

Luis Fortin: Dodging Flak for France

Bomber pilot Luis Fortin was a rare bird among World War II airmen: an Argentine-born volunteer in a Free French squadron in Britain's Royal Air Force, flying an American-built plane.

By Jon Guttman

There is a reason it was called a world war. Besides the major powers involved, numerous lesser countries were caught up in the global struggle that officially began with the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. Volunteers from neutral or occupied countries fought in the Allied or Axis armies, navies or, most noticeably, air forces. The Luftwaffe included Slovak, Croatian and Spanish fighter squadrons. The Soviet army air force had Czech, Polish and French regiments. During the 1939-40 Winter War, Finland had a flight whose Gloster Gladiator fighters and their pilots came from Sweden. Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF) outdid them all, however, with squadrons made up of Czechs, Poles, Belgians, Dutch, French and Norwegians, as well as three "Eagle Squadrons" of Americans who had volunteered before their country entered the conflict.

Within that context, Luis Horacio Fortin may have a multinational status unique among wartime airmen. An Argentine citizen, he volunteered to fight for France and, after doing some of his training in Canada, ended up in an RAF squadron of French airmen-in-exile carrying on the struggle from Britain -- flying American-built aircraft.

"I was born in Buenos Aires on February 14, 1920," said Fortin. "My mother was an Argentinian. My father was French, sent by a French company that built and operated the port of Rosario, 400 kilometers north of Buenos Aires, on the Parana River, which shipped cereals from Argentina to Europe.

"I went to war out of love for my father's country," he explained. "In September 1939 I went to the French ambassador in Buenos Aires and told him I wanted to go and fight for France. The ambassador thanked me, but said that when it came to foreign volunteers, France only asked for specialists: medical doctors, engineers, pilots and -- believe it or not -- veterinarians. I had not thought of flying before, but at that point I decided I wanted to be a pilot. I took a course in Buenos Aires, accumulating 15 to 20 hours. I had just flown solo when the war ended in France. Soon after that, however, 'Comités de Gaulle' were founded all over the world. Those who escaped with General Charles de Gaulle, and Frenchmen everywhere, decided we had to go and help liberate France. Although I had flown only five hours solo, soon I was on the steamship *Trojan Star*, bound for England."

After undergoing RAF entrance tests, Fortin was sent to Canada, first to Monkton, New Brunswick, and then to a flying school in Medicine Hat, Alberta, where he flew in the de Havilland Tiger Moth. His next stop was Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, where higher-ups decided he would be a bomber pilot. "I

trained in twin-engine Airspeed Oxfords and Avro Ansons," Fortin said, "then I was shipped back across Canada and then the Atlantic in what was said to be the largest convoy up to that time -- five or six columns of ships. Prime Minister Winston Churchill was coming across the Atlantic at the same time, and when his ship met our convoy, he went down each column, waving at us." Although Fortin had above-average ratings in his flight tests, the British believed that he did not have enough flying hours, and since they had enough pilots at that time, he was assigned as a staff pilot in a school on the west coast of England, where the RAF trained wireless personnel as SI (secret instrument) operators. When he finally had enough hours, he was sent to an operational training unit in Finmere, where for the first time he flew the Boston, as the British called the Douglas A-20 Havoc. "This was a plane that did not have a dual command -- just a single seat for one pilot," said Fortin. "I flew for about a half-hour as a passenger in the back, then the pilot said, 'Now it's yours.' I flew a few hours, familiarizing myself with the Boston. Then they gave me the Free French crew that was going to fly with me in operations and sent me to No. 342 Squadron, RAF, at Hartford Bridge, Hampshire."

Known as *Groupe Lorraine*, No. 342 Squadron was part of 137 Wing, along with the all-British No. 88 Squadron. "All of the crews in No. 342 Squadron were very French, very patriotic," recalled Fortin, "though they came from all over the world. Among my more interesting squadron mates was gunner Ricardou, who before each mission asked the mechanic to keep his artificial leg, so it wouldn't be stolen by the Germans if he was shot down. Romain Gary, who was of Polish origin, sometimes flew with me as navigator. He later served in the French diplomatic service in California, became a famous author, writing 50 or 60 novels, married a movie star and ended up committing suicide. The squadron's intelligence officer was a woman, Lieutenant Jeannette Mascias."

The Boston Mark IIIA with which No. 342 Squadron was equipped was a version of the Douglas A-20C built to meet British requirements. It was powered by two 1,600-hp Wright Cyclone GR-2600-A5B engines, which gave it a maximum speed of 304 mph and a cruising speed of 250 mph. Britain imported about 200 of that model. In addition to 2,000 pounds of bombs, the Boston IIIA carried as many as seven .303-inch machine guns -- four fixed in the nose, two on a double mounting in the rear cockpit (manned by the wireless operator), and an optional seventh rear-firing weapon in a ventral position. "I remember the first time I did a strafing attack," Fortin remarked with amusement, "and how my bombardier almost had a heart attack when those forward machine guns mounted alongside his position suddenly opened fire for the first time." The plane's operational range was 1,020 miles, and although the service ceiling was 24,250 feet, Bostons usually carried out their missions at half that altitude or lower.

"A Boston's crew consisted of the pilot, a navigator/bombardier and a wireless operator/gunner," Fortin explained. "Sometimes we would also carry another rear gunner, shooting down through a hatch in the fuselage. Many officers who did not want to go back without having fought -- even generals and the medical doctor -- volunteered to go on missions in the ventral gunner's

position. It was a dangerous thing, though. If the plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire, the gunner at the bottom of the fuselage was the most likely one to be wounded or killed. I took 10 to 15 flak holes in my fuselage in many of my missions. But I had a good engineer. He would work all night on the plane, patching the fuselage, and would have it ready in the morning.

"My navigator, Captain Niel, flew most of my 50 missions with me. Niel was a pseudonym, not his real name. Most of our people who had families in France used pseudonyms, to avoid German reprisals against them. Since my only relatives were in Argentina, I used my real name. My wireless operator, John Marius Brown, was French, and that was his real name. I also had a rear gunner named Smith, and that also was his real name -- his family was in England, though his mother was French."

Fortin and his crew flew in boxes of six planes, comprising two three-plane elements. Plane No. 2 would fly to the right of the leader and No. 3 to the left, wingtip to wingtip. No. 4 would fly under them, looking up to the leader, with Nos. 5 and 6 at his sides. A typical bombing raid involved four or five boxes. They flew missions together with No. 88 Squadron, against the same target. Each squadron in the wing had its own leader. The general leader could be from either No. 88 or No. 342 squadron, often alternating from one sortie to the next.

Before the mission, the general leader would do a briefing to designate the target, how to get there, what evasive action to take, etc. Once the planes were underway, the boxes had a certain amount of freedom to maneuver to avoid enemy anti-aircraft fire until they approached the objective. Nine or 10 seconds before the target, the leader of the box would turn on it and, with the help of the navigator, fly straight and level. "This was when we were most vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire," said Fortin. "During that final approach, the leader of each box would be on the radio to the others: 'Left, left...right...steady...steady...go!' Then the six planes would drop their bombs simultaneously, and we would be able to take evasive action again."

Fortin was never attacked by German fighters on any of his missions -- there was good high cover protection from RAF fighters -- but operating at altitudes as low as 8,000-10,000 feet meant the planes could be hit by light, medium or heavy flak. One unusual thing about the Boston was that the pilot was not the last one to bail out. "If the plane was hit," Fortin said, "the bombardier would jump first, while the pilot held the plane on course. The wireless operator had a rudimentary set of controls so that the pilot could then get out of the plane and jump clear and not kill himself hitting the tail, then the wireless operator would bail out."

Fortin's RAF logbook shows that his first RAF sortie with the squadron on February 7, 1944, was just a familiarization flight. Two days later he flew his first bombing mission in a Boston Mark IIIA bearing the squadron code OA-P "P for Peter," which he would pilot on the majority of his missions until the late summer. The French target on February 9 was Febvin-Palfart, and Fortin described the flak at 11,000 feet as "intense, heavy and accurate." One Boston came back on one engine, only to crash-land at the airfield, and Fortin's own plane had 12 holes in it. Fortin got another early taste of "intense, heavy,

accurate" flak during a strike on Flottemanville-Hague, near Cherbourg, on February 15, in which the leader of his box was shot down, and his own plane came back with 37 holes. "After 10 missions," Fortin remarked, "I got to be leader."

Throughout March and April, No. 342 Squadron struck at various targets in France, including sites that British intelligence had learned were being set up to launch a new weapon, the V-1 pulse jet-powered guided bomb. On April 11, Fortin was pulled out for further training in North American Mitchell Mark II bombers with No. 1482 Bombing and Gunnery Flight at RAF Swanton-Morley. He completed the course on the 22nd and on April 25 was back in his Boston, leading a raid on Bois-de-la-Justice through "heavy, moderate, very accurate" flak.

The Allied landings in Normandy on June 6, 1944, were given tremendous air support by both the U.S. Army Air Forces and the RAF, and 137 Wing certainly did its bit. Fortin, however, spent the day on standby, sitting in his plane from 6 p.m. into the night. Finally, at 2:20 a.m. on June 7, he got the order to take off on a night intruder mission to bomb Folligny railroad station and, as he put it, "to hit General Erwin Rommel's troops." June 10 saw him taking off on another nocturnal mission at 2:45 a.m., bombing the marshalling yards at La Haye-du-Puits at 4,000 feet and returning at 5:15 a.m. On June 13, No. 342 Squadron attacked a concentration of tanks of the 21st Panzer Division six miles northeast of Caen. The next day, Fortin led the wing at 12,000 feet as it bombed a fuel dump at Condé-sur-Vire, six miles southeast of St. Lô. On June 15, the squadron came in at 13,000 feet to hit the headquarters of the German I SS Panzer Corps at St. Vigor-des-Mézerets.

"June 16 marked the end of my first tour of duty," Fortin said, "and on June 17, I began my second tour. There was no time for me to take leave." And so it went on, with the Lorraine squadron doing its best to aid the Allied ground forces in their slow, costly struggle to advance through Normandy and into the open country of France. The Allies finally achieved their breakthrough at the end of July.

On August 4, Fortin took part in a night intruder mission to bomb and strafe German positions at Argentan, Falaise, Condé-sur-Noireau and Flers. "This was a bad mission," he recalled. "Five crews were lost -- one landed at Manston, the others, including my one-legged friend Ricardou, were killed. *Sergeant-Chef* Pierre Pierre's Boston was shot down. With the aid of French civilians, he managed to evade capture, and later rose to the rank of general. My plane was the only one in the box to get back to Hartford Bridge."

On August 13, Fortin was leading four boxes -- the first two from No. 342 Squadron, the third and fourth from No. 88 Squadron -- against a German strongpoint at Donville near St. Pierre-sur-Dives from 13,000 feet. "That was a good bombing," he recalled. "Half of the bombs were on target and half of them overshot. Overall the squadron log commended me for a good concentration." Less fruitful was a mission two days later to the Bois-St. Anne-d'Entremont, five miles northeast of Falaise, when he was recalled to base. "This happened quite often, usually when the weather was bad," Fortin explained. "The target was covered by clouds, and you could not bomb it."

"On August 26, we attacked troops and vehicles crossing the Seine at Rouen," Fortin said. "Flak was heavy, intense but inaccurate over Rouen. Bombing was excellent; we scored a direct hit on the target, the southern dockside. Accuracy was always important to me. We were there to destroy the enemy, but every time I look at reconnaissance photographs marked to show the results of a mission, I think about the innocent civilians who might have been killed by the bombs that, as a result of the carpet bombing, fell outside the target area."

Fortin was serving as general leader to five boxes of Bostons on September 8, when they struck at 105mm gun positions at Boulogne-sur-Mer. "We were at 12,500 feet," he recalled, "and due to clouds we had to make a second run. The flak was heavy, and suddenly I had a fire in the port wing. I had taken a hit in tank No. 1, and the port engine suffered a burst oil pipe. My starboard rudder control was nearly completely cut. I took a direct hit on the directional compass, the intercom between crew and navigator was cut, and I took a hit on the hydraulic system, seeming to leave me with no brakes at all. In spite of that, I landed at Manston, using the emergency brake system. There were more than 50 holes, and the aircraft was written off as Category AC [reparable on site by an attached maintenance unit], but it had gotten us back on one engine. Very strong plane, the Boston." On December 14, 1945, King George VI of England awarded Fortin the Distinguished Flying Cross for his conduct during that mission.

On September 21, Fortin was leading a strike on Fort-de-la-Crêche, three miles north of Boulogne-sur-Mer, at the controls of a new Boston Mark IV (American designation A-20J, featuring four forward-firing .50-caliber machine guns and a rear gun turret), marked OA-Q. "We came in at 9,300 feet, and the weather was very bad," he reported. He then added: "Bombing excellent. We landed at Newchurch." September 26 saw a strike at the road and railway junction at Cleve, Germany, at 12,800 feet. "I was leader of the third box," Fortin noted. "Flak was heavy, intense but inaccurate, bombing excellent. We landed at Manston."

Fortin's 50th and final mission was to have been against German troops three miles northeast of Nijmegen on October 3: "I was the leader, but I was brought back to base -- there were 10/10th clouds [solid cover] over the area. That ended my second tour of operations. While I was in England, the squadron had already moved from Hartford Bridge to Vitry-en-Artois [France], but there I flew only as a passenger. Soon afterward I was sent to the United States to form a squadron in Texas to carry on the war against Japan. I had had enough of military service, however, and since I was a volunteer, a French general who had an office in the Pentagon arranged for me to go to be demobilized in the French Embassy in Buenos Aires. Thus I was able to go back home soon after the war with Japan [ended]. My father was relieved to have me back and proud of what I had done for his country."

Fortin continued his aviation career after World War II. He was the first captain of the international airline Flota Aerea Mercante Argentina (FAMA), where he met his wife, Blanca, who was its first stewardess. They married a year later. After FAMA and other local airlines merged into one service, Fortin was

operations director of Argentine Airlines when it brought in its first de Havilland Comet jet airliner. In 1962, after retiring from the airline due to high blood pressure, he went back to the University of Buenos Aires to get a doctorate in economic studies. He then received an invitation and scholarship to attend Columbia University in New York, where he received a master's degree in business administration on February 26, 1964. "I went back to Argentina to teach," Fortin said, "but its schools could not afford me." He returned to the United States and got his Ph.D. in finance in 1967. He became a senior investment officer in the International Finance Corporation (World Bank). When he retired in 1985, he and his wife decided to stay in the United States. In addition to the British DFC, Luis Fortin was made an *Officier de la Légion d'Honneur* by the French, who also awarded him the *Croix de Guerre* with three Palms. "I was glad to have helped liberate France," he concluded, "but I saw so many of my friends die or come back with their arms or legs shot off that I hoped we had fought the last war, and the world would never have to fight anymore. But I suppose that's too much to hope."