

**A chap who loved guns -
the highest-ranking machine-gunner in the
North Atlantic Squadron**



Albert Earl Godfrey, known as Steve to his friends, grew up in Vancouver. He loved guns and all things military, so much that in 1902, at the age of 12, he joined the 6th Regiment of the Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles as a drummer and bugler.

He was building his own airplane when World War I started, so he immediately volunteered for the Royal Flying Corps. However he would have had to pay for his own flight training. Being unable to do so, in January 1915 he joined the 11th Canadian Mounted Rifles and then the 1st Canadian Pioneer Battalion, going to England in November 1915. While there, he tried to take flying lessons, but his Commanding Officer

would not give him the time off from his duties. He shipped off to France, and served in the trenches until mid-1916.

While in France, he was awarded a medal for his meritorious work inventing an automatic rifle, in fact converting an ordinary rifle as used in the trenches to full automatic. His invention won for him an audience with General Currie, Canadian Corps Commander, to whom Godfrey expressed his desire to get into the British Royal Flying Corps (RFC). His wish granted, he was commissioned in 1916 to serve as an observer in No. 10 Army Co-operation Squadron. He then joined a fighter squadron and won his wings as a pilot.

He normally flew the Nieuport 17, most often associated with Billy Bishop VC, a peculiar plane. Its normal armament was a Lewis machine-gun attached to the upper wing and accessible through a sliding rail. Once emptied, the ammunition drum had to be changed by hand, often in the middle of a fight. To always have a gun available, Godfrey, with his skill as a gunsmith, managed to fit two machine-guns to his Nieuport, although changing drums was still quite a job.

During WW I, he became an ace, with 14 kills to his credit. After his military service he went into the civil aviation branch of the Dominion Government, and in 1922 he entered the Royal Canadian Air Force to take command of Camp Borden. In 1926 he made the first trans-Canada seaplane flight, and in 1928 he made the first airmail flight across Canada. During the Second World War, he held a number of key positions and in December 1941 he became Deputy Inspector General of the RCAF.

A Canadian Legion source says that Godfrey was close to his men. Early in 1926, writing of his wartime experiences, he observed: "Only once during my career with the Air

Service did I have the opportunity of seeing the Commander of the Air Force. It gives one the impression that there is a tendency among the senior officers to completely overlook the existence of the junior officers. The same conditions prevail among the junior officers, as I have noticed, much to my regret, how a great many of them completely ignore the existence of the men. In my opinion, there is nothing that keeps up the spirit of the personnel more than occasional visits from senior officers.”



Gander 1943/09/22

He was in fact visiting RCAF Station Gander on Sept. 22, 1943, while No.10 (Bomber Reconnaissance) Sqdn, better known as the famous North Atlantic Squadron, was engaged in intense coverage of an Europe-bound convoy which was under heavy U-boat attack. Being pretty much a “hands-on” type of chap and certainly not known for micro-managing, the deputy inspector-general of the RCAF decided to “inspect” at first hand, taking up the role of waist gunner in a Liberator. Squadron-Leader J.F. Green was his chosen captain. The aircraft was a B-24 Liberator with the identification 594 “P”.

At dawn on Sept 23, Sqn-Ldr Green attempted an attack on a surfaced U-boat, spotted by radar, scoring some machine

gun hits, but unable to get into a bomb drop position. The next six hours were uneventful, although the very presence of the Liberator inhibited U-boat operations.

At last they found another enemy vessel. This one, U-422, chose to fight on the surface and Godfrey hammered away with a .50-calibre gun, becoming the most senior RCAF officer to fire on the enemy during the war. After 27 minutes, the submarine dived. Green dropped two acoustic homing torpedoes (which malfunctioned) before returning to base. U-422, en route home with wounded aboard, was sunk 17 days later by aircraft from the USS Card.

Air Vice Marshal Godfrey retired from service in 1944 and passed away 1 January 1982. The airplane itself later crashed in a snowstorm in Gander, on 13 February 1945, a total loss but with no casualties.

Godfrey was immensely proud of two things. One was having held, from 1910 to 1944, virtually every rank from bugler to air vice-marshal. The other was that of being the most senior Canadian officer to fire directly on the enemy during World War II, which he did while flying from Gander with famous North Atlantic Squadron (10 Bomber Reconnaissance), in a plane that later crashed there.

Maybe a street should be named after him.