

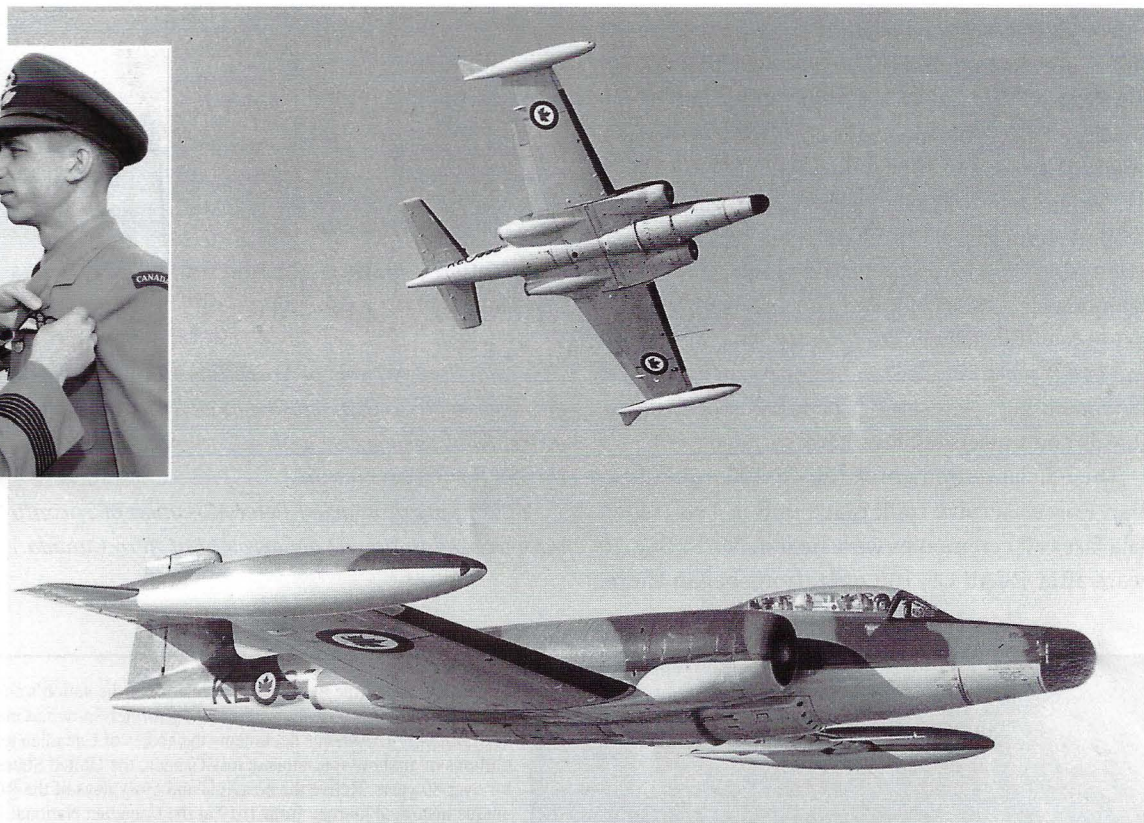
The Making of an All-Weather Fighter Pilot

by Lieutenant Colonel Terry Thompson, CD (Ret)



W/C C.W. Burgess, DFC, pins pilot's wings on Terry Thompson during a Wings Parade at RCAF Stn Penhold, Alta, in Feb 1954.

Thompson then proceeded to Portage la Prairie, Man, for advanced training on T-33s, then on to North Bay, Ont, for operational training in the CF-100 all-weather fighter (right).



DND photo

It was one of those dull days on the Prairies. The kind of a day you can't see the sun, but from a T-33 jet trainer at 30,000 feet you can see 100 miles to the horizon. A thick layer of high cirrus blanketed the whole of southern Manitoba and we were nearing the end of our gunnery school training at RCAF Stn MacDonald.

I had just landed following what was to be my last gunnery sortie from that base. My logbook reads: "July 14th 1954 – Flag Live, four plane, 30 per cent." Not a bad score when one considers that 10 per cent was about the average for most of us at this stage of our training. I was told to report to the flight commander who advised me to pack my bags as I was to leave immediately for 3 All Weather Fighter Operational Training Unit (3 AW(F) OTU) at RCAF Stn North Bay, Ont.

Four of us had been selected for operational training on the mighty CF-100 Canuck and we were to

become all-weather pilots in the defence of North America. The four of us departed together for our new home at 3 AW(F) OTU, otherwise known as the "Witches Squadron." The OTU crest was a black witch riding her broom into a full orange moon.

North Bay was a fine station, recently designated as a key NORAD base and a temporary training centre for CF-100 aircrew. New messes, new single quarters, new hangars and administrative facilities gave us all a sense of pride and a keen desire to get on with our training. The instructing staff were mostly all seasoned veterans of WW II and many had seen combat up close and personal.

We of course were in awe of these heroes who had "been there" and we clung to their every word and gesture. Our small group of four were part of the second course to complete advanced flying training on the T-33, and we all had close to 100 hours on the "T-Bird." It didn't take us long to discover that each

of us had more time on type than the whole instructor staff put together.

In fact during my training at Advanced Flying School (AFS) in Portage, I had accumulated around 25 hours more on the T-Bird than my classmates. You see, I was deemed to be a slow learner. Somehow I was cursed with a sickly instructor during the pre-solo stage of my T-33 training. This gentleman whom I will call Flying Officer Grump showed up on the flight line three or four times a week – if I was lucky. It seemed that every time I was fine-tuned for the solo check, F/O Grump would take sick and after a couple of long days sitting on the ground I would have to start all over again.

This had a very depressing effect on me and worse, in the eyes of my mates I was marching down CT (cease training) alley. Finally, one day a swashbuckling youngish instructor strode into the flight room, and seeing me sitting gloomily in the corner shouted, “Thompson why the hell aren’t you in the air?” I stammered that I hadn’t yet passed the solo check. Most of my course-mates had flown solo at around five hours and here was I with eight hours on type and not yet qualified to fly solo.

After a brief examination of my flying records, F/O Roy Windover introduced himself and I was told to get ready to fly. In my insecure state, I wasn’t sure whether he meant off the end of his flying boot or actually in an aircraft.

With only a hurried but safe briefing we completed our pre-flight checks and were airborne. “Take me to 20,000 feet” said my fearless instructor. Once level I was told to “burn off the tip tanks and then, show me your sequence.”

Well, I had heard others talk about their sequences, but with my rather checkered beginning, I had not had the opportunity to practice a consecutive sequence of aerobatics nor had I been shown any of the finer points of developing one.

F/O Windover, I discovered had a very gruff approach on *terra firma* but once



The staff of 3AW(F) OTU gather at the North Bay Officers' Mess prior to the OTU's departure for Cold Lake, Alta. Front row (L to R) are: F/O Terry Thompson (author), F/O Tony Gunther-Smith, Maj (USAF) Zeiglegrubber, F/O Zeke Sicard, F/O Gerry Smith, unknown, and F/L Bill Seigel. Second row (L to R) are: F/L “Mac” MacAllister, F/L Ken Doiron, F/O Bill Short, S/L Bert Allison, W/C Bob Braham, F/O Reg Wand, F/O Tom Lennie, and F/O Harry Jenkins. Third row (L to R) are: unknown, F/O Frank Holtan, F/O Howie Fisher, F/O Dick Keith, unknown (USAF), S/L Bob Bayliss, F/O Gord Hoffos, unknown, F/O Keith Hester, F/O Ed Francis, and F/L (RAF) Jack White. Rear row (L to R) are: F/O Bill Jensen, F/O Frank Augusta, F/O Dooley Danard, F/O John Sorfleet, F/L (RAF) Paul Kent, F/O Jim Cameron, F/O Stu Cassels, unknown, and F/O Steve Dzamka.

in the air he inspired confidence in me and we began to get along amicably. “Show me your sequence,” he said, as I completed a loop.

Not to admit I didn’t know what I was doing, I put together a roll each way and then a loop followed by a lazy eight. “Show me a vertical eight,” was the next instruction from the back seat. Once again I was in the dark as I had never completed one of these maneuvers in a T-33 before. However, relying on second-hand information gleaned from bar conversations, I proceeded with macho confidence.

I entered the bottom of my vertical eight at 10,000 feet and 350 knots. It went very smoothly at first and as I approached the top of the second loop I thought I had it made. Airspeed a bit low, 100 knots and decreasing rapidly but no sweat. That’s when all hell broke loose. The nose of the aircraft pitched upward followed by a snap roll and then into a set of unrecognizable and uncontrollable gyrations.

I made several attempts to recover but I didn’t really know what I was recovering from. After a few seconds

when nothing seemed to work, I took my hands and feet off the controls and to my amazement after a few more flips the aircraft entered an upright spin which I did recognize and my subsequent recovery was uneventful. However, I felt certain that the peculiar gyrations at the top of my vertical eight had scotched my chances of ever becoming a fighter pilot.

“Take me back to base,” was all I heard from the back seat and I headed straight home calling for a fighter break and landing. Since I expected this to be my last trip in the T-Bird, I was pleased that my circuit and landing had been by the book.

I completed the post-landing check as I taxied in. I knew that all fighter pilots did that. I pulled off the high-pressure fuel cock as I turned into the line (all fighter pilots did that too) and came to a stop with the nose-wheel precisely where the marshaller indicated he wanted it.

We dismounted and walked wordlessly into the servicing shack. I stood quietly while F/O Windover signed in and as he completed the paper work, he turned



Terry Thompson took advanced flying training on the T-33 Silver Star at RCAF Stns Portage la Prairie and MacDonald, Man.

to me and said, "You'd better grab a quick coffee because you're going solo."

Needless to say, I was surprised and overjoyed but I had no time to celebrate. We debriefed over coffee and I was told that the reason for the bizarre maneuver was that I had entered the base of the vertical eight at too high an altitude not allowing me to sustain sufficient airspeed over the top to complete the tight sequence.

"But what was that thing at the top of the vertical eight?" I asked. "Well, I don't rightly know," he evaded sheepishly, "but your recovery technique was flawless." That was the only answer I had until several years later when a test pilot at Cold Lake, Alta, experienced a very unusual attitude during a routine test flight on a T-33.

A test program was immediately embarked upon which identified my unique vertical eight experience as a "tumble" and went into the history books as a "recognizable, unrecognizable" maneuver. I never encountered it again after my initial experience but had I done so, I had the recovery down pat. Furthermore, all of my vertical eight maneuvers thereafter were entered at a much lower altitude.

Back at North Bay I was confronted by the mighty "Clunk" or CF-100 Mk II. An imposing monster that had been jerry-rigged with dual controls and a baseball bat handle for a stick in the rear cockpit. After a few months both cockpits were modified by canting the stick off 15 degrees to the right so that one could read the instrument panel. This was deemed to be important in an all-weather/night-fighter aircraft and after the dual aircraft were modified they went on to modify all succeeding marks.

The first day of the OTU course was called the wedding day. Equal numbers of pilots and AI (wartime talk for "airborne indicator") navigators were dumped into a room together and told to get on with it. "It" being that each pilot and navigator had to find each other before weather briefing the next day. There were a few introductory classes during the first day together and by late afternoon there were a few "courtships" in progress. Two or three hours after the bar opened at 5:00 p.m. the ritual had reached frenetic proportions as pilots and navigators careened around the room in search of like-minded souls.

I am sure that nowadays there are more scientific ways of matching pilots

and navigators, and making them into proficient all-weather fighter crews. But this somewhat inhuman means was effective and many pilot/navigator relationships are still intact to this day. They were "best man" at each other's weddings; some were godfathers to each other's children and in some instances their progeny intermarried, thus extending the relationship over two generations. In many cases they became family.

Not all initial pairings were successful and mine was one of them that didn't work. Either I had a bad effect on navigators, or I was just too independent for the process. After three attempts at crewing up and each time with a navigator who was unable to complete the training satisfactorily, I went on to complete the course with staff navigators.

This was a slow process I discovered, as my navigator was whoever happened to be available whenever I was scheduled. Primary and secondary duties being what they were on the OTU, my meagre needs for operational training were accorded a very low priority.

To ensure that I didn't get bored sitting around, I was checked out on the C-45 Expediter, or the "Bug Smasher" as it was fondly known. I became part of the

target force and flew many a sortie alone day or night, fair weather or foul, flying target for the B-25 Mitchell AI trainers. As the OTU was short of instructors, my C-45 experience was followed by a check-out on the B-25, a WW II twin-engine bomber made famous by Jimmy Doolittle in his carrier-borne attacks on Japan. By the time I graduated from the CF-100 OTU course, I was checked out and current on the T-33, the CF-100, the B-25 and the C-45.

On completion of my final night sortie marking the end of my OTU training I idled over to the bar for a quiet beer. To my surprise there was one helluva party in progress. One of those wild celebrations that started for no apparent reason and continued on for as long as there were people standing and the bar remained open.

The CO, W/C Bob Braham turned to me as I approached the bar and asked "Whatchyer cock"? I guessed that it meant how are you and I replied, "fine Sir" as I tried to ease in the direction of company more in keeping with my own modest rank level. But before I could move away, the Wingco who was bare from the waist up and wearing a shirt collar and tie around his neck with shirt cuffs around each wrist asked with great dignity, "I say cock, how'd you like to stay on at the OTU as an instructor?" I was momentarily speechless and without much hesitation stammered that I would be delighted to become a genuine "Witch." For a fighter pilot to stay on as an instructor was heresy but I had good reason to be pleased with this possibility and was told to report to his office at 0800 hrs next morning.

Once again my confidence failed me and as I turned out the next morning for my appointment fully spit and polished. I was sure that the Wingco had completely forgotten what he had asked me the night before. What if he was to ask me why I was there? What the hell would I say?

As I walked into the Adj's outer office all I heard was, "Thompson, get your ass in here!" The Wingco barely

acknowledged my presence as he snatched up the phone on his desk and called someone at Air Defence Headquarters in St Hubert, Que. A brief conversation ensued which seemed a bit one sided. It went something like, "Thompson is staying here on staff, get the paper work done," and that was it.

But what a windfall! Pipeline pilots like myself were being trained all around me and with their navigators were streaming through to their assigned operational squadrons, some of which had yet to take delivery of their shiny new CF-100 Mark IV aircraft. The graduating CF-100 squadron pilots, once established at their various units across Canada, maintained their currency by flying anything they could get their hands on but mostly it was a small fleet of two or three T-33s assigned to each base that provided for their interim flying needs.

Conversely, I was in pilot's heaven as there were four types on the base and I was checked out on all of them. It couldn't have been better training for a green young pilot and while I picked up a few bad habits from some of the old war-timers, my basic and advanced training at Penhold, Alta, and Portage la Prairie provided me with a solid reference point.

They were great days at 3 AW(F) OTU at North Bay. Up at first light, met briefing and into the air; finish flying in time for supper in the mess and after a few beers to bed to start all over again the next day. Weekends were dull and most of us volunteered to fly anything anywhere, just to be in the air.

We were expected to fly cross-country missions on weekends and there were always a half a dozen aircraft away from Friday night to Sunday night. Whitehorse, Vancouver, Gander and all points in between were all on the agenda. We flew to any base in Canada and some in the U.S. that had the appropriate servicing facilities for our aircraft. Our inventory of T-33, C-45 and B-25 aircraft never had a chance to cool down. We didn't take the CF-100

on away trips very often because of its unique servicing requirements. But we more than made up for it on the other types.

Training was stepped up and the course sizes were increased to feed the demands of the operational squadrons that were beginning to receive their inventory of CF-100s at an ever-increasing rate. We turned out operational all-weather fighter crews who were trained to carry out lights-out intercepts at night and in all weather. In the process we learned about jet engines and high-speed aerodynamics as we went along. As technical problems were encountered, they were corrected. If procedures were found wanting, they were modified.

Our flight safety record by today's standards was abysmal but we were learning as we went along. We sharpened the learning curve, found faults, shortfalls and danger areas that were recorded and rectified. Our knowledge of jet operations improved exponentially as we gained knowledge from experience. In today's parlance, "we were pushing the edges of the envelope."

The OTU's existence at North Bay was to be short-lived, and as my first winter of all-weather flying over the dark expanses of Northern Ontario came to a close, a whole new era was to open as the "Witches" began preparations to move to RCAF Stn Cold Lake. But that is another story. ☉

(Author's note: Roy Windover stayed on at the AFS at Portage la Prairie. He originated the idea of the Red Knight in 1957 and for two years put his bright red T-33 aircraft through it's paces at air shows all over North America. He retired as a lieutenant colonel following his terminal posting in Ottawa. He was killed in a tragic auto accident near Arnprior, Ont, on May 29th 1990 at age 65.)

(Ed note: Terry Thompson lives in Calgary, Alta.)