



**THE
GREAT
EAGLE
ALBATROSS
CONTROVERSY**

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TIME WAS, SAY THE OLDSTERS, when a simple statement in a Service Mess about the bird that appears on RCAF [Royal Canadian Air Force] buttons and badges was sure to start an argument that would last far into the night.

This once-burning issue about the bird's true identity has all but flickered out, and (it is hoped) new members of the Force are correctly "indoctrinated" that the bird is an eagle. Mention that to a veteran wearing First World War ribbons, however, and you run a risk of becoming involved. If he flew in the Old Royal Naval Air Service [RNAS] (and three of our four Chiefs of the Air Staff did), a gleam will come into his eye and he will begin convincing you. By the third round you will find yourself tactfully agreeing that it isn't an eagle at all, but—as any clot can plainly see—an albatross.

Actually the controversy was settled—officially—long before it even began, and, for the benefit of those who have endured, or have yet to face, the argument, here are the facts.

It all started in the summer of 1914 when the Board of Admiralty took it upon itself, in defiance of Cabinet orders issued two years earlier, to rename the Naval Wing of the Royal Flying Corps [RFC] as the Royal Naval Air Service, and issued regulations for the organization, rank titles and uniform of the Service. These regulations of 23 June, 1914, clearly stated that officers of the RNAS would wear an eagle on the left sleeve above the rank lace. An eagle was also substituted for the anchor on buttons, cap badges, and other insignia. According to tradition, the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty adopted the eagle design

(outstretched wings with head inclined to the right) from a brooch which the wife of a naval officer had purchased in Paris. So, from the very moment it was hatched, the bird was an *eagle*.

But, as many will tell you, regulations are meant to be printed, not heeded. It may be that the outbreak of war a few weeks later caused the details of the regulations to be overlooked

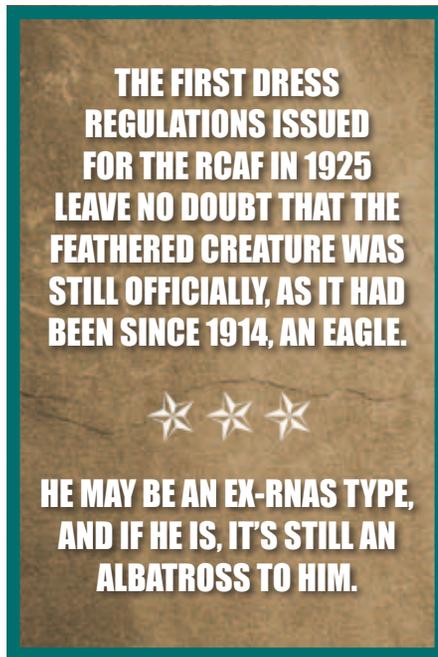
or forgotten—or read in true Nelson fashion with telescope to the blind eye. Or maybe the Navy fliers decided that the eagle, a land bird, had no place in a naval service. At any rate, before long the members of the RNAS considered as high treason any suggestion that their bird was other than a proper seagoing albatross.

Then, in 1918, the RFC and RNAS were merged into the Royal Air Force [RAF], and the new Air Force took over the RNAS rank insignia—and the bird. Quite naturally, ex-RNAS

members carried with them into the RAF their unswerving loyalty to the albatross, although there is nothing to show that the RAF ever regarded it—officially—as anything but an eagle.

When the CAF [Canadian Air Force] was formed in Canada in 1920 it carefully sidestepped the issue by adopting a uniform with army rank badges and insignia that contained wings but no bird. When the RCAF emerged in 1924, however, it adopted the RAF style uniform with all its appurtenances, including the bird. The first dress regulations issued for the RCAF in 1925 leave no doubt that the feathered creature was still officially, as it had been since 1914, an *eagle*.

Many of the RCAF's early personnel were veterans who had flown with the RNAS and, true to the traditions of the "Silent Service,"



they eloquently and persuasively spread the myth that the bird worn by the RCAF was really an albatross. The argument smouldered for years, mostly in the messes, although occasionally someone actually sat down to write a memo about it.

When the Second World War came along, the controversy flared up again. Thousands of wartime recruits were told that the bird they wore on their shoulders and brass buttons was an albatross. Thousands more were told that it was an eagle. To others it was simply a bird, although one officer irreverently suggested it was a pregnant duck. Of course, no one bothered to consult the regulations.

The controversy should have been settled, once and for all, in January 1943. Ever since 1924 the RCAF had been using as its “official” badge the badge of the RAF, modified by the addition of a scroll bearing the words “Royal Canadian Air Force.” After 18 years of use it was, somewhat belatedly, discovered that this

RCAF badge had never been officially approved or sanctioned. The Chester Herald, who had been appointed Inspector of RCAF Badges, accordingly prepared a proper design, improving upon the 1924 version, and in January 1943 this general badge of the RCAF was approved by H. M. the King. The Chester Herald’s description of the badge clearly and specifically refers to the bird in the design as “an eagle volant affronté, the head lowered and to the sinister.” In short, it was still an eagle and always had been—although the albatross was a very nice bird, too. Nevertheless, rumblings of the controversy were still heard until the end of the war.

Today, former members of the RNAS are so few in the RCAF that there is little they can do about it except mutter in their beer. But even so, if the subject should ever come up and there’s an old veteran about, be careful. **He may be an ex-RNAS type, and if he is, it’s still an albatross to him. ■**