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CONTENTS

Cover Story

A Manitoba "Naval Ace"

Page 4

The Friends of the Naval
Museum

Manitoba Naval Museum
Information

Naval Museum:

See also: "A Legacy in
Stone" Brochure - "The
Prairie Sailor Memorial"

WHEELHOUSE LOG

SPRING 2024

A MANITOBAN "NAVAL ACE"

William "Bill" Henry Isaac Atkinson was born on 22 April 1923 and raised at Minnedosa, Manitoba. Later he made his home in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

In the winter of 42-43, at the tender age of 19, Bill Atkinson made a decision that would alter his life forever: He decided to volunteer for naval service. It was cold Manitoban winter day, 13 Jan 43, when Bill Atkinson was accepted into the RCNVR at HMCS CHIPPAWA in Winnipeg. But, unlike others who were joining the Navy at that time, Bill did not have plans to go to sea on a convoy escort. Instead, he chose and was accepted into a special program that provided pilots to the Royal Navy.



A Hellcat N.F.II, as flown by Lt. W.H. Atkinson, RCNVR, 1844 Squadron Detachment aboard HMS FORMIDABLE, July 1945. Atkinson shot down the last three enemy aircraft for the Fleet Air Arm in World War II on 25 July 1945. (Photo: Bill Atkinson)

Atkinson immediately went overseas to the United Kingdom where he did his basic flying training at HMS St. Vincent as a Leading Naval Airman, RNVR. He then was dispatched to RCAF Goderich for Elementary Flight Training School in 1943 and to RCAF Aylmer, Ontario for Service Flying Training School. He received his pilot wings in April 1944 and was promoted to Petty Officer Pilot RNVR on 1 March 1944. Administratively, he transferred back to the RCNVR at that time and assumed the commissioned rank of Acting Sub-Lieutenant (seniority dated 1 April 1944). In 1944 he was posted to HMS Macaw and RAF Erroll for Advance Flying Training.

His first active posting was to No. 761 RN Squadron in 1944 and to Royal Naval College Greenwich in 1944. He was promoted Sub-Lieutenant RCNVR on 1 October 1944 and then was posted to HMS Ravager for Deck Landing Training on Seafires. Later he was transferred to RNAS Puttalan (Ceylon) for advanced Flying Training on the Grumman Hellcat.

OPERATION ICEBERG

The US built F6F Hellcat was developed from the "Wildcat". The Hellcat was, without a doubt one of the finest carrier-borne fighters available at the time. In its USN wartime service, Hellcat pilots were responsible for approximately 5,000 of the 6,500 Japanese aircraft that were shot down.



SLt Bill Atkinson (right) shares the story of the night's adventure with SLt Mackie (left) after their return to HMS FORMIDABLE. (Photo: Bill Atkinson)

In December 1944 Atkinson was posted to the 1844 RN Hellcat Squadron aboard HMS INDOMITABLE. Soon after the RN fleet had been asked to carry out a strike on the oil fields and tanks at Palembang. The Americans had tried but without success. The targets in the Palembang area were at Songei Gerong, which had been the East Indies oil refinery for the Standard Oil Company. The other was at Pladjoe, the former Royal Dutch Shell refinery. Both were quite large and between them produced and supplied 50% of the oil used by Japan, including 75% of the vital aviation fuel.

On 24 and 29 Jan 45, SLt Atkinson flew his Hellcat as a combat air patrol during carrier-borne aircraft attacks against the oil refineries at Palembang. In this operation the allied forces claimed thirteen Japanese planes and six probable at a cost to us of six corsairs and one Hellcat.

In early April 1945, Atkinson found himself participating in the strikes to neutralize the Sakishima Gunto Island group and in air strikes on Formosa. Called OPERATION ICEBERG these raids were designed to neutralize airfields that were being used by the Japanese to re-supply Okinawa.

In the initial raid on the Miyako Airfield Atkinson downed his first enemy plane as a wartime pilot, a Japanese "Betty" bomber, but he was only awarded a "probable kill". On a subsequent raid, on 6 April 45 he scored his first confirmed kill, a "Judy" bomber.



SLt Bill Atkinson
(Photo: Bill Atkinson)

Six days later, on 12 Apr 45, Atkinson shot down an enemy "Zero" which was credited to him as a "confirmed kill". He was also credited with another "probable kill" which was a Japanese "Tony" fighter. The next day, on 13 Apr 45, he was confirmed with another "kill" of a Japanese "Betty" bomber. On 15 Apr 45 Atkinson shared in the destruction of a Myrt reconnaissance aircraft. These achievements were not without cost, and in an attack on Sakishima on 21 May 45 his aircraft was badly damaged by flak.

At the end of June 1945, while the INDOMITABLE was undergoing refit, the 1844 Squadron was relocated to HMS FORMIDABLE. Atkinson was in good company on the FORMIDABLE as other Canadians serving there at the time were Lt Robert Hampton Grey, Lt G.A. Anderson (1841 Squadron), Lt Charles Edgar Butterworth (1942 Squadron) and Lt. J.F. Ross (1842 Squadron).

In the Company of Good Friends

During his attachment to FORMIDABLE, Atkinson achieved a rare distinction on the night of July 25. Four Hellcats were scrambled on a night combat air patrol. These were conventional Hellcat II's [F6F-5s] without radar, but their pilots had been trained in night flying. Shortly after assuming patrol, incoming Japanese aircraft were detected. Two Hellcats were forced to return to the carrier unserviceable. SLt Atkinson assumed the lead of the remaining two Hellcats and was vectored out on an intercepting course. Under a full moon, Atkinson identified the bandits as big, single engine "Grace" torpedo planes and took his New Zealand wingman, Sub-Lieutenant R.F. Mackie, into the attack. Atkinson latched on a pair of Graces and shot them both into the water while Mackie dumped the third. Then, in routing the other bandits, a fourth Grace was damaged and the enemy attack was completely broken up.

Atkinson was credited with shooting down three Grace Torpedo bombers, with Mackie claiming the fourth. Atkinson thereby established himself as the second Canadian "Naval Ace" of the Pacific war.

A tragedy was also averted following the action that same night. Mackie lost his electrical system and radios in the skirmish; he became disoriented, had lost Atkinson and had no means of locating the distant blacked-out carrier. Fortunately, as Atkinson came into land aboard and the carrier was illuminated, Mackie saw the distant flash of light and flew safely back to the FORMIDABLE.

The war was nearly over, but the Fleet Air Arm still had business to do. On a clear and sunny 9 Aug 45, after he had completed an earlier sortie, SLt Bill Atkinson was the friend who helped a fellow Canadian, Lt. Hampton Gray, RCNVR, of Nelson B.C., strap himself into his Corsair fighter-bomber in preparation for a raid at Onagawa Bay, Japan. In that day's raid Hampton-Gray sunk the Japanese Destroyer Amakusa, but was tragically killed in the process. For his valour, Lt Hampton Gray was awarded the Victoria Cross.

By war's end, most of SLt Bill Atkinson's wingmates, both Canadian and Allied pilots, had perished. This is the sad truth behind the young pilot's valour and wartime exploits. But, for his intrepid flying, Atkinson was awarded initially with a Mention in Despatches which was followed by the Distinguished Service Cross "For gallant services in the Pacific. For gallantry, skill and marked devotion to duty in the Far East."

After the war, Atkinson stayed with the Navy. He served with the RCN as a Squadron Leader and as a pilot for the Banshee aircraft. In 1958 he was posted to HMCS Nootka as Executive Officer, and after being promoted to Commander in 1962, he assumed Command of HMCS HAIDA from 20 July 1962 to 22 September 1963. Later he became Commanding Officer of HMCS Venture, the Officer Training School. Commander Bill Atkinson retired from the RCN on 1 September 1973 and moved to Peachland, B.C.

In his naval career, Bill Atkinson flew a total of 3,400 Hours and accomplished 241 day deck landings and 34 night deck landings. He was one of only sixteen WW2 Fleet Air Arm pilots to achieve five or more air victories.

Story by Mark Nelson, CHIPPAWA Alumnae Association

Picture Gallery



Cdr Bill Atkinson
(Photo: Bill Atkinson)



The Friends of the Naval Museum

The Friends of the Naval Museum of Manitoba is a fund-raising organization set up to provide the Naval Museum with the donations of funds it requires to operate.

The Friends of the Naval Museum are dedicated to preserving naval heritage in Manitoba, and in turn promote the history of Canada's Navy.

For more information please contact Commander Claude Michon (Retd) at <mailto:friends@naval-museum.mb.ca>



The Naval Museum of Manitoba located at
HMCS Chippawa 1 Navy Way Winnipeg

When is the Museum open?

Wednesday 9:00 am to 3:00 pm
School or Group Tours available on request.
Contact: Claude Rivard
Phone (204) 9437745 Et: 3294
Contact can also be made through the website
<https://naval-museum.mb.ca/>

Was a member of your family in the Royal Canadian Navy during WWII?

All Donations made to the Naval Museum, whether they are naval artifacts or financial donations, will receive a receipt for charitable purposes.

For More information call:
Claude Rivard, Curator
Phone: 204-943-7745 Ext: 3294