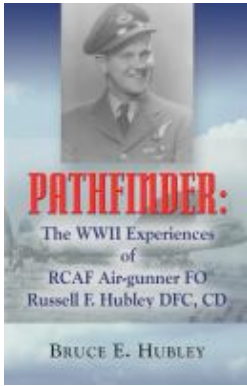




PATHFINDER:

**The WWII Experiences
of
RCAF Air-gunner FO
Russell F. Hubley DFC, CD**

BRUCE E. HUBLEY



The adventures of a young Canadian RCAF officer from Halifax, Nova Scotia, serving as an air gunner on Lancaster bombers during the final two years of WWII. The biography covers the period from enlistment until discharge following the end of the war. Although written by FO Hubley's son, the tale is told in the first person present tense. The tales include some of the humorous events which befell aircrews during WWII.

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First Edition

Introduction

These are stories of the World War II experiences of Flying Officer Russell Frederick Hubley, now Lieutenant Colonel (Ret'd) Russell Hubley, DFC, CD, my father. While growing up, my sister and brothers, and myself, were often regaled with these stories, usually humorous, but always fascinating. For years now family and friends have been urging me to commit these stories to a book before they are lost. The problem has never been a lack of interest on my part, but it has entailed a great deal of prodding to convince him to sit down and fill me in with all the details.

Flying Officer Hubley served first as a mid-upper air-gunner in the Royal Canadian Air Force, No. 431 Squadron of 6 Group, Bomber Command, flying in Halifax aircraft out of Britain during World War II and is an original D-Day veteran, having crossed enemy lines ten minutes after the commencement of the invasion. Most of his career was spent in No. 405 Pathfinder Squadron, the only Canadian Pathfinder squadron, flying with 8 Group, Royal Air Force. 405 Sqn. flew in the Lancaster heavy bomber.

Pathfinders were the aircrews tasked with marking enemy targets for the main bomber force. With at least two aircraft ahead and other Pathfinder aircraft mingled with the main force, these were the planes that the German pilots and anti-aircraft gun crews had the greatest interest in knocking from the sky. Downing these planes before the target was marked would be catastrophic to a bombing raid. In a world where your life expectancy was less than five trips, Flying Officer Hubley,

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with his fellow aircrew, completed two full tours of duty, a total of sixty operations, six of which were extra trips, and survived to tell us the tale.

I have compiled these stories from hours of recorded conversations as well as excerpts from his original logbook during his military career. To provide additional information, many details are supplemented by historical and technical references. The journal is written primarily in the first-person singular, present tense, as this is how the stories were told to me and this form seemed simplest. The account spans the period from Russ's enlistment in the RCAF to his discharge in 1945 with a brief account of events to the point of this writing in 2013.

Russell Hubley was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia on the 19th day of December 1921. His father was Russell Warren Hubley born in Seabright, Halifax County, Nova Scotia, on the 19th day of September 1895 and his mother was Esther Mildred Brogan of Chipman, New Brunswick, born on the 7th day of September 1900. He grew up in Halifax and lived here until his enlistment in the RCAF. At the time of this writing he has four children, eight grandchildren and several great-grandchildren whose numbers are growing.

Chapter 3: Off to England

Now we are ready to enter the fray. With home training complete, my New Zealand crew and I are posted to 'Y' Depot on Windsor Street in Halifax. Barracks postings are issued to my crew; however, being a native of the city, I am not assigned to the barracks but live at home and show the sights of the city to my New Zealand crew with my father's car.

We are scheduled to depart from Pier 21 on the ocean liner Queen Mary which had been converted to a troop transport. We are briefed on the coming events and read the secrecy act with the admonishment that "loose lips sink ships". We are warned about telling anyone, even family, of the departure details. This, however, did not change the fact that every waitress in the city knew exactly when the ship was leaving.

The next day, November 11th, is my sister's birthday and I say goodbye, because I am home that night, before being driven by my father to 'Y' Depot. I learned later that my crew visited my parents on my sister's birthday and advised them that I was now on board the Queen Mary.

This is where the story gets strange. After all the hush-hush warnings and insistence on secrecy, the military, in all its wisdom, forms us up in a long parade and proceeds marching us in all our glory through the main streets of Halifax to Pier 21, where we board the Queen Mary. If there are any German spies in the city they are surely among the onlookers cheering us on. Interestingly, we are marched directly past the Air Force headquarters on South Street, where I wave to many of those with whom I had previously worked.

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In my naïve thoughts I figured this was to be a free trip on a luxury ocean liner, but things do not go as I had planned. The white linen covered dining tables are no more, as are the uniformed waiters. Nor do you find individual cabin accommodations, unless you are a senior officer. Once settled on board ship the air gunner's receive assignments manning the Bofors guns, thus working our passage across the Atlantic. So much for the free trip. The Bofors was a 40 mm rapid fire gun suited to anti-submarine and anti-aircraft warfare. It was developed in the 1930s and saw use into the 1980s. I am assigned with another chap to the midnight shift, also known as the moonlight watch, to be ever vigilant for submarines. It soon becomes apparent why nights at sea are so scary for the Navy sailors. Perhaps the German U boats need not have been too worried, for although the other air gunner and myself are shown the gun and the drum of ammunition to go on it, no one ever bothers showing us how to load or fire. We are simply posted to the position without instructions. This turns out to be a recurring theme in the coming times.

While we are on duty at the gun positions on the upper deck, the galley crew bring us sandwiches made from black bread and grated cheese and hot cocoa which they pour into our aluminum mess tins. The cocoa is so hot that you cannot drink it, and after three minutes it is so cold that you do not want it.

The crossing is tolerable and the ship zigzags all the way to avoid detection. The Queen Mary sailed without escorts as its speed was far in excess of the average speed of a convoy. It relied upon this advantage to outrun the German U-Boats, but it was little comfort to us on board.

I have relatively nice quarters in what had once been the theatre on the upper deck aft. Here the bunks are welded six high and I am lucky enough to get a bottom berth with its

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obvious advantages. However, every silver lining has its cloud, and being on the bottom means that five other people must trod on your bunk in attaining theirs. There are a lot of soldiers, sailors and airmen crammed onto one ship and I must admit I am missing the private quarters experienced during training at the University of Toronto.

Although the food is good, mealtime represents an adventure. We are provided two meals per day. The mess hall is decked out in tables for ten and your seating placement dictates how much you get to eat at that meal. The food is brought out on trays which are started at one end of the table and passed around. If seated at a table with Canadian soldiers and being so unfortunate as to be at the far end, you may be lucky getting bread and jam for that meal. Those chaps grab everything they can without thought for the rest of the table. It is usual to see them take two pork chops each, so that an empty platter reaches the hungry souls at the far end of the table. The bread and jam is on the table when you sit for your meal. Anyone at the far end of the table grabs that quickly as the Canadian soldiers are also adept at securing this and making sandwiches for later. The trick, of course, is in obtaining a seat at the middle of the table.

The best tables for dining are those occupied by the American service personnel. These soldiers are true gentleman, and when a tray of food arrives at the head of the table each person will take one of whatever the tray contains and pass it along until it makes a complete round of the table. If there is anything left on the tray after its first passage, it is started around a second time. There is no hogging of food but a true sense of sharing.

Everyone eats their meal from their two aluminum mess tins, one of which contained a drink. It often occurs that the other tin contains at one time both your main meal, such as

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stew, with perhaps a slice of apple pie. It didn't matter much at the time as it all goes down the same way. Following the meal you wash your mess tins in hot water and rinse them in another tub; drying towels are non-existent.

The ship also has a canteen on board where personnel buy snacks. The problem is that the line is so long that you spend most of your day getting to the counter. I remember once standing in line for 2 1/2 hours and having to leave for lunch. I had still not made headway half the distance to the canteen counter.

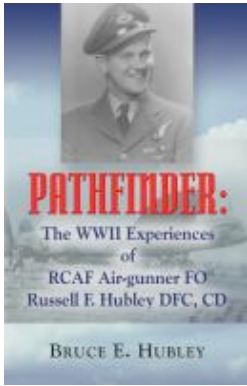
During the crossing, when not on gun duty, we stroll around the outside decks for exercise and fresh air. Back in the sleeping quarters a number of the chaps lay blankets on the floor and play dice. Often five hundred dollars is won on a single roll of the cubes, and this activity persists during the entire trip.

The washroom accommodations are very Spartan and open. There is a single washroom bench running the entire length of the room, having washbasins with running water installed, with mirrors above. Toilet facilities consist of a long drainage pipe on the other side of the washroom with toilets mounted on it, and a continuous flow of water through the pipe. When you had to go, you use the toilet in front of everyone. It is common, if you looked into the toilet when you stood, seeing the waste discharge of others carried in the water flowing through the pipe. There are no enclosures and no privacy. Forget modesty, it didn't happen, and when nature called, you answered the call.

As the Queen Mary was much faster than the convoys protected by naval vessels it sails alone on its zigzag course across the pond. It is a relief finally reaching the shores of Scotland.

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During the entire crossing I do not see my New Zealand aircrew, actually I never saw them again, as once we land in Scotland we are posted to different locations; pilot and navigator to fly Mosquitoes, wireless operator to Coastal Command and myself to Bournemouth, in the South of England, awaiting posting to Bomber Command. And so ends our remaining as a crew to fly on tactical operations. This is typical military planning by those in charge, but I figure someone somewhere has some type of master plan.



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