

## PROLOGUE

### In Normandy with the RCAF— June 1944

THE SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE IX-Bs landed, one at a time, shrouded in dust. Sod had been lifted from the field, and interlocking steel matting laid over the dusty surface to form the landing strip. Flight Lieutenant A. W. Roseland parked his aircraft and proceeded to the squadron headquarters. It was an eerie feeling, walking on ground that so recently had been enemy territory. Number 442 Fighter Squadron had just been deployed to Ste-Croix-sur-Mer on the Normandy coast on the morning of June 15, 1944, arriving about 0900. The other two squadrons in the wing would follow at half-hour intervals, and the remaining pilots from 442(F) would fly over in Douglas Dakotas around noon. Theirs would be the first complete wing to operate from France in four and a half years. Their aircraft had flown over, strafed and bombed this territory for months. It would take some days before this felt like home.

The pilots were pleased to be located in France. The Spitfire IX-B had a short flying range. While on sorties to France from Ford, Sussex, they had always been at risk of running out of gas and ditching in the channel on their return trip. From Ste-Croix-sur-Mer, they would be over enemy territory almost immediately once in the air.



The countryside around was very flat, green and pretty, with the same hay and grass that Arnold was familiar with in Alberta. To the south, he would have noticed the sparkling green orchard and the bomb craters that dotted the nearby hayfields. German equipment lay scattered on the ground—uniforms, rifles, helmets, gasmasks and hand grenades, soon snaffled as souvenirs. This had been the site of a German headquarters. Hugh Morse, one of Roseland's buddies, climbed a tree in the orchard. He found blood splattered through the limbs—probably that of a sniper, they thought, buried in one of the nearby, recently dug graves. There were plenty that looked less than a week old.

The ground crew for 144 Wing had come over by ship two days earlier to set up the facilities from which the squadron would operate. It was no small task getting three squadrons settled on a barren hayfield and orchard. The wing consisted of three squadrons with a total of thirty-nine officers, of which Arnold was one, and 750 persons of other ranks. Each squadron was set up in a separate location.

The Number 442 Fighter Squadron pilots camped in the orchard. After picking up their tents, they chose a site and dug themselves a deep slit trench to sleep in, as protection from the flak and anti-aircraft fire. Then they set up their tents over their slit trenches, and tucked their personal effects away, as they always did. Although they had moved their location many times, they were now on the front lines of battle and they would sleep in the trenches at night, to protect themselves from enemy fire.

They heard the artillery all day long. As soon as night came, enemy bombers and aircraft made their appearance, their target the mass of Allied shipping in the channel, which was only one mile north of their base at Ste-Croix. The noise of thousands of anti-aircraft guns in the channel, and a nearby Bofors cannon shooting at the aircraft over and above their campsite, created a din that was almost unbearable. The shells from the anti-aircraft guns made an unearthly shrill whine, racing through the night air. Naval gunners in the channel opened up with orange tracers that ripped across the night sky. Periodically, the pilots in their tents felt the earth shake with the impact of falling bombs.



On D-Day, the Allied forces had established beach-heads all along the Normandy coast, with the Americans to the west in the region of Cherbourg, and the British and Canadians to the east in the region of Le Havre. On D-Day, the Canadian army had taken Ste-Croix-sur-Mer, a small village ten miles northwest of Caen, and one mile from the channel, and they had immediately proceeded to establish this airfield. On the same day, the British and Canadian armies advanced towards Caen, but they were held back by a heavy German counterattack. A prime objective of the Allies after D-Day had been to establish an emergency landing strip and refuelling station in France. The next step was to establish a base from which to operate in Normandy, to give their fighters a greater flying range into enemy territory, by not having to cross

the channel twice on each flight. The establishment of this base in Normandy was such a momentous occasion in the turning tide of the war that BBC crews arrived to do newsreels and radio interviews for audiences in Britain and North America.



The morning after Arnold's arrival, six pilots from 442 Squadron were about to take off in their Spitfires when four Focke-Wolfe 190s strafed their airfield. Later that day, a "Beetle Tank" entered the airfield area—a remote-controlled small tank, about four or five feet long. The tank was filled with explosives and propelled by an electric motor. It was one of several weapons the Germans had developed secretly and used in 1944 to bolster their declining manpower resources. The Canadians were not too impressed. The engineers in the squadron proceeded to fix it up to use as a small vehicle to ride in.

Families from the local farms came over to the base to welcome the Canadian airmen, bringing gifts of fruit, flowers and wine. Arnold and a group of airmen visited with children, who showed them papers and ration books that the Germans had given them. The Canadian airmen gave the small children *bonbons* and gum. One child showed his ration of black bread. It was hard, very dark brown, partly mouldy, and a small portion for a day's ration, even for a child. The children told stories of incidents that took place during the occupation, up to the time that the Allied forces had "kicked *les Boches* out." The Canadians later started purchasing milk, vegetables and wine from the local farmers. While

the war went on around them, the farmers continued to work in the fields.



The British and Canadian armies on the ground were battling to take the city of Caen, only ten miles to the southeast. Roseland and the other pilots of 442(F) spent many hours on patrol over the battlefield, keeping the airspace clear of enemy aircraft, to allow the armies on the ground to do their job. On other sorties, the Spitfires strafed moving vehicles on roadways and other targets, and dive-bombed specific targets such as bridges and railways, in order to cut off enemy supplies and reinforcements. One night, when American bombers came over from Britain to bomb Caen, the airfield was treated to a spectacle, as nine air crew bailed out of an American B-17 Fortress before it took its final plunge to the ground and burst into flames. It crashed only a short distance from the end of their airstrip.

After a week at Ste-Croix, Arnold wrote to his sister Agnes in Canada, “. . . *it's not so bad here, and we do manage to stay quite comfortable even though conditions are a bit rugged . . . . It is so much better to be nearer the battle, and not have all that water to cross—twice each trip . . . .*” He added, “*It was certainly grand to receive some mail once again—after what seemed like a very long wait.*” He stated that he wasn't getting the opportunity to write the number of letters that he usually wrote.

Even his wife, Audrey, was not getting her usual number of letters. He thought she understood, though, that he wouldn't be able to write as

often. She had written that everything was under control at home, and that she and the children were in good health. *“We’re both looking forward very much to the time when this is all over and we’re back together once again—for good this next time, I hope. I have had enough travelling and adventure in the past four weeks to last one a lifetime, I’m sure. Now I am looking forward to settling down in our own little home somewhere.”*

Arnold was twenty-eight years old, almost the same age that his father was forty years earlier, when he wrote of a similar longing to his sister back home.



*Flight Lieutenant A. W. Roseland, RCAF 1944*