number of lives lost in Canada

Method of calculation	Number of deaths
Deaths before graduation	856
Non-operational units of the RCAF (1,155), including Allied students of the BCATP (387)	1,542
Students killed (856), representing less than 50% of the total	1,713
Monthly data gathered from 01-1942 to 06-1945 (1,690), spread over the entire duration of the program	1,991
Proportion of RCAF students who died before graduation (54.8%), applied to the total of non-operational units of the RCAF	2,108

Table 1: Fatal BCATP casualties, 1939-1945, according to various hypotheses.

by the RCAF is 2,367, or 14 percent of all fatalities recorded over the duration of the war. This figure far exceeds the fatal casualties of the Dieppe and Hong Kong disasters, and is even greater than the losses of the RAF and its Allies during the Battle of Britain, when 915 aircraft were lost. How, then, can the difference between the 856 generally acknowledged accident fatalities and the 2,367 deaths mentioned above be explained? These figures come from another compilation produced by the RCAF during the months following the end of the war.

Slightly over a quarter of these fatalities (619) were not the direct result of military activity; they include natural deaths, road accidents and even suicides. This

proportion is far higher in Canada than overseas, where this type of death constitutes less than 2 percent of the total. Of the remaining 1,748 deaths in Canada, 22 percent (383) occurred in operational units, and only eight were the result of 'enemy action'. One could argue that the fatal casualties that occurred in Canada did not involve the same element of violence as those that took place overseas, but it should be noted that the deaths that occurred abroad were not always the result of enemy action. Almost 40 percent of the RCAF's fatal casualties (5,630) did not result from such action, and almost 2,000 occurred in non-operational units. In all, out of the 17,001 pilots that the RCAF lost during the Second World War, enemy action played a direct role in just 54 percent of the cases (9,209).

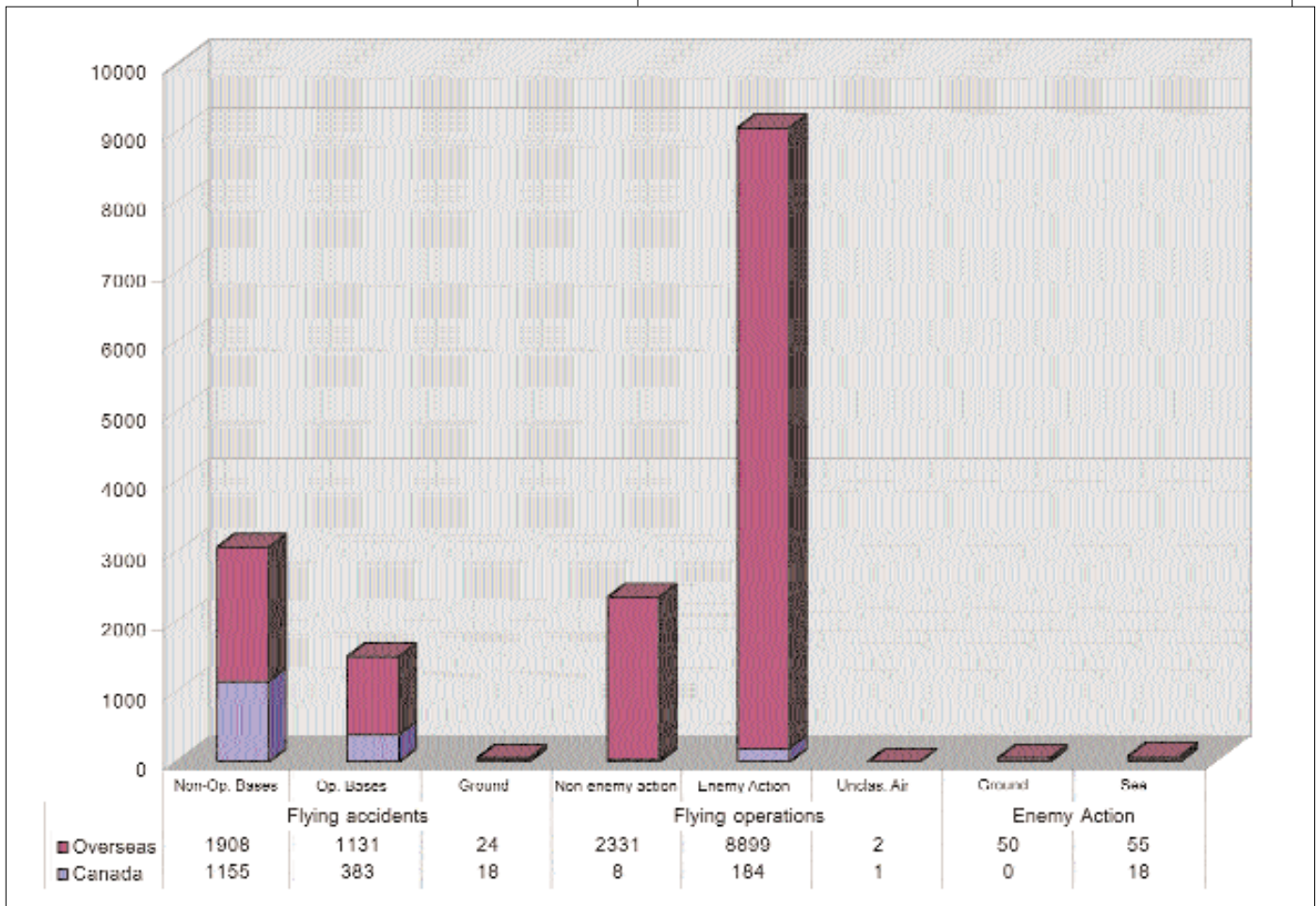


Figure 2: Fatal casualties of the RCAF, 1939-1945.

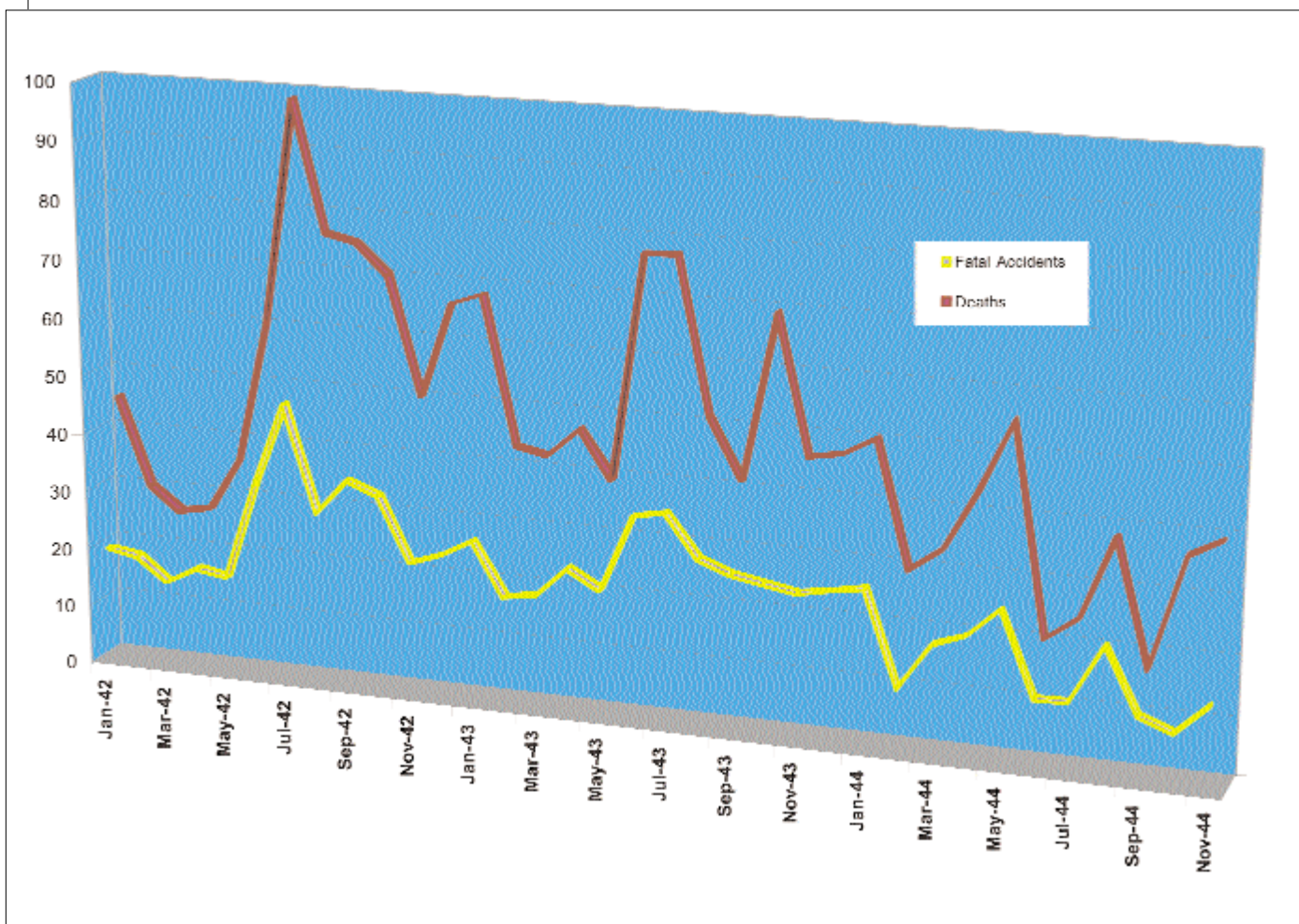


Figure 3: Fatal Air accidents of the BCATP from January 1942 to November 1944.

Generally, no distinction has been made between the 3,063 airmen killed in flying accidents overseas and the 9,004 others who were killed in action. Therefore, there is no reason to make any distinction between those killed overseas and those who died in Canada. The 2,367 RCAF airmen who died in Canada merit the same honours as the 14,643 who lost their lives overseas. But who were these 2,367 pilots, since it is generally agreed that the BCATP lost only 856 'students' during training? In fact, the source of the confusion, for the BCATP, lies in the use of the term 'student'.⁵

In addition to its Elementary Flying Training Schools, the BCATP also had Service Flying Training Schools, other specialized schools (for bombing, observation, navigation, etc.), and Operational Training Units, where recently graduated pilots would go to complete their training while participating in domestic defence activities. For example, the pilots of Operational Training Unit No. 1 in Bagotville, QB, were involved in the air defence of important aluminum factories in Arvida, in the Saguenay region. These pilots, no longer considered students, could be accident victims. The BCATP's final report even establishes that they were involved in accidents more often than the students: "One point was common, however, to all types of schools, namely, that trained pilots were involved in more than half of the flying accidents which occurred" (BCATP Final Report, p. 40). As well, instructors and

other members of the school staffs were the first victims of these accidents.

For that reason, how can the true total of the BCATP's fatal casualties be established? RCAF statistics show that 1,155 deaths resulted from accidents involving non-operational units, which were therefore training units.⁶ However, this number only accounts for airmen from the RCAF. BCATP schools also trained pilots from other air forces. Canadian airmen made up only 55 percent of the 856 students killed during their training: another 291 of them belonged to the RAF, 65 to the Royal Australian Air Force, and 31 to the Royal New Zealand Air Force. If these proportions were applied to all of the fatal casualties at non-operational bases in Canada, the total of deaths among BCATP airmen, including both students and graduates, would be 2,108.⁷

This would suggest, however, that pilots from Britain, Australia and New Zealand did all of their operational training in Canada, which was, of course, not the case. It is difficult to know exactly how many Allied airmen to add to the fatal casualties of the RCAF. The number for the entire BCATP programme would have to be somewhere between the 387 that appear in Table 1 (showing the 856 students who died in training) and the 953 resulting from applying the calculations explained above. The monthly compilation of accidents reveals

850 fatal accidents that resulted in 1690 deaths in BCATP schools between January 1942 and June 1945.⁸ But since it is already known that students were involved in less than half of these accidents, it can be affirmed that the BCATP had at least 1,713 fatalities⁹ during the war, and conceivably even 2,000. If the losses of the operational units are added, one can put forth the claim that some 3,000 Allied and Canadian airmen died in Canada during the Second World War.

THE MOST COSTLY AIR BATTLE IN CANADIAN HISTORY

It is easy to forget certain things about the war. When we consider Canada's participation in the Second World War, we understandably think about the ordeals of Hong Kong and Dieppe, the difficult battles in Italy, the spectacular landing on 6 June 1944, and the long campaign to reclaim Europe that followed. The contributions of Canadian pilots to the Battle of Britain, and of the Royal Canadian Navy to the victory in the Atlantic, are also remembered. However, all too often, we forget that the war was also taking place on Canadian soil.

In fact, during the early years of the conflict, it was mostly in Canada that the war found its victims: over 1,000 airmen had already lost their lives on Canadian bases before the raid on Dieppe was launched in August 1942. From the beginning of 1942 to the end of 1944, 831 fatal air accidents took place in Canada — an average of 23 per month, or five every week. Each week, at least a dozen airmen died in Canada, an enormous number. Imagine how Canadians of today would react if a Canadian Forces operation recorded such a high proportion of fatal casualties! Perhaps we also need to be reminded that during the Second World War Canada had only one third of its current population.

But we cannot compare a wartime situation with a period of relative peace. This is precisely the whole point of the preceding analysis: a reminder that between 1939 and 1945 the war was also taking place in Canada. The country may never have suffered any direct attack, and indeed no fighting took place on our soil,¹⁰ but the thousands of airplanes flying in our skies, and the hundreds of



The remains of an Oxford from North Battleford's Saskatchewan Flight Training School 35, after an accident in which the pilot and two passengers were killed (19 October 1943).

aircraft that crashed in fields, lakes and even occasionally in cities, certainly does not fit the peaceable image that we too often imagine of Canada at that time. During the first years of the war, Canada was, figuratively speaking, the most dangerous place a pilot could be.

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NOTES

1. The oft-mentioned number of 131,553 graduates does not, of course, include the 26,061 students who never finished their courses. Nor does it take into account the 5,296 graduates of the RCAF and the Fleet Air Arm who were transferred to the BCATP before 1 July 1942, or the 1,726 students who began their training too late to receive their wings before the end of March 1945. Another group of 2,816 pilots who had received their training elsewhere also served in operational training units in Canada. Students from the other Allied forces (France, Poland, etc.), whose exact numbers are unknown, are not included in these statistics.

2. The expression is from Lester B. Pearson. While he was posted to the Canadian embassy in Washington, he slipped it into a message that he had written for the President of the United States to sign. The expression was later used by F.J. Hatch in the title of his book on the history of the BCATP.

3. C.G. Grey and Leonard Bridgeman, *Jane's All the World Aircraft*, 1939, p. 15b.

4. The monthly compilation of air accidents in Canada only distinguishes between losses attributable to the BCATP and those sustained in other units based in Canada as of October 1942.

5. The English version of the report uses the term 'trainee'.

6. One must also take into account the 237 airmen who lost their lives in the course of Ferry Command operations. Unfortunately, it is not known whether RCAF statistics considered those losses operational or not.

7. If the 469 Canadian students represent 54.8 percent of the 856 who died before graduation, one could conclude that 2,108 fatal casualties occurred in training units in Canada, since 1,155 Canadians died in them (1,155 = 54 percent of 2,108).

8. *B.C.A.T.P. Monthly Summaries from 1942 to Present*, DHH, 80/482. The Accidents Investigation Branch was only set up in March 1942, which explains the absence of precise statistics before that time. The monthly average is 48.3 deaths, and the total would be 1,991 deaths

for the entire programme, were we to apply at least the general trend of the period for which data is available to the periods for which there is no data. The lower number of schools and students would have to be kept in mind, however; but so would the higher ratio of accidents per flying hour during the first months of the programme.

9. Most of the accidents typically involved "trained pilots, including flying instructors and staff pilots" (*B.C.A.T.P. Monthly Summaries...*, October 1944, p. 1) [TCO]. The already determined number of 856 students can therefore be doubled, and at least one more victim could be added to the total, resulting in a minimum of 1,713 deaths.

10. With the notable exception of the Battle of the St. Lawrence, during which German submarines sank many ships in Canadian waters between 1942 and 1944. Perhaps it will also be necessary to refer to a "Battle of Canada" when the heavy casualties sustained in the country by the RCAF and other air forces during the Second World War are considered.