

CENTENNIAL OF FLIGHT CANADA 2009

THE LOST FLIGHT

115 COMMUNICATIONS FLIGHT

UNEF EL ARISH EGYPT

Communications Flight 115, a detachment of 426 Transport Squadron, Dorval, Quebec, operating from El Arish Egypt, I believe is a forgotten operation.

In 1957, while still flying Dakotas with # 1 ANS, Winnipeg, Manitoba, I was asked to consider a posting to Egypt. Specifically to El Arish on the Mediterranean Sea. It did not take me long to say yes, for two reasons. Promotions in Training Command at the time were nearly non existent, and everything seemed to happen in Transport Command. Then there was the opportunity to see far off places and perhaps be a small part of bringing Peace to the region.

Just to backtrack a few years, I grew up in Verdun, Quebec as part of an Airforce family. My Dad, Norman J. Patton, was involved with mobile equipment in the Montreal area, and stationed in Lachine. His duties included being a senior driver in the area for VIP's and senior RCAF personnel. He was on a first named basis with many, including AVM McEwen.

I don't know how he managed to be so close to these stalwarts of the RCAF, but he was even able to get me a job as a Page Boy in the Queen's Hotel in Montreal, owned in part by AVM Raymond. (As I understood the situation).

And being in Verdun, he somehow managed to get Buzz Beurling, the hero of Malta, to come to our place for dinner.

I guess it was as a natural progression because I loved aircraft and wanted to fly, that at the persuasion of my biology teacher, I joined the # 69 Royal Canadian Air Cadet squadron in our Verdun High School.

In 1951, under the tutelage of my biology teacher, I received a Flying Scholarship. In those years this only included eighteen hours of flying, after which, if you were successful, you received your Air Cadet wings.

I received my coveted wings at a gala reception in Montreal, and continued on to my Private Pilots Licence, ULP 2800, in May of 1952 @ age 18.

The Air force moved my family to Whitehorse in the Yukon, in 1952, and I joined the RCAF from there in 1953.

Preliminaries over, I refer back to my original comments about 115 Communication Flight in Egypt and area, being a forgotten operation of the RCAF as Peacekeepers.

Only once, in books I have read of RCAF history did I ever see reference to 115 Comm Unit El Arish. Are there other references I have missed ?

When the request came via Sam Newman, our Ontario Group President, to consider writing about our RCAF times, I thought this was my chance to tell of 115 Comm Flight.

At this point, I would ask the following persons, the flight mates I can recall , to correct me if I'm wrong via future issues of Airforce Magazine, and to renew our acquaintances, and indeed talk up our UNEF operation of long ago. F/Os, Gilchrist, Cass, Wannamaker, Doucette, Cowie, Dyck, Fayder, F/L Irving & our CO, S/L Ham. My apologies to the Navs, RO's a crewmen, as I never recorded your names.

As many of you know, when Lester Pearson came forward at the United Nations with his proposal of a United Nations Emergency Force, Canada became a major contributor. In addition to ground forces for surveillance, we were to provide all the air transportation & logistics requirements for UNEF, under the auspices of General ELM Burns, of Canada.

We flew whenever required in the Mediterranean area,(using Dakotas & Otter aircraft),including Rome, Athens, on occasion, and regular flights to Beirut Lebanon, and Sharm el Shiek (now a tourist mecca) in the Sinai Peninsula. Routinely we flew to the Gaza airstrip, which as I recall was roughly 2800 feet of grass & sand. Needless to say, we came in dragging everything at 70 knts.

With your indulgence, I will recall, as I remember them, a number of "situations" we encountered during my time, and I hope you may get a laugh or two from them.

One day going to Gaza (9 Dec 57) to pick up General Burns, we found a thunderstorm just sitting over the airport area. A decision had to be made to land or go back to El Arish. Fortunately, I was not the Captain on this trip (we switched on various flights), So the "Captain " of the day decided we could do it, and onward we pressed. Sound familiar ?

Grass and water do not make for good braking traction. The imbedded sand did not seem to help either. As we touched down on the button (a necessity) we careened down the strip with skidding brakes, trying to slow down. The end was coming, along with many peasants farming / cultivating in the end zone. I'm sure there were many scared individuals as they ran for their lives with a white growling Dakota monster bearing down on them. Fortunately, we came to a slower pace and were able to circle back to the main runway, with a few grooves in there " garden ".
Whew !!

Then there was the time Don Gilchrist & I were flying General Burns, his secretary et al to Rome. I believe it was in mid January 1958 in a/c 989. Gen. Burn's secretary used to like standing behind the pilots to see the view & what was going on ahead. On this particular trip, we asked her to make sure the General, herself et al were strapped in & seated as we were running into some heavy turbulence. Soon she reappeared, and the air was getting rougher. Unheeding our requests to be seated, she remained up front... At least until we hit the great one. This sent her to the ceiling and back, where her spiked heels drilled into the old floorboards.. Needless to say, she soon was strapped in, minus a shoe. We were never bothered up front again.

Don, I'm not sure if it was on this trip (Dec 22/57) that we had the thermocouple act up in the starboard heating ducts. Remember when the red fire warning light came on halfway across the Med. We found if we dumped the heat on the starboard side, the light went out. This was the rear cabin heat. So Gen. Burns and I believe that this was the trip we also had Dag Hammarskold, the then secretary General of the United Nations, on board, and they all flew the rest of the way quite cool.

As the ground persons in Rome could not see anything wrong, we hit upon the idea of switching the left & right engine thermocouples for the trip back. Lo and behold, the port red light came on when we were going home, but we let it glow, so we could have heat up front. Sorry General for your cold trip back then.

One of our "regular flights" was to Sharm el Sheik, at the end of the Sinai, between the Gulf of Aqaba and the Gulf of Suez where the Red Sea begins. (I understand there is a big resort town there now) The interesting point about Sharm, was that we landed on a plateau of sand & gravel. This was a hundred odd feet higher than the water over which we approached . Our (at least my) challenge was to try and do a normal approach with set airspeed and power settings. It seemed it was never to be no matter if you made a steep or shallow approach. The wind coming over the end of the plateau caused us to power up the last few hundred feet. Anyone out there ever make it into Sharm without adding power ?

At Sharm el Sheik, there was a contingent of Canadian Army Signal Corps who had a small building housing radio equipment. We delivered various supplies to them.

Also, guarding the area, were troops from a Scandinavian country. I think it was Sweden. We would rotate them back to El Arish.

Mount Sinai (where Moses received the Ten Commandments) was not too far away, and we were asked on several occasions to fly them over the mountain, which was just over 9000 ft. As some of you will know, a Dak usually climbed at 300 ft a minute (not very fast). What with the coastal ranges rising on our flight track, we were always pressed to clear the tops, but we did and arrived at enough height to go over Mt. Sinai. The St Catherines monastery could be seen way down in the valley, as well as the zig-zag foot paths up the mountain used by the Monks.

From there it was downhill to El Arish, unless we ran into a sand storm. Then we would stay above 5000 ft until we were over the Med, and come back into our airport.

One of the hazards then for our troops, as it is today, was land mines. The Canadian Army out of Gaza, did patrols in the desert on a regular basis to uphold the Armistice between Egypt and Israel after the 1956 fighting.

A sad situation I remember was when one of our jeeps on patrol ran over a land mine in the desert. A Pvt. Cheverfilles from Winnipeg was blasted into the air and I understand, landed on his back on a rock. He was paralyzed.

Our job was to transfer him to Jerusalem, where he would be picked up by USAF for transport home. I always wondered how he made out.

Speaking of Jerusalem, when Don & I flew there, I was in the left seat. We had never been in there before but it looked normal, that's if you can consider a roadway crossing the middle of the main runway "normal".

As usual, we had everything set up nicely, planning to kiss her on, but it was not to be. We hit rather hard and were at a loss to figure out what went wrong. A few days later we found out when we were leaving. The runway was like a roller coaster and we had literally flown into it. Ouch! I have photos of undulating surface.

There were ancillary duties to be handled at the Air Base, and the one I "volunteered" for was entertainment officer. Part of my duties, keeping a good supply of sporting equipment, also included going weekly to our UNEF HQ in Gaza to pick up movies to show at night in El Arish camp.

On one of these trips, rounding a curve, I found the road blocked by barbed wire. Not without concern, but wanting to get the movies for the troops, into four wheel drive went the jeep and up and around the barbed wire. On the way back it was gone. I guess the wisest thing to have done was to have gone back to El Arish, but we were younger then.

Hal, do you remember the time you wanted pictures away up the sand dune? When we got back, the Egyptian Army had blocked the road with the Coca-Cola truck. Not wanting to lose your camera, at gun point we floored a jeep and ducking, took off around the truck.

Ray, remember having to abort a landing and go around again at El Arish, because the camel herder started driving his camel train across the runway.

And then there was the time I got slipped a " mickey finn " in the show bar in Beirut, and the crew rescued me, but that's a story for another day.

I hope my reminiscing will give you some insight as to what it was like with UNEF Egypt back then. We had a great time overall, and thanks to our superb RCAF ground crews, I cannot recall an incident where we had any serious problems with our Daks. So hats off to you all.

R.N. Patton F/O retired