

A VERY SPECIAL FURY

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On 24 May 1948, 27 Hawker Sea Fury FB 11s were taken on strength by the Canadian government for use by the Royal Canadian Navy. This was the first of six batches of Sea Furies scheduled for delivery to the RCN between 1948 and 1953. Manufactured by Hawker Aircraft Ltd, Surrey, England, the entire 1948 complement of Sea Furies was craned aboard the carrier HMCS Magnificent at Belfast, Northern Ireland in late May. The ship and her cargo departed for Canada on 25th of the month and arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia on 1 June. One of the a/c on board carried the serial number TG 117; and both in the task that lay ahead of her and in her outward appearance, she was markedly different from the 26 other machines that formed that initial batch of Sea Fury 11s acquired by the RCN.

Dealing first with appearance, it is important to acknowledge two different paint scheme formats that distinguished TG 117 from its contemporaries. These formats, "Pattern 1" and "Pattern 2", define the distribution of different camouflage colours over the surface of the a/c. With Pattern 1, a dark colour covered the top and sides of the a/c overall, while a light colour covered the fuselage belly and the undersides of the wings and tailplanes. The border or line of contact ("paintline") between the dark and light colours in Pattern 1 was positioned near the bottom of both sides of the fuselage. All of the RCN Sea Furies acquired in May 1948, with the exception of TG 117, were decked out in this Pattern 1 format (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. TG 114, in the Pattern 1 EDSG/Sky paint scheme, was typical of all but one of the RCN Sea Furies TOS in 1948. DND, via A. Baltzer

In Pattern 2, the dark colour covered only the dorsal surface of the fuselage and the topsides of the wings and tailplanes. The light colour occupied the fuselage sides and belly, as well as the undersurfaces of the wings and tailplanes. Thus the paintline in Pattern 2 was situated towards the top of the fuselage. It was in this Pattern 2 format that TG 117 was originally finished (Fig. 2). In early 1947, the Canadian government had issued a Naval General Order (NGO) entitled "I 20-Canadian Naval Aircraft-Colour Schemes and Markings". The purpose of this document was to instruct civilian contractors in the painting and marking of naval aircraft. It called for "Extra Dark Sea Grey" (EDSG) on the upper surfaces and "Sky" on the sides and undersurfaces, in a Pattern 2 format.

In Britain, where the colour assignment to the term originated, "Sky" denoted a very pale shade of green. But, contrary to their own specifications, the Canadians did not intend their a/c to be painted green; rather, the light colour was to be a variation on light grey. In other words, there was a direct self-contradiction between what the RCN wanted and what was spelled out in their own technical order!

The reason for this incongruence probably lies in the fact that NGO I 20 was based on an existing Royal Navy document, Admiralty Fleet Order 5286/46. The latter used the word "Sky", and it appears that this term was uncritically transferred to the Canadian derivative. This adaptation did not pose a problem in Canada, where "Sky" was consistently understood to mean "light grey". In the British factories, however, the appearance of the term in I 20 was interpreted to mean pale green, and all of the Pattern 2 Sea Furies delivered to the Canadian Navy between 1948 and 1950 -- including TG 117 -- were so painted at the British factory.

Immediately upon her arrival in Canada, TG 117 was placed in storage ("stored reserve") at the Naval Air Section at RCAF Station Dartmouth. This respite, as it turned out, was short-lived: placed on loan to the British Ministry of Supply, she was flown on 4 June -- barely three days after arriving in Canada -- to the Winter Experimental Establishment (WEE) at RCAF Station Namao, near Edmonton, in preparation for cold-weather trials.

Early photographs (Fig. 2) of TG 117 confirm that it was painted in the Pattern 2 format.



Fig. 2. TG 117 in 1948, in its original paint scheme and markings. Photo credit: Patrick Martin Collection.

Ron Heath, the naval test pilot with WEE, recently recalled that the lower surfaces were "a very light lime/yellow" -- in other words, "Sky". This fact, together with the very short layover at Dartmouth that offered no time for repainting, would indicate that the original paint job had been applied in Great Britain. A particular aspect of TG 117's paint scheme were the red tailplanes and outer panels of the mainplanes. This attribute, designed to enhance the aircraft's visibility in case she crashed on the northern snow-covered landscape, did not appear on the operational Sea Furies.

TG 117 was unique among the initial intake of Sea Furies not only in terms of its paint scheme but in the markings she carried as well. Those of the 1948 batch that bore letter codes mostly displayed the 803 Squadron prefix "BC" followed by the individual aircraft designator (Fig. 1). The one exception was TG 117; destined from the outset for service with a second-line test unit rather than an operational squadron, she displayed the prefix "ZZ", along with the individual suffix "A" and the Navy's ICAO code "VG" in appropriate positions.

Parenthetically, the letters "ZZ" were also employed by the military at the time to denote that an a/c had been written off, usually due to an accident. As will be seen, the allocation of these same letters to TG 117 as identification codes proved to be ominously prophetic.

As scheduled, TG 117 underwent her first phase of cold-weather testing at RCAF Station Watson Lake, Yukon Territory during the winter of 1948-49. By that time, a standard annual routine had been worked out that saw the unit's test aircraft moved to Watson Lake from Edmonton in late October or November. Except for a two-week break during the Christmas holiday period, the test season ran until about mid-March, at which time the a/c were returned to Edmonton and work began on a detailed report on the winter's results. The summer was devoted to comparative temperature tests, training programmes, public relations events such as airshows, and getting the a/c ready for the upcoming winter season.

TG 117 was a participant in the June 1949 Edmonton airshow. Her contribution involved a demanding aerobatic manoeuvre that resulted in pulled rivets in the wheel wells; a 6"-in-wide, 2"-in-high ripple running the full length of the chord on either side of the cockpit; and wing-tips several inches higher than normal due to main spar distortion. This damage necessitated a visit to the Avro Canada plant at Malton, Ontario which had been contracted to repair and overhaul the Navy's Sea Furies. TG 117 arrived at the Avro shops on 25 August 1949 and the necessary work was taken in hand.

Until 1951, aircraft delivered to the RCN from British factories were finished in Royal Navy paint schemes thanks in part to the misleading NGO I 20. It was considered uneconomical to repaint shiny new aircraft, and so the practice was to operate them in their original attire until the opportunity arose to refinish them in the normal course of maintenance or repair in a Canadian factory.

We can safely assume, then, that the repairs effected in the summer of '49 justified a repainting of TG 117 overall in the Navy's standard two-tone grey scheme in place of the original EDSG/Sky. Black and white photos show that the original EDSG on the spinner was replaced by a lighter shade, probably a continuation of the light grey that now covered the fuselage sides and undersurfaces. Since the a/c was scheduled to continue functioning as an experimental machine in a winter environment, the tailplanes and outer mainplanes were once again painted red.

The ICAO marking system was still in effect at the time, and so the VG ZZA codes were retained as well. However, photos post-dating the Avro overhaul demonstrate that the port fuselage letter-roundel sequence differed from that of the starboard. Specifically, the sequence on the port side was Z (roundel) ZA, while its counterpart on the starboard side was ZZ (roundel) A (Fig. 3,4,5).

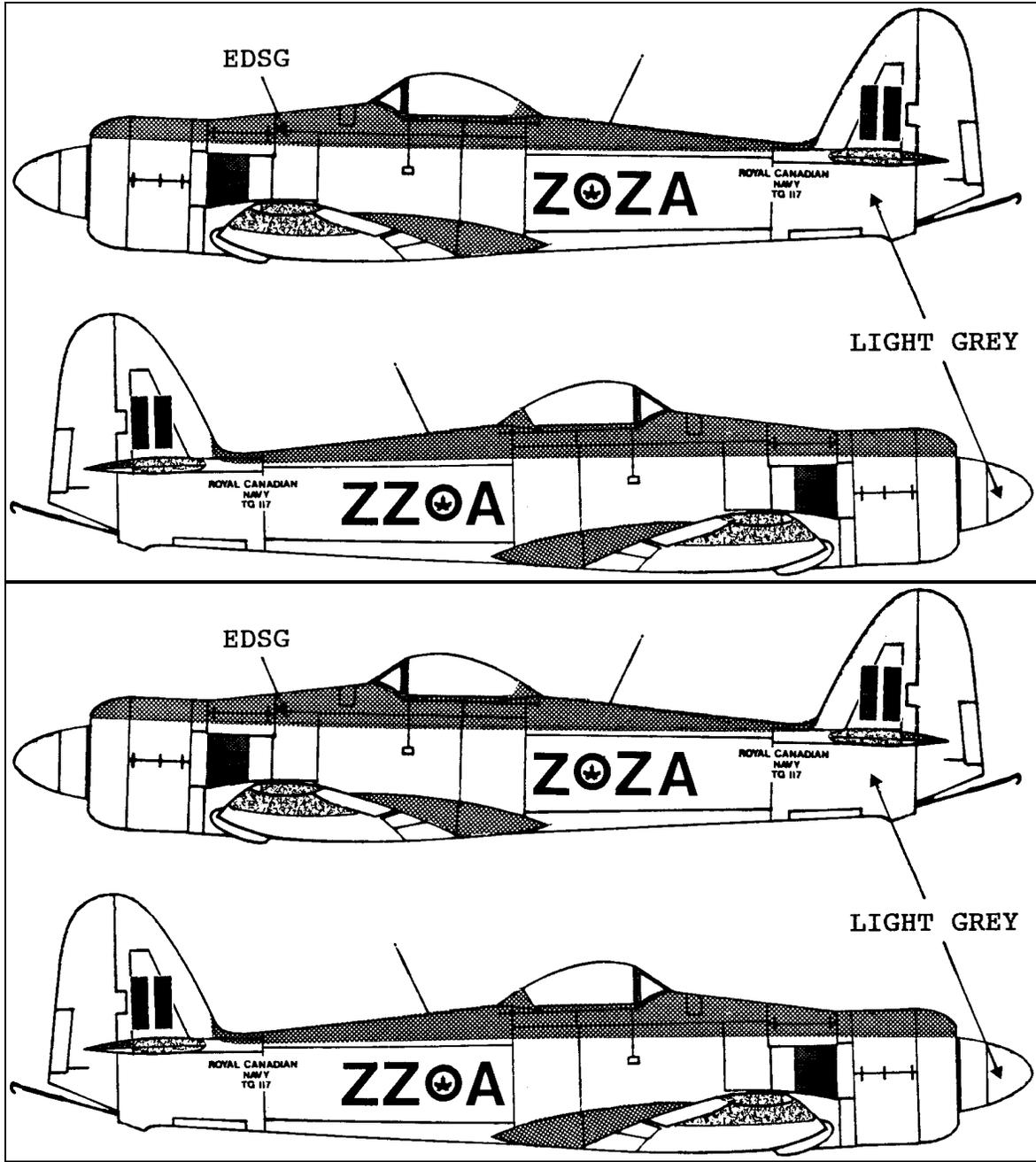


Fig.3. Side-views of TG 117 following its visit to the Avro plant.

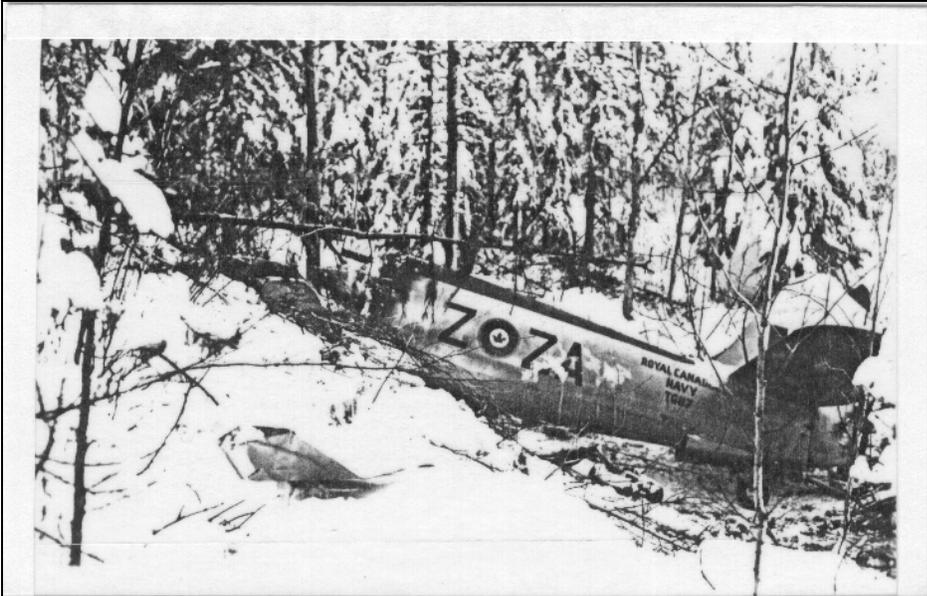


Fig.4. Crash photo of TG 117, port side. DND, via D. Jones.

Fig.5. Crash photo of TG 117, starboard side. Note differences in positioning of fuselage letter codes as shown in this and the preceding photo. DND, via D. Jones.

This arrangement ensured that two letters appeared aft of the roundel, and one letter appeared forward of it, on both sides of the fuselage. This was not the case in the original (pre-Avro) finish, which featured two letters aft of the roundel and one letter forward of it on the starboard side [ZZ (roundel) A], but one letter aft of the roundel and two letters forward of it on the port side (Fig. 2).

There is one further detail in which the Avro markings differed from those in the original scheme. A standard feature of all naval aircraft of the day was the presentation of the words ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY on both sides of the aft fuselage above the serial number. In the original scheme, these words were laid out in a simple straight line: ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY (Fig. 2). At the Avro plant, they were rearranged in a partially "stacked" configuration (Fig. 3), as follows:

**ROYAL CANADIAN
NAVY**

In the original scheme, the fuselage letter codes were somewhat oversized; that is, they were longer on the vertical axis than the diameter of the accompanying roundel. In the Avro scheme, they were of the same size as the roundels (Fig. 3).

With the necessary repairs and new finish in place, TG 117 was returned to WEE for her second year ('49-'50) of tests. According to her Record Card, she went into "S.R. from W.E.E." at an undisclosed location on 1 May 1950, and was back on 17 November for the 50-51 test season. It was during this final phase of her tour -- on 30 January 1951 to be exact -- that she was destroyed in a fatal crash at the hands of an RCAF pilot. She was officially struck off strength on 12 February 1951.

Acknowledgements

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