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Above and Beyond: The Canadians' War in the Air, 1939-45

Spencer Dunmore

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From the first skirmishes over Europe in September 1939, Canadian airmen served in almost every theatre of the Second World War, from bases in Britain and Europe, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. And in the months and years that followed, with the slaughter mounting in hostile skies around the globe, the contribution of Canadian pilots, navigators, gunners, air bombers, and flight engineers grew out of all proportion to their country’s population.

In the early days of the conflict, great numbers of Canadians served in units of Britain’s RAF and Fleet Air Arm. As the war progressed, however, the Royal Canadian Air Force came into its own, and by Germany's surrender, forty-eight RCAF squadrons were overseas, almost completely manned by Canadian officers and men.

Among the Canadians were Johnny Fauquier and Reg Lane, Canada’s leading bomber pilots; Stan Turner, perhaps the country’s greatest fighter leader; Len Birchall, the gallant “Saviour of Ceylon”; the redoubtable ace Buzz Beurling; the great naval hero Hammy Gray; Roly Dibnah, Bert Houle, and many others.

These brash young men from the Empire’s senior dominion had little time for ceremony and tradition. Countless British officers considered them dangerously independent and lacking in respect for rank. But in the air, where it counted, the Canadians more than proved their worth.

Combining first person accounts of the action and his own vivid prose, Dunmore captures the high drama and gut-churning tension of dogfights and bomber raids, charts the victories and defeats of the armies and navies below, and recreates the mood abroad in wartime as the world watched the drama unfold.

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