

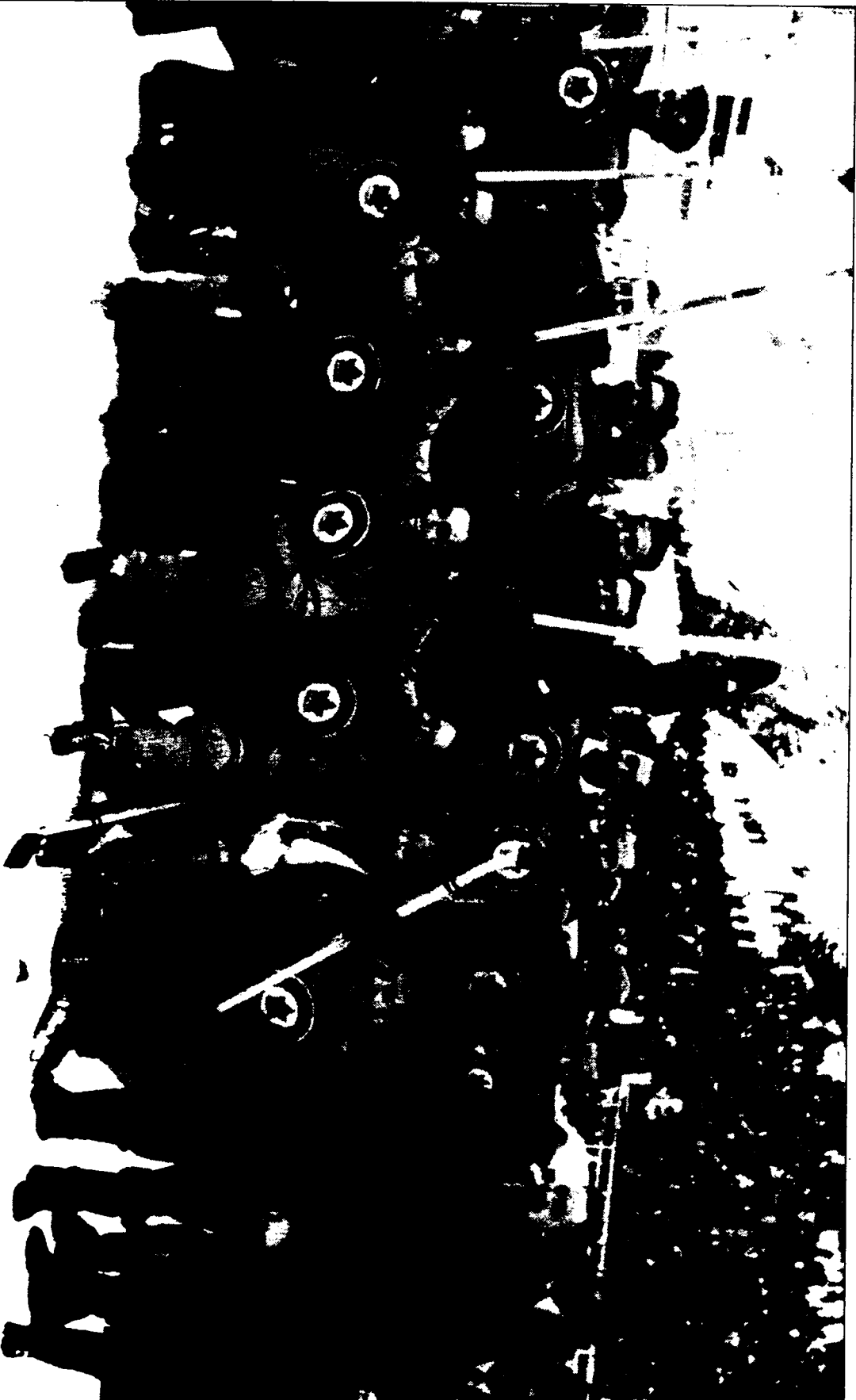
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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

SPORTS

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Canada's winning gold-medal hockey team, the U.S.A. Flyers, celebrates its gold-medal win over Switzerland on the outdoor rink at Mt. Moritz in 1948.

Winning on a wing and a player

Canada is preparing to send a team of National Hockey League professionals to the Winter Olympics for the first time. Fifty years ago, the country had decided not to enter a team in the 1948 Games because of a controversial international decision to narrow the definition of amateur. But thanks to a persuasive senior air force officer with a passion for hockey, Canadian hockey officials and the air force took a flyer and let him put together the 1948 RCAF Flyers and compete in the Games. What was widely seen as an impossible mission turned into one of the great underdog stories in Olympic history and the second-last time Canada won Olympic hockey gold.

BY LES McLAUGHLIN
Special to The Globe and Mail
Ottawa

MURRAY DoweY was settling down to another day's work in his Toronto Transportation Commission office when the telephone call came. The tall, slim, 22-year-old clerk was somewhat taken aback. He had never heard of the fellow on the line, and the request stunned him.

"Could you take the train to Ottawa tomorrow and join our Olympic team as the starting goaltender?" said Squadron Leader Sandy Watson, manager of Canada's hastily organized Olympic hockey team, the RCAF Flyers.

It was Jan. 6, 1948, and in just two days the team was to catch a ship in New York for a transatlantic crossing to Europe and the Winter Olympics in St. Moritz, Switzerland.

The call from Watson to DoweY was symptomatic of all that had gone wrong with Canada's Olympic team.

Unknown goaltender Murray DoweY's fast hands helped make the RCAF Flyers Olympic hockey champions in 1948. Not too shabby a result considering the air force fielded Canada's team.

High Flyers

The 1948 RCAF Flyers, with rank and home town:

Goalies

Ross King, corporal, Portage la Prairie, Man. (deceased).
Murray DoweY, leading aircraftsman, Toronto.

Defence

Roy Forbes, leading aircraftsman, Vancouver.
Louie Lecompte, flight sergeant, Ottawa (deceased).

Frank Dunster, flying officer, Ottawa (deceased).
André LaPerrière, aircraftsman 2, Montreal.

Forwards

Reg Schroeter, flying officer, Ottawa.
Patsy Guzzo, corporal, Ottawa (deceased).
Irving Taylor, corporal, Ottawa (deceased).

Orville Gravelle, aircraftsman 1, Alymer, Que. (deceased).

George Mara, naval reserve, Toronto.
Wally Halder, naval reserve, Toronto (deceased).

Andy Gilpin, sergeant, Montreal.
Pete Leichnitz, aircraftsman 1, Ottawa.
Ted Hibberd, aircraftsman 1, Ottawa.
Ab Renaud, leading aircraftsman, Ottawa.
Hubert Brooks, flying officer, Montreal (deceased).

Coach

Frank Boucher, sergeant, Ottawa.

Manager

Sandy Watson, squadron leader, Port Dover, Ont.

Trainer

George McFaul, corporal, Ottawa (deceased).

It had been 16 years since Canada had won an Olympic gold in hockey. The defending champion was Britain, which won the Olympic tournament in 1936. There were no Olympic Games during the Second World War.

In the summer of 1947, the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association had decided that Can-

ada would not send a team to the St. Moritz Olympics because it could not find one good enough and also meet the International Olympic Committee's stricter new rules governing amateur status. Olympic athletes had to sign a declaration saying they had never taken any money for playing any sport.

"Only players from juvenile or midget teams could qualify as real amateurs," George Duley, secretary-manager of the CAHA, said at the time.

But Canada's protest action did not sit well with Watson, the senior medical officer at the Royal Canadian Air Force headquarters in Ottawa. He had a passion for hockey, he knew hockey politics and he knew the RCAF.

"When I read the headline saying we — this great hockey nation — would not be sending a team, I was offended," Watson recalled recently at his home in Ottawa. "And I thought maybe I could do something about it."

Watson, who went on to become one of Canada's top eye surgeons, set out to persuade the CAHA and the air force that he could put together a true amateur team of airmen from bases across the country.

After all, Watson argued, the RCAF had won the Allan Cup, emblematic of Canadian senior amateur hockey supremacy, in 1942. And he had coached some excellent RCAF teams in Europe just after the war.

Watson promised that his team of RCAF players would be amateur and would be good. The CAHA and RCAF officials were won over by Watson's proposal, with the air force offering to pick up the cost of scouring its ranks of 16,000 for players and sending a team to the Games in Switzerland.

Thus began an odyssey of Olympic promotions, featuring the most unusual group of hockey players ever to represent Canada on the international stage.

Please see **RCAF/58**

RCAF surprised Canada with hockey

◆ From Page S1

"We only had 2½ months to assemble a team," the coach of the Flyers, Frank Boucher, said in an interview. "I knew the air force had good players, but a good team is something else."

Boucher, a sergeant at the time, had the pedigree for the job. A member of the legendary hockey family, he had an illustrious career in the American Hockey League before joining the RCAF. His father, George (Buck) Boucher, had played in the National Hockey League in the thirties. His uncle Frank was Mr. New York Rangers, having played for and coached the NHL team in the thirties and forties.

Training camp in Ottawa began in October of 1947, and more than 200 airmen were ferried in from across the country to strut their stuff for Boucher and Watson.

Boucher recalls thinking that a few of the would-be players were in Ottawa just for the trip.

"One guy who couldn't skate very well says to me, 'Coach, I had my skates sharpened for outdoor ice and they don't work indoors,'" Boucher said with a laugh.

Watson remembered that "one guy who was putting on his hockey uniform held up his garter belt and says to me, 'What's this for?'"

But there were some gems among the recruits, such as Andy Gilpin.

"I'd just been transferred to Whitehorse when the [commanding officer] called me and said I was going to a one-day tryout in Edmonton," the former sergeant said recently from his home in South Bend, Ont. "I hadn't heard a thing about this hockey team.

"I had a wife and two young daughters and didn't want to go, but the CO was the boss."

The special workout in Edmonton took Gilpin to Ottawa for the main tryout camp.

Another find was Hubert Brooks, a flying officer from Montreal who had been shot down over Germany in 1942. He escaped captivity for the third and final time in 1943 and spent the rest of the war working with the Czech and Polish underground. Brooks was one of only five airmen awarded the Military Cross.

Now, he had another chance to serve Canada in Europe and at the same time marry his sweetheart, Birthe Qronved, whom he had met overseas shortly after the war.

In mid-December, the final squad of 17 players was announced. The press, which had not been kind to the Flyers during the tryout camp, was not convinced that the RCAF players were up to the immense challenge.

"Don't expect much from the RCAF Flyers," the Ottawa Journal said. "They are nothing more than an intermediate team that should not be asked to play an exhibition game against any senior team in Canada."

Nevertheless, the RCAF showed off Canada's Olympic hockey team on Dec. 14, when the Flyers played their first exhibition game, against the McGill Redmen, a Montreal university team.



university team.

Air force brass, CAHA officials and more than 6,000 fans were on hand at the old Ottawa Auditorium for the Olympic preview, which included an exhibition by Canada's figure-skating sweetheart, Barbara Ann Scott. She wowed the crowd with her skating, but the hockey game was a disaster. McGill thumped the Flyers 7-0.

The shock waves reverberated throughout Ottawa.

"Between the second and third periods, the Governor-General, Viscount Alexander, came into the dressing room," Boucher said.

"He said, 'What's the matter with my team coach?' I said, 'Sir, if I knew, I'd fix it.'"

Media reaction was ravaging. "The folly of sending a group of hurriedly organized airmen to represent Canada has now become apparent," The Ottawa Citizen roared.

This was not the RCAF's finest hour. The brass knew it. The press knew it. The CAHA knew it. And the fans knew it.

"I don't really know who organized that exhibition game," Boucher said. "We weren't ready. We hadn't gelled as a team yet."

No matter, the message from across the country was clear: Disband the team and cancel the project.

Despite the uproar, the CAHA decided to stick it out, but ordered the Flyers to bolster the squad.

"Sandy Watson's neck was really on the line now," Boucher said. "So was mine, I guess. We didn't have much time left."

To make matters worse, Reuters reported from Europe that the days of North American hockey domination were coming to an end. In the past, Canadians had gone overseas to teach Europeans the game. "The lessons," the news agency said, "had been learned. The U.S. and Canada should send their best amateur teams if they want to win in St. Moritz."

Watson and Boucher knew they needed help. How much, they didn't know.

"One night in December, I got a call from a fellow named Sandy Watson," said Reg Schroeter, a crafty forward who was burning up the Ottawa Senior League for the New Edinburgh Burghs on a line with Ab Renaud and Ted Hibberd.

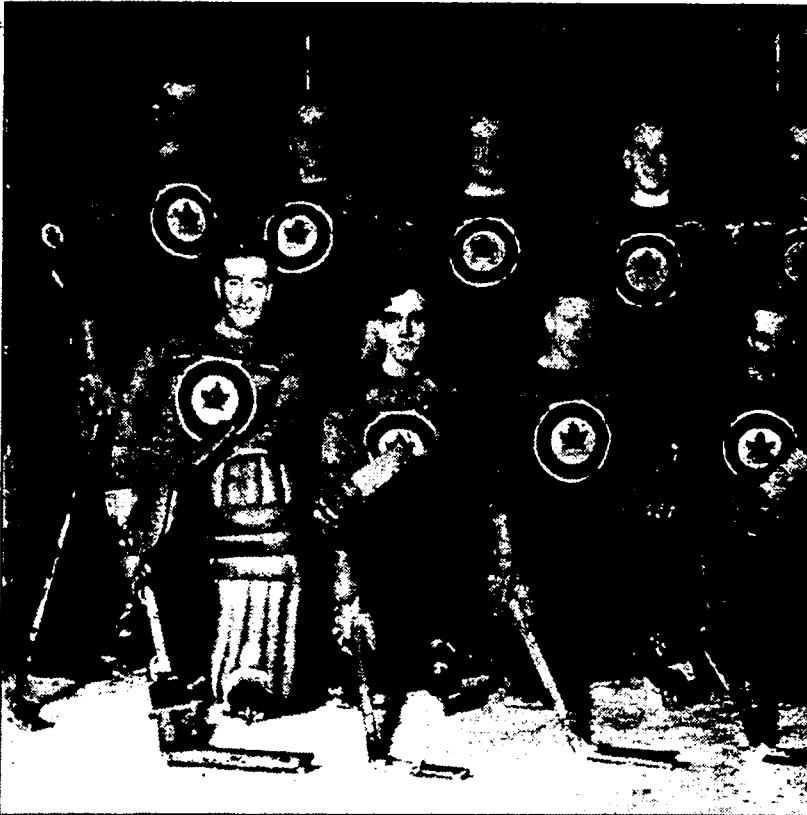
"Watson said he and CAHA officials were watching our next game. If we did well, we might get a call to join the Flyers. I was thrilled.

"Our line scored five of the six goals. I was in the war as a flying officer, but got out. A few days later, I was back in the air force."

Linemate Renaud recalled how he was offered an invitation to join the team. "I was working for the Department of Agriculture. The deputy minister called me in and said the Minister of National Defence wanted me to join the Flyers. I'd been overseas in the army as a sergeant. Next thing I knew, I was in the air force as an LAC [leading aircraftsman]."

Besides Schroeter and Renaud, three other players from the New Edinburgh Burghs were brought in to bolster the Flyers — former flying officer Frank Dunster along with Pete Lechnitz and Hibberd, two civilians who had never been in the military because they were too young during the war. After passing the RCAF exams and a physical checkup, both were sworn into the air force as aircraftsman I.

Figure skater Barbara Ann Scott is shouldered triumphantly by Ab Renaud moments after her golden performance in the skating in my final program and the marks had just gelled the group because we were a small contingent. Reg and Alexander came off the ice, the photographers were all around. Then Reg handed me a chocolate bar, and that's what



The RCAF Flyers official team photo. Back row (from left): trainer George Schroeter, Hubert Brooks, Andy Gilpin, Wally Halder, George Mara, Irving (from left) Murray Dowey, Ted Hibberd, Orville Gravelle, Ab Renaud, Roy Dowey has been pasted on to the body of Dick Ball, who didn't pass the fitness

"These five players helped our cause," Watson said, "but the team still had weaknesses.

"I called Frank Selke at the Montreal Forum and Connie Smythe at Maple Leaf Gardens and asked for names of real amateurs who could do our team some good."

In late December, three players from Toronto, forwards George Mara and Wally Halder and goalie Dick Ball, were recruited. Defenceman André LaPerrière was brought in from Montreal on Selke's recommendation.

Ball was a fine young prospect and quickly became the starting goalie, but he failed his final medical examination because of a lung infection.

Flyers manager Watson was frantic.

"George Mara told me the best amateur goalie in Canada was a fellow by the name of Murray Dowey," Watson recalled. "Mara and Dowey, it turned out, were teammates in the Toronto Mercantile League."

"When I got his call, I told Watson the TTC would never let me go," Dowey recalled recently from his home in Toronto. "But his power of persuasion obviously worked on my boss."

Dowey arrived in Ottawa just in time to be sworn back into the air force and catch the train for New York, where the Olympic team was to board the liner Queen Elizabeth for the trip to Europe, then play two weeks of exhibition games before the Olympic tournament. Dowey joined the

McFaul, Andre LaPerriere, Frank Dunster, Louie Lecompte, Reg Taylor, manager Sandy Watson and coach Frank Boucher. Front row Forbes, Pete Lechnitz, Patsy Guzzo and Ross King. Note that the head of al physical and Dowey was brought in too late for the team photo.

Flyers so late that he didn't arrive until after the team's official picture was taken.

Brooks and Gilpin remained on the team, as did seven others of the original 17 RCAF Flyers.

"Brooksie and Gilpin were first-rate players," Schroeter said. "But as for Dowey, we didn't see him play until our first exhibition game in London. He was good. Hands fast as lightning."

"My main sport was baseball," Dowey said. "I just never thought about anything except catching the puck when I could."

As the Olympic hockey tournament began on Jan. 30, 1948, Canadian and European sports writers picked the top three teams -- Czechoslovakia, Sweden and Switzerland. Canada, they all agreed, would be an also-ran.

"This bad press had dogged us all the way," Boucher said. "I don't know if it had anything to do with it, but we sure had something to prove."

The Flyers' first game at the outdoor rink in St. Moritz, against Sweden, featured the legendary aggressive style of Canadian hockey. It also resulted in a steady parade of Flyers to the penalty box, including Dowey.

"Late in the game, I caught a shot and threw the puck down the ice," Dowey said. "I don't know why."

"In those days, if a goalie got a penalty, he had to serve it himself. It was a close game. When I went to the penalty

games, winning 3

"We were treated to the largest crowds we ever saw. In Paris, a thousand people

Telegrams poured in. The most telling comment of External Affairs was a diplomatic feat of endurance." It was from the ter.

A large crowd gathered as they paraded. The team was displayed in an exhibition game against Phil Watson, former RCAF Flyers leader. Such a game had

As for one of the probable quest for the official team, Dowey cleverly Ball.

gold in 1948

box, coach Boucher wasn't too happy. He grabbed my goalie stick and gave it to one of our defencemen."

But during the rest of this critical game, Dowey showed off his lightning-like gloved hand, and Canada defeated Sweden 3-1.

"It became apparent that we had a star goaltender," Watson said. "He was a standup goalie who blocked most shots with his hands.

"Later in the tournament, fans came out for the pregame warmup just to watch him catch the puck. It was quite an innovation at the time."

Boucher said the team seemed to gain a lot of confidence from its first game. "And I kept telling them we had to keep our goals-against down. Backchecking and defence. That's what I wanted."

The goal scorers for Canada against Sweden were Schroeter, Halder and Mara, setting a pattern for things to come. The three went on to lead Canada's offence in the tournament, with Halder scoring 29 points, Mara 21 and Schroeter 17 in eight games.

Canada's next game was played in a blinding snowstorm against the tough British team. But Dowey's hands and Boucher's advice paid off, with Canada prevailing 3-0.

The Flyers easily won their next three games — 12-3 over the United States, 15-0 against Poland and 21-1 over Italy.

Canada, Czechoslovakia and Switzerland were tied for first place with five wins and no losses in the tournament, which used a simple round-robin format. Each of the nine teams played the others once, with the final standings determining the medal winners.

"We were really concerned about the Czechs," Schroeter said. "They had a big, tough team, a crafty Canadian coach [Mike Buchna of Trail, B.C.] and they were the tournament favourites."

The crucial game against Czechoslovakia came on Feb. 6.

"I told the players, 'If you don't let them score, you can't lose,'" Boucher said.

"All I can remember," Schroeter said, "is backchecking, backchecking, backchecking. But the big Czechs still had some good scoring chances."

When the final whistle blew, Dowey had his third shutout in six games. But Canada couldn't beat Czechoslovakia's netminder, and the game ended in a 0-0 tie. Canada and Czechoslovakia now were tied for second place. Canada could still get the gold medal, but only by winning its final two games and hoping Czechoslovakia would beat Switzerland.

The next day, Canada easily defeated Austria, 12-0. Later that day, Czechoslovakia beat the Swiss. Canada was back in a tie for first place with Czechoslovakia, but had a far better ratio of goals for and against, which would be the deciding factor in breaking a tie for first.

The game that would decide who won the gold medal was played against Switzerland on Feb. 8. The stands and hills around the outdoor rink in St. Moritz were packed with Swiss fans. The ice was slushy, and more than one snowball was heaved at the Canadian bench.

The Canadians made three times as many trips to the penalty box as the Swiss, as the referees seemed intent on supporting the Swiss cause.

Dowey didn't seem to mind. The goalie with the quick gloved hand gave Canada the gold with a 3-0 victory, his fifth shutout in eight games. He also set an Olympic record with a goals-against average of 0.62.

"Per ardua ad astra," Boucher said. "Through adversity to the stars. There was nothing else we could do but win it."

With the strains of the *Maple Leaf Forever* (mistakenly substituted by the Olympic organizers as Canada's national anthem) echoing through the hills of St. Moritz, team captain Mara led the champions to the podium to receive their gold medals. Czechoslovakia received the silver medals and the Swiss took the bronze.

"When they raised the flag, it fills you," Renaud said. "You know, you can feel it and you become quite emotional. I still am."

Two days later, in a little church overlooking the rink at St. Moritz, Brooks and Grontved were married. The RCAF Flyers, wearing their Olympic gold medals, formed a guard of honour. Canada's figure-skating gold medalist, Scott, was the bridesmaid, and the Flyers' manager, Watson, was the best man.

"It was a dear little Swiss church that looked down over the Olympic stadium," Scott recalled recently from her home in Chicago.

"Hubert and Birthe didn't have too many friends there. I was Canadian and a female, and they were sweet enough to ask me to be part of the wedding. It was a great thrill."

The Olympic champion RCAF Flyers went on to play exhibition games throughout Europe. They played a total of 42 Olympic and exhibition


games, winning 31, losing five and tying six.

"We were treated like heroes," Renaud said. "The largest crowds we ever had back home might be a few thousand. In Paris, against Le Racing Club de Paris, 19,000 thousand people showed up."

Telegrams poured in from across Canada. Perhaps the most telling came from a senior official in the Department of External Affairs. "What you did was the greatest diplomatic feat of any group from Canada in my experience." It was from Mike Pearson, the future prime minister.

A large crowd gave the RCAF Flyers a heroes' welcome as they paraded through downtown Ottawa on April 6. The team was disbanded on April 10 after playing an exhibition game against a team of NHL all-stars that included Phil Watson, Frank Eddolls and Sid Smith. The exhausted RCAF Flyers lost 6-3. No matter. Three months before, such a game had been unthinkable.

As for one of the lasting mementoes of the Flyers' improbable quest for the Olympic gold, if you look closely at the official team picture you can see the head of goalie Dowey cleverly pasted onto the body of his predecessor, Ball.



ote, Reg
er. Front row
that the head of
am photo.