

March - April 2017 Issue

May-Gorman Airplanes

By Denny May

April 1911 was an exciting month for two young men in Edmonton. Hugh Robinson and “Lucky” Bob St. Henry brought a Curtiss Biplane to Edmonton, and on April 28th Robinson took to the air from the fairgrounds. Many young men watched in awe that day and the next as the aircraft circled ‘round the city. Wilfrid “Wop” May and his brother Court were among the crowds and likely another young man George Gorman was there too.

When World War I was declared many young men across Canada joined the army and headed overseas. Some lucky ones decided to try becoming pilots with the Royal Flying Corps. Other young men could not go including Court May who had polio as a child and had difficulty walking.



Figure 1 - Wop May & Court May
(Denny May Collection)

World War I was the ultimate test for a pilot. More pilots died learning to fly an airplane than died in combat - it was a tough life. The planes they flew were modern for the time, but many had rotary engines that threw off oil and shook the planes - pilots had to fly the planes often to altitudes of 20,000 feet, read a map, keep one hand on the control column at all times and shoot a gun. The courage of those early pilots was legendary.

“Wop” May and George Gorman both joined the flying fraternity and flew in combat. “Wop” serving with the 209 (9th Naval) squadron flew into his first combat on April 21, 1918 and survived being chased by “The Red Baron” thanks to the efforts of A. Roy

Brown (who had been a schoolmate of “Wop’s” in Edmonton). “Wop” survived the war and returned home with the rank of Captain, and with a score of 13 (+ 5 probables) was a “Double Ace”. George Gorman was not so lucky - his plane was shot down behind enemy lines, and he spent four months in a Prisoner of War camp. George returned home as a war hero.

When “Wop” returned to Edmonton in 1919 he was wondering what to do with his life. A chance came when a surplus Curtiss “JN-4 “Canuck” (#C-1347 - registered as G-CAAI) called “the City of Edmonton” was sent to Edmonton. “Wop” and Court quickly formed and incorporated “May Airplanes Ltd.” - one of Canada’s first aviation companies. A contract was signed by Manager Court May and Mayor Joe Clarke on May 22, 1919. A \$2,000.00 performance bond was given the City of Edmonton and they rented the aircraft from the City of Edmonton for \$25.00 a month.

In the late spring of 1919 “Wop” and Fred McCall from Calgary headed to the U.S.A. where they acquired two surplus Curtiss JN-4 “Jenny” aircraft, and during June and early July “Wop” and Fred were flying at airshows in Southern Alberta. On July 5th Fred McCall landed his Jenny (#34214) on top of the Merry-Go-Round at the Calgary Stampede grounds and as it was no longer flyable he bought Wop’s Jenny (#34210), and “Wop” headed back to Edmonton. While “Wop” was away, George Gorman was flying the “Edmonton” from May Field in west Edmonton. May Field was located on the west side of the St. Albert Trail at 122 Avenue.



Figure 2 - May Airplanes
(Denny May Collection)

In early June, May Airplanes was contracted to deliver copies of the Edmonton Journal to Wetaskiwin, and on June 7th George Gorman and engineer Pete Derbyshire took off from May Field with two bundles of the Journal. There was a strong wind that day and Pete had to throw the bundles of newspapers out of the aircraft as it was too windy to land - this was probably the first use of an aircraft to deliver commercial goods in Canada. Later in the month a similar flight to Killam successfully delivered papers to the ground.



Figure 3 - George Gorman and R Jennings, Edmonton Journal,
Prior to Wetaskiwin Flight
(Denny May Collection)

On January 27, 1920 George Gorman formally joined the company and its name was changed to “May-Gorman Airplanes Co. Ltd.”. A new contract with the City of Edmonton was signed on March 20, 1920, and the performance bond was dropped to \$1,000.00. On May 7, 1920 the Air Board issued “A Temporary Certificate of Air License for Air Harbour” to May-Gorman Airplanes Co. Ltd. The location was identified as: “on the St. Albert Trail in a 3½ mile radius, in a northwesterly direction from the Post Office” (in

those days the Post Office was located on the SE Corner of 101 Street and 101 A Ave where the old Post Office Clock sits on display outside the entrance to the Westin Hotel).

A number of legendary aviation events took place over the next few years.



*Figure 4 - Wop May and his Curtiss Canuck over Diamond Park
(Denny May Collection)*

July 12, 1919 - “Wop” May flew Edmonton Mayor Joe Clarke over Diamond Park (on the flats below the Macdonald Hotel) so the mayor could drop a baseball to open the season.

“Wop” convinced Joe that the only safe way out of the river valley was to fly under the High Level Bridge which was probably illegal.

August 30, 1919 - “Wop” May was called upon by the Edmonton Police Service to fly Detective James Campbell from Edmonton to Edson. This was the first use of an aircraft in a manhunt in Canada (and maybe North America). Campbell was chasing John Larsen who had shot Edmonton Police Constable

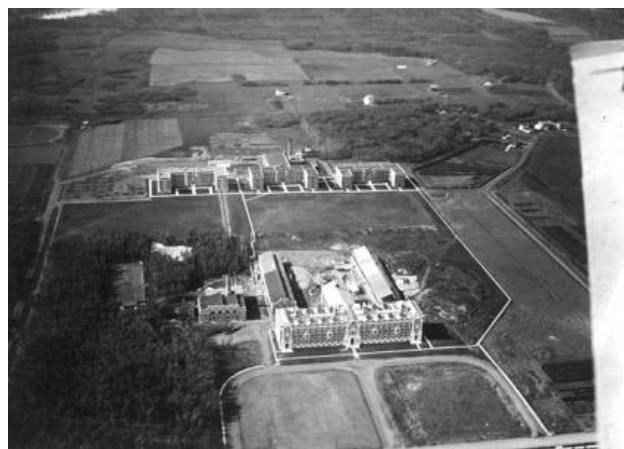
Hugh Nixon. Nixon, a World War I hero who had survived the battles of Ypres, Passchendaele and Vimy Ridge, died after identifying Larsen. “Wop” had to land the “Edmonton” at Wabamun for fuel. Taking off from the small field at Wabamun, the plane hit some trees but carried on safely to Edson and landed on the main street. On taxiing for takeoff the next day the aircraft hit the town pump but was not damaged. Campbell and Provincial Police Constable McElroy captured Larsen.

September 12, 1919 - “Wop” flew the “Edmonton” alongside the CPR train carrying Edward, the Prince of Wales, to Edmonton.

September 13, 1919 - “Wop” was in the air with Ray Ross (a former Royal Flying Corps pilot who joined the RFC in 1917 with “Wop” and served as an instructor during the war). They took the first aerial photos over the city of Edmonton including great photos of the University of Alberta buildings.

May 1, 1920 - George Gorman took Mrs. Annie Bulyea (wife of Alberta’s first Lieutenant Governor) on a flight over the City of Edmonton to drop leaflets promoting the need for a YWCA building in the city.

July 20, 1920 - a flight of four American de Havilland 4B aircraft landed at May Field



*Figure 5 - University of Alberta 1919 –
Photo Taken from Wop May's Airplane
(Denny May Collection)*

on their way to Alaska and stopped again on their way back on October 8th.

July 1920 - Pete Derbyshire became the first man in Alberta to drop from an airplane with a parachute. George Gorman was flying the aircraft for that demonstration at Red Deer.

August 20, 1920 - "Wop" May and Pete Derbyshire were in Grande Prairie with the "Edmonton" for the town fair and flew on to Peace River carrying the first air-mail to that community.



*Figure 6 - Wop May & George Gorman
with Junkers JL-6 in Background
(Denny May Collection)*

January 27, 1921 - Imperial Oil Company purchased two Junkers-Larsen JL-6 Monoplanes in New York. "Wop" May, George Gorman and Pete Derbyshire went by rail to New York to pick up the aircraft and over the next few weeks they flew the aircraft back to Edmonton. "Wop" felt that the aircraft were not suitable for use in the NWT, but George Gorman and Elmer Fullerton flew the aircraft north. Both aircraft had their props broken, and replacement props were made from sleigh boards and moose glue by William Hill and Walter Johnson.

May 21, 1922 - May-Gorman Airplanes Co. Ltd. President Court May died after falling on the stairs at the MacDonald Hotel.

I have been unable to find out exactly when May-Gorman Airplanes ceased operations, though we know that "Wop" May continued to fly into the 1920s. In 1924 "Wop" picked up a Curtiss Jenny at the US border and delivered it to Harry Adair in Grande Prairie. Adair had established the "Edmonton and Grande Prairie Aircraft Company". "Wop" flew the plane at

town fairs in northwestern Alberta over the summer but it was not financially viable, and the company folded.

In 1924 "Wop" and Edmonton Mayor Ken Blatchford worked on the purchase of the Hagman Estate, by the City of Edmonton, for a new airfield in Edmonton. The field was licensed on June 16, 1926. "Wop" May convinced the city to name the field "Blatchford Field" and a letter was sent in November 1926 to the Department of National Defence requesting the former Mayor (who was then a Member of Parliament) be honoured this way. The airport was officially opened on January 8, 1927 when "Punch" Dickins and R. Collis flew Siddeley Siskin aircraft from High River and landed at the airport where they were greeted by the Mayor and other city officials.

Aviation in Alberta grew steadily in the late 1920s. The Edmonton and Northern Alberta Flying Club was formed by "Wop" May and Cy Becker in 1927. They then went on to form Commercial Airways in 1928 but that's another story.

Today, the "City of Edmonton" Curtiss "Canuck", which was lovingly restored by Stan Reynolds, hangs inside the front doors of the Reynolds Alberta Museum at Wetaskiwin.



Figure 7 - Denny May
(Denny May Collection)

EDITOR'S NOTE: Author and artist, Denny May, son of famed bush pilot Wop May, is a member of the Alberta Aviation Museum and is also part of the Operations Committee for Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame. He worked extensively with author Sheila Reid in the writing of the books 'Wings of a Hero' and 'Conquer the Sky'. In 2011, he completed and published 'More Stories About Wop May.' In 2014 he republished 'Wings of a Hero' with many new photos.

Blatchford in the 'Twenties and the Early Development of Bush Flying

By Ken Tingley

As Ottawa aviation historian Hugh Halliday observes, “[when] people think of Canadian aerial achievements, they will quickly recall the group that opened the northern frontier by air.” Of course, this statement refers to the famous, now almost mythic, men who first opened the northern resource frontiers of Canada after the Great War of 1914-1918. While this period of perhaps two decades forms the “golden age” of bush flying in the popular imagination, it is important to point out that bush flying never really ended. It continues today.

Halliday also provides a working definition of bush flying, defining the events of the interwar period as representing a complex historical process. “Of necessity, the term ‘bush flying’ has been used with some flexibility,” he writes. “It implies aviation at the edge of the Canadian frontier, but that frontier was itself retreating with each succeeding year.”

The process was complex. There were, in fact, two types of "bush flying". One was purely commercial - passengers, mail contracts, freighting - conducted by private enterprise. The other was government sponsored - chiefly aerial mapping and forestry protection - carried on by the Air Board and then nascent RCAF. The lines were not always clearly drawn; some commercial enterprises did aerial photography or forestry work as well. In between were the provincial air services that performed a myriad of tasks. Yet they worked together and formed a community of interests. Nothing illustrates this more than the ease with which individuals passed from one type of organization to another; bush pilots became air force officers and vice-versa.

Halliday goes on to debunk the prevalent heroic nationalism of bush flying by pointing out a few significant historical facts. “Bush flying achieved mythic status in Canada - and every myth cries out to be challenged.”

To a great degree the preponderance of frontier flying represented a failure elsewhere - the inability of Canada to develop even short-haul domestic air services in its more

populated areas. By 1930 European centres were linked by a virtual spider web of airline routes from London to Moscow and beyond, with air links to Africa and the Middle East. Some offered only weekly services; all were extremely expensive, but they were there. Similarly, numerous air lines connected major American cities, using Fokker and Ford products which carried about a dozen passengers; they were linked to carriers flying to South America, and even scheduled (if infrequent) transoceanic flights were under way.

“Such services were conspicuous by their absence in Canada,” Halliday concludes. “The principal passenger services here ran north-south, with American carriers flying between Toronto and Buffalo or between Vancouver and Seattle. There was no hint of a true Canadian transcontinental air service until Trans-Canada Airlines appeared on the scene in 1937.”

This failure stemmed from Canadian geography. Until large heated passenger cabins were developed, the winter climate stopped any year-round passenger service through northern Ontario or across the vast western plains. The Canadian Rockies were more difficult to cross by air than the more southern mountain chains. During the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Canadian railways had been built and operated through massive government subsidies and loan guarantees. European airlines lived on subsidies and as early as 1926 every nation aspired to having a "flag carrier" on international routes.

Canadian support was restricted to a few support services and mail contracts. J.A. Wilson wrote in 1932: “We deliberately turned our backs on inter-city services and put the whole of our energies into flying in our northern hinterland. We felt at that time that inter-city services could well wait and that the north country offered a field of development where aircraft could play an immediately useful part....”

In 1932 Wilson wrote in *The Engineering Journal*, “There exists generally throughout northern Canada efficient commercial air services which have been self-sustaining, have required no subsidy, and which give access to the remotest districts of the country.”

More has been learned of northern Canada during the past ten years than in the preceding three hundred. The forester, surveyor, geologist, prospector, mining engineer; the clergy, the doctors, the nurses, the police; in fact, all whose activities lie in northern Canada find their task greatly lightened, their range of action multiplied many times and their efficiency increased by the use of aircraft.... No country has spent less on civil aviation and no country has had greater returns from the money spent.

What emerges from a close examination of bush flying in Canada is a picture of a gutsy entrepreneurial elite forging a commercial niche in an area left undeveloped by the national or provincial governments. Halliday once again sums up this situation succinctly. “Bush flying was important - but as we shall see, its total impact declined as commercial aviation developed in other ways.”

Air mails to the Arctic were spectacular - but by the early 1930s far greater loads were carried in the aerial corridors of southern Canada. Bush flying appeared hazardous -

but for the most part it was conducted in a cool, calculating fashion. Airplanes were expensive, and whether flown by a private entrepreneur or a professional military pilot, nobody wanted to risk their loss. The goal was to draw a map or turn a profit - adventure for the sake of adventure was left to others - like those trying to fly the Atlantic in the 1920s, or racing pilots in the 1930s.

Early Aviation in Edmonton 1909-1925

Before the end of the Great War of 1914-1918, Edmonton was introduced to the new marvels of powered flight through local experimentation and traveling exhibitions. Eugenie L. Myles has documented these romantic times in her popular early account titled *Airborne From Edmonton*, published in 1959.

Two examples of early Alberta aviation pioneers set the trend of early fascination with the lure of the air. The Underwood brothers, from Botha, near Stettler, built and “flew” Canada’s first aircraft in 1907. The Underwoods made several flights, but their craft was attached to the ground with a tether.

Reginald Hunt, a young carpenter, built a glider with a homemade motor, and shaped his own propeller based on the design of a ceiling fan. On 9 September 1909 Hunt took off on his inaugural flight from a west Edmonton field. If this flight had been officially recorded, Hunt would have been the second man in Canada to take flight in an aircraft, following J.A.D. McCurdy, as well as the first in Western Canada. His nephew Desmond Hunt, later recalled that his uncle came to Canada from the Channel Isles in 1905. During the following three years he crisscrossed the country twice, working at all sorts of jobs. He came to Edmonton about 1908, working as a carpenter during the boom times, and working on his aviation inventions in his spare time. The *Edmonton Journal* described his aircraft as an “aeroglider of the monoplane type.” It continued the description by noting the plane was “a winged device with two great birdlike wings” and was propelled by “large fans...similar to those used to keep flies from sleeping in restaurants.” Hunt crashed at the Edmonton Exhibition in 1910, and later abandoned aviation for boat building.

The organizing committee for the 1911 Edmonton Horse Show contracted American barnstormers Hugh Robinson and Bob St. Henry to bring their flying machines to Edmonton. They shipped their planes up by rail, but Bob St. Henry's craft never arrived. On 28 April 1911 Hugh Robinson took off from the centre of the Exhibition Ground racetrack, and flew his Curtiss up to 400 feet above the enthralled crowd. For fifteen minutes he circled the grounds before landing. On the following Friday and Saturday Robinson repeated his flight four more times.

In July 1916, while the world read about the adventures of the air aces over Europe, the dashing young aviatrix named Katherine Stinson appeared at the Edmonton Exhibition. Stinson showed her aeronautical skill flying her Curtiss each afternoon and evening. Katherine and her brother and sister ran a flying school in San Antonio, Texas.

Stinson was asked back in 1917 to demonstrate her high jinks at the summer exhibition. On this return engagement, as before, she was doing a tour of Western fairs. The plane that she had

flown in Calgary had been damaged, so she was sent a different plane. Problems with this machine led to a spectacular crash landing during her performance. When the plane was repaired she demonstrated many of the aerial maneuvers being used in "dogfights" over Europe, as well as "smoke writing." The grand finale consisted of dropping a dummy bomb on an "enemy trench" prepared for the show.



Figure 8 - Katherine Stinson completes the first airmail flight into Edmonton, 1918 (City of Edmonton Archives, EA-10-1246)

In 1918 Katherine Stinson announced she would return to the Edmonton fair, and while in Calgary she was appointed an official mail carrier and handed a sack of first class mail. The mail had been stamped "Aeroplane Mail Service, July 9, 1918". Seven miles north of Calgary her Curtiss Stinson Special developed mechanical problems, and she had to land for repairs. She returned to Calgary where she started again, following the old Calgary and Edmonton Railway line. Stinson flew over the Edmonton Exhibition grounds landing in front of the

grandstand on the infield. This was the first official airmail flight in Western Canada, second in Canada only to a Montreal-Toronto run completed two weeks earlier by Captain Brian Peck.

At the end of the war, two Edmonton flying companies were established. First, May-Gorman Airplanes Ltd. operated between 1919 and 1921. Wilfrid "Wop" May DFC and his brother Court set up an aviation firm called May Airplanes Ltd. on 19 May 1919. They then located a landing field in a pasture on Walter Sprole's farm, on the northwestern limits of the St. Albert Trail at about 122 Avenue. One of their main business goals was to begin aerial map-making and photography. They soon hired another veteran pilot, Lieutenant George Gorman, and Pete Derbyshire, as their mechanic. *[EDITOR'S NOTE: For additional information on May-Gorman Airplanes please refer to previous article by Denny May.]*

The Edmonton Airplane Company, the second early Edmonton aviation firm, was incorporated on 28 January 1920. It operated in the area during 1920 and 1921. Its principals were John McNeill, a local transportation entrepreneur, Peter McArthur, Captain Keith Tailyour, a celebrated Air Force flying instructor, E. Owens and R. L. Greene. The plan was to start an Edmonton to Calgary route, making two to four trips a day and possibly later extending up to Peace River. A patch of land on the Hagman estate was leased and a modest hangar built. This would become the first hangar on the future Blatchford Field, and would be used until a new Municipal Airport hangar was constructed in 1929 and 1930. The company invested in an Avro 504K when it opened for business.

On 2 July 1920 Captain Tailyour flew Mrs. M. R. Jennings to Calgary in two hours and thirty minutes, making her the first woman commercial air passenger in Alberta, and theirs the first plane carrying a passenger from Edmonton to Calgary.

On 27 July 1920 the United States Army Air Service expedition, en route across the continent to Alaska, stopped in Edmonton. Five days later the corps of airmen took off for Nome, Alaska. On their return flight, they landed in Edmonton on 8 October and on 20 October they arrived in New York, completing a 9000-mile journey to Alaska and back, and completing the first transcontinental flight.

In August 1920, "Wop" May flew to Grande Prairie on what turned out to be another flight which would make it into bush flyers' folklore. May spent six weeks touring the Peace River district stunting at fairs. On the return flight in September, accompanied by Pete Derbyshire, they used their compass to guide them over the forests between Grande Prairie and Whitecourt. Near Whitecourt they developed engine trouble and landed in a small clearing, damaging the aircraft. Over the next three days they repaired the plane. According to the story a leaking radiator hose was patched with a paste of weed seeds, or was wrapped with a bacon rind. They then cleared a rough runway, and finally got airborne again. Finally they flew to Sangudo, where they landed to refuel and overhaul what they could of their airplane.

Captain Tailyour temporarily took a posting as flight instructor at Camp Borden in 1921. In early April he met with a flying accident and was killed. With McNeill's pilot gone, the Avro Aero, the hangar and the lease were turned over to John Larsen, a New York businessman interested in aviation, who had recently had sold two Junkers-Larsen JL-6s to Imperial Oil. Discovery of oil



Figure 9 – George Gorman and "Wop" May kneel in front of one of Imperial Oil's Junkers-Larsen JL-6 aircraft
(City of Edmonton Archives, EA-10-3181.13.4)

by the Imperial Oil Company at Fort Norman led the company's western development manager to think that the area might not be as inaccessible if planes were used to fly in men and freight. The JL-6s that Imperial Oil purchased had 175 horsepower engines, and could be fitted with wheels, pontoons or skis. The May-Gorman Airplane Company was hired at the beginning of 1921 to fly the Junkers from New York to Edmonton. The trials and tribulations of this trip, and the subsequent northern expedition, have entered into bush flying lore.

John Larsen, meanwhile, announced plans to operate a seaplane base at

Cooking Lake and to operate a marine engine plant in Edmonton. However, following the disappointing excursion to Fort Norman in 1921, Larsen gave up and returned to New York. Imperial Oil then took over Larsen's local airplane interests, including the hangar and the lease of the Hagman estate field.

The struggles of the early 1920s meant that "Wop" May could not raise adequate financial support for his company in 1922, so it collapsed. Conditions for aviation would begin to change for the better in 1927.

The Edmonton Grande Prairie Aircraft Company also operated for a while in 1924, when "Wop" May became a partner with Harry Adair, a Grande Prairie farmer. In May, Adair had purchased a new Curtiss "Jenny" in San Diego and arranged for May to fly it back to Edmonton from the US border. This plane was an improved model from the old "Edmonton", and had a 180 horsepower Hispano engine with a range of 330 miles. The company would concentrate on transporting raw furs from the north and performing at all the summer fairs. Headquarters were in Edmonton. Unfortunately on 26 June, at Grande Prairie, May failed to clear some telephone wires with a heavily loaded plane and crashed. The plane was badly damaged but the pilot and passengers were unharmed. The company soon went out of business. By 1925 there were no truly active commercial aviation companies in Alberta.

Blatchford Field 1924-1939

In June 1924 Harry Adair and "Wop" May petitioned Mayor Kenneth Blatchford, an outspoken supporter of the role of aviation in Edmonton's future, to set aside land for a permanent airfield.

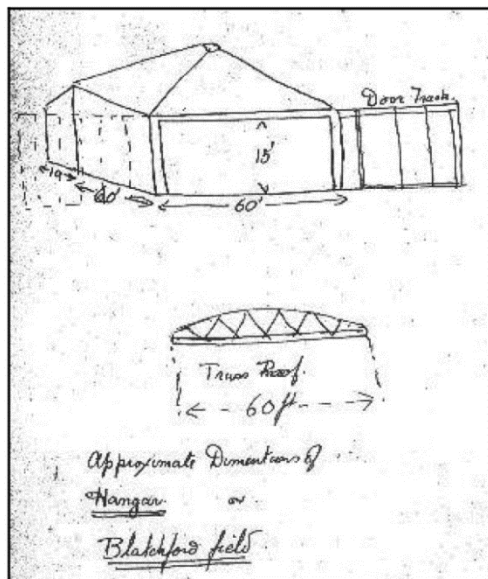


Figure 10 - Plan of the 1st hangar at 'Hagman Field'
(National Archives of Canada, RG 12, Vol 2270, File
5258-771, pt.1, c.1928)

The Hagman estate was the recommended site, as there already was a hangar on it and the city had acquired ownership of the property through tax forfeiture in 1923.

A Commissioner's Report to Council, 8 October 1924, suggested that the area between 118 and 123 Avenues, and 113 and 121 Streets, was suitable and owned almost entirely by the City. It was close to the city centre, railway services, and utilities such as light, water, power, sewer and gas. Both the City Engineer and the Commanding Officer of the High River RCAF station gave advice on the best location for the planned airport buildings and general layout.

City Council endorsed the recommendation to establish an aerodrome in this area on 13 October 1924 and an application form for a federal license was sent to the City. This was not completed until the City Engineer brought it to the City Commissioner's attention in April 1926. At a Council meeting on 10 May 1926 the plan for the layout and improvement expenditure was carried, as was the authorization of the City Engineer to apply for a federal license for a Public Air Harbour.

In June 1926 Edmonton received the first license for a Municipal Air Harbour in Canada. It read:

This certifies that the City of Edmonton, whose address is Civic Block, c/o A. W. Haddow, City Engineer, is hereby granted a license under the Air Regulations, 1920, and under the conditions

*specified overleaf, for the use as a Public Air Harbour by day, of the area described as follows:
New Hagman Estate, Summerwilde.*

Dated this 16th day of June, 1926.

Later a motion was carried to make application to Ottawa to have the Air Harbour officially named "Blatchford Field" in honour of Mayor Kenneth Blatchford.

In September 1926, three landing courses, 150 feet wide, were constructed. These runways were for daytime flying only and were not paved but were flat grassy fields until use and rain turned them into muddy fields. At that time there were no landing lights and on the occasion that a plane had to come in to land in the dark, oil pots were put out and flares used. The total reserve was one hundred and ninety acres. McNeill's old hangar remained and could hold up to three medium planes if the wings were taken off. It had no phone or electricity at that time and apparently barrels of oil and gas would be stored there. Rental of the hangar was possibly \$15 a month at that time. In the winter of 1926 an arrangement was made allowing the Air Force to carry out winter testing of their Siskin planes with no charge. The City apparently was happy to have them use the field, which was an endorsement in a way.

Blatchford Field was officially opened 8 January 1927. Flight Lieutenant Collis and Flying Officer "Punch" Dickins flew in two RCAF Siskins from Number Two Squadron, High River. The planes came in on their skis, smoothly taxiing down the field to a stop where Mayor A.U.G. Bury welcomed them, and declared the airport officially open for business.

During early 1927 "Punch" Dickins remained in Edmonton conducting low-temperature testing with the Siskin, before returning to High River. "Wop" May, Cy Becker and Vic Horner incorporated and started Commercial Airways in 1928. They purchased a new Avro Avian from England, which could be equipped with wheels, skis, or pontoons, with a speed of 100 miles per hour. It had an open cockpit.



*Figure 11 - Blatchford Field with DH60X Cirrus Moth G-CYYG
returning to the hangar
(National Archives of Canada)*

On 31 December 1928 a message was sent to the provincial Department of Health from a doctor in Fort Vermilion. Diphtheria had broken out in Little Red River and antitoxin serum was urgently needed. With charcoal burners at their feet to keep both serum and feet warm, they took off in the Avian on New Year's Day with the temperature at 33 degrees below zero. They reached McLennan on the first day, flying low against strong headwinds and with very poor visibility. The next day they reached Peace River and stopped to refuel. Then they followed the river and managed to fly into Fort Vermilion, handing the serum over to the local doctor. They finally reached Peace River on the return trip with about a gallon of fuel left.

They worked on their airplane all the next day, and the following day they took off again, but had to battle strong headwinds and thick snow while flying at an altitude of 100 feet above ground. In Edmonton about 10,000 people lined the airfield and Portage Avenue. May and Horner returned as heroes. During the years that followed they would be called upon several times to fly "mercy flights" for the Department of Health.

In February 1929 Commercial Airlines purchased a new Lockheed Vega which featured an enclosed, heated cabin and could carry four passengers or six hundred pounds of freight. Capable of speeds up to 120 miles per hour, it had an undercarriage adaptable for wheels, pontoons, or skis. This plane made the inaugural mail flight from Edmonton to Grande Prairie.

Commercial Airlines held the weekly air mail contract for Edmonton to Peace River, and later it got the mail contract for the Mackenzie Valley route. The company then purchased three new Bellanca Pacemakers. In November 1929 headquarters were moved up to Fort McMurray.

Western Canada Airways continued its experiments with the Prairie Air Mail Service connecting the major cities in the west, including Edmonton. In 1929 Leigh Brintnell, operations manager for Western Canada Airways, landed at Blatchford flying a new Junkers on his way to Prince George. Later he touched down in a Fokker Super-Universal on his way to Vancouver. Near the end of the year Archie McMullen flew a Lockheed Vega back from Los Angeles to Edmonton.

During the 1930s Edmonton continued to consolidate its position as the gateway to the north. Its orientation was definitely fixed on the North Star by this time.

The federal Controller of Civil Aviation assessed Edmonton's role in northern aviation in 1938. "Edmonton has always been regarded as a key point and one of the principal bases of operations in commercial flying," he concluded. "It is the base of supplies for the whole Mackenzie and Peace River areas and an important terminal point on the trans-Canada airway. Air mail services between Winnipeg and Calgary, and Edmonton were the first to be inaugurated on the trans-Canada system in 1930, after a period of survey and construction in 1928 and /1929."



Figure 12 - Ken Tingley

The emerging aviation industry grew rapidly during the years between the two global wars in which Canada played a significant role. Its growth was part of a national Canadian pattern based on commercial self-reliance, and the initiative and derring-do of its pilots and owners. Edmonton positioned itself as the Gateway to the North during these days, building upon earlier fur-trade connections and commercial routes. By the end of the 1920s the Edmonton airport was becoming an important commercial entrepot. Northern flying was a significant part of this development and would be built upon during the 1930s.

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".

Wilmot Pettit: Uncovering the Story of a Courageous Relative

By Rosemary Williams



*Figure 13 - S/L Wilmot Pettit
(Rosemary Williams Collection)*

**Wilmot Reginald Pettit O.B.E., D.F.C.
Squadron Leader
Royal Canadian Air Force
April 3, 1912 – June 6, 1944**

Wilmot Pettit's story was almost unknown to us until my mother Carmen Litt moved to our home on Vancouver Island in 2011. Wilmot was her cousin who had grown up next door to her in Brantford, Ontario. He later moved to Montreal and then to Ottawa for employment as a shoe salesman and manager in department stores.

With Carmen just beginning her Alzheimer's journey, much of our time was spent trying to capture old family memories. She often spoke of Wilmot, first as he arrived at their front door in uniform in 1940, age 28, announcing that he was going off to war. Returning to the story from time to time, we heard of Aunt Kate, Wilmot's mother, rushing over with news – Wilmot missing in action, Wilmot confirmed killed in action, then a letter from a farmer saying that Wilmot had crashed and was buried in his field.

In 2012, my sister-in-law Pam Calvert, an Ontario teacher and a Director of the Juno Beach Centre Association, invited my husband Peter and me to take part in a student battlefield tour in France and Belgium. I decided to get more information about Wilmot before we went. Always looming was the question about whether I could rely on the stories of my mother, considering her failing memory.

What I learned from official records was that he was an intelligent, healthy and fit young single man who enjoyed photography, golf, tennis, badminton, skiing, swimming and hockey. He enlisted in the RCAF in September, 1940 in Ottawa, Ontario. After attending various training schools in Canada, he graduated as a pilot in July, 1941 from No. 3 Service Flying Training School in Calgary, Alberta. After arriving overseas in England, he trained as a flight instructor. Later he was posted to No. 199 Squadron, Bomber Command. His second tour was with No. 620 Squadron.

Wilmot Pettit had an outstanding record of service during the war. In October 1943, after completing a tour of dangerous bombing missions over enemy-occupied territory, then-Flight Lieutenant Pettit was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. The citation reads: "As a pilot, this officer has participated in many attacks on important enemy targets and has displayed great skill and determination. On a recent occasion, whilst over Berlin, his aircraft was hit by fire from the ground defenses, but he continued his bombing run to execute a successful attack. Shortly afterwards, the bomber was hit again, this time by fire from an enemy fighter. The rear turret was rendered unserviceable; most of the electrical system was shot away, while the control wires of two petrol tanks were severed. Coolly and skillfully, Flight Lieutenant Pettit evaded the attacker

and afterwards flew the bomber to base. This officer displayed great courage and determination throughout."

Wilmot was later promoted to Squadron Leader. An example of his great courage and sense of his responsibility towards his comrades was cited when he was made an officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire on May 26, 1944, mere days before D-Day. The citation reads: "Squadron Leader Pettit was in charge of night flying at an RAF station when an aircraft crash-landed and caught fire in swampy ground. With the aid of LAC J. T. Wray, of the RAF, he released two members of the aircraft's crew who had been trapped in the fuselage, and then discovered the rear gunner pinned upside down in his turret, seriously injured. Defying flames, danger from exploding ammunition and pyrotechnics, and the fact that fuel tanks had begun to explode, S/L Pettit succeeded in extricating the rear gunner. He is credited with having saved the lives of three members of the aircraft crew".

In June, 1944, with an exemplary combat record behind him, and when he might have returned to the safety of Canada, he further demonstrated his sense of duty by volunteering for the D-Day assault on Normandy, with the dangerous task of carrying paratroopers into the invasion area. The group took off from the southern coast of England a few minutes before midnight. S/L Pettit piloted one of the two Stirling aircraft in the attack that night which carried sappers and other troops and towed four Horsa gliders with paratroopers.

According to a survivor's account (www.591-antrim-parachute.info), the trip across the English Channel was uneventful. At twenty minutes before the scheduled jump time the plane lights were dimmed, and the ripples of the water shone in the moonlight. But within minutes of reaching land, a deadly enemy attack began. Fifty-two men died on impact, 38 wounded were captured and evacuated to a German hospital at Pont l'Évêque, and 7 others were taken prisoner and summarily shot by enemy soldiers a few hours later.

Wilmot's plane was among those that failed to return and he was officially reported missing. Later it was determined that he had been killed in action on June 6, 1944 and was buried near the roadside with his compatriots, in a field belonging to a M. Bresard at Grangues, Calvados, Normandy, beside their crashed Stirling Aircraft. He was identified by letters carried on his person. His body was later moved to the nearby Ranville Cemetery.

So now I knew! My mother's account was not imaginary. Grippled by this story, we eagerly went off on our student battlefield tour. The trip organizers graciously agreed to depart a bit from the planned itinerary, and we were able to spend a few touching moments at Wilmot's final resting place in Ranville Cemetery.

Back at home, with more questions left unanswered, I laboured over my rusty French, and sent an e-mail off to the town hall (le mairie) in



Figure 14 - Peter Williams at Wilmot Pettit's grave,
Ranville Cemetery
(Rosemary Williams Collection)

Grangues, and later, a second e-mail, both with no response. Who could be surprised? They probably had no idea what I was talking about.



*Figure 15 - Château-de-Grangues
(591 Parachute Squadron Collection)*

We decided to travel to Normandy again, this time with our son Matt and his partner Carla. We hoped to discover some small bit of information in Grangues, a village lying in a valley about five kilometres south of the coast town of Houlgate. I knew the village hall (le mairie) was open only on Tuesdays until 12:30 p.m. It happened to be on our route from Dieppe to Bayeux, but what a journey, from a major

highway, to a smaller highway, then to a seemingly endless dirt road through a tunnel of tree boughs. As we drove along, the minutes ticked off. Does this place even exist? Suddenly an opening in the trees, and we came across an ancient church with a graveyard, and “le mairie!” With the car still rolling, I burst out of the door, and up the stairs, waving a copy of my e-mail, and was lucky enough to make the acquaintance of the elegant mayor, M. Francois Langevin, and a couple of his helpers.

Not only did they know about the incident, they had reams of information on tables and photos on the walls, plus a painting of the Stirling aircraft piloted by Wilmot being fired upon by enemy artillery! We learned that the Château de Grangues and its grounds had been occupied in June 1944 by German troops, with the owner and his family living in very restricted and uncomfortable conditions in the Château’s basement. We were so surprised to receive this information and so pleased with the level of interest: it was like this incident had just happened yesterday, and these wonderful, grateful people never, ever forgot their liberators.

The mayor then hopped into his car to lead us past the Château to the site of the crash, that farmer’s field that my mother had spoken of. We were shocked and touched to see how close this farm was to the English Channel. These brave men had barely made it over land before being shot down. The first aircraft crashed with a number of survivors who either jumped or were able to escape. No one survived the crash of the second aircraft.

In 1994 in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of D-Day (known in French as le Jour-J as we learned), a memorial had been



*Figure 16 - Crashed aircraft on the Château grounds
(591 Parachute Squadron Collection)*

erected in the graveyard beside Grangues' small 13th century Romanesque-style church, L'Église de Notre Dame et de Saint Roch), naming all Allied soldiers and airmen who lost their lives in Grangues on D-Day. We noticed that there was a French flag, and a Union Jack in honour of Wilmot's British compatriots, but no Canadian flag. Not until our arrival did the local people become aware that one of the soldiers who sacrificed for them was Canadian. Once home, we sent a Canadian flag to fly in Grangues, and were rewarded with a photo of that year's D-Day ceremony showing our flag flying high, along with the text of the mayor's speech, which included mention of our visit. It turned out that it had been just as moving for them as for us!

In the spring of last year, we were excited to receive an invitation to take part in the 2016 D-Day ceremony. How could we say no? People came from many villages around as well as from Britain. Our French was polished up, yet it was difficult, even when we put our heads together, to get the full meaning of the quick and excited French words. They mentioned "le pilote" and touched our arms in awe, as if to assure themselves that we were real. It was made abundantly clear that they were grateful every day to their liberators, and could barely express their appreciation for the sacrifice our family had made.

After singing a misty-eyed bilingual version of O Canada (with our Canadian flag proudly flying) and raising a glass of homemade wine with the villagers and other guests, our dazed family adjourned to the seaside town of Cabourg to share our thoughts about the village that seemed locked in time. We agreed that it had been a surreal and unforgettable experience for four proud Canadian visitors to have met these eternally grateful people. It was a great privilege

for us to have honoured our courageous relative, Wilmot Pettit, and all of the other brave men in his entourage who gave their lives on D-Day to liberate Normandy.



Figure 17 - Rosemary Williams with M. Francois Langevin,
Mayor of Grangues
(Rosemary Williams Collection)

EDITOR'S NOTE: Rosemary Williams was born in Brantford, Ontario and lived in a number of Ontario cities before moving to Comox, British Columbia in 2004. The fathers of both Rosemary and her husband Peter served in the RCAF during World War II. As well, many uncles and family friends were veterans of the War in various capacities. Rosemary would be interested in receiving any comments from readers of this article at rosemaryw34@hotmail.com.

Wallaby Airlines: Canadian Caribous Serve with the Aussies in Vietnam

By Neil Taylor

While Canada was a non-belligerent in the Vietnam War, that did not preclude Canadian industry from selling equipment and supplies not only to the Americans but also to other nations embroiled in the conflict. Australia was one of those recipients, purchasing twenty-nine de Havilland Canada DHC-4 Caribou transports. These aircraft were assigned to No. 35 Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), a transport unit that earned the moniker “Wallaby Airlines” from Australian and American forces fighting in the region.

The DHC-4 Caribou was a product of de Havilland Canada based at Downsview, Ontario. This company, originally established in 1928 as a subsidiary of de Havilland Aircraft (UK), had achieved considerable initial success with its construction of the DH.82c Tiger Moth: over 1,700 Tiger Moths were manufactured by de Havilland Canada. During the Second World War, de Havilland Canada Tiger Moths became the basic trainer in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. The company also produced the highly successful Mosquito fighter-bomber with over 1,100 examples rolling off the assembly line during the Second World War.

After the war, de Havilland Canada began designing and building aircraft uniquely suited to the harsh rigours of flying in Canada. Two of these aircraft, the DHC-2 Beaver and the DHC-3 Otter, were specifically designed for northern bush operations incorporating a wide range of features demanded by bush pilots, including the ability to fly on floats, skis and wheels, and to take-off and land in short distances, such as on northern lakes.

The next logical step for de Havilland Canada was to build a larger aircraft capable of carrying bigger loads without sacrificing its short take-off and landing (STOL) capability. This led to the design of the DHC-4 Caribou, the company’s first twin-engine cargo utility transport. Its load lifting capability was equivalent to that of a Douglas DC-3.



*Figure 18 - de Havilland Canada DHC-4 Caribou Prototype – CF-KTK-X
(Chris Griffiths Collection)*

The impetus for development of the DHC-4 Caribou was a US Army requirement for a STOL-type military transport, and the military proved to be the Caribou’s greatest customer. Design work began in 1955 and proceeded quickly. The first flight of a Caribou occurred on July 30, 1958 with the aircraft powered by two 1,450 hp Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp radial engines. It carried up to 8,740 lb. of cargo which could be loaded through a downward opening rear door with ramp extensions. Alternatively, the Caribou had the

capability to carry 32 troops, 26 paratroopers or up to 22 casualty stretchers.

The US Army took delivery of five Caribous, designated YAC-1s, in 1959 and after a thorough evaluation placed an initial order for 56 production aircraft with delivery to take place in 1961. Subsequent orders eventually totalled 165 aircraft, the last one being delivered in 1973.

Vietnam was one of the first places the US Army put its Caribous to work. The aircraft's tactical ability to deliver troops and supplies to remote bases in rugged areas was especially valued. But the US Army was not the only combatant who sought the Caribou's STOL capability.

The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) flew DC-3 Dakota transports during the 1950s, but by the early 1960s a replacement was needed. The RAAF was already familiar with the DHC Beaver and Otter, operating several of each type, and the STOL capabilities of the Caribou made it a strong competitor to replace the Dakota.

In May 1963 the RAAF ordered eighteen DHC-4 Caribous for No. 38 Squadron. This squadron was originally formed during the Second World War, and utilizing Douglas Dakotas transported personnel and supplies to New Guinea and Borneo. After the war, some of its aircraft were stationed in Singapore for use during the Malayan guerilla uprising.

The first Caribou produced for the RAAF, A4-134, was handed over at de Havilland Canada's Downsview plant on February 25, 1964. The RAAF used the designation A4 followed by the construction number of the aircraft. The first three production aircraft were ferried by No. 38 Squadron crews over 16,000 miles to Australia, arriving at RAAF Base Richmond north-west of Sydney in March and April 1964.

By this time the Australian government had already been drawn into the Vietnam conflict. In August 1962, after repeated requests by the Republic of Vietnam government, the Australian Army sent thirty advisers to work with American advisers in training South Vietnamese army elements. The number of Australian advisers grew to one hundred by January 1965, and when the Americans decided to send in combat troops in March 1965, the Aussies committed a full battalion the following month.

With Australian advisers deployed in South Vietnam, logistical support was needed, and the RAAF decided to send six of their new Caribou transports to Vietnam. When three Caribous were ferried from Canada to Australia in June 1964, they were held at RAAF Base Butterworth, Malaysia to form the core of a new unit entitled the RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam (RTFV). After a brief work-up period, the three Caribous were flown to the US Army base at Vung Tau, Vietnam on August 8, 1964. Three more Caribous were to follow in October, and at its peak the RTFV operated seven RAAF Caribous.

The US Army base at Vung Tau was the Caribous' home base, but the RTFV undertook operational missions across Vietnam as part of the Americans' Southeast Asia Airlift System. Over 115 airfields, many little more than a dirt strip carved out of the rugged terrain, were visited by the RAAF Caribous during their deployment.



*Figure 19 - RAAF Caribou A4-173
(Courtesy of ADF-Serials at www.adf-gallery.com.au)*

The RTFV Caribous adopted the call sign “Wallaby” so quite naturally they quickly became known as “Wallaby Airlines”. They flew almost anywhere, squeezing onto short runways and packed tracks where other aircraft were unable to land. They primarily carried mail, fuel drums and military personnel, but they were also occasionally used to carry peasant workers and livestock.

There is an interesting story associated with the history of the “Wallaby” call sign. Evidently a group of RAAF pilots had befriended some Qantas airline hostesses not long before the RTFV was formed. The pilots, upon learning

that they would be assigned to the RTFV, asked the girls if they could have some Qantas golden kangaroo pins to give as rewards to people in Vietnam who provided the RTFV group with special service. Qantas was pleased to be approached and provided several hundred pins.

After taking up residence at the Vung Tau base, RTFV pilots and crew members began to distribute the kangaroo pins to US military personnel who helped them get organized. One of those Americans, the USAF liaison officer with the RTFV, was involved in designating a unit call sign that would identify the Aussies during operations.

The officer was presented with one of the gold kangaroo pins and politely asked the name of the animal. He was told it was a kangaroo, and the Aussies suggested it become their unit call sign. The USAF major thought the name too difficult for the Vietnamese to pronounce so he asked if the animal was called anything else. The Aussies noted that “wallaby” was an alternative name. The USAF liaison officer immediately took to the name, noting wallaby sounded much better than kangaroo. He quickly arranged for “wallaby” to become the RTFV unit call sign and “Wallaby Airlines” was born.

Vietnam was a dangerous place, and many of the airstrips were subject to Viet Cong or North Vietnamese army ground fire. To protect themselves the Aussies developed a set of survival techniques for their air supply missions. First, squadron aircraft were not permitted to cruise below 2500 feet thereby reducing their exposure to small arms fire. Second, when landing at strips under fire, the Caribous utilized a tight, high-speed spiral descent. The aircraft would plummet from 2500 feet down to approach height around 1000 feet and at the last possible moment deploy the wheels and flaps just prior to a tight base turn into the field.

At remote airstrips time on the ground was minimized as much as possible. The engines were often kept running while cargo was being unloaded and loaded, and stays on the ground at Special Forces’ bases were often in the ten minute range. In extreme situations when a landing could not take place due to the danger, “low level extraction” was used. Cargo would be mounted on shock-absorbing pallets that were yanked out of the aircraft by drogue chutes as the aircraft flew over the landing area at a height of six feet.

Each airstrip had its own challenges but one of the worst was the Special Forces camp at Plei Me. The only fixed-wing aircraft capable of landing here was the Caribou, and the strip was such a challenge that only RAAF Caribous ever attempted the feat.

The short Plei Me strip was located at 1200 feet above sea level which further hampered an aircraft's performance. The strip looked even shorter since it was humped in the middle; the last half of the runway only visible once the airplane was on the runway. A pilot needed a lot of faith to land there. Often pilots had to dodge Huey gunships involved in area assault operations, just one more challenge to landing at Plei Me.



*Figure 20 - Caribou A4-185 Fuselage after conversion to a Bunker at A Ro, Vietnam
(Courtesy of ADF-Serials at www.adf-gallery.com.au)*

Despite the precautions taken to avoid ground fire, RAAF Caribous were not immune and several were peppered by small arms fire. The distinction of being the first Caribou damaged by enemy fire goes to A4-185 which was hit on November 11, 1964. Three days later it suffered an even worse fate as it crashed into a ditch at the A Ro airstrip. The damage was so severe that only the wings and engines were salvaged. The fuselage was left in the ditch and converted to a command bunker.

As the war escalated, more Australian troops were committed, and their logistical demands rapidly increased. By May 1966, it was

decided to expand the RTFV to a full squadron utilizing 12 aircraft. The new squadron became RAAF No. 35 Squadron, and operational control was passed to the 834th Air Division of the USAF Seventh Air Force.

No. 35 Squadron's first serious incident occurred in mid-August 1966 when a Wallaby Airlines' Caribou crashed while landing at Ba To, an isolated government outpost south of Da Nang. This incident involved pilot error. At each end of the strip were fifty foot cliffs so overruns were not an option. In this instance, the pilot attempted to land as close to the cliff edge as possible but clipped the drop-off with his port undercarriage, slewing the aircraft in a tight left-hand circle, shredding a propeller and wing and bringing it to a halt just short of a minefield.

American aircraft involved in runway crashes were often bulldozed into nearby ditches or depressions, but the Aussies had few aircraft available – their standard modus operandi was to patch up the aircraft if at all possible or salvage it for parts. In the Ba To incident, a replacement wing, propeller and undercarriage had to be flown in along with the repair crew, but the team managed to patch up the Caribou and fly it out within a week of the crash.

Two other RAAF Caribou's were destroyed while serving in Vietnam. On August 30, 1967 while on approach to An Thai airstrip, Caribou A4-171 ditched in water 300 metres short of the runway. Then on March 29, 1970, A4-193 was struck during a mortar attack while on the ground at That Son. Luckily, no one was killed or injured in the attack.



Figure 21 - Caribou A4-193 Destroyed by Mortar Attack at That Son, Vietnam

(Courtesy of ADF-Serials at www.adf-gallery.com.au)

The ruggedness of the Caribou was amply demonstrated during another mortar attack that took place in January 1969. Three mortar rounds landed within 25 metres of the aircraft while preparing for take-off. Both pilots were injured from shrapnel, the aircraft's hydraulics, flaps and brakes were all damaged, and the main tires were flattened. Yet, the pilots still managed to coax the damaged bird into the air and fly it to safety.

As opposition to the Vietnam War grew in the 1970s, the Australian government decided to reduce Australia's level of involvement. In June 1971 the squadron's detachment in Vietnam was reduced from seven aircraft to four, while the other three aircraft returned home. Those aircraft remaining in Vietnam helped move Australian troops to Vung Tau, then home.

Wallaby Airlines' time in Vietnam was drawing to a close, in February 1972 flight operations ceased. The final four Caribous departed Vung Tau on February 26 returning to Richmond Air Force Base in Australia. No. 35 Squadron was the last RAAF unit to leave Vietnam.

By the time RAAF No. 35 Squadron withdrew from Vietnam in February 1972, Wallaby Airlines' Caribous had flown an amazing 80,489 sorties. Nearly 690,000 passengers had been flown across the breadth of Vietnam. Freight shipments exceeded 91.4 million pounds and 12.4 million pounds of mail had been delivered.

Back in Australia, No. 35 and No. 38 Squadrons, both flying Caribous, pursued other missions important to the Australian government. In 1975 one Caribou was utilized in Pakistan for peacekeeping purposes and another was assigned to transport Red Cross supplies to East Timor where civil war had broken out. That aircraft was hijacked by East Timorese soldiers to fly refugees to Darwin, Australia earning that Caribou the dubious distinction of being the only RAAF aircraft ever hijacked.



Figure 22 - Commemorating 45 Years of RAAF Caribou Service (Wikimedia Commons Collection)

The Caribous continued to serve in a transport capacity for the RAAF until the late 2000s. By then the aging aircraft were increasingly difficult to maintain and lacked modern electronics. The Caribous were gradually phased out by Beechcraft King Air 350s with the last Caribou taken off strength in December 2009 after 45 years' service.

An aircraft born from a rich bush plane heritage in northern Canada had gone on to serve with distinction in the steaming jungles and rugged highlands of Vietnam. The de Havilland Canada Caribou was truly a leader in twin-engine STOL development.

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In Formation Editor – Neil Taylor

Address: 11410 Kingsway NW
Edmonton AB T5G 0X4
Phone: 780-451-1175
e-mail: info@albertaaviationmuseum.com
Web site: www.albertaaviationmuseum.com