

It was quite a long haul for a green kid, volunteering for service in the Royal Canadian Air Force at the tender age of 17, to dodging Nazi bullets and ferocious rats in the sewers of Paris less than three-years later, but lanky William "Bill" Atkins made it the hard way.

Having learned to fly in 50-hp Piper J-2 Cubs, and too young to get a license, he was fiercely determined to become a fighter pilot. Bill hitchhiked to Windsor, Ontario, in 1942. Everything went smoothly at the recruiting depot as the 6-ft 3-in teenager began signing the enlistment papers except for one snag — he didn't have a birth certificate, a mandatory requirement since the USA had entered the war.

Before that point, many Americans had enlisted in Canada with the tacit approval of both governments. He didn't give up, there was another way. Just down the street was another recruiting office where he enlisted in the Canadian Army. Somewhat less rigid, they required no birth certificate. At Guelph, Ontario, Army

Classification Center, following a battery of tests, enlistees were interviewed for the purpose of assigning them their "jobs" in the service. Feeling he had done well on his tests, Atkins with outward confidence and inner trepidation asked the Artillery Captain sitting as examiner if he might have an opportunity to transfer to the RCAF. The sympathetic captain approved Bill's request.

In a few days, Bill was officially discharged from the Army and was reenlisted in the RCAF.

In Toronto at No. 1 Manning Depot, he entered a rough twelve-weeks of basic training, again went through a battery of tests and was selected for pilot training. Four-weeks of pre-aircrew education (refresher) courses in Montreal, twelve-weeks of Initial Training School (ITS) in Toronto, and Elementary Flight Training School (EFTS) in de Havilland Tiger Moths followed. His record satisfactory, he was allowed to progress to Service Flight Training School (SFTS) to fly Harvards, the RCAF version of the USAAF's AT-6 for the next three-months.

A brief and uncomfortable period at No. 5 Bombing

and Gunnery School at Dafoe, Saskatchewan, followed for instruction in the RCAF's obsolete Avro Anson, twin-engine trainer. Seven-weeks later, he successfully checked out on Lockheed Hudsons, and was soon graduated at "Wings Parade" as a Sergeant Pilot.

Bill was initially assigned to the Ferry Command as co-pilot on Hudsons being ferried to England, serving six-months on the transatlantic hop from Toronto to St. Johns, Newfoundland; Reykjavik, Iceland; Prestwick, Scotland; and finally to Croydon Aerodrome, near London, for delivery.

This duty was then extremely dangerous, a combination of the distance, bad weather, and navigational problems all being contributory factors. In addition, nearing the terminus of their flight, they faced the problem of being jumped by *Luftwaffe* long-range fighters, when they were the most tired and low on fuel.

At times like these, the best they could do was to try to take evasive action before Jerry had done his damage and slid away. Hudsons that were separated from the main formation were frequently never heard from again.

At the end of this tour, Bill received happy news. He had been promoted to Warrant Officer and 1st Pilot. Best of all, his application for transfer to an operational squadron had been approved, and he was to be forthwith transferred to England.

Upon arrival in London, all leaves were automatically cancelled. Rumors were a penny a dozen in wartime as to what was going to happen next. Hoping to get into a hot fighter



Atkins after returning to England.

group, Bill was a little disappointed to learn he had been posted for a tour of ops in de Havilland Mosquitos. This feeling was greatly alleviated when the new group was briefed on the plane's performance. They were remarkably fast and maneuverable to the point of being able to challenge enemy fighters on almost equal terms. "To this, add their considerable bomb capacity and you have achieved a very formidable weapon," Bill stated.

"Mind you, a great deal of the instant success and popularity of this airplane resulted from performance factors achieved by light-weight wood construction; this had initially been viewed with dismay and alarm by Bomber Command.

"Performance data was highly restricted because Mosquitos were actually faster than some of the fighters then used operationally."

The new bunch consisted of about a third seasoned multi-engine pilots; the balance ranged from 18-year-old ex-clerks to WWI retreats. Many were former liaison and fighter pilots transferred to multi-engine duty to speed the implementation of this new weapon.

Assignment to Bournemouth, a peacetime vacation resort in southern England, followed. Combat Air Crew training was roughly polished on a hush-hush basis. Due to wartime stringencies, little time could be wasted, and within a few days, the majority of Bill's squadron had checked out satisfactorily. This familiarization course dispelled any lingering doubts about Mosquitos. Rugged, fast and well-armed, the former fighter pilots took to them readily.

Bill's squadron first experimented with individual night

DOWN OVER FRANCE

AMERICAN PILOT
BILL ATKINS KNEW
HE WAS IN FOR

ADVENTURE WHEN HE JOINED THE RCAF, BUT LITTLE DID HE KNOW THAT THESE ESCAPADES WOULD INCLUDE A FLAMING MOSQUITO AND A PROTRACTED VACATION IN THE SEWERS OF PARIS

BY BOB HUNTER

