



VINTAGE NEWS

BLIND FAITH
A Magnificent Miracle at Sea
BY BRYAN HAYTER, RCN



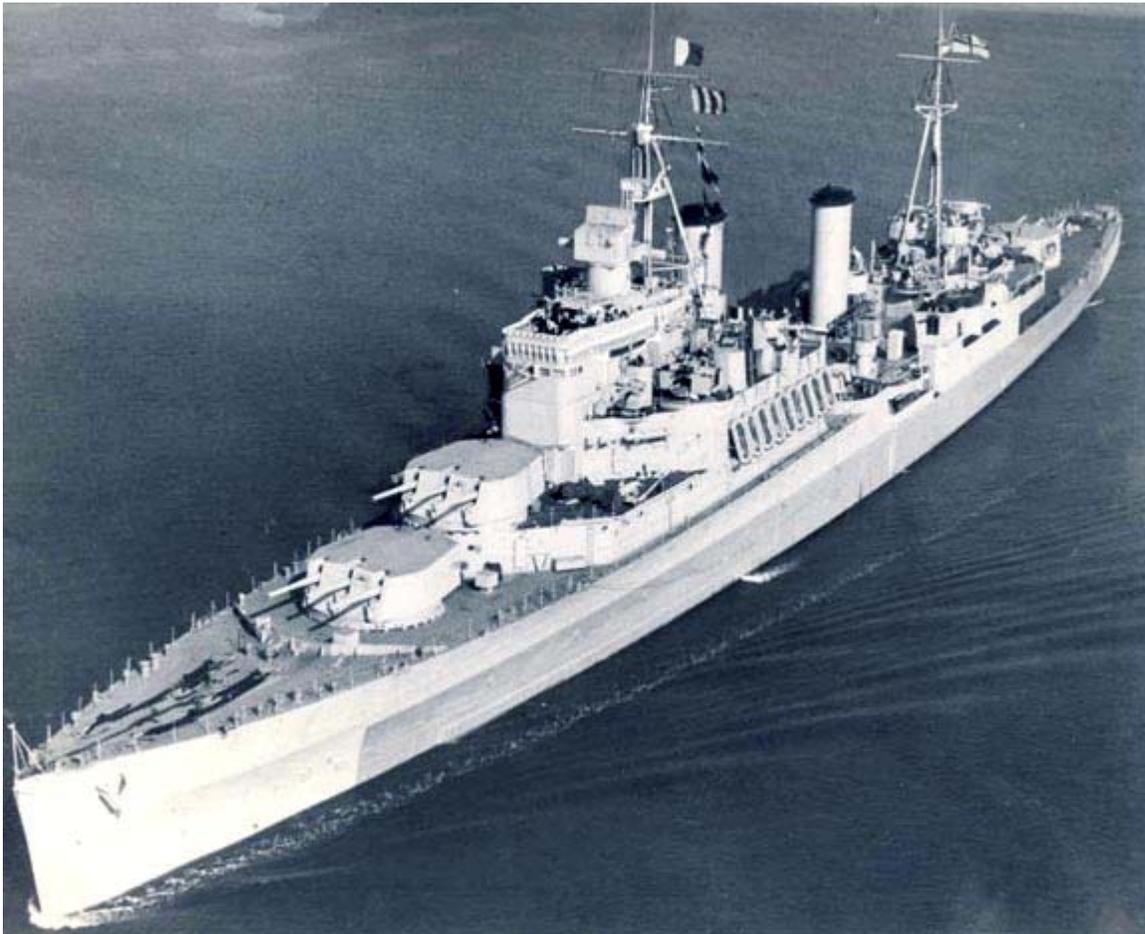
IN THE FALL OF 1953, ONLY A MIRACLE PREVENTED THE MASS DITCHING OF 42 AIRCRAFT INTO THE NORTH ATLANTIC.

Photo: RCN/DND

On September 23, 1953, a little remembered but near-tragic incident took place on the high seas. As one of the 42 pilots involved in this terrifying event, it remains strong in my memory. Before I get to that day in 1953, I should tell you how I came to be aboard the carrier HMCS *Magnificent*.

In January of 1951, we were at war with Korea and following a family tradition of military service I joined the Air Branch of the Royal Canadian Navy as a Midshipman on a 7-year Short Service Commission. I would, in fact, be joining an older brother who had survived the war and was then serving as a pilot and Batsman. It was naval tradition that I become a naval officer first and a pilot second, so I was sent to serve my time before the mast in HMCS *Ontario*, a *Swiftsure* Class Cruiser.

We sailed over 19,000 nautical miles to, around and from the South Pacific. We visited Hawaii, Fiji, Samoa, Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand. In the ship we learned that Midshipmen were the lowest form of life on board. We were known as "Snotties" and were assigned latrine duties, boiler cleaning, deck swabbing and painting. There is an old saying "if it moves salute it; if it doesn't move pick it up and if you can't pick it up paint it." We studied seamanship, naval history, gunnery, communications, officer-like-qualities and experienced the fickleness of an unforgiving sea. We stood watches, made rounds and took part in almost every thing that happened aboard the ship.



HMCS *Ontario* one of the Royal Canadian Navy's largest ships was a *Swiftsure* class light cruiser built for the Royal Navy as HMS *Minotaur*, but transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy on completion and renamed *Ontario*. *Ontario*'s ship's bell is presently on display at the Maritime Museum of British Columbia. Photo: RCN/DND

There was one duty that taught me an interesting lesson. One day I was the officer in charge of Up Spirits, the then, traditional serving of a tot of rum to the entitled crew. With me, was a grizzled, mature chief petty officer and as we awaited the arrival of the rum he asked if I had ever tasted it? I told him I had not. "Well Sir, you wouldn't want to be serving this to the men without tasting it first would you?" I replied "Oh no chief." As soon as the rum arrived he poured out a tot and gave it to me. Wanting him to think I could do this with the best I tossed it back. Wrong thing to do! I was on fire, my eyes watered and my throat constricted. I

could barely breathe and through it all I could see the bemused look on the chief's face knowing full well that he couldn't wait to tell his ship-mates how he got the Midshipman of the watch.

In spite of the relentless pressure to perform we learned a great deal on that extraordinary adventure and we were privileged to see the exotic beauty of the South Pacific and its people.

I returned to Canada as a fledgling naval officer and was appointed, along with four colleagues, to the RCAF Station Centralia, Ontario, for pilot training. For 13 months my life was filled with awe. I married my teenage sweetheart, wrestled with the ornery flight characteristics of the Harvard and AT-6 Texan training aircraft, studied Meteorology, Navigation, Aircraft engines, Principles of Flight, Communications and more and it was with great pride and joy that I received my wings from the Naval Chief of Staff and was partner to the unbelievable experience of the birth of a beautiful daughter. I was also promoted to Acting Sub-Lieutenant. At the end of our flight training, my colleagues and I enjoyed a short leave and were then appointed to the Royal Navy for operational flight training. The farewells were painful. We flew to London, England in a very noisy Trans Canada Airlines North Star and then journeyed by train to the Royal Naval Air Station *Lossiemouth* on Scotland's North Sea coast.



**Author Hayter was lucky to still have his hearing after crossing the Atlantic on a Merlin-powered North Star operated by Trans-Canada Airlines, the progenitor of Air Canada.
Photo: Canadair**

During our three months there we were checked out on the Fairey Firefly. It was a well armed, relatively fast aircraft that saw considerable action during the Second World War and Korea in both a fighter and anti-submarine role. We carried out low-level cross-country navigation exercises, quarter attacks, night illumination exercises and rocket assisted take-offs.

There was one memorable flight I had in the Firefly. I had climbed to its service ceiling of 28,400 feet. In that thin air the aircraft's controls were very sluggish, something I had not experienced but it was almost overlooked by the spiritually awesome view from that altitude. I could see most of the United Kingdom and also the barely perceptible curvature of the earth, a defining moment perhaps. It was then that I realized that this was what John Gillespie Magee Jr. described in his immortal poem, *High Flight*:

"Oh I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And climbed the skies on laughter silvered wings,
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds and done a hundred things....."

A defining moment indeed!



A Royal Navy Fairey Firefly is refueled prior to another training mission at RNAS Lossiemouth in Scotland. Photo: RN

In the classroom we dealt with navigation from a moving base, anti-submarine tactics, naval air history and communications.

When the course ended and after a brief leave we went on to Londonderry, Ireland and the Royal Naval Air Station *Eglinton* for carrier training.



The airfield at RNAS *Eglington* on Lough Foyle in Northern Ireland back in the days of carrier training. Today Eglington is the City of Derry Airport. Photo: RN

In the three months that followed we spent many hours doing field carrier landing practice, a low level circuit flown at speeds just above the stall and when we turned onto the approach the Batsman, standing on the end of the runway, would pick us up with his bats and wave us in as he would aboard the carrier. This helped hone our ability to control the aircraft at low speed and altitude and how to obey the signals of the Batsman.

When the time came for us to join the carrier for our qualification landings we were welcomed aboard HMS *Triumph*, a Colossus Class, British, light fleet carrier. She looked enormous from dockside. On the following morning we sailed into the Irish Sea and positioned the ship for landing on aircraft. When "Hands to flying stations" was piped we rushed up top to see our instructors come aboard. Three out of the eight crash-landed! The instructors, thankfully uninjured, were very embarrassed for such a poor show in front of their young students. We thought, if they can't do this, how can we?



**The aircraft carrier HMS *Triumph* was the ninth of ten Royal Navy warships to carry this name - from a 68-gun galleon in 1561 to a nuclear-powered *Trafalgar*-class submarine today. She was completed during the Second World War, saw service in Korea and ended her life first as a fleet training carrier and then as a heavy repair ship until the mid 1970s.
Photo: RN**

After a sleepless night it was with some misgivings that we taxied into the take-off position the next morning. My instructor jumped up onto my wing and asked me if I was alright. I said I was really nervous. He patted me on the arm and said "You'll be OK. Just keep the aircraft straight on take-off and when you get airborne fly around and have a good look at the ship." Well, I barely remember the take-off but I certainly do remember how unbelievably small that 690 ft x 90 ft rolling deck looked. On gathering up my courage I joined the landing circuit and when I turned onto the approach concentrated solely on Bats. He did his job well as did I and landed successfully. I was trembling when directed into position for another take-off but the incredible stress of that first landing was over and I felt slightly more at ease. In spite of a few more exciting mishaps, we all passed our carrier qualifications.

When our operational training ended we returned to Canada to join the carrier air group, flying Grumman Avengers. I was promoted to Sub Lieutenant!

After a great leave with my family we moved from Ontario to Dartmouth, Nova Scotia and were on our own as a family for the first time.

In the immediate months to follow I qualified on the Grumman Avenger AS-3 day and night aboard our Majestic class, British light fleet carrier HMCS *Magnificent*. The Avenger, a slower, more rugged aircraft than the Firefly, was also well armed and much modified for its Canadian anti-submarine role. It was not a handsome aircraft (nicknamed the Turkey) but it was forgiving and with its rugged simplicity was a relative joy to land aboard *Magnificent*. It was originally designed as a torpedo bomber and saw yeoman service in the battle of Midway in 1942. Over 1,000 were built.

This now brings me to how I was aboard *Magnificent* in September of 1953 when she sailed from Halifax to join a fleet of NATO ships and aircraft on what was heralded as the greatest maritime maneuvers in history,

Exercise *Mariner*. Over a 19-day period, 300 ships, 1000 aircraft, and half a million men from nine NATO countries took part in coordinated operations in the North Atlantic, North Sea and the English Channel. The primary object of this massive undertaking was to test the efficiency of the participating naval forces under simulated conditions of war. What I am about to relate to you is the story of a miracle and it is told not only through my personal recollections but also through my friend, Stuart Soward's book, *Hands to Flying Stations Vol. 1* and the recollections of *Magnificent's* Captain, Vice Admiral H.S. Rayner.

For *Magnificent*, the exercise began on September 16 when she sailed as the senior ship of a task force to provide anti-submarine and air defense for a 10-ship logistic force convoy. Flying intensity was of high order with our squadron Avengers flying around the clock on anti- submarine patrols, maintaining four aircraft on station. Our fighter aircraft, the Hawker Sea Fury's, were conducting dawn-to-dusk combat air patrols in defense of the fleet and convoy. An additional asset to the air surveillance of the fleet was provided by a flight of airborne-early-warning Avengers called "Guppies". Fitted with the powerful APS 20 Radar they provided radar intelligence on all surface units within 100 miles of the carrier.

After the first phase of *Mariner* was completed, the convoy group assumed the role of a logistic support force. Replenishment was carried out and *Magnificent* and her escorts were now integrated in a fast carrier force with two American Essex Class carriers, USS *Bennington* and USS *Wasp*. The fleet was now transiting one of the most treacherous and unpredictable ocean areas involving the combination of the Labrador and Greenland Currents and the Gulf Stream. The ensuing merging of these three different overlapping currents was not only subject to changing air masses overhead, but the entire region was notorious for its unpredictable weather patterns.



USS *Bennington* - During the fog incident, *Magnificent* would give shelter to one of *Bennington's* Skyraiders. Photo: USN

On September 23 a series of events unfolded around the three-carrier task force which swiftly deteriorated into an extremely dangerous situation. It was feared that a catastrophe was about to take place and of such proportions that it would result in the worst peace time disaster in history.

Let me share more of this unbelievable story through the eyes of Vice Admiral H.S Rayner in a newspaper article in the *Calgary Herald* 11 years after the event. I quote,

"Probably the most hair-raising incident in the peace time history of the RCN has been recounted for the first time by Vice Admiral H.S Rayner who retires this month as the Chief of the Naval Staff.

Admiral Rayner told a reporter that the September 23 incident, when Canadian and American carrier-borne planes were almost lost en masse sticks out in his mind as vividly as his battle actions as a destroyer commander in World War Two. At the time, Rayner was commanding the aircraft carrier Magnificent which was in company with US carriers Bennington and Wasp, the US battleship Iowa and a host of other Canadian, American and NATO ships on exercise Mariner in the mid Atlantic. The nearest landing field was an unmanned strip on the southern tip of Greenland 450 miles from the fleet. Admiral Rayner tells the story this way. "Weather information on that particular afternoon was unusually meagre. At 1330, 52 aircraft were launched in good weather to carry out an exercise some distance from the fleet. Without warning a blanket of fog rolled in!. The aircraft were recalled at 1440 but only 10 managed to land. Repeated attempts were made to talk down more planes using radar and radio but the pilots couldn't get low enough to see the decks. We could hear the unseen approaches through the solid wall of fog. The Iowa and cruisers were ordered well astern of the carriers to eliminate the hazards of masts and high structures for the aviators.

The three carriers were formed in line abreast. We were entirely dependent on radar because the ships had lost sight of one another in the fog. The planes formed up high above and were orbiting the position of the unseen fleet below. At 1620 it was estimated the planes had enough fuel for another 2 hours. Plans for a mass ditching of aircraft were made. Boats were manned with picked crews, ropes were rigged to hang down over the side, life rafts were readied for slipping, the sick bay was prepared and our two Padres were pacing up and down the flight deck praying for divine intervention.

Then came a call from the US submarine, Redfin, 10 miles to the west. Redfin said the ceiling near her was 100 feet with 2 miles visibility. The carriers could not reach the area by dark but the aircraft could so we decided to head for Redfin where the pilots could ditch in a group near the submarine. Just as darkness approached There was a miracle! That is the only word for it. The fog ahead began to thin and lift a bit. We began to make out other ships. The planes were recalled and came down one by one on which ever carrier was most convenient. At 1820 it was dark and 10 planes were still in the air even though their estimated fuel time had passed. But they all got down.



Re-enactment - A Skyraider attempts a landing on USS Wasp just as the fog lifts enough to recover aircraft. Photo Illustration: manipulated USN image



Re-enactment - At last!, with only fumes left in her tanks, the first Skyraider lands successfully aboard *Wasp* and the end of a terrifying day begins. Photo Illustration: manipulated USN image

Within minutes after the last plane landed the fog shut down again. An isolated patch of warm water on the way to Redfin had opened up the fog at exactly the critical moment” and so the article ended.

As I was flying one of the last 10 aircraft my perspective was much different. After our 1330 launch we formed up in two flights of four with the Guppy Avenger leading and were vectored by the ship in the direction of the enemy submarine *Redfin*, that had been shadowing the fleet. Our mission was to engage. Not long after turning on course we were instructed to begin an orbit until further notice. After another 20 minutes we were told to fly in loose formation and to lean out our fuel/air mixture to conserve fuel. What was happening?

When the minutes grew into hours, a real sense of alarm crept over us. As the afternoon waned we noticed the sea began to cloud over and before long was gone from sight. It was then that we were informed that the fleet was fog bound. Where in the world were we going to go? I thought, with night coming on and the prospects of having to go down through the fog in formation our chances of landing on were going to be slim. At this point, our Guppy aircraft was ordered to attempt a landing aboard the ship using its great radar to track in.

They didn't make it. They couldn't get close enough to see the ship and overshot and returned to altitude. Before long they were called in again and again to no avail. There was utter silence in our cockpit. It slowly began to dawn on us that we might have to ditch our aircraft and by the look of our dwindling fuel supply and the gathering darkness it would be sooner rather than later. It was hard to believe but I started to go over the ditching procedures. My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the ship calling the Guppy in again. We held our breath! Minutes later, a triumphant cry broke the silence. "We have made it on board!" We had a chance!



Re-enactment - The first Avenger "Guppy" catches a wire aboard *Magnificent*. Photo Illustration: manipulated RCN image

With that initial success the ship began to clear us in two-by-two and when it came to our turn, I closed up on my formation leader tucking in as close as I dared. He signaled a descent and before long we entered the dense fog. Visibility deteriorated drastically. When my radio altimeter registered 150 feet above the water and I could barely make it out I felt a flash of despair. Suddenly a light swept by us. What was that? Then another and another went by. We found out later that the lights were flares thrown into the sea by the ships crew. Our leader followed them until we saw the wake and then the stern of our carrier and we came up along her starboard side and into the upwind leg of the landing circuit.



Re-enactment - "I closed up on my formation leader tucking in as close as I dared. He signalled a descent and before long we were in dense fog." Photo Illustration: RN image and Dave O'Malley

When the leader turned down wind I counted to 10 and did the same. Darkness had fallen and as we came abreast of the ship downwind we could barely make out her silhouette. When we turned onto the approach I settled down to watch the Batsman's signals like never before for we did not know if we had have enough fuel to go around again. As we approached the ship's round-down with a Roger signal meaning "you are in the groove" the tension eased. He gave a cut signal and we landed on with a welcome thud.

As I was clearing the deck, I noticed an American Skyraider aircraft ahead of me. Any old port in storm I guess! When I climbed out of the cockpit, my legs gave way and I slid off the wing into the arms of a group of cheering deck hands. One thoughtful deckhand thrust a tot of Navy rum into my trembling hands and as I slowly drank it down I felt the tension of all those hours in the air begin to ebb. The remaining aircraft came aboard safely. We had all made it. HALLELUJAH! And then the fog closed down again.

There was great rejoicing and thanksgiving in the ship and, indeed, in the entire fleet that night. Aboard *Magnificent*, we attended chapel and gave thanks for the safe return of all of the aircraft and for the blessed miracle that made it happen. We welcomed our fellow pilot from *Bennington* and he was overjoyed to share in the libations that our wardroom bar served. The USN does not serve alcohol aboard their ships but in this case an exception was made. According to test pilot Don Mallick in his book *The Smell of Kerosene - A Test Pilot's Odyssey*, "The flight surgeons [aboard *Wasp*] broke out the medicinal alcohol (brandy) to celebrate and help relieve the stress. The fog lifted sometime the next day but it was several days before the "whiskey front" cleared".



Days later, the relieved and possibly still-hung-over pilot of the *Bennington*-based Skyraider gets ready to launch while Hayter and his Avengers warm up on the aft aircraft park. Photo: RCN/DND

The following morning I made my way to the flight deck to clear my head from the celebration of the night before and to look at the visiting aircraft. It was covered in graffiti. As I began to chuckle at the scene the Captain appeared. He was not chuckling. He ordered the crew to erase the graffiti but did acquiesce to leaving a small red maple leaf on the fuselage as a memento of the terrifying night a young American pilot found safe haven aboard a Canadian carrier.

When *Mariner* was completed and the ship back in Halifax, I was promoted to Lieutenant. When my time in the Avenger Squadron ended, my C.O. asked me if I would like to take the Batsman's course in Pensacola, Florida. I was really flattered for I could have followed in my brother's footsteps but we were leaving the service at the end of our seven years and it was not possible.

I went on to take a helicopter course and spent the next two years helping to form up and serve in an anti-submarine squadron using Sikorsky helicopters. Our second beautiful daughter was born.

As our last day in the service and a new beginning approached a group of our friends threw a farewell party for us. As I looked into their dear faces I was reminded of the life and times that we had spent with this unique, professional and happy band of warriors and of the miracle we had been given. It was a life that was so meaningfully described by an unknown American naval pilot when he said, "It gave us moments of fear and loneliness, kinship and challenge, joy and sorrow, pride, tragedy and triumph. It became a part of us then and is a part of us now. It will be with us until the end of our days, THE CARRIER EXPERIENCE! "