

Exercise Call Shot 1979

There was a prestigious international air weapons competition that took place at the USAF's Tyndall Air Force Base, which was 19 km east of Panama City, Florida known as William Tell during the even-numbered year. This competition pitted the best of the NORAD Air Interceptor (AI) Squadrons against each other. In the competition, teams representing the various major commands of the USAF compete in live-fire exercises, using towed banner targets for gun engagements, and obsolete fighters converted into unmanned target drones (QF-4 Phantoms) for air-to-air missile engagements. The majority of Squadrons that participate are USAF ones, with Canada having sent one of its CF-101 Voodoo Air Interceptor (AI) Squadrons to participate in that portion of the competition. In 1972, it was won by a Canadian team from 425 All Weather Fighter Squadron "Les Alouettes".

In order to choose which Canadian AI Sqn would represent Canada at William Tell 1980, there was a competition in Bagotville in September 1979. I was asked by the Base Aircraft Engineering and Maintenance Officer (BAMEO), Major Stan Broadbridge, if I would like to head up the Maintenance Team for the Competition.

I had been the OC of the Mechanical Support Organization (MSO) as well as the Avionics Support Organization (AVSO) up until that June, so I had 115 airmen and airwomen to look after. I knew most of them well, so I selected Warrant Officer Gerry Cormier to be my 2i/c on the team. Gerry was laid back, but could bring out the best in the technicians. We needed the best of the best from each of the air force trades. We also needed to select our best aircraft for serviceability, and the ones with the best Fire Control Systems (FCS).

Once the team members had discussed and selected the five aircraft for the competition, our maintenance team were given those aircraft to do the major inspections that were required, change out components and tires that would time expire during the exercise and then tweak the fire control components so that the pilots and navs were able to get the best performance out of them.

During the week before Exercise Call Shot, our aircraft had priority for flying the profiles that would be used during the exercise. Each aircraft was assigned to a pilot and a nav pair for the duration until the exercise was over. When they landed, time was taken by the aircrew to debrief the various trades about how the aircraft performed. Gabby Hayes, a Radar Tech (524), was our go-to tech for tweaking the radar and finding FCS faults. He tuned each aircraft's radar and scope displays so that the indicators on the scope matched each AI Nav's sight line when they operated it.



This picture was taken on the last day of Exercise Call Shot '79 at BFC Bagotville, PQ on 15 September, 1979. Rear Row: Norm St. Onge, Bill Carter, Al Oostenbrug, Frank Payeur, Todd Hume, Jim Abbott, Dean Rainkie, Ron Dudley, Earl Robertson, Larry Arnold, Ry Grogan, and Fraser White. Front Row: Doug Mills, George Mitchell, John Turner, Gerry Cormier, Guy Duhamel, Don Nicks, Mac Corbett, Randy Thistle, Norm Bonikowsky, and Owen Coffell.

The ground crew had to have the aircraft 'turned around' in minimal time; fueled, repaired, new drag chute installed, LOX topped up, reloaded, and wind screens cleaned and polished. It was a like concert as the techs performed under the watchful eyes of WO Gerry Cormier in the Line Van. The armourers (MOC 572) did their own loading practices using checklists under the watchful eyes of crew chiefs such as MCpl Brian Thomson and MCpl Al Rice. They used designated aircraft, along with training missiles, rockets, trailers, and equipment. Theirs was a set piece loading scenario that was timed. Although the maintenance crew belonged to the BAMEO and were not officially part of 416 Sqn, we were still given 416 ball caps and squadron crests from the Squadron. This was a real motivator for the Techs. By the time that we were ready to fly to Bagotville in a CC-130

Hercules as a “416 Squadron” team, we will as ready as we were ever going to be.

We were provided with a large sectional tent as our 416 Squadron Maintenance operations area, as were the other two Sqns that we were competing against – 409 Sqn from Comox, and 425 Sqn from Bagotville. The rules were that we could not have any support from our home bases without a ‘travelling time’ delay for spares, if we did not bring them with us. We had everything that we thought we would need, and then some, including a spare engine. We had several ‘Paul Bunyan’ containers that were loaded with all the equipment as well as specialty items such as food and drink for the night that we hosted the members of the other two Sqns that we were competing against. When 409 Sqn hosted, they had hay boxes full of abalone, a seafood delicacy from the coastal waters of southern BC. It was the first time that I had tried it, and it was delicious.

Throughout the competition, it was neck and neck and no one knew for sure who would win. The scores were posted at the end of each day, so we had a snapshot of who was ahead at that time. The aircrew scored points for their airborne intercepts, weapons accuracy, and gunnery. The maintenance team score points for turning around the aircraft in minimal time, reloading them, and declaring them ready for the next mission. All four aircraft that flew the last mission had to be serviceable. There was a spare aircraft that was on standby, and serviceable, should one of the mission ready aircraft be U/S (unserviceable – a term that always confused our American friends – they would use the term NS – not serviceable). There was a penalty for using the spare aircraft in a four-plane mission, which none of us wanted to do, but some teams had to.

There was also weapons loading competition for our armourers. They had practiced in Chatham until they could load an aircraft in their sleep. They had to conduct three ‘scored’ loads, and each had to be done in accordance with the approved check list. In the evenings in YBG, we would move all of the beds in our H-hut back against the walls so that the armourers could do a simulated practice load using the appropriated checklist. MCpl Brian Thompson was the lead armourer and would shout out each step on the loading checklist. All of the maintainers and some of the aircrew would watch the practice and cheer on ‘our boys’. We had a few cases of beer in the barracks, which we enjoyed, but not to excess. After one of our practices, it was noticed that the beer supply had been depleted. It was also noted that 409 Sqn had some cases of beer sitting on the back porch of their H-hut, so being resourceful, some of our members ‘borrowed’ their beer and were going to replace it the next day with cases purchased from the Mess. Well, before we could do that, our deed was discovered and all heck broke

loose. This too was resolved with a promise to give them more beer than was taken – a true air force compromise.

The next day was also the final 'Loading Competition', which we (416 Sqn), won. This gave our Sqn some much needed points. As the end of the day, when the final missions had been flown, we set about servicing our aircraft for their flights home the next day. This was the last time we were 'evaluated' for points, so we did our best to turn the aircraft in minimal time and still follow all of the safety rules. For the aircraft, the HUD tapes of the missions were reviewed and the missions scored. Only the judges knew at that point, who scored what on the final day. We all gathered on the flight line when the time was up for servicing and repairing our Voodoos to await the announcement about who had scored what and which Sqn was the overall winner. We had already packed up most of our spares in the Paul Bunyans for the trip home the next day, Saturday, 15 Sept, 1979, in the CC-130 Hercules back to Chatham.

There were some dignitaries present from Air Defence Command in North Bay, and they were given the privilege of announcing the scores for the various categories of the competition. Our maintenance team finished a close second, but our armourers had won, which put us in first place prior to announcing the aircrew competition results. We knew our jets had been tweaked to perfection, but it all came down to the final flights that day to see how we did against the other two Air Defence Sqns. After the standard build up about how tough the competition had been, how the competitors had given their all, and the judges were praised for their dedication; it was announced that 416 Sqn were the overall winners of the competition. We were all elated. The beer that we celebrated with that night had never tasted so good. Some of our aircrew 'borrowed' a Canadian government licence plate from the line van that we were using because it had the number '36416'. It made it back to Chatham, but had to be shipped back to YBG after being displayed at the morning brief on Monday.

Since our Squadron won the Call Shot '79 Competition, we were selected to represent Canada at the William Tell 1980 competition at Tyndall Air Force Base the next year. Unfortunately for me, Call Shot was considered 'my turn' to lead the team, so a friend of mine, and fellow RMC Class of '76 member, Vern French, was selected to lead the Maintenance Team for that competition. Although disappointed that I was not going, I debriefed Vern about the competition, and helped the team prepared for William Tell. It had been an honour and a privilege to have led such a fine team of maintainers for Call Shot.