

Dr. Lee White

WWII Pilot



Fleet Finch II



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Lee White - Bomber pilot in WW II

Bombed Rommel in Egypt, guarded convoys on Atlantic
by Robert LaFrance (Victoria Star 2010)

Retired dentist Dr. Lee White of Perth-Andover will be 97 next month, and for many decades practised that profession in Perth-Andover. Later, after he retired, he took up playing the fiddle and even making fiddles. It sounds like a normal life, not especially exciting, but ask him about being a bomber pilot in World War II.

After joining the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1940, White, who was born in Wicklow, NB, in 1913, went on to become a pilot of twin-engine Wellington bombers and later, promoted to Squadron Leader White, piloted 4-engine B-24 long range reconnaissance aircraft whose role was guarding convoys bringing badly needed supplies to England.

Lee White was about 28 when he first travelled to Moncton from Wicklow where he was teaching school and presented himself at the RCAF recruiting office. "I was teaching when the war broke out," he said last week during an interview at his home, "and I decided that I would attempt to join the air force when the summer holidays came. After school closed for the summer in 1940, I went to Moncton to sign up and I told them I wanted to be flying. They said they would be happy for me to join the air force but no guarantee about flying. So I said: 'when you want me for flying, let me know' and I went back home."

After a few months and no phone call, White went again to Moncton and was told the same thing. He waited another month and this time tried something different. "This time I didn't announce to the recruiting centre that I was coming; I waited until the chap I'd talked to twice - the one who was shifting me off - had gone to lunch and I walked right in to an office where sat what I learned later was a Squadron Leader. Nice guy, he listened and then had me go through an eye test which went all right. "From there on joining the air force was no problem at all. Later on, back in Wicklow, I walked over to Bath to go on the train to Ontario."

On that trip he met Basil Hargrove of Bath area and they became good friends. Presently they arrived at the manning depot near Toronto and joined the RCAF together. After a month of guard duty at a new training airport White began his flying course, which, curiously enough, began with a 'ground training course'.

Finally flying

"By the middle of the winter I was due for flying training," White remembered, and what a memory! With only a few glances at his pilot's log book covering the war years, he could relate

names and dates from seven decades ago. “We went off to a little flying field halfway between Montréal and Ottawa, near the village of St. Eugene.

“We were introduced later to our training airplane, a Fleet Finch II and we found out later that it was not a terribly reliable airplane,” he laughed, “but that was neither here nor there; it was an airplane and that was what we wanted to fly. After ground training we went up with an instructor. I went through the Elementary Flying School there and then we were sent to Moncton to be trained on twin-engine aircraft. That’s a long jump, from elementary to twin-engine.”

The successful pilots received their wings in Moncton and were sent to Charlottetown on a General Reconnaissance Course where they learned much more about navigation. “We still weren’t qualified to fly over water any distance,” said Lee White. “That came quite a lot later. When we finished training in Canada, in 1941, forty-one of us pilots crossed the ocean and by the time we were in England not more than two weeks, all the other forty had been sent to squadrons and I was all alone. I was sent to the Air Force College at Cranwell, a very posh place I remember. I even had a batman (valet).”

Cranwell was and still is a Royal Air Force College and is located in east central England.

An old codger of 27

“Having been a teacher for a while, I was a little older than average,” Dr. White said, “eight or ten years older and I think they were wondering what to do with me. I stayed at Cranwell for training on Wellingtons, which were twin-engine aircraft, about as big as twin-engine aircraft got.”

After that training, Lee White was ordered to choose a flight crew for a squadron to go to the Middle East. He flew a Wellington to Gibraltar and when he landed there he found that he and his crew had been lucky to arrive at all. “We found that the one of the propellers had not been put on securely enough. I found this out by noting that I couldn’t synchronize the two engines, one would go faster than the other. I reported this as soon as we landed at Gibraltar, never dreaming that there was anything very serious. I got out, took hold of one of the blades and it just rattled around on the shaft, just ready to let go.”

Lee White and his crew had to wait there for about two weeks while a new engine was being brought from England and installed. From there the Wellington crew were to fly to the Egyptian desert and become attached to a squadron there, where the British forces were working their way westward, all the while under attack from Field Marshall Erwin Rommel’s forces.

Eventually 2nd Flight Lieutenant Lee White and crew arrived on the Mediterranean island of Malta. “Once we were at Malta there were bombings every night (by the German Luftwaffe) and very often in the daytime too. We were trying to get out of Malta and get onto our squadron in

Egypt. Once there we struggled back and forth with Rommel; he was chasing us more than we were chasing him.”

Bombing Rommel

“We went out on many missions there and bombed Rommel, definitely. That’s where I did most of my flying and going on bombing missions. This went on until the end of the war in the Middle East (when Montgomery’s ground forces defeated Rommel’s soldiers). I was shifted back to England where they said I was due for a month leave at home in Canada. I was there three weeks and they sent me word that I was to report to Nassau to train on 4-engine aircraft, long distance reconnaissance aircraft. I trained on the American made B-24, which had a long, long range. These were intended for flying from Ireland all the way to Halifax, but often only halfway that far to meet convoys bringing supplies to England.”

His new tour now did take him from Ireland to Halifax or halfway there. By now he was Squadron Leader Lee White flying his B-24 over the Atlantic. “It was pretty lively times,” he remembered. “Some of the big convoys we were sent to meet were really in danger of U-boat attack. We did sink one submarine. That’s what I was doing when the war (in Europe) ended,” said Dr. Lee White last week. “Then they wanted to know if we wanted to go to the Pacific. We said no, we thought maybe we’d had our fair share.”

After V-E Day in the spring of 1945, Squadron Commander White became citizen Lee White again, and after “milling around home for a month or two” he decided to study dentistry at McGill University. Five years later, in 1951, he moved to Andover, NB, set up his practice, and stayed there until his retirement. Those who know Lee White know that he has always kept his mind and body active even many years after retirement. He complained once or twice during the interview that his memory “Wasn’t much good now”, but most people in their sixties would wish for a memory like his.

Squadron Commander

Although the insignia denoting his rank is not on this official RCAF portrait taken in 1944, Squadron Commander Lee White, later dentist Dr. Lee White, indeed held that rank, and was flying B-24s across the Atlantic to protect convoys of vital supplies. Before that he had been a Wellington pilot based in Egypt and engaged in many bombing missions against Rommel’s forces there.