The 19th Carrier Air Group on the RCN's 1949 Spring Cruise – *by Michael Whitby*

At 1500 Wednesday 16 March 1949, seven Hawker Sea Fury FB 11 fighter bombers thundered off the light fleet carrier HMCS Magnificent, steaming off Colón, Panama on the Royal Canadian Navy's 1949 Spring Cruise. Fighting strong head winds, they headed for American bases defending the Panama Canal Zone where they carried out a low-level 'attack' on the 319th Fighter Squadron base at France Air Force Base near Colón before beating up Coco Solo Naval Air Station.

Two Sea Furies then split off from the rest to carry out a photo reconnaissance of the Panama Canal. Flown by Lieutenant-Commander Jim Hunter and Lieutenant Pat Whitby—the author's father—the two fighters sped low over the entire extent of the Canal photographing the locks and enjoying the spectacular view. "All completely successful", Hunter wrote in his diary after they returned to the carrier.

Lt. Pat Whitby Lt Cdr Jim Hunter

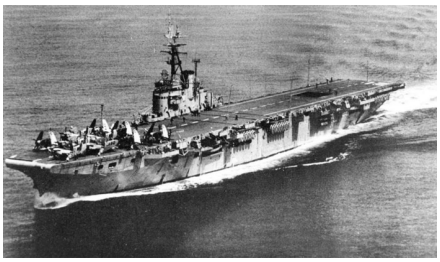
.Lieutenant Pat Whitby (left) and Lieutenant-Commander Jim Hunter were experienced pilots, typical of those who formed the nucleus of Canada's naval aviation branch in the immediate postwar years. Whitby had joined the RCAF in 1942, but to his frustration was assigned to instructor duties in the Canadian West with the BCATP. In December 1944, after accruing hundreds of flying hours, he responded to a notice from the Royal Navy seeking experienced RCAF instructors to transfer to the navy to fly with the British Pacific Fleet. One of several that volunteered, he became one of the original members of 803 Squadron, which was working up to join HMCS Warrior, Canada's first carrier, when the war ended. He was accepted into the permanent force after the war. Jim Hunter joined the RCNVR in October 1939 and, after serving as an Ordinary Signalman in HMCS St Laurent on North Atlantic convoys, transferred to the Fleet Air Arm. He eventually specialized in night fighters and, while undergoing familiarization 'training' with the RAF, flew more than a dozen intruder missions over occupied Europe in deHavilland Mosquitos. He was appointed to command an RN night fighter squadron flying Fairey Fireflies but the war ended before he, too, could deploy to the Pacific. Hunter went on to become perhaps the most respected aviator in the postwar RCN, serving in critical operational, development and policy appointments. Photos via author

Barely three years old, Canadian Naval Aviation needed success. Defence budgets were tight in the immediate post-war, and some in the defence community, not least the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), viewed naval aviation as an extravagance. Numerous accidents had not helped the cause. The situation was so bad that two days before Hunter and Whitby buzzed the Panama Canal, the Chief of the Naval Staff sent out a service-wide message to refute widespread scuttlebutt that the air branch was about to be disbanded: "There is no repeat no truth in this rumour." Nonetheless, there was immense pressure on naval aviation, and the carrier operations associated with the 1949 Spring Cruise became the obvious microscope through which critics would judge its viability. Lieutenant-Commander Hunter, leader of the 19th Carrier Air Group (CAG) embarked in Magnificent, was well aware of this scrutiny. The day 'Maggie' left Halifax he noted in his diary: "There is no doubt in anyone's mind about the importance of putting up a good showing on this cruise. No exaggeration to say that nearly the whole future of Naval Aviation depends on it."

Newly commissioned into the RCN, HMCS Magnificent sits alongside at Sydenham outside Belfast, Northern Ireland in May 1948 with a deck load of brand new Sea Furies. The crane is about to hoist a rare twin-engine deHavilland Sea Hornet on board, which was being taken to Canada for a series of demonstration flights. Photo via royalnavyresearcharchive.org.uk

Two photographs that highlight the classic, powerful lines of the Hawker Sea Fury. Derived from the Hawker Typhoon, Tempest and Fury family of fighters, the Sea Fury proved to be a superb naval aircraft, capable of fulfilling both fighter and fighter-bomber roles. It was the fastest piston-engined naval fighter of its generation, had good endurance and was well armed with four 20mm

cannons and the ability to carry either bombs or rockets. Photos: DND



HMCS Magnificent. Canada's second aircraft carrier was a Majestic class Light Fleet Carrier (CVL) built at Harland and Wolff shipyard in Belfast Northern Ireland—Admiralty Confidential Fleet Orders defined a CVL as a carrier with a hangar capacity of 20 to 30 aircraft and a speed between 21 and 25 knots. Displacing 18,000 tons full load, with a length of 695 feet and a complement of 1100, 'Maggie' gave the RCN eight years of steady, dependable service carrying out a variety of operations, including numerous NATO exercises and the 1956 UN mission to Suez. Photo: US Navy National Museum of Naval Aviation

The RCN had carried out Caribbean cruises since the 1930s. Seeking better conditions away from the harsh Canadian winter, ships from the east and west coast fleets rendezvoused in warm Caribbean waters to conduct a variety of training serials. For the 1949 cruise the cruiser Ontario, the destroyer Athabaskan and the frigate Antigonish joined from Esquimalt, while Magnificent sortied from Halifax with the destroyers Nootka and Haida. The senior officer was Commodore George Miles, who also commanded the carrier. As on other occasions, the Canadian ships had the opportunity to exercise with warships of the Royal Navy's America and West Indies Station (AWI), consisting of two cruisers, three escorts and a submarine. They would also train with American assets in the Caribbean.

Magnificent embarked an atypical air group for the cruise. Normally, the RCN's two carrier air groups each comprised a squadron of anti-submarine aircraft and another of fighters. However, since 825 Squadron was in the process of working up its new Firefly Mk V A/S aircraft, for this cruise the 19th CAG was formed from 803 and 883 fighter squadrons, each of eight Sea Furies. A number of Firefly Mk Is from 826 Squadron were also embarked. Lieutenant-Commander Hunter commanded the air group, but responsibility for planning and conducting air operations lay with Magnificent's Commander (Air), Commander Bruce McEwen, RN, and his staff. Like the flying personnel, many were experienced veterans of the Second World War.

The ships of the 1949 Spring Cruise. Together, they formed the ingredients of a capable, balanced naval Task Group, which spoke to the stature of the RCN at the time. Ontario, Haida and Antigonish were veterans of the Second World War, while Magnificent, Nootka and Athabaskan were of postwar vintage. Antigonish, Nootka and Athabaskan were all constructed in Canadian shipyards. Photos: DND

A Fairey Firefly FR.I launches from HMCS Warrior with a load of practice bombs under the port wing during the carrier's West Coast cruise in the winter of 1946–47. Unlike, her successor Magnificent, Warrior was not "Arcticized", or fit out for Canadian winter conditions so had

to spend her winter in Canadian waters on the more temperate West Coast. Photo: DND

The cruise marked the Sea Fury's operational debut as a carrier fighter in the RCN. Although 803 Squadron had begun conversion training on the aircraft in the UK during the autumn of 1947, it had only carried out limited deck landing training on Magnificent in September 1948, and 883 had only re-equipped with Sea Furies in November 1948 and had no carrier time whatsoever. Although a superb fighter, the Sea Fury was initially beset by teething troubles mainly to do with its powerful but temperamental 2,550 hp Bristol Centaurus engine. A number of accidents occurred but two at Shearwater left a scar. On 14 October 1948, Lieutenant Stan Berge lost his life when his Sea Fury crashed at low altitude after an engine failure, and in a particularly horrific incident on 1 February 1949, Lieutenant Tom Coultry died when his parachute snagged his tail plane when he was forced to abandon his aircraft after his engine quit. Due to these accidents historian Stuart Soward, who was in the air branch at the time, identified "a reluctance among some of the Fury pilots to continue flying the aircraft, which in a few cases prompted subsequent requests for a transfer. In rare instances there was outright refusal to accept an appointment to a Sea Fury squadron." That is perhaps understandable, but the fact that the vast majority of Sea Fury pilots carried on in the face of the ultimate adversity says much about their courage and professionalism.

Sea Fury FB 11s of the 19th CAG on the tarmac at Shearwater. Canada selected the Sea Fury as its replacement for the Supermarine Seafire, and due to fears that the RCN might procure American aircraft, the Royal Navy provided the RCN with early production Sea Furies. This meant the RCN had to work out the teething troubles typically associated with a new aircraft, which in the case of the Sea Fury, involved significant problems with its powerful 2,550 horsepower Bristol Centaurus engine. This process was not helped by the fact that the RCN was operating the aircraft across the North Atlantic thousands of miles from the Hawker factory and suffered from a shortage of maintainers and engineers. Photo: DND

A Sea Fury and Firefly Mk 5 prepare for launch from Magnificent. Although both Warrior and 'Maggie' had catapults, they usually utilized "free" launches, which took less time and effort. The destroyer in the background is probably serving as plane guard, ready to move in to rescue the pilots if a mishap occurred during launch. Photo: DND

When landing on, pilots followed the directions of the Landing Signal Officer. Here, Lieutenant Barry Hayter looks embarrassingly uncomfortable in this obviously posed shot—a sailor would not be strolling casually down the flight deck in the midst of flying operations! Photo: Bryan Hayter

Flying operations commenced on 7 March 1949, two days after Magnificent departed Halifax, when the air group conducted Deck Landing Training (DLTs). The training was much needed. In 1948 RCN aircraft had undertaken only 182 deck landings in contrast to 408 the previous year—the discrepancy was due to the fact that Warrior was exchanged for Magnificent in the summer of 1948—and, as Hunter observed in his diary on 6 March, "the whole Air Department is creaking through lack of use." Eager to get back at it, on 7 March thirteen pilots carried out 47 deck landings. Hunter, Whitby and Lieutenant 'Nibs' Cogdon had been first off, flying to Kindley Field, Bermuda. After lunch and a quick tour of the island, they returned to 'Maggie' in time to see the Sea Fury of Lieutenant Chuck Elton being "carted away" after a barrier crash. According to the accident report, Elton's aircraft "floated over all wires and hit No. 2 barrier." Ken Nicholson, an experienced Sea Fury pilot, later explained "The Sea Fury landed on the deck at 90–95 knots in a fairly level attitude. At that speed, if you eased your nose up to make sure the hook made contact, you would float. If you snapped the tail down it would generally break the tail wheel." When Whitby landed on the carrier he experimented with a technique he had worked out with Hunter, whereby he eased the stick forward when his wheels touched down, hoping the hook would catch the arrestor wires with his tail lifted slightly. Unhappily, he only managed to snag the final, #10 wire and momentum carried him into the barrier, "so the idea was abandoned"—the problem was ultimately solved by lengthening the tail hook. Despite the Elton and Whitby incidents, the air group had a "VG" day, and that night reviewed the DLT film with some satisfaction.

The "controlled crash" associated with landing a high performance fighter on a carrier took mere seconds, but they were filled with risk. Ideally, a Sea Fury approach ended in a level attitude touchdown at 90–95 knots with a good trap on one of the 10 arrestor wires that stretched

across the axial deck. Too fast and the aircraft would float over the wires and slam into the barrier; too slow and it could hit the ramp with catastrophic results. Missing the groove to port or starboard could result in a plummet over the side or an unceremonious perch on the catwalk or gun mounts. With their good visibility forward, wide undercarriage and stable handling, Sea Furies gained a reputation as a dependable aircraft on deck. Photo: DND

Contrary weather interrupted flight operations for the next five days with seas either too high or winds too low to use the deck. Aircraft were aloft again on 12 March when Magnificent was south of Kingston, Jamaica. Eighteen navigation, homing and interception sorties were carried out successfully, while a further 14 took place the next day. Two accidents occurred in the afternoon of the 12th when the pilots of a Firefly and a Sea Fury took late wave offs from the Landing Signal Officer and stalled. The plane guard HMCS Nootka quickly picked up both pilots. Of the Sea Fury pilot, Lieutenant J.J. MacBrien, Hunter observed "how he got out is quite a mystery—but he did, with only a small cut on his head." He added that reports of the loss of two valuable aircraft through accidents would make "quite interesting reading for our critical friends in Ottawa."

With aircraft landing on at low speed close to their stalling point, a last-minute wave-off could have disastrous consequences. In these spectacular images of a Firefly and Sea Fury stalling into the sea off Magnificent—which could well be of the two accidents on 12 March 1949—the pilots were either slow to react or the wave-off signal from the LSO came too late for them to respond safely. On that date, all aircrew were rescued by the plane guard HMCS Nootka. Photos: DND

Maritime reconnaissance and strike were important naval aviation roles. Finding, fixing and attacking warships was a challenging mission on the broad ocean reaches but wartime episodes such as the hunt for the Bismarck, and the battles of Midway and Philippine Sea, demonstrated how critical such missions were to victory at sea. When Commodore Miles learned that the cruiser HMS Jamaica was on passage to the Canal Zone ahead of Magnificent, the air department organized search and strike missions for 14 March. Lieutenant-Commander Hunter's diary relives the operation:

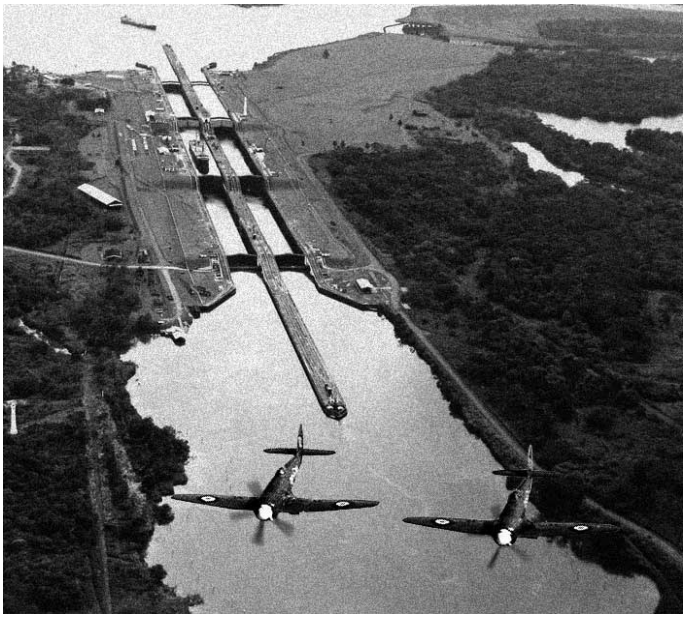
Ops planned a diverging search for 4 pairs of Furies, and we had one as R/T link. The other three pairs went out to 150'[miles], [Lieutenant Bill] Munro and I to 200 miles. At ETA there was nothing in sight, so by good luck I started a square search into sun (to port) and two minutes later there she was! An enormous stroke of good fortune. Took some photographs and set course for home. Passed in our FLASH report by 141—[Lieutenant-Commander Ray) Creery—as 212° OBOE 200', course 023, speed 14K.

After some difficulty in finding Magnificent, Hunter landed on safely:

Refuelled, re-spotted the deck and flew off a 9 Fury strike at 1000. Went down in a scouting line, spread over about 30 miles of sea. Saw her at 1043—110 miles away. Delivered an attack from both bows simultaneously, reformed, flew past her, and came back. This time the navigation was better, the ship ahead, and on ETA. Landed on and learned that all were most thrilled with the effort. Lucky or not, the air group's ability to find and attack a solitary warship at long range was commendable. As Hunter emphasized in his post-cruise report "This exercise not only gave the pilots confidence in their ability to keep a fairly accurate D.R. [Dead Reckoning] plot but also demonstrated the fact that an enemy force could be found and attacked far ahead of the fleet."

After arriving off the Canal Zone the 19th CAG carried out the mock attack on the American installations described in the opening. Despite the thrill associated with the operations, Hunter found flying in tropical conditions to be "very trying". "It is exceptionally hot on deck", he recorded, "and in the air below 2,000'. At first when we set down in a high speed dive into the hotter air we all checked our instruments thinking the engine was overheating. Now we know it's just us!" As Hunter acknowledged in his final report the situation was far worst for the members of the air department working in Magnificent. Aircraft handlers faced "extremely uncomfortable" conditions on the flight deck due to the heat, and temperatures in the hangars hovered at 90–100°F. As a result "personnel became very fatigued and irritable, more from the long hours on duty than from the actual amount of work done." This seems to be Hunter's explanation for the 'incident'—in fact, technically a mutiny—that occurred on the morning of 20 March 1949. On that day 32 aircraft handlers refused duty when they received an order to clean ship after they had been standing by at flying stations since early that morning with

more on the schedule. As accounts of the infamous 1949 mutinies in two destroyers and the carrier make clear, there were other factors behind the incident—not least the poor relations between the air department and Magnificent's executive officer, a situation hinted at in Hunter's diary—but as far as air operations are concerned, there is no indication of ill-feeling within the air department proper, and flight operations proceeded unhindered for the remainder of the cruise.



Photoshop recreation of Whitby and Hunter's "attack" and tour of the Canal Zone, showing them returning from Gatun Lake over Miraflores Locks towards Colón. Recreation by Dave O'Malley

Magnificent and the other Canadian ships departed Colón on 16 March for exercises with the RN's America and West Indies Station. High winds caused flying to be scrubbed on the 17th but, as Hunter recalled, the air group took the opportunity to review its performance: "… we all relaxed and chewed things over. We had a lot of energetic discussion about the different phases of our deck work and flying—I do believe we are learning a lot." The next day—my parents' first anniversary, which saw my mother alone at Shearwater with my two-month-old brother in decrepit base-housing derisively known as 'Dog Patch'—Sea Furies and Fireflies carried out strafing attacks on a target towed by the cruiser HMCS Ontario, which Hunter and 826 Squadron's CO, Lieutenant-Commander Jim Roberts, punctuated by beating up the cruiser. On 19 March, 19 CAG carried out a successful strike against the AWI Station, using Fireflies to locate and shadow the 'enemy' while Sea Furies formed the strike force. As that was occurring, air direction officers on Magnificent vectored two Sea Furies onto an American Fortress reconnaissance aircraft long before it could find the task group. Despite those successes, the day did not end well. Lieutenant Garry Wright's Sea Fury floated on final approach, missed the wires and crashed into the barrier—"very stupid barrier", Hunter grumbled in his diary.

Anti-submarine warfare was the RCN's primary role during this period, and after four days off from flying due to uncooperative weather and port visits, the 19 CAG participated in an exercise where the submarine HMS Tudor attempted to attack the task group. Although the Fireflies had a degree of ASW capability due to their additional crew member and AN/APS-4 radar, Sea Furies had virtually none unless they caught a submarine on the surface. In this case, however, the clear water of the Caribbean worked to their advantage. Four Fireflies and three Sea Furies took off in the forenoon on 22 March to search for the submarine ahead of the task group, and a Firefly soon spotted Tudor lurking at periscope depth. "We all joined in the fun", Hunter write in his diary. "Pat Whitby and I kept above him, diving and homing the escorts, to their satisfaction." The submarine was "clearly visible in the lucid blue water", but despite the pastoral setting, he decided "they are vicious, deadly looking beasts." In his post-cruise report Hunter cited this as an example of Sea Furies' ability to conduct close ASW patrols but it is doubtful they would be very effective in that role in the North Atlantic where the RCN could normally expect to operate.

The Sea Fury's reputation as a temperamental aircraft grew later in the day. Lieutenant 'Doc' Schellinck was taking off in the forenoon when smoke suddenly poured from his exhausts, the engine seized and the Sea Fury crashed into the sea off Magnificent's starboard bow. Schellinck scrambled out of narrow cockpit before the aircraft sank and was quickly rescued by Athabaskan. Having witnessed yet another Sea Fury engine failure, the pilot ready to follow Schellinck off deck lost his nerve and refused to fly. In his diary, Hunter, who had a reputation as a tough, no-nonsense leader, promised "He will be kicked out if I have my way." He was true to his word, and on 26 March the pilot was transferred to Nootka for the remainder of the cruise. The others carried on. It was later established that the individual still wanted to fly, but had lost complete confidence in Sea Furies. His appointment was terminated and he left the navy in August 1949.

From cocoon to fallen butterfly. In the first photograph, BC-C sports gear to protect it from the elements. Note the temporary guard rails surrounding the open elevator and the barriers stretching across the flight deck in the distance. The second photo was taken moments after the Sea Fury nudged gently into the barriers—there is no obvious damage to

the aircraft which meant it only suffered a mild collision, perhaps caused by the aircraft snagging the last wire. The result was similar to Pat Whitby's barrier incident on 7 March 1949. Note the small ad-hoc maple leaf stencilled into the roundel. Photos: DND

The 19th CAG continued operational flying on the 23rd and 24th before Magnificent put into Guantanamo, Cuba for a port visit. The evolutions were mainly routine with aircraft providing radar targets, carrying out navigation and intercept exercises, and conducting various attacks on the fleet but it involved a full programme lasting from 0830 to 1630 each day. However routine, these operations emphasized the danger associated with carrier flying during that era. In the midst of a high altitude flight on 24 March, Hunter and Whitby's canopies iced up so that they had no forward visibility even with their hoods open, and were forced to fly on instruments as they returned to the circuit, an exceedingly challenging evolution. Eventually, the warmer temperatures at low altitude melted the ice. Other incidents involved 826's Fireflies. One was involved in barrier crash when it bounced over the wires due to a high approach, while two others made "precautionary" landings due to mechanical problems. Nonetheless, Magnificent's air group was able to meet all commitments.

A beautiful photograph of a Sea Fury wheeling over its carrier. Despite its early teething troubles, the Sea Fury ultimately gave the RCN a high performance front line fighter that could fulfill the roles assigned to it. Most pilots thought it was a delight to fly. Photo: DND

Air operations ground to a halt after Magnificent departed Cuban waters on 29 March. Seven days previously, the port undercarriage of Lieutenant 'Abbie' Byrne's Sea Fury sheered off after a "Very Heavy" landing, causing considerable damage to the aircraft. The day 'Maggie' cleared Cuban waters, the port oleo of Lieutenant Elton's Sea Fury also snapped off when he made a normal deck landing. Faced with an apparent chronic weakness with the landing gear, Commodore Miles accepted his air department's advice and grounded the Sea Furies, essentially ending air operations for the remainder of the cruise.

In his post-cruise report, Lieutenant-Commander Hunter noted that even though the Sea Furies had been grounded, the main lessons of the cruise "had already been learnt." Pointing to the various achievements, including the long-range attack on Jamaica, the interception of the Fortress, the encounter with Tudor, the smooth running of the flight deck and maintenance departments, and others, he concluded "the main lesson learnt during this Cruise was that the Group could operate efficiently from a carrier to the safe limit of their fuel and were able to carry out all the duties required on this cruise." The accidents could not be ignored, but Hunter thought "the experience gained in the embarked period has been very much worth the price in lost and damaged aircraft." Nonetheless,

It is considered that the standard of carrier flying is still low. It cannot be expected to reach a peak for at least another two years; two years which must be spent on continuous carrier operation. It is only thus that the accident rate will decline and full value be gained from the great cost of Naval Aviation.

As acknowledged previously, pilots were rusty due to a lack of opportunity to carry out deck landings in any sustained manner, but that would change over the next few years. In 1949 alone pilots carried out more than three times the number of deck landings they had the previous year, and more than double those from 1947. The process to grow experience suffered gaps simply because the RCN had only the one carrier, but, as Hunter foresaw, opportunity increased proficiency. Although accidents still occurred—that is just the nature of the carrier business—they were reduced in number. Problems continued with the Sea Furies over the short term. Engine problems caused the entire force to be grounded in the summer of 1949, but engineers brought over from Hawker and Bristol finally found a fix. Likewise RCN engineering personnel solved the landing gear weakness. Although problems still arose, the Sea Fury performed fairly dependably into the mid-1950s.

Despite the black clouds that had hovered over naval aviation in the spring of 1949, it survived for another twenty years. Relief came with increased defence budgets as the Cold War heated up with the Korean conflict, and, after considerable sparring, the RCN and RCAF eventually reached agreement over their mutual roles in respect to maritime aviation. The high accident rate remained an immediate source of concern at headquarters. One of the worst accidents in Canadian naval aviation history occurred at Shearwater on 28 March 1949 when a Sea Fury pilot clipped two Harvard training aircraft while stunting aggressively around their formation. The three aircraft plummeted into the harbour killing all four personnel onboard. Within days Headquarters issued an unprecedented warning to the air branch:

The Naval Board views with concern the number of aviation

accidents which have occurred in the last year. The evidence is clear that bad air discipline is the cause of many accidents and the heavy loss of lives. All pilots are to be informed of the above by their commanding officer. He is to impress upon them that rigid air discipline is essential to the safety of personnel …

Naval Aviation was on notice, but as indicated above, performance steadily improved with experience and an effective aviation safety organization was also established. By the mid-1950s the air branch had evolved into an extremely effective force, a situation that improved dramatically when Bonaventure was commissioned with her modern air component.

HMCS Bonaventure. Magnificent's successor was of about the same size and performance but was modified to support the next generation of naval aircraft, which were larger and faster than those before. But even featuring an angled flight deck, mirror landing system, steam catapult and many other improvements, Bonaventure's F2H-3 Banshees and CS2F Trackers operated under very fine tolerances, and it is testament to the dedication and skill of Canada's naval aviators—seasoned by their experiences in Magnificent–that they got so much out of the carrier. Photo: DND

Although the achievements of the 1949 Cruise were not dramatic by any means, naval aviation had put in a solid, professional performance. From a pilot's point of view, my father remembers "it had been a good cruise and we felt as though we had accomplished a good start to operational flying from the ship." Perhaps more than anything it provides a glimpse into the challenges confronting that era of naval aviators and how they were overcome. As for Hunter and Whitby, they flew off the carrier for home on 5 April 1949. My father rotated off the deck just as Magnificent's bow dug into a heavy swell, forcing him to claw airborne through a solid sheet of spray. The rest of the long, 225-mile flight was a delight, providing a panoramic view of the busy transatlantic shipping lanes east of New York that my father still speaks of with amazement. Such were the joys of flying. Once home on solid ground, he got a blast from my mother for sending just one postcard home. *By Michael Whitby*