

May - June 2017 Issue

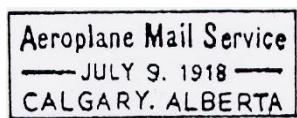
Three Weeks in December 1928: Canada's Experimental Prairie Air Mail Service

by Gord Mallett

In December 1928, a three-week-long series of experimental air mail flights took place across the Canadian prairies. The aerial route that was established linked Winnipeg and Regina to Calgary, as well as to Saskatoon and Edmonton. Navigational aides were all but nonexistent. The winter weather was brutal and oftentimes impossible to penetrate. On occasion, takeoffs and landings had to be made in the dark!

Despite these adversities, the Western Canada Airways pilots and their air engineers performed admirably. Accidents claimed two planes but most days the mail was delivered with dispatch. Company records reveal 5000 lb. of mail carried and a near 75% flight completion rate. Success of the venture gave substance to a vision first glimpsed in 1918.

The Vision



When American Katherine Stinson ventured north of the 49th parallel to do demonstration flying on the 1916 summer fair circuit in Canada, she was recognized as the world's leading female aviator. She continued to fly on the Canadian circuit the next two summers.

Exceptional flying skills and a winning personality made her an instant hit with the public. Fans were enchanted by her soft southern drawl, big brown eyes and long flowing curls. At just five foot three and a tad over 100 pounds she was a mere slip of a thing, but everything else about her was larger than life!

The aviatrix's admirers were delighted that she excelled in a field generally viewed as the sole domain of male pilots. Like a number of other early aviators, she was willing to take chances – to carry out feats not previously attempted. Among her lengthy list of 'firsts' are events linked to air mail service, including being the first woman to transport United States mail by air.

In 1918 Katherine returned to Canada totally unannounced, joining the fair circuit season that had started at Calgary on June 28. Four days earlier, an aviation event took place in eastern Canada which received national attention – the dominion's first ever, officially authorized aerial mail. It is likely that this Montreal-to-Toronto inaugural mail delivery and the aviatrix's previous accomplishment in flying mail in the United States were major factors in her decision to attempt a similar feat between Calgary and Edmonton. Permission was required from the military for her July 9 intercity flight, such approval necessary for all civilian flying in Canada during World War I.

The success of her undertaking is of particular note in that it was the earliest trip made by air between two cities in western Canada, previous flights having been limited to the urban centres themselves in aircraft constructed on site or transported there by rail. As well, it was western Canada's first ever air mail flight.

The July 9, 1918 Calgary→Edmonton "Aeroplane Mail Service" was accomplished by the aviatrix aboard her favourite biplane—the *Stinson Curtiss Special*. A static replica of the aircraft is located at Edmonton's Alberta Aviation Museum.

Of more than 250 letters carried, the 20 plus known to have 'survived' are now held by collectors or archives. The letter shown to the left is perhaps the most unusual and well-known of the lot.

Often referred to as the 'map cover', this folded letter was penned on the lower left corner of an Alberta map and then addressed to Calgary's exhibition manager: "Calgary

July 9, 1918. Mr. Richardson: As I've no note paper along am taking part of the map I will use on the trip up. Hoping we soon have a regular route between Calgary and Edmonton. Thanks for your assistance. Sincerely, Katherine Stinson."

Unfortunately, ten years after Stinson's flight, there was still no air mail delivery on the prairies! However, in early 1928 Western Canada Airways (WCA) was considering the possibility of an air mail service in the three Prairie Provinces. A few mail routes were then operating in eastern Canada and WCA was optimistic that the Post Office Department would support similar service in the west. To that end, the company made a number of submissions to the government in which they outlined their plans and conditions, the initial route proposed being Winnipeg to Calgary via Moose Jaw (later changed to Regina).

WCA became frustrated with the slow progress in negotiations for the proposed route, so in early fall they formed an alliance with the Canadian Pacific Express Company. A schedule of express mail and passenger flights was decided upon, in large part an attempt by WCA to force the government's hand.

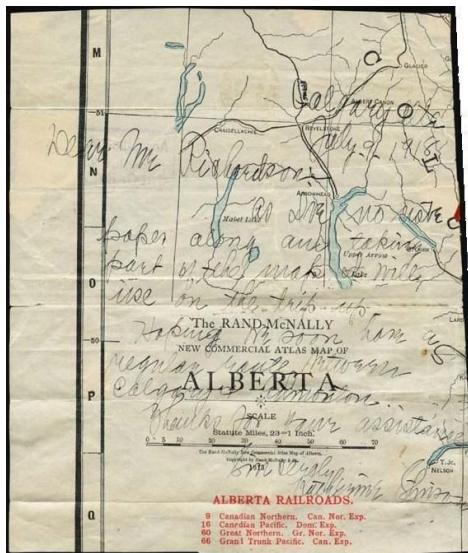


Figure 1 - Katherine Stinson July 9, 1918 note on Alberta map
(Gord Mallett Collection)

John Bracken, the Manitoba premier (centre in the photograph to the right), was one of five passengers on the September 13 inaugural flight from Winnipeg to Regina. Pictured as well are WCA's pilot/senior operating manager Leigh Brintnell (right) and air engineer MacMaster (left).

The plane used for the flight – a de Havilland 61 Giant Moth G-CAJT – is in the background. Several days were required to complete the circuitous route: Winnipeg → Regina → Calgary → Edmonton → Saskatoon → Winnipeg.

Later, on October 22, the express mail and passenger service resumed on a planned bi-weekly basis. The next day, G-CAJT was destroyed by fire in an accident five miles east of Calgary. The flights continued nevertheless, company aircraft Fairchild FC-2 G-CAID and Fokker Super Universal G-CASK being used as replacements.

It was not until November 16 that a Canadian government contract for an experimental prairie air mail service was awarded, granted solely for a three week long series of trial flights starting December 10 and ending December 29.

The Trial Flights



The Post Office Department contract for the experimental flights outlined a six-day fixed timetable to be strictly followed Monday through Saturday. Sunday December 23 was later added to the schedule. The *Saskatoon Star Phoenix* announced the selection of the pilots, all World War I veterans: "W. J. Buchanan will operate between Winnipeg and Regina, A. N. Westergaard and A. H. Farrington between Regina and Calgary, C. H. Dickins and P. B. Calder between Regina and Edmonton. A. D. Cruickshank will be an auxiliary pilot."

The route's layout was different from the circuit that WCA had navigated earlier in the year. Regina was now the hub, rather than Winnipeg. Roundtrip flights from Regina linked that city to Winnipeg in the east, to Calgary in the west and to Edmonton via Saskatoon in the northwest.

Official announcements were distributed outlining details regarding the datestamps, backstamps and cachets to be applied to the mail. Eight different cachet designs were created, the call letters of one of the company's Fokker Super Universals, G-CASM, appearing on three of them.

All told, eight different aircraft were pressed into service: three Fokker Universals G-CAFU, G-CAIX & G-CASD; four Fokker Super Universals G-CASJ, G-CASK, G-CASM & G-CASN and Fairchild FC-2 G-CAID.



Figure 2 - Sept. 13, 1928 inaugural mail and passenger flight between Winnipeg and Regina L. to R.: MacMaster, John Bracken, Leigh Brintnell
(Courtesy of City of Regina Archives)

Records reveal that hazardous weather, aircraft problems and aerodrome deficiencies were ongoing challenges faced by the pilots. A WCA circular gave instructions regarding forced landings and uncompleted trips: "The mail in every such case should be turned in to the nearest post office to be forwarded on the first mail train bound in the right direction."

The flight reports in the Canadian Airways Limited Collection fonds archived in Winnipeg allow a more accurate story to be told of the route's 152 legs scheduled to be flown. A study of these pilot written records yields useful numerical data and interesting details of a human interest nature. The incident below provides an excellent case in point.

Confusion and controversy surrounded new WCA pilot Paul Calder's inaugural day flight from Edmonton to Regina! Winnipeg's *Evening Tribune* reported, "The pilot arrived too late in Regina to connect with pilot Buchanan's return flight to Winnipeg", while the *Manitoba Free Press* claimed, "The pilot arrived just in time to connect with pilot Buchanan."

Calder recorded the wind as, "south in general S.W. above 1000 ft." but he did not make note of the wind intensity. The *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* evening newspaper however reported that, "The strength of the wind could be gauged from the fact that the machine (Fokker Universal G-CAIX) at times almost stood still when flying directly against it."



Figure 3 - Saskatoon to Winnipeg letter bearing signature of C.H. Dickins,
although he was not the pilot for the flight
(Gord Mallett Collection)

signature of pilot C. H. Dickins on the cover, although he was not the pilot for the flight! Events suggest that he had done the signing prior to inaugural day.

Dickins's mistaken signing was another consequence of the ongoing conflict between Atkinson and Brintnell. Atkinson was stationed at Regina, operations hub for the experimental flights. His preference was for one pilot to fly the complete Edmonton↔Saskatoon↔Regina route and with that in mind, he made preliminary arrangements with Dickins. The plan was that Dickins, after landing at Regina, would promptly drop off the mailbags from Edmonton and Saskatoon and then load up the mailbags to be carried aboard his immediate return flight.

Therein lies the reason for the late arrival time at Regina—his low-powered Fokker averaged less than 80 mph on the Saskatoon to Regina flight. The upshot for the young pilot was unwarranted discredit, in large part the result of a flawed work relationship that existed between WCA senior manager Leigh Brintnell and prairie manager Dale Atkinson.

One of the letters in the mailbag Calder picked up at Saskatoon and conveyed to Winnipeg bore the

Brintnell was in New York taking delivery of a new aircraft. At a late stage in the planning, he wired the prairie manager with instructions for him to prepare Calder to fly the inaugural mail to Regina and for Dickins to pilot the aircraft for the return flight. It is apparent that Atkinson was riled by Brintnell's independent decision! After the scheduled mailbag transfer at Regina failed to take place, Atkinson had Calder traverse the above route each of the next two days as a 'deadhead' (non-paying passenger) in a plane piloted by "Punch" Dickins on some legs and by the prairie manager himself on others. These facts are made known in details recorded in the flight reports. It was a humiliating affair for 29 year-old World War I veteran pilot Paul Calder!

The rift between the managers was a clash of personalities, their actions during the trial flights revealing an unwillingness to work together in supervising company contracts. Other problems persisted as well, and in due course they both 'left' the company and continued their careers in other firms. Brintnell founded a rival and successful aviation company, Mackenzie Air Service. Dickins became Mackenzie District Superintendent of Canadian Airways, WCA's successor. Paul Calder remained with WCA/Canadian Airways until his death on January 31, 1933 when his Fairchild G-CATL went down in severe weather near Cameron Bay, NWT.

The Aftermath



Prairie air mail service was discontinued December 29 despite the lobbying of Western Canada Airways and the mayors of prairie cities. Assistant Deputy Postmaster General P. T. Coolican defended the action in a telegram to Edmonton Mayor A. U. G. Bury: "Experimental air services across the prairies were inaugurated to ascertain operating difficulties. Experience of the last three weeks establishes necessity for adjustment in timetables, installation of lights ..."

In the new year, Western Canada Airways submitted a detailed invoice for \$15,657.80. The Post Office countered with an even more detailed analysis, contending that the amount owing was actually \$15,237.88. A cheque for that amount was issued. In response, the company meticulously reworked its calculations and submitted a second invoice for a further \$3,113.57. Coolican, however, dealt the final blow in the negotiations. He rejected their submission for the extra amount and in a lengthy letter to the company he offered one final payment—\$14.20!

Western Canada Airways was in a very tight spot. Should they counter this humiliating offer and chance the wrath of the Post Office or cut their losses and foster good will? They chose the latter, arguably the right choice! An April 18, 1929 letter by WCA manager Leigh Brintnell, mailed from Ottawa to WCA's Winnipeg headquarters, announced success in negotiations to obtain a contract for the prairie air mail: "After many talks with Mr. Coolican and other officials of the Post Office Department, I was finally able to secure the western mail contract at the rate of 75 cents per mile. This price is a very low bid but due to the fact that they have only \$800,000 voted for this work, it means that our contract takes about \$725,000 of this money. Went over every phrase of the contract and had to fight them on every paragraph."

Regular service was introduced on March 3, 1930 with Moose Jaw and Medicine Hat added to the Winnipeg↔Regina↔Calgary section of the route that had been established during the December 1928 trials. North Battleford was added to the Edmonton↔Saskatoon↔Regina sector. Mail on the east-west Winnipeg-Calgary sector was flown at night.

Other changes to the route were made later. In April the junction point for the sector linking Edmonton to the east-west main line was moved from Regina to Moose Jaw. Lethbridge was added to the route the following January.

An August 17, 1931 Calgary to Edmonton flight by Conway Farrell was a high point for the two Alberta cities. Direct intercity air mail service, first envisioned by aviatrix Katherine Stinson in July 1918, finally had become a reality! The *Edmonton Journal* reported comments made by Farrell on his late arrival in the northern city, "We were a trifle late this morning. This was due to violent storms on the prairies. They have been having intensely hot weather and last night the elements joined in a real fireworks display." Paul Calder piloted the Fokker 14.A mail plane on the inaugural return flight to Calgary later that day.

Several months later, a decision made by the government in Ottawa dealt a blow to the young financially strapped aviation company. Success by Western Canada Airways in winning the prairie mail contract proved to be short-lived! The March 30, 1932 'mourning cover' overleaf is headed THE END OF A GREAT ENTERPRISE.

Indeed it *was* the end—the GREAT DEPRESSION had claimed another victim!



Figure 4 - 'The End of a Great Enterprise' air mail cover, Mar. 30, 1932
(Gord Mallett Collection)

All of the prairie air mail routes were shut down due to postal estimate cuts. It was not until March 1938 that mail again took flight across the Canadian prairies.

In the 'mourning cover' shown to the left, the cachet drawing is bordered in black, the colour frequently linked to mourning or distress. It shows a crashed plane, aptly branded **WESTERN AIR MAIL**.

This limited production cover is addressed to WW I veteran Col. R. H. Mulock, Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Mulock acted as company president James A. Richardson's trusted assistant in aviation matters. The caption provides a brief recap of the prairie service:

CANADIAN PRAIRIE AIR MAIL

Length of route, 991½ miles. Contract price per annum \$481,869.00

EXPERIMENTAL FIRST FLIGHT, DEC 10, 1928

Pilots: Buchanan, Calder, Dickens [sic], Farrington, Westergaard.

INAUGURAL CONTRACT FLIGHT, March 3, 1930

Pilots: Brown, Buchanan, Farrell, Hollick-Kenyon, McLaren.

LAST CONTRACT FLIGHT, MARCH 30, 1932

Pilots: Ashton, Calder, Farrell, Hollick-Kenyon, Jarvis, Moar, Stull.

Anyone wishing to obtain a detailed study of the December 1928 experimental flights is invited to contact CalderRiver@hotmail.com. A URL link to the 75 page investigation will be emailed promptly. Daily particulars about the flown legs (pilot, engineer, aircraft performance, flight statistics, etc.) are charted. Each of the 152 legs scheduled to be flown is assigned one of twelve classifications ranging from “complete leg flown & arrived on schedule” to “mail was carried partway by train & transferred to plane en route for completion of the leg.” The express mail and passenger flights carried out between the prairie cities (eight circuits flown) earlier in the year are also investigated and the details charted.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Gord Mallett is a member of the Canadian Aerophilatelic Society and has authored several studies dealing with early air mail delivery in Western Canada and the NWT, including detailed investigations of Katherine Stinson's pioneering Calgary→Edmonton flight in 1918 and 1929's Mackenzie River District inaugural air mail service.



Figure 5 - Gord Mallett with Fokker Super Universal CF-AAM (Gord Mallett Collection)

In this photo the writer is aboard Fokker Super Universal CF-AAM prior to a flight kindly provided by pilot/restorer Clark Seaborn. 'AAM is now on permanent display at the Royal Aviation Museum of Western Canada in Winnipeg.

Mitchell Memories

By John J.N. Chalmers

The hangar in which the Alberta Aviation Museum is housed is much more than the last double-wide double-long hangar built during the Second World War for the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP). Built in 1941, the wooden building is a designated provincial historic site that houses one of Canada's largest aviation museums and aircraft collections.

But the hangar is more than a repository of aircraft, artifacts, displays and home to several aviation organizations. The building houses an extensive aviation library, rooms dedicated to RCAF City of Edmonton 418 Squadron Association and displays of Air Cadet crests and uniforms. Its education centre sees hundreds of school children visit each year and a lecture series features evening talks about aviation history. A drill hall area is used for Air Cadet parades and other functions such as sales events.

The venerable structure stirs memories of all who have worked there in air force uniforms or as civilians. Unlike the airplanes and displays, which are tangible evidence of our aviation history and heritage, the memories exist in the minds of those familiar with the hangar. If the walls could talk, their stories would be endless!

For me, the hangar has had special meaning ever since I was a teenager. After a year in Air Cadets with Edmonton 12 Squadron while in grade 10, I enlisted in the RCAF Reserve as an aeroengine technician, 61142 AC2 JJN Chalmers.



Figure 6 - The B-25 Mitchell of the Alberta Aviation Museum restored as a project of 418 Squadron Association. "City of Edmonton 418 Squadron" is painted on the fuselage and nose art is an image of the Grey Cup.
(John Chalmers Collection)

I started my training in the summer of 1954 with the long-gone 3054 Technical Training Unit on land where the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology is now located, and I became a member of 418 Squadron.

At the time, the squadron was flying North American B-25 twin-engine Mitchell bombers.

Perhaps because of my association with them, I have always considered the Mitchell to be one of the most beautiful warbirds, a truly handsome aircraft. Along with other young fellows in the squadron, we worked on the Mitchells under the guidance of very knowledgeable NCOs of the ground crew, the men who were responsible for keeping the aircraft in the air.

After two years with the squadron, I finished high school and started my studies at the University of Alberta, transferring to the U of A's officer training program in the University Reserve Training Program (URTP). After graduating from the program four years later, I received my commission as a Pilot Officer. Unlike those in the Regular Officer Training Program (ROTP), my tuition fees were not paid, I received no monthly allowance, and I was not obligated to serve a term in the regular RCAF after graduation and receive a permanent commission.

I bought an RCAF officer's hat, which I have worn only once to our graduation dinner. No longer was I required to wear the wedge cap with the white flash that indicated my rank as a Flight Cadet. I still have my summer and winter uniforms that Flight Cadets wore as subordinate officers. They are airmen's uniforms without the patch pockets of officers' attire and bore the narrow band of a Pilot Officer rank insignia on the sleeve.

Upon graduation I was given three options. One was to resign from the RCAF. At that time, the air force had 51,000 members and I was proud to be one of them. I had spent six years, including full-time summer employment with the air force and had no desire to resign. Another choice was to apply for a permanent commission in the regular force. I chose the third option – a transfer to the Supplementary Reserve.

"What does that mean?" I asked, in those days of the Cold War. "It means we will put you on a list, you retain the rank of Pilot Officer and we will call you if we need you," I was told. I accepted, but was never called up. In fact, just a few years ago, I mentioned to a career air force

senior officer I know well, that I had never resigned and never got a letter telling me I was finished. I presumed that I was still a member of the Supplementary Reserve of the Royal Canadian Air Force! Maybe still a Pilot Officer!

“No you aren’t,” he replied. “When you turned 65, you were automatically retired!” But I treasure that officer’s hat and the memories of the RCAF that come to mind every time I visit the museum.

However, my association with the Alberta Aviation Museum did not end. Years later, I found myself serving for five years on the board of the Alberta Aviation Museum Association. It was an experience I thoroughly enjoyed and gained a great appreciation for staff, fellow board members and the amazing, talented and dedicated volunteers who worked their magic in aircraft restoration in the museum’s shop.

One of the many projects undertaken by volunteers was the reconstruction and restoration of a B-25 Mitchell. When it was introduced to the public on September 2, 2011, it sported 418 City of Edmonton Squadron livery, exactly like one flown in the 1950s by men such as Terry Champion, Mike Kutyn, John Mallandaine and Edmonton historian Tony Cashman when I was an Acey Ducey and used to gas up their Mitchells when they returned from a flight. Restoration of the bomber took eight-years.

The museum holds many special memories for me of the Mitchells and the people I worked with there. My father, Jack Chalmers, trained at that hangar as a navigator student, then was a navigation instructor when as F/O J25039 JW Chalmers he flew Avro Ansons in the yellow paint of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. The building was home to No. 2 Air Observer School of the BCATP. Dad’s association with the RCAF continued many years after the Second World War, through the Royal Canadian Air Cadets until 1961. By then he had been promoted to Flight Lieutenant and awarded the CD.

Anyone who has served in a uniform of Canada’s armed forces develops lifelong friends. A special friend from the time I signed up with the RCAF was Tony Allinson. We were both in Grade 11, aspiring aeroengine mechanics with 418 Squadron. Tony joined the regular air force after finishing high school, became an accomplished aeroengine technician, served as Chief Engineer with the Edmonton Flying Club after leaving the RCAF, and eventually retired from the Transportation Safety Board as Superintendent of Technical Investigations, Western Division.

My wife, Linda, and I served as bridesmaid and best man to Tony and Maxine when they were married three months before us in 1964. Decades later, we attended their 50th wedding anniversary, and three months later, they attended ours.



Figure 7 - A B-25 Mitchell flown by 418 Squadron during the 1950s
(RCAF photo)



Figure 8 - The Pacific Prowler, flown to Edmonton from Texas, is one of the vintage aircraft that visited the Alberta Aviation Museum
(John Chalmers Collection)

Aviation Museum, I was prompted to write the following poem, “Gassing Up the Mitchell.”

Gassing Up the Mitchell

Bundled up in our air force parkas,
We stand on the ramp beside the hangar
On this frosty Sunday morning in the 1950s,
Directing the twin-engined B-25 Mitchell bomber.

As it taxis towards us after landing, its engine rumble is music to our ears.
We signal where the aircraft should come and where it should stop.
As teenage reserve RCAF airmen holding the lowest rank,
Just AC2, Airman Second Class,
We are privileged to direct the crew of this beautiful warbird,
Crewed by veteran officers who flew in the war,
But we have no idea of what they went through in combat,
Or the meaning of all the ribbons on their breasts.
Our job is just to refuel the bomber.

As the propellers stop turning, the gas bowser arrives.
We place the chocks in front of the tires,
Clip the static line to the ground,
Turn the propeller so that one blade points straight down,
Jump up to grab the propeller’s nose cone,
Then shinny up the prop’s blade to the wing –
No ladder for us!

Standing on the wing, we remove the gas caps for the wing tanks
And reach for the hose nozzle when handed up.
A simple job, but makes us feel important –
The plane won’t fly again unless we refuel it.

Cancer took Tony’s life late in 2016. We were unable to attend a celebration held for him in January 2017 at the Alberta Aviation museum when some 200 people came to remember him and his place in the aviation community. At the time, we were spending the winter in Mexico. But on the day of the service held for Tony, thinking about him and all the memories in the atmosphere of the Alberta

Later, inside the hangar, as aspiring aeroengine mechanics,
We may get to change the platinum-tipped spark plugs
On the bomber's mighty supercharged 14-cylinder radial engines.
The rumours and hangar lore still come to mind,
Like my service number, 61142, never forgotten:
Can the green buttons on our parkas
Really be melted to make pea soup for winter survival?
Herman Nelson is an engine heater, not a corporal;
Prop wash is not a solvent to clean the propeller blades,
And there are no left-handed monkey wrenches in the tool crib.

Today, a restored Mitchell, painted and polished,
Attired in City of Edmonton 418 Squadron livery,
Stands at attention in the hangar, now a historic building,
Erected for the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan,
Then becoming a great Canadian aviation museum,
Where the beautiful bomber resides,
And is a tangible reminder of memories for all who served.

EDITOR'S NOTE: John Chalmers is Historian for Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame and Membership Secretary for the Canadian Aviation Historical Society. As an aeroengine trainee, he never flew in a Mitchell, but when the Pacific Prowler flew in to City Centre Airport from Texas in 2008 to visit the Alberta Aviation Museum, he was one of six volunteers from the museum who had a chance for an unforgettable flight in that veteran aircraft. johnchalmers@shaw.ca.



Figure 9 - John Chalmers

Bush Pilots on the Northern Canadian Resource Frontier

By Ken Tingley

In addition to forestry patrols, there were several early attempts to use aviation for opening the Canadian north during the early 1920s. Stuart Graham seems to have been involved in the first use of an airplane to stake a mining claim when a Montreal businessman named Guy Toombs, searching for molybdenum deposits near Lac St. Jean, hired him to visit the site at Lac Wapigigonke (Sand Lake). The party left Grande Mere on June 22, 1920, flying the famous Curtiss HS-2L flying boat *La Vigilance* (G-CAAC), locating the site from sketch maps provided by Toombs, and spending three days staking the claim. Other firms made similar pioneering efforts at this time.

In 1925 prospecting in northern British Columbia commenced when men and equipment were shipped in relays to a base on the Stikine River, and on to Dease Lake; they then took on parties of two or three to previously inaccessible spots. The pilots were J. Scott Williams and Jack Caldwell. In 1926 Caldwell and his engineer Irene Vachon took a flight into the "barren lands" to search for gold deposits, flying from Lac La Biche to Fort Fitzgerald.

Passengers, mail and freight were being flown into the new Red Lake gold fields during 1928, necessitating fuel caches being set up to allow deeper northern extension of exploratory flights. "Punch" Dickins and his engineer Bill Naden flew 850 miles non-stop south from Baker Lake to Stony Rapids on September 3, 1928. Stan McMillan and Charles Sutton flew in mid-March 1929 into the high north where winter conditions prevailed. Two planes flew from Winnipeg to Baker Lake, over 5000 miles. An aerial crossing of the Arctic Circle occurred during a flight to Fort

Good Hope on March 6, 1929. From there a "test cargo" of furs was flown out by "Punch" Dickins, and reached the Winnipeg fur market within days.

Dickins and Sutton crossed the Arctic Circle again on flights to Aklavik on July 1, 1929, and to the northwest tip of Hudson Bay on August 25, 1929.

Finally, "Wop" May and Vic Horner flew their most famous mercy flight to take diphtheria antitoxin to Little Red River during the winter of that year.



Figure 10 - Wop May accepting diphtheria antitoxin from Dr. Malcolm Bow prior to Ft. Vermilion mercy flight in January 1929
(Denny May Collection)

Walter Gilbert flew from the Arctic coast to Edmonton in 1931, 1,374 miles in ten hours. Punch Dickins flew from Great Bear Lake to Edmonton with the first cargo of radium ore the same year. Of course, the most famous exploit took place during the epic hunt for the "Mad Trapper of Rat River" in 1932, a search in which "Wop" May took a prominent part.

Ten tons of mining equipment and provisions were flown from Fort Rae to Great Bear Lake by Leigh Brintnell, Stan McMillan and Matt Berry during 1933. The air mail services from Edmonton to Cameron Bay and Camsell River, established two years earlier, were extended to Coppermine on January 28, 1934. During 1935 Stan McMillan flew the first flight on the new "air loop" through the north, connecting Edmonton to Fort Rae, Great Bear Lake, Fort Norman, Whitehorse, Fort St. John, and then returning to Edmonton. Grant McConachie and Ted Field flew the inaugural air mail flight from Edmonton to Whitehorse in 1937.

"It has been said that aircraft opened the Canadian frontier. In some respects this is an exaggeration," historian Hugh Halliday concludes. "The growing frontier spurred aviation at the same time that aircraft simplified the opening of that frontier."

Aircraft helped many a surveyor and prospector to reach his destination and kept parties supplied in the field. Yet if a few explorers had been the only customers, flying companies would have had only the briefest existence. It should be noted that many of the great mineral strikes in Canadian history had been made before aircraft appeared on the scene. The mines had been sunk; communities were springing up around them. The existence of the mines and mining towns provided customers for the fledgling air firms.

The fact is that the growth of Canadian aviation coincided with the growth of Canadian mining - and what phenomenal growth it was!

The costs of frontier flying in that era were staggering. In October 1930 a passenger flying from Winnipeg to Edmonton paid \$ 18.50 on Western Canada Airways; from Montreal to Toronto cost \$ 29.00 on Canadian Airways. However, the same passenger on an unscheduled Commercial Airways flight from Fort McMurray to Aklavik paid \$ 410.00, while the return flight from Aklavik to Fort McMurray cost \$ 340.00.



Figure 11 - Western Canada Airways' Fokker Universal G-CAFU
(Alberta Aviation Museum Collection)

engineers. The firm began life with a Fokker Universal, G-CAFU, named *The City of Winnipeg*. On December 27, 1926 it carried out its first operation, carrying express cargo to Woman Lake, Pine Ridge and Narrow Lake.

Western Canada Airways and the other smaller sized operators also had to compete with a large number of even smaller, often one-man aircraft companies which proliferated with the opportunities in northern freight and express air transport at this time. These "vagabond" operators took away customers from the larger companies. They also were partly responsible for rate-cutting and extreme competition, which weakened the air transport industry during most of the 1930s. This economic pattern was characterized by severe competition, high operating costs and insecure revenues. Russell H. Catomore, in *The Civil Aviation Movement in Canada, 1919-1939*, his MA thesis (1971), concludes that during 1919-1944 almost no company had consistently satisfactory financial returns.

Important changes in the federal government's attitude toward the aviation industry occurred in 1927. In January Sir Alan Cobham, the famous aviation pioneer, visited Ottawa to lecture about aviation. Prime Minister Mackenzie King attended one lecture and was so impressed that he invited Cobham to lunch. Cobham stressed to the Prime Minister that governments could not stand by passively, waiting for aviation to develop of its own accord; they must help the process through federal support of aviation companies and flying clubs. Almost immediately, official Canadian indifference to civilian aviation was replaced by active support. In September 1927 a programme was launched to assist formation of Canadian flying clubs, which in turn would train civil and military pilots, promote construction of community airfields, and provide a market for Canadian aircraft suppliers.

In August 1926, James Richardson, the famous Winnipeg merchant and land dealer, was persuaded by James M. Clarke to establish an aviation company. Central Canada Air Lines Limited would serve the mining districts along the northern Manitoba-Ontario border. Clarke was unsuccessful in pulling the operation together, but Richardson hired "Doc" Oaks to put the business back on its feet. Under Oaks, Western Canada Airways was formed and attracted experienced pilots and

Coinciding with this was a Post Office decision to let out air mail contracts, beginning with a service launched on October 4, 1927 between Lac du Bonnet and the mines around Bissett and Wadhope in Manitoba, and gradually spreading throughout the Canadian west. Such factors made the late 1920s a period of rapid growth in the aviation industry. In 1927 there were only 67 licensed civil aircraft in Canada; the figure jumped during the next two years to 264 (1928), and 445 (1929). While most aerial activity remained in the south, other ventures were driving increasingly northwards.

Penetration of the western Arctic increased at this time also. In 1927, Yukon Airways and Exploration Company established scheduled mail service between Whitehorse, Dawson and Mayo with a Ryan monoplane. In 1929 this aircraft was wrecked. In the winter of 1927-1928, Western Canada Airways extended its mail service down the Mackenzie River as far as Fort Simpson, and then to the Arctic Circle in March 1929. On Dominion Day 1929, "Punch" Dickins landed mail at Aklavik. Regular mail service to that community commenced in December 1929.

The far north during the 1920s lacked beacons and weather services. Carburetor icing was a common winter problem, while rubber shock absorbers lost all resiliency. It took years of experience in northern flying before improved heaters and hydraulic shock absorbers were developed to solve these problems.

Most of the north remained an intimidating wilderness at the end of the 1920s. "Punch" Dickins made a famous flight with Lieutenant-Colonel C. H. MacAlpine, the President of Dominion Explorers, a prospecting firm, between August 28 and September 9, 1928, in a Fokker Super Universal. For much of the trip, they followed well-charted coastlines such as those along Hudson Bay, but when they landed at Baker Lake on September 2, they were only the second aircraft to visit that community. The next day, however, they flew inland, from the Hudson Bay water drainage system to the Mackenzie River drainage basin. Some of the territory crossed had never been explored, and much of that was bare rock, devoid of any vegetation other than moss.

Late the following year, Colonel MacAlpine led another Arctic exploration flight with two aircraft, CF-AAO , a Fairchild FC-2W, and G-CASK , a Fokker Universal. On September 9, 1929, the expedition became stranded at Dease Point on Bathurst Inlet, and its disappearance triggered the famous MacAlpine Search of 1929. The annual freeze-up was imminent and there were few trading posts or fuel caches to supply the search. Only aircraft with powerful engines could participate, and few of these were available. Six aircraft were used during the search, and eight more were available to back up the main search party with supply flights. On November 4, MacAlpine and his party, guided by Inuit, reached Cambridge Bay on Victoria Island. On December 4, 1929, the last of the MacAlpine party arrived at Cranberry Portage. In



Figure 12 - G-CASK at Dease Strait north of Kent Peninsula,
circa 1929
(Alberta Aviation Museum Collection)

the month following MacAlpine's disappearance, "the Barrens" witnessed more flying than had been performed in all the years to that date, accelerating the pace of air penetration of the northern wilderness. The similarity with the Franklin search is unavoidable.



Figure 13 - Ken Tingley

Kenneth C. Eyre, in *Custos Borealis: The Military in the Canadian North*, his PhD thesis (1981), records how the Northwest Territories and Yukon Signal System was assisting northern flying by this time. The Royal Canadian Corps of Signals operated their wireless stations at Dawson and Mayo using two 120-watt transmitters. They soon extended into the Mackenzie basin and by 1929 northern prospectors and mining companies relied upon its messages, including the only comprehensive weather reports in the north.

The secrets of the north were quickly being revealed through advances in aviation and technology, and the brave exploits of the bush pilot.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ken Tingley became the first municipal Historian Laureate in Canada when he was named to the position in April of 2010. During his two-year tenure, Tingley published "Ride of the Century: The Story of the Edmonton Transit System" and "My Heart's in the Highlands: The Building of a Historic Edmonton Community".

No.1 Squadron Royal Canadian Air Force at RAF Northolt, Part One

By Sergeant Mark Bristow, BA (Hons), MA – No.1 AIDU and Station Historian

Canada was represented in the Battle of Britain by several hundred officers and airmen who served as aircrew and groundcrew in Fighter, Bomber and Coastal Commands. Forty-seven of these have their names inscribed on the Honour Roll in the memorial chapel at Westminster Abbey. The great majority of these Canadians had crossed the Atlantic in pre-war days to enroll in the RAF, and served in units of the RAF.

There were however two fighter squadrons which bore the name Canadian, one was No 242 (Canadian) Squadron, composed of Canadian fighter pilots within the RAF. The other was No 1 (Fighter) Squadron, Royal Canadian Air Force (this was later re-designated No 401 on March 1, 1941). This squadron had formed in June 1937 at Trenton, had left Canada on June 9, 1940, and arrived in Britain on the eve of the Battle on June 19. It was initially based at RAF Middle Wallop, where it received Mk 1 Hawker Hurricanes and commenced its Operational Training.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, Air Officer Commander-in-Chief of Fighter Command, in his despatch paid tribute to the two Canadian squadrons. No 242, he wrote: "... became one of the foremost fighting squadrons in the Command ... No 1 (Canadian) also came into the line and acquitted itself with great distinction."



Figure 14 - 401 Squadron Crest,
formerly No. 1 (Fighter) Squadron

No 1 RCAF Squadron was commanded by Squadron Leader EA McNab, and was formed from two fighter squadrons: No 1 (permanent) and No 115 (auxiliary) from Montreal, which had been amalgamated just prior to their departure from Canada. Amongst the pilots who took part in what was perhaps the most critical of all air battles were Flight Lieutenants VB Corbett and GR McGregor, Flying Officers EW Beardmore, CE Briese, E de P Brown, BE Christmas, JPJ Desloges, GG Hyde, JW Kerwin, TB Little, PW Lochnan, WBM Millar, H de M Molson, AD Nesbitt, RW Norris, JD Pattison, OJ Peterson, PB Pitcher, EM Reyno, BD Russel, R Smither, WP Sprenger, CW Trevena and AM Yuile.

On July 3, 1940 No 1 Squadron moved to Croydon to undergo an intensive six weeks programme of training. On August 17 they were passed as ready for operations and were soon put to the test.

Already the battle raged in the skies above; since August 8 the

Luftwaffe had been making strenuous efforts to destroy the fighter bases in south-eastern England. On August 15, whilst the Canadians were at RAF Northolt receiving instruction in the theory of air fighting, a group of fifteen Me110 fighter-bombers made a low-level attack on Croydon, causing considerable damage to the offices and stores. This was the first time that bombs had been dropped in the London area, and all the attacking aircraft were in fact shot down. Earlier that day S/L McNab, on temporary attachment to the RAF to gain operational experience, had drawn first blood for the RCAF: in action high above Kent he destroyed a Dornier Do17 bomber, which crashed on to marshy ground near Westgate-on-Sea.

On August 17, the day it became operational, No 1 RCAF moved to RAF Northolt, where it remained until October 10. For the first nine days of this deployment pilots stood at readiness with their Hurricanes and were repeatedly scrambled after raiding aircraft, yet none entered their area of operations. In the meantime the tempo of the battle changed as the *Luftwaffe* on August 24 launched the second phase of its campaign, by striking at the fighter stations defending the metropolitan area, at the aircraft factories, and at the industrial targets along the Thames Estuary.

On August 26, No 1 RCAF Squadron's opportunity finally came: temporarily patrolling over North Weald to relieve another squadron, the RCAF pilots completed one patrol of this sector without incident. However, whilst on a second patrol, they were informed by ground control that an enemy raid was approaching across Essex. A Spitfire squadron drew off the escorting German fighters, leaving some twenty to thirty Dornier Do215 bombers for the Canadians. S/L McNab led his squadron in a diving attack out of the sun. He destroyed one bomber before the Dorniers' return fire forced him to land his damaged Hurricane. F/O RL Edwards, flying next to his leader, opened fire at very close range, shooting the tail off another bomber. But his aircraft was hit by heavy cross fire from enemy gunners and crashed. F/O Edwards thus became the first member of the RCAF to lose his life in combat with the enemy in World War Two. F/O JPJ Desloges' Hurricane was also damaged in the action and he force-landed. Another Dornier was shot down by F/L GR McGregor and four were damaged by F/Os H de M Molson, AD Nesbitt, TB Little, and F/L VB Corbett. In their first engagement the RCAF pilots destroyed three of the enemy and damaged four more, with the sad loss to themselves of one pilot killed.

On the last day of August the squadron was in action twice. A morning patrol over Dover was surprised by some high-flying Messerschmitt Me109s which dived out of the sun and shot down three Hurricanes. Fortunately all three pilots were able to bale out, although F/L Corbett and F/O GG Hyde suffered burns to the face, hands, and legs. The score was evened in the afternoon when the squadron was scrambled to meet a raid over Gravesend. Blue Section engaged the escorting Me109s, while other pilots attacked the bombers. F/Os TB Little and BE Christmas each claimed a Me109, and F/O R Smither badly damaged another. A Do215 lost tail fragments as a result of F/O BD Russel's attack. The Canadians lost one aircraft when a Hurricane flown by F/O Desloges was shot down in flames. Desloges was severely burned before he could take to his parachute. Corbett later commanded No 402 Sqn, winning the DFC. He rose to the rank of Group Captain, but was killed in a flying accident at Bagotville on 20 February 1945. Hyde also met his death in a flying accident in England on May 17, 1941. Desloges became a Wing Commander but was killed in a flying accident at Casablanca on May 8, 1944.

Enemy attacks against RAF aerodromes on the following day (September 1) were not as determined. No 1 Squadron assisted in breaking up an afternoon raid by 160 aircraft, headed towards Kenley and Biggin Hill. The Canadians, one of eleven squadrons scrambled to meet this attack, flew head-on into the group of twenty bombers, broke up the formation and destroyed one Dornier, probably destroyed another and damaged three more. The scattered remnants of the enemy turned tail and headed for home. F/O Kerwin, who destroyed one Dornier, then attacked some Me110s, finishing off one, just as his own aircraft was hit by cannon shells and set on fire. He baled out and landed in a field near Maidstone, suffering from face and hand burns. Two more Hurricanes were damaged by enemy fire; one pilot brought his down safely, but F/O AM Yuile had to take to his parachute.

This engagement ended one week of action for No 1 RCAF Squadron: a week in which it had fought four air combat battles, destroyed eight enemy aircraft and probably destroyed or damaged ten others. It had lost one pilot killed, four injured, and seven Hurricanes written-off.

At midday on September 4 an engagement with some Me110s added nine more to the squadron's tally. On this occasion the German pilots tried a new defensive manoeuvre, flying in a tight circle to cover each other's tail, but the Canadians soon broke the circle. F/Os Nesbitt and Smither each sent a Me110 down in flames, another was probably destroyed by F/O Russel, who also badly damaged a Junkers Ju88, and five more Me110s were damaged by F/L McGregor, and F/Os H de M Molson (two), Smither and Peterson.

The battle now entered a third phase: it had commenced with heavy German attacks on convoys and harbours, but had progressed to all-out efforts to win air supremacy for the *Luftwaffe* by



Figure 15 - S/L Ernest McNab, CO of No. 1 Sqn.
during the Battle of Britain
(RAF Northolt Collection)

assaults on aerodromes and aircraft factories. Although considerable damage had been inflicted Goering had not yet achieved his goal. The RAF was still fighting and the *Luftwaffe* was suffering heavy losses. The day and night ordeal of London – *The Blitz* - now began. On September 7, when the first mass daylight raids penetrated to the heart of the Empire, the Canadian squadron was engaged on protective duties over its base at Northolt and thus saw no part in the action being fought to the east. Later in the day however, S/L McNab flew a lone sortie, encountered five Me109s over Kent and probably destroyed one.



Figure 16 - No. 1 Sqn. takes to the skies to engage the enemy, 1940
(National Air Force Museum of Canada Collection)

September 8 was quiet, being a prelude to another large-scale attack the next day by approximately 350 enemy aircraft. McNab's squadron sighted a large number of hostile 'bandits' south-west of London, giving chase with throttles wide-open. Before reaching the bombers however, the Hurricanes tangled with Me109s escorting another enemy group. F/O Peterson blew one to pieces at such close range that debris damaged his propeller and shattered the windscreen. With a cut face and obscured vision caused by fragments of glass and perspex, Peterson fell to 11,000 feet

before his eyes began to clear, and he was able to see his instruments. Another pilot, F/O WBM Millar, was wounded when his Hurricane was damaged in combat, forcing him to make a parachute descent. In addition to Peterson's victory, F/O PW Lochnan damaged two yellow-nosed Me109s, and S/L McNab made smoke stream from another as it fled towards the Channel.

The *Luftwaffe* returned to the assault on September 11, sending a large force to strike at London, whilst smaller forces bombed Portsmouth and Southampton. These new tactics were to little avail; as on previous days, the raids were broken-up by the defending squadrons, seventeen of which engaged the enemy. No 1 RCAF Squadron intercepted a group of Heinkel bombers, fifteen to twenty in number, over Tunbridge Wells, and, after scattering the enemy, engaged the German pilots in a series of individual combats. F/L McGregor shot down an He111 that crashed in flames after one of the crew baled-out. F/O Molson shot down another Heinkel, and two more were damaged by S/L McNab and F/O Christmas. A lone Junkers bomber dived into the ground after three attacks by F/O Yuile. The enemy gunners had kept up a heavy fire throughout the action and two Hurricanes were shot down. F/O Lochnan crash-landed without injury, but F/O Little was wounded in the leg and had to descend by parachute. On August 27, 1941, whilst serving with No 402 Canadian Squadron., F/L Little was lost over the Channel.

There was little activity for the squadron during the next three days, apart from a brief encounter on September 14 with a Do215, which the Canadians damaged. The brief lull ended the next day when the Battle of Britain reached its climax. In the late morning and early afternoon of that September Sunday two waves, totaling 500 enemy aircraft, crossed the Channel to deal a crushing final blow to London. The attempt failed.

No 1 Squadron RCAF was in action twice: first at midday and again at 1430. In the first scramble the squadron was caught at a disadvantage over Biggin Hill by some Me109s which ‘bounced’ them out of the sun. F/O Smither was shot down and killed. Their formation broken by the Me109s attack, only two of the Hurricane pilots engaged the enemy. F/O Nesbitt fired a burst into one Me109 at close range, and the enemy fell in flames. But the Canadian was himself shot down by another Me109. Nesbitt baled out of his smoke-filled cockpit to land near Tunbridge Wells with head injuries.

The second scramble was more successful. Southeast of London, Hurricanes intercepted a formation of about twenty He111 bombers with a strong fighter escort. The fighters however, made little effort to defend their charges and the Hurricanes cut the Heinkel formation to pieces. S/L McNab opened fire on one bomber which promptly jettisoned its bomb load and turned for cover in the clouds, smoke trailing from one engine. Later McNab chased another Heinkel into the clouds, waited until it emerged and emptied his guns into the bomber. The Heinkel crash-landed on mudflats in the Thames Estuary. A second Heinkel was forced down at West Malling by F/O Lochnan who landed alongside and helped to remove the crew. Probables were credited to F/L McGregor and F/O Russel who smashed bursts into the engines of their respective Heinkel targets and silenced the enemy gunners. Yet another Heinkel which F/O PB Pitcher attacked was last seen belching smoke from the fuselage and one engine. While most of the pilots were engaged with the bombers, Yellow Section stood guard high above. F/O RW Norris caught a Me109, fired three bursts, and saw flames and smoke come out of the cockpit as the enemy fighter fell off on one wing into the clouds. It was recorded as a ‘probable’. Early in the action F/O Yuile was hit in the shoulder, but managed to bring his Hurricane back to Northolt.



Figure 18 - Sgt. Mark Bristow

During that day of epic aerial combat, the zenith of the Battle of Britain, the RAF and Anti-Aircraft Command claimed 185 enemy aircraft destroyed. British losses amounted to only 27 aircraft destroyed, with eleven pilots killed or missing, with the same number wounded. Airmen from Canada, serving with the RAF and the RCAF, contributed over fifteen to the day’s tally. Since 1945 it has been established from German records that the figure of 185 was considerably in excess of the actual enemy losses. It may be of interest to note that contemporary British claims for the entire Battle were 2,692 enemy aircraft destroyed; *Luftwaffe* losses were actually 1,733 aircraft.



Figure 17 - No. 1 Sqn. ground crew tend to a Hurricane
(Library and Archives Canada Collection)

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