

## July – August 2016 Issue

---

### Editor's Message

Members of the Alberta Aviation Museum Association will be aware that changes are afoot at the Museum – new display islands, new exhibits and new promotional materials are all aimed at increasing our exposure and increasing visitor traffic to our facility.

As part of these many changes, the Alberta Aviation Museum is revamping its publications. Recently Steve Finkelman, our Communications Coordinator, relaunched *From the Hangar*. This publication, which will be produced monthly, will highlight current and upcoming activities at the Museum. This will be the forum for keeping members aware as to what is happening at the Museum and what they can expect in the future.

*In Formation* is also undergoing a revamping as you can tell from the new banner at the top of the page. As the banner notes, *In Formation* will now serve as the Museum's historical publication. Published six times a year, *In Formation* will feature articles with a historical emphasis. These articles will examine in detail the people, aircraft, facilities and events that have helped shape our museum and aviation in Edmonton, Alberta and the rest of Canada. These articles will feature the work of many writers, both professional and non-professional, in order to expose our readers to the wealth of talent that has documented, and is documenting, the aviation milestones of our region and country.

I hope you will continue to enjoy *In Formation* and if you have any comments or would like to submit an article for inclusion in this publication, please feel free to contact me through the Museum office at [info@albertaaviationmuseum.com](mailto:info@albertaaviationmuseum.com).

Neil Taylor  
Editor – *In Formation*

---

# Cooking Lake Airport - 1926 - 2016

by Denny May

*EDITOR'S NOTE: June 2016 marked the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Cooking Lake Airport southeast of Edmonton. Alberta Aviation Museum member Denny May participated in the celebrations, and in the following article he talks about many of the colourful individuals and companies who frequented Cooking Lake during its days as a seaplane base and later an airfield.*

## The Earliest Days

Probably one of the first aircraft to visit Cooking Lake was the amphibian G-CAEB, a Vickers Viking Mark IV, Type 69. It was originally purchased and operated by Laurentide Air Service of



Figure 1 - Vickers Viking (Denny May Collection)

Montreal in 1922. Northern Syndicate of Calgary, a mining company, purchased it in 1926 and hired pilot, Jack Caldwell and engineer, Irene Vachon to fly it into the Northwest Territories to search for a lost gold mine east of Great Slave Lake. They failed to find the mine site and freezing weather forced them to retreat south in late August. They landed at South Cooking Lake to drop off company personnel, and to refuel prior to continuing on south to put the aircraft in winter storage at the R.C.A.F. field in High River.

Cooking Lake was an ideal location for a seaplane base - it was close to Edmonton, there was a good gravel road from Edmonton to the lake and the shore was sandy, which allowed aircraft to taxi to the shore and be moved on to land to change to skis come winter then back to floats in the spring. The name Cooking Lake was derived from the Cree Indian description of: "OPI-MI-NOW-WA-SIOO" which means a favourite camping ground. It was to become a favourite stopping place for northern bush pilots and their air engineers as well.

There have been three seaplane bases at Cooking Lake as shown on the map to the right. The first (#1) was located near Grandview beach on the south side of Plover Point. Local resident Charles Upright had built nine cottages and later a small store and tea room. He was persuaded to set up some docks and provide refuelling facilities.

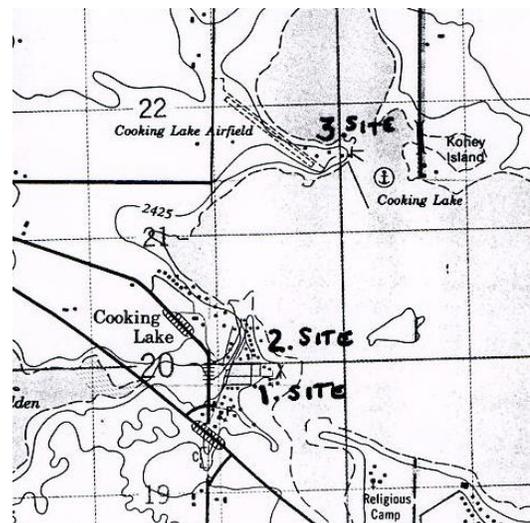


Figure 2 - Cooking Lake has had Three Seaplane Bases (Denny May Collection)

These were exciting times for the Uprights and Charles son, Les, used to drive the aircrews and their passengers back and forth in his car between South Cooking Lake and Edmonton. There

was no formal charge, just whatever they were willing to pay. The tea room was well patronized and some of the flying personnel rented the cottages for the season. The main dock was near where the baseball diamond was located in 1990, and the planes used to taxi out into the bay to the east and take off into the prevailing wind right up over the hill where Cameron's store is today.



Figure 3 - Wop May's Lockheed Vega at Cooking Lake, July 15, 1926  
(Denny May Collection)

### Wop May Drops In

In July of 1929 “Wop” May brought his brand new Lockheed “Vega” to Cooking Lake, landing at North Cooking Lake where they put on floats. The aircraft was underpowered and heavy and would not take off. On July 15th he tried again unsuccessfully - so they started taking out everything from inside until only the pilot’s seat was left – then it could take off. Over the next two days they tried to move the Moore party north with no luck. On August 2<sup>nd</sup> they taxied back to North Cooking Lake, removed the floats and flew back to Edmonton. The aircraft operated on

wheels until November when it was flown back to Los Angeles for a more powerful engine replacement.

Another situation faced by “Wop” May’s Commercial Airways took place in the fall of 1930 when a windstorm blew over Bellanca CF-AML. However, with determination and hard work they righted the aircraft and had it back in the air within a few weeks.



Figure 4 - Wop May Inspecting Flipped Bellanca CF-AML, Fall 1930  
(Denny May Collection)

The water level in Cooking Lake had been slowly receding in these years of drought, and by 1932 there was concern that the Grandview side of Plover Point would become too shallow for aircraft float operation. The water remained deep enough around the other side of the point so the docks and facilities were moved to Wellington Beach in 1933.

### Operations at Wellington Beach

This was the second of three sites for the Cooking Lake Seaplane Base, but it still lacked a location for a landing strip when the aircraft were on wheels or skis. In spite of this the base was used extensively by the following flying service companies: Leigh Brintnell's *Mackenzie Air Service* flying two new Fokker “Super Universal” aircraft, CF-ATJ, and CF-ATW; Grant McConachie's *United Air Transport* flying among other aircraft Fokker Universal G-CAFU (he later acquired G-CAHE and G-CAHJ when *Explorers Air Transport* went out of business);



Figure 5 - CF-AKI at Cooking Lake  
(Alberta Aviation Museum Collection)

“Wop” May's *Commercial Airways* flying Bellanca Pacemaker CH-300 aircraft, CF-AKI, CF-AML, CF-AIA, CF-AJR and CF-AJQ; and *Consolidated Mining and Smelting's* Bill Jewitt flying first a de Havilland Gypsy Moth then Curtiss Robin CF-ALZ. All of these aircraft were involved in flying people, material, food supplies and airmail into northern Canada to develop the mineral wealth and the fur business.

### The City of Edmonton Gets Involved

In 1932 the City of Edmonton was thinking of expanding its Air Harbour to include a new Seaplane Base at Cooking Lake with a proper adjacent landing strip for wheeled planes. The Dominion Government had been keen to build an emergency landing strip there as part of a projected air mail route linking Edmonton and Regina, Saskatchewan. A political change in Ottawa and the Great Depression led to cancellation of this route and the project was shelved, but the city council decided to proceed with a plan of their own.

On March 3, 1933 the City Engineers Department, with the assistance and approval of the flying service companies involved, made a proposal to the City Commissioners to establish a formal seaplane base at Cooking Lake. The site they chose was at the west end of the lake across the bay to the north of the hamlet of South Cooking Lake.

The estimated cost to the City was about \$5,000.00 and the operation of the Seaplane Base was to come under the management of the Municipal Airport. Construction began in the fall of 1933 and continued through 1934 and 1935. No machinery as we know it was available at the time, and as the job was a make-work program, it was very labour intensive. Literally hundreds of men and dozens of teams of horses pulling scrapers, known as Fresno's, were involved in site preparation, grading and gravelling of the roads. Meanwhile carpenters worked on the administration building and the dock.

In the meantime, the operating airplane companies continued to utilize the facilities at South Cooking Lake as a base for their summer operations. Finally after many months of construction, the new Seaplane Base was ready for the grand opening on May 19, 1936.



Figure 6 - Cooking Lake Airfield as it Appears Today  
(Denny May Collection)

## **Consolidation in the Air Transport Industry**

The Cooking Lake Airport flourished during the 1930's but the smaller airlines did not. "Wop" May's Commercial Airways, along with most small airlines in Canada, yielded to pressure and sold out to George Richardson's Canadian Airways of Winnipeg, Manitoba, and "Wop" became the Regional Manager in Edmonton. In spite of the depression that hung over the country like smoke from a bush fire all through the 1930's, commercial aviation continued to grow with each new copper, gold, or uranium strike down north. By 1937 most of the original independent companies were consolidated into each of three major operators:

### 1. Canadian Airways Ltd.

Based in Winnipeg with a Regional Office in Edmonton. Local Manager: W.R. "Wop" May. 6 aircraft & Pilots: Con Farrell, Archie McMullen, Rudy Heus, Don Lawson, and Art Rankin.

### 2. Mackenzie Air Service Ltd.

Based in Edmonton, Alberta. Owner/Manager: Leigh Brintnell. 7 Aircraft & Pilots: Stan McMillan, Harry Hayter, Marlowe Kennedy, Gil McLaren, Bob Randall, Alex Dame, and Archie Van Hee.

### 3. United Air Transport Ltd.

Based in Edmonton, Alberta. President and Manager: G,W,G. "Grant" McConachie. 10 Aircraft & Pilots: E.R. "Ted" Field, R.F. "Doc" Oakes, North Sawle, Sheldon Luck, Len Waagen, and Charles Tweed.

The declaration of war in the late spring of 1939 had a profound effect on the local commercial flying business in the Edmonton area as it did everywhere else in Canada. Many of the pilots joined the R.C.A.F. as soon as they could be accepted and served their country with distinction. "Wop" May became the manager of the No. 2 Air Observer School in Edmonton. This was one of six Air Observer Schools operated by Canadian Pacific Airlines Limited as part of Canada's Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

The U.S. Army Air Force established a base at Cooking Lake to support all the activity going on in the north. Float planes were required because they were still the most practical aircraft to get in and out of the remote locations until airstrips could be carved out of the bush. The Americans wisely purchased a number of Canadian built Noorduyn Norseman airplanes equipped with wheels, skis, and floats and designated the type as C-64. The military also decided to hire Canadian civilian pilots and engineers to train their own people in the intricacies of flying and survival in the Canadian North.

## **The Spooners Arrive at Cooking Lake**

In 1935 "Wop" May met a man named Art Spooner. Art Spooner moved his family into the lodge and began his term as the manager of the Cooking Lake Seaplane Base. He and his wife Irma carried on the tradition of hospitality at the lodge. They raised chickens, turkeys, and a large vegetable garden for the table and raised mink for the fur trade. Irma established her own



Figure 7 - Aerial Photo of Cooking Lake Today  
(Denny May Collection)

reputation for serving top notch meals to those of us lucky enough to have work assignments at the base.

Art and Irma Spooner continued to raise their large family of two boys, Bryan and Richard, and three girls, Lorraine, Gail, and Colleen. Perhaps a high point in the history of the base was when a Hollywood film company came in to make the movie *Wings of Chance* in 1959. It was based on the book, *Kirby's Gander* written by an Alberta writer, John Patrick Gelese. The Spooners recall many happy times working with the film crew. Actress Frances Rafferty even pitched in and helped Irma do the dishes after their meals every day. They were guests at the lodge but were

treated like family. In return the Spooners had bit parts in the movie. On another occasion Art Spooner played the part of an Indian guide in a Jacques Cousteau documentary, part of which was filmed near the base. There were many other celebrities who were guests at the lodge from time to time. These included Wiley Post and Will Rogers who stopped off on their last trip to Alaska. Joe Louis also stopped off on his way to his favourite fishing lodge down north.

By October of 1969 both the lodge and the docks at the Cooking Lake Seaplane Base had been condemned by the City of Edmonton. The base no longer fit into the City's long range plans.

It should come as no surprise however that Art Spooner came to look on the Cooking Lake Seaplane Base as "his" airport. That original memorandum of agreement clearly stated he could live on the property, collect rentals, charge for meals and rooms, sell fuel and oil, service airplanes, changeover floats and do repairs. He could do all these things and still not be considered to be a government employee. He did lose sight of the fact that he never legally owned the land but he tried on several occasions to buy the property to no avail. In 1979 Art Spooner purchased a 40 Acre lot west of the airport and his son, Richard, established his home there. After 32 years as resident Supervisor of the Cooking Lake Seaplane Base, Art and Irma Spooner "retired" to a new home on the west side of Half Moon Lake, just a few miles northeast of the airport. Art continued to work with Richard at the acreage, doing aircraft repairs and float changeovers under the name "Spooner Aviation" well in to the 1980's.

### Further Changes at the Airport

The old lodge was demolished in 1980, and in 1981 a temporary terminal building was put in place and the roads and parking lot were upgraded at the terminal and down on the waterfront. The long causeway, or jetty, was rebuilt with considerable fill and a new seawall installed to protect it from winter ice. New underground three phase wiring cables were installed throughout the base. This required some 11/2 miles of cable. Twenty small floating docks that could be removed at the end of the season were installed alongside the jetty for mooring seaplanes.



Figure 8 - Marg May, Denny May and Audrey Kahovec Prior to 1st Air Mail Delivery Edmonton to Cooking Lake (Denny May Collection)

Over the years mail was moved by air throughout Canada, but until 2007 there never was an Official Air Mail flight from Edmonton to Cooking Lake, or from Cooking Lake to Edmonton. “Wop” May’s son, Denny May, his wife Marg May and pilot Audrey Kahovec (Edmonton Flying Club Instructor) flew the first Air Mail over the two routes.

There is much more to the story of the Cooking Lake Airport. The stories are well documented in the book *Wheels, Skis & Floats - A History of the Cooking Lake Seaplane Base* by Les Faulkner - it was published in 1992. I borrowed much of this story from the book. The Lake is no longer deep enough for use by float planes and the airport has grown immensely in the past few years.

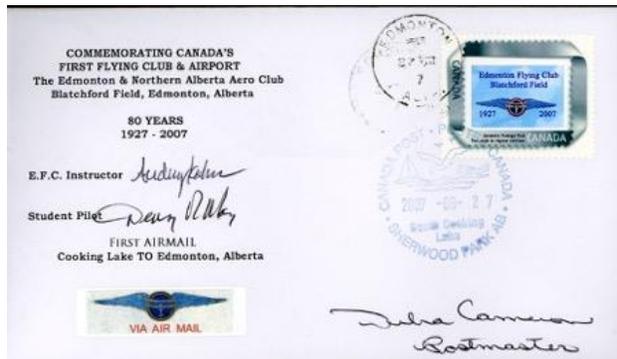
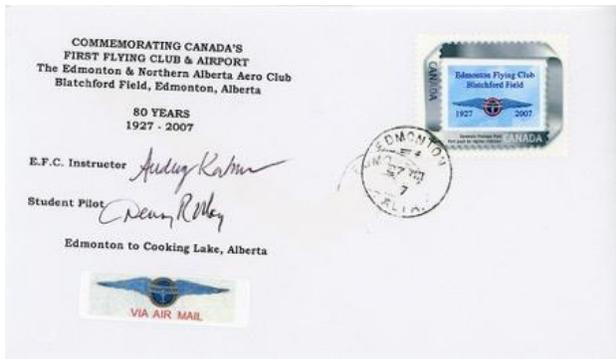


Figure 9 - First Flight Covers with a Special Stamp Commemorating the Founding of the Edmonton Flying Club and Blatchford Field (Denny May Collection)

Today almost 200 small aircraft are based at Cooking Lake, 76 hangars are located on the Airport and annually more than 26,000 aircraft movements take place. In 2015 Cooking Lake Airport became an International Airport when approval was given for direct flights from the U.S.A. to land and receive customs clearance under the Canada Border Services Agency’s CANPASS Program. Once again the future looks bright for Cooking Lake.

*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.*



Figure 10 - Denny May (Denny May Collection)

# The Inventive Life of Warren Smith – Part 1

By Warren Smith as told to Danielle Metcalfe-Chenail

*EDITOR'S NOTE: During the Second World War thousands of Edmontonians enlisted in the Canadian military, many of them opting for the Royal Canadian Air Force. While not seeking fame or glory, these individuals put their lives in danger and many made the ultimate sacrifice. Others toiled in relative obscurity, proud just to serve their country. All of them deserve to have their stories told so we will never forget their contributions to our freedom.*

*Not too long ago, Danielle Metcalfe-Chenail, former Edmonton Historian Laureate and author of **Polar Winds: A Century of Flying the North**, met with Mr. Warren Smith of Edmonton to compile his life history. Mr. Smith has kindly granted his consent to print excerpts from his memoirs **The Inventive Life of Warren Smith**. In this, the first of a two part series about Mr. Smith, we learn about his training with the wartime RCAF. Next issue we will look at his service overseas.*



Figure 11 - Warren Smith in 1940  
(Mary Short Collection)

I was with 435 Transport Squadron in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and I often say when they sent me overseas they forgot to stop - they just kept on sending me until I ended up in Burma. I think it's called Myanmar today.

I tried for a year and a half to join up before they would take me. I've always worn glasses as I have astigmatism, so that washed me out as far as air crew was concerned. But they still wouldn't take me for ground crew until 1942. I always say they finally got desperate and took me.

My family don't really know what things were like over there. Besides my friends who were in the Forces during the war (who mostly went to England or France), I haven't talked much about that time. There

are some memories that are very bad and they can still make me break down. And I guess I don't want to get anyone in trouble telling them. But that was about seventy years ago now, and I'm one of the few people that are still around from then. It will be good to get these stories down, to let my kids and grandkids and great-grandkids know a little bit about who I am and what I've done. And the more I think of it, the more I see that yes, I have done some very interesting things.

## Joining Up in Edmonton

I tried and tried to get into the Air Force but I had an astigmatism. So I went to join up but I kept getting turned away. In fact, I had the same doctor twice before I got his okay. He wouldn't even give me a medical the second time. He said, "Nothing has changed. You might as well go on home and enjoy your life."

The last time I went up, I'd found that if I squinted my eyes very close I could read the doctor's sign, so I made the same sign up at home with the letters. I didn't have to go into the fine print as they had different levels of what they could let you into the Air Force for, and so I found that by squinting my eyes I could go quite a ways down that chart. When I went in the third time and that doctor tried to turn me away again, I said "No, no, come on, give me a shot. Maybe your rules have changed slightly and you haven't paid attention to them."

The medical was fine and then we get to the eye test and I started out and I'm going down pretty good, but even then it was hard to read. All of a sudden I see him start to make it move. I open my eyes and remembered the last four letters, and said them. All the time he's looking at me because he's trying to figure out how I can read this. He never found out, so he turned his back and he took me down as far as I could go.

He turned around again and said, "You're going to make it this time, if you still want to go." I said "That's why I'm here!" So he did what he was supposed to do, signing papers and asking me questions and so forth. Finally he said, "Tell me, how were you able to see that good?" and I said "Well, I found these glasses like I have on now. If they're shaped right I can see a little bit better. I was hoping they'd be good enough for me to try now." He looked at me for a minute and said, "I've been in this business for quite a while now as a doctor and I don't know whether to believe you or not."



*Figure 12 - Warren Smith in Uniform circa 1942  
(Warren Smith Collection)*

That was August 1942, when they finally let me in. When I'd be asked about it I'd say, "Well, the only reason I got in the Air Force was because they were hard up, coming on the invasion of Europe. So they would even take guys like me with poor eyesight."

### **Radio Work in Calgary**

I was sent to Calgary first. It's funny, I can't remember being sworn in, but of course I would have had to do it. I know I got there in September, just before my birthday on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September. I had to report for school on the Monday at 4:30 p.m. It was in downtown Calgary, in the bottom part of the old grandstand where there used to be a place for rodeos. We had to attend from about 5 p.m. to 11 p.m., with a break about 9 p.m. It was very much like technical school.

Because we were in classes at night, during the day I studied. We were taught just the basics of electricity. Our teacher was a little fella, an older man, and he wasn't one of the best teachers. Luckily the Air Force would pair us up with somebody and the guy I got paired up with, he was a schoolteacher. And he was a brilliant man – after the war he was the head of teachers in Alberta. That's the only way I passed my exams in the Air Force, because he could explain things so I could understand it.

You had to remember formulas, a lot of formulas pertaining to electricity and measurements for resistors and condensers. We worked as a good pair because part of our training was we had to design and wire certain light circuits with electricity.

Even though we didn't have the basic training program, they still gave us a certain amount of exercise while we were schooling. Every day we had to arrive at the school an hour ahead of time and they gave us PT (physical training) – marching and things like this. One day, they gave us a bag or something to carry, and we had to march from downtown Calgary to the Air Force station out at the airport. When we got there, they gave us our uniforms. I always remember that because I used to poke fun at my friend for being chubby because his uniform would be straining, and he'd say, "Hey, it's not my fault - it's not my size!" A lot of guys complained. Some guy showed me his boots one time. He put one next to his bare foot, and you know what? His foot was two inches longer than the boot.

## **On To Montreal**

Once I was done teaching that class, all of us were loaded onto a troop train in Calgary headed to Lachine, Quebec. I don't think we were even allowed leave to go home, although it may have happened on a weekend and we got the weekend in. The weather was so bitterly cold all across Canada that at every place that we stopped, they would take up to half an hour before the train could get up to any speed at all or we'd just be creeping along. The wheels would freeze on them.

In every major city along the way us fellows would usually get out for a bit to wander around. I remember at Winnipeg in particular, they warned us not to get out of the car, even though we had our winter greatcoats, because the winds were howling and you were right close to Portage and Main. It's been called the coldest intersection in Canada. That's over seventy years ago now. It's been that way for a long time. But they warned us as we were getting out, that if for any reason we wanted to go out the back or something, make sure you take your coat because just going across the street you could be in trouble. With the wind and everything, you'd freeze that quickly.

I must have got to Montreal around the first of March for radio school. This was our final course, where we got our Air Force training. The Air Force had taken over a hospital and that's where we had our classes and our quarters. I remember it was on Barrie and Sherbrooke Streets, and we could sit in one of the classrooms and look right across the street down maybe a block, a block and a half, to the big cross on the mountain. Well, the Montrealers called it a mountain but us Albertans laughed at that. It's just a glorified hill.

Another time I remember, we were taken on a tour of the RCA plant to see the various parts they made for radios. On that particular day they were working on radios for tanks. As far as I could see, row after row, were women on a real assembly line assembling these radios. They each had a little thing to drop into place. There were probably about thirty of us there in uniform, and the minute we opened the door and started walking down, watching the girls doing this assembly, they started whistling! That's the first and only time I can ever remember a girl whistling at me and boy I was blushing – and so were a bunch of the other fellows! Those girls, they were laughing like crazy. They knew we were embarrassed.

## Lethbridge

We were warned when we left classes in Montreal that the fellas in Lethbridge would “break us in” – initiate us. I had no idea what it was. But when I first arrived there, I was assigned to someone who’d been there for a while, who was supposed to know the ropes. They were to take us around to service the aircraft periodically during the day – they call them D.I. or Direct Inspection. That means you get right in the aircraft.

They did this every day, usually before takeoff in the mornings or in the evening if they were going to be night flying. So I was with the fella going around with me, showing me the ropes, and one of the things that you were told to do was to check to make sure the transmitter worked. You’d turn the transmitter on, and the best way to check it was to have a meter and plug it in – it clamped onto the antenna part. And you would read it there, and he would put in what the reading was.

Well that’s a lot of nuisance because you had a meter that you had to carry – so the best, the fastest way, ’cause usually you wanted to get through in a hurry and get to a meal, was to take your screwdriver and approach the antenna contact which was metal. You’d get as close as you could and the spark would jump. That’s because that plane had just come down – it was always windy in Lethbridge – and it had a huge build-up of static electricity.

Well, I had a little bit of training before, and I had learned about this static business from the fella at the radio shop in Edmonton a couple of years before. So anyway, I’m with this guy and he says, “Oh yeah, you gotta check the transmitter. But that meter you guys got – forget it. Just take the screwdriver and make sure you hold here, with the handle up here, and fingers wrapped around the metal part of it good and tight.”

I just about did it, but I thought, wait a minute! I’d learned several years ago that if you happened to be touching something metal, the current could go right through you. So I just grabbed hold of the handle – which wasn’t metal - when he couldn’t see and stuck it out into the air. Wham! And you know, I jumped ’cause the spark did scare me as it was bigger than I expected. Luckily I had known not to touch the metal, because you’d get a good burn. But it wouldn’t really hurt you. It would spark, and the voltage was high, but what they call the ampere section (which is the dangerous part of a volt of electricity), wasn’t much. All it did was scare the daylights out of you and your fingers would be burned a little bit.

## Servicing Aircraft

I was stationed at Lethbridge for almost a year servicing the aircraft at the Air Force station there. There were two or three of us in the same role there. I think we had about six of the crew if I remember rightly in the Air Force, to cover the full 24 hours each day. I used to love the night shift and I’d get this as often as I could. I had an ulterior motive.



*Figure 13 - Warren in Battle Dress 1943  
(Warren Smith Collection)*

At night a plane landed only about every four hours, so you had time to go out and talk with the pilot to find out if there was anything he needed, anything wrong with the equipment. I used to enjoy that talk with them because I'd ask them questions about the radios that even we couldn't answer. And I'd say, "Okay I'll have to come along on your next flight to see what's up." So away we'd go, and three or four hours later we'd land, and by this time it was about six o'clock in the morning. Everybody would walk to the kitchen or the mess hall to get breakfast together. And the thing about the breakfast was you got all you could eat bacon and eggs for breakfast, which us poor Joes at our stage of the game never got. It was always porridge or some other breakfast food. So that's why as often as possible I used to wait to go on night flights.

### **A Favourite Flight**

I had one of my favourite flights there on something even better than a Dak. The complaint came in during the afternoon and I was on duty. The radio equipment had failed on a Lysander, a very high winged plane, I saw a lot of later in Burma. They used it for spying on the enemy as you flew over the jungle. It wasn't a fast plane and you wouldn't get up to 10,000 feet in it, but it was a very safe plane. Anyway, they wanted it checked right away. They said, "The wind velocity is fast increasing to the point where it will wash out the flying altogether and we'd like to get this thing up as a drogue plane."



*Figure 14 - RCAF Lysander (Canadian Forces Collection)*

A drogue looks like a hollow tube you let out from behind your plane by a rope til it was fifty feet or more behind you. And the guys who were training as gunners shot at the drogue you were towing. But I always thought they didn't leave enough space between the tow-plane and the drogue!

I was the only one in the office at the time and I said, "Okay, I just have to go get my chute and my tools and equipment."

It was starting to get real windy and the Lysander was between my Quonset repair hut and the other one for storage. The airfield was just loaded with Quonset huts for the different trades. Anyway, as I was leaving the one Quonset hut, all of a sudden the Lysander was there, motors idling.

It turned out the pilot who was going to take me up for the test flight to fix this plane was a former bush pilot. Those pilots from southern Alberta had made quite a name for themselves. They knew everything about flying. But the thing with this pilot – his name was Brown but he wanted to be called Brownie – I heard afterwards he'd been promoted to flying officer three or four times, but within one or two months was always back to pilot officer. He kept getting promoted and demoted.

He says, "You're gonna be back there and I'm up here," because the equipment is back there, and the cockpit behind. He climbs in the cockpit with his parachute, and he was up in about half the time it took me to get up there 'cause I was loaded down with equipment. I jump up, and climb in my seat, and the equipment is behind me. I'm sitting there looking back at the equipment - I didn't have any safety belt on or anything, and all of a sudden we're moving at top speed. We were off the ground by a couple of feet before we left the confines of those two Quonset huts and before we reached the taxi strip, which went all around the airport, we were a good 50 to 100 feet in the air. And with all of this, I didn't get a chance to look at the equipment 'til we leveled off. It pushed me right face-forward into my equipment and I couldn't move 'cause of the speed he was getting at so quick.

## Leaving Canada

I was stationed in Lethbridge at the time they sent me over to England. They checked you over health-wise before they would send you and that included your teeth.

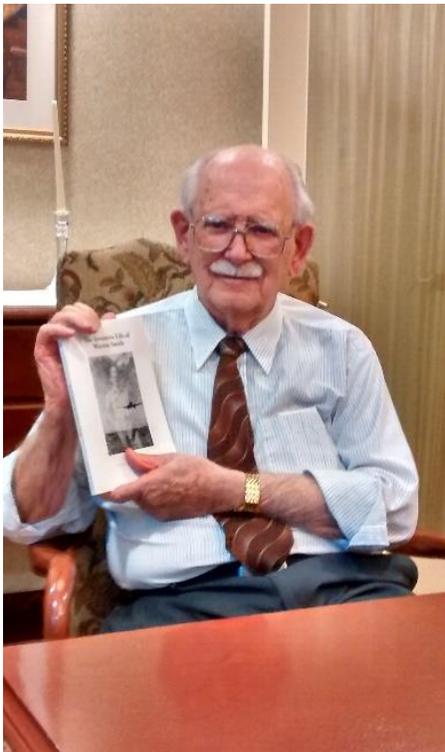


Figure 15 - Warren Smith Poses with his Book  
(Warren Smith Collection)

I had the good fortune to get a nice young fellow, just brand new out of dentistry school, to check my teeth. He gave me six fillings across the bottom without freezing me. "I have to be finished by noon," he said, "so I don't have time to freeze you."

About the second last one he asked me if I was feeling all right. I said, "Well have you ever had four teeth filled knowing you had two more to go?" He said no. I said, "Well I don't feel that hot." He said, "Well I've got to do it anyways. I'm not going to send you away overseas without all your teeth being in good shape." He didn't give me a thing, just kept drilling away on them. When it hurt he'd stop for a minute and say, "Okay?" What else could I say?

I'll put it this way: he was an officer and I wasn't so I couldn't call him any nasty names. I could have refused, but I would have gotten into more trouble than it was worth because in the Forces your officers are just like little tin gods.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: After the war Warren continued his involvement with electronics in Edmonton where he repaired radios. He graduated to other equipment, even gaining responsibility for maintenance of the PA system at the Edmonton Gardens and the announcing of hockey games. Eventually he tackled other work like insurance sales, wholesale paper sales and event recording. The second part of his story – his service overseas in Burma during the Second World War – will be told in the next issue of **In Formation**.*

# The C-46 Commando – Giving a Lost Legend its Due

by Fred Petrie

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Although the C-46 Commando is primarily remembered as a military transport from the Second World War, it has served as a rugged cargo transport in some of the most inhospitable regions of the world, including the Arctic. In this article, Fred Petrie looks at the development of the C-46 and the role it has played in Canada's aviation history.*

The Curtiss-Wright model 20 was designed in the 1930's to compete with the famous Douglas DC-3 since the fabric covered 15 passenger Curtiss Condor of the day was no match. The CW20 would fly higher and faster in pressurized comfort with more passengers having more space.



Figure 16 - USAAF C-46 Flying Over The Hump  
(USAF Collection)

It was billed by Curtiss as the “Sub-Stratosphere Transport”. The airplane that later became the C-46 military transport was intended to be a 36 passenger (or twenty sleeper) airliner with a pressurized cabin. Design work began in 1936 under Chief Engineer George A. Page, who had obtained his pilot license in 1913. The prototype first flew in March of 1940. The CW-20T had twin vertical stabilizers and was powered by two Wright R-2600 14 cylinder engines producing 1,600 horsepower each, turning three blade Hamilton-Standard constant speed propellers. The unique aspect of its design was its double cylinder fuselage, where

only the upper cylinder was to be pressurized. This created a below deck area for baggage storage, a feature of airliner design to this day.

After initial flight testing, the twin tail arrangement was replaced by a single vertical stabilizer, and testing revealed that the CW-20 had some promise as an airliner. Whether it would have posed a threat to the Douglas DC-3 market share is debatable. On paper, the CW-20 seemed much more capable than the DC-3, with greater fuel capacity, more seats and a higher service ceiling. However the CW-20's larger engines used more fuel, which limited the aircraft's range. All of this, however, is academic, as the U.S. was gearing up for war.

September, 1940 saw the U.S. Army order 200 CW-20B's, which were designated the C-46. The first 25 C-46s were basically civilian aircraft that were slightly modified for military use. The 26th aircraft to come off the production line was the first C-46 “A” version, which was the first true military version of the aircraft. It was powered by the Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engine, producing 2,000 horsepower. Ironically, this was the engine originally intended for the airplane. Other changes included replacement of the Hamilton-Standard propellers with four blade Curtiss Electrics. While there was no cabin pressurization, the airplane retained its service ceiling of 22,000 feet (no doubt due to the two stage supercharger equipped engines), and incorporated a

reinforced cargo floor, and extra-large cargo doors on the fuselage. The C-46's most attractive feature was its large cubic volume. This was particularly useful with less dense cargos; where 10 pounds per cubic foot is the air cargo standard, the C-46 efficiently handled cargos of only 4.5 lbs. per cu. ft.

Initially, the C-46 was used to ferry cargo across the South Atlantic. It also saw some use as a glider tug in the European theatre. However, the C-46 became famous for its use in the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater, flying supplies over the Himalaya Mountains known as "the Hump" supplying Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese Army (and Claire Chennault's Flying Tigers). While DC-3's were used as well, the C-46 hauled more and was better able to handle the high altitude required to cross the Himalayas.



*Figure 17 - Cargo Area in the C-46  
(Royal Aviation Museum of Western Canada Collection)*

Seventeen variants of the airplane were produced, but the C-46A and C-46F made up the bulk of the production run. A total of 3140 Commandos were made before production ended in 1946.

The cargo area in the C-46 was 48 feet long, 9 feet 10 inches wide, and 6 feet 8 inches high. Its maximum loaded weight was 45,000 pounds (which could be pushed to 50,000 pounds). Not surprisingly, the C-46 became the mainstay of the CBI cargo route because of its combination of range, payload, and high altitude capability. Despite the hazards and losses, the C-

46 had flown hundreds of thousands of tons of cargo by the time operations ended in November of 1945.

The C-46's military career didn't end with World War Two. The United States used the C-46, along with some other World War Two types, to fly missions during the Korean War and the CIA used it in the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Given its utility during the war, it is no surprise that the C-46 was used quite extensively afterward in civil roles. Small cargo operators scooped up surplus Commandos and used them to ply the non-scheduled routes. The airplane was perfect for operation in the rough terrain found in parts of South America, such as the Amazon jungle and the Andes Mountains. Flying Tigers operated as many as forty.



*Figure 18 - The Commemorative Air Force's China Doll  
(RAMWC Collection)*

Another well-known operator was the infamous Air America, a front of the CIA, which operated widely in south-east Asia.

Still, age and wear have taken their toll, and there are only around a dozen Commandos still flying today, two of them operated by the Commemorative Air Force.

### The C-46 in Canada and Manitoba

In the post war 1950's airlines sprouted up across Canada to serve the north. The building of the DEW Line in the late 1950s was a major stimulus to the operations and fleets of these carriers that included: Nordair, Wheeler, World Wide, Quebec Air, PWA and Associated Airways. At one time or another, virtually all of them operated C-46's mainly for cargo services.



Figure 19 - Transair C-46  
(RAMWC Collection)

This included Winnipeg based Central Northern Airways formed in 1947 with the CPA bush services for Manitoba and Northwest Ontario. It became Transair in 1956 when it acquired Arctic Wings for its Churchill base. Lamb Air from The Pas operated three C-46s in freight charters and Ilford-Riverton also had one. *My Life in the North* by Jack Lamb recounted that "The C-46 would land with 35 drums of diesel fuel on the snow covered lakes, plowing through two and three foot snowdrifts". The C-46 would operate into any strip that could handle a DC-3 but could carry twice the payload.

As work slowed in the 1960s most were replaced with larger capacity aircraft like the DC-4 and DC-6 or with post war turbine aircraft like the Hawker-Siddeley 748. That trend continues today with the ATRs operated by regional carrier Calm Air.

Engineer Tom Phinney, and my source of Manitoba C-46 history, began his career with Ontario Central Airways (OCA), in 1972. He quickly became the DC3 expert when OCA had up to fourteen one winter. A Manitoba northern entrepreneur, Pete Lazarenko, operated Northland



Figure 20 - Worldwide Airways C-46 at Frobisher Bay [Note Nearby CF-100s]  
(RAMWC Collection)

doing commercial fishing and flying his own freight. Two smaller operators, Ilford and Riverton, had merged but still went out of business when Pete bought them from the Receiver and started Northland Air Manitoba in 1975; it took until 1980 before he was allowed to shorten the name to just Air Manitoba. Air Manitoba operated from the old Air Canada (TCA) double hangar on

Allen Dyne road that had formerly housed the North West Company and Transport Canada; it could accommodate six DC-3s.

Air Manitoba became the dominant regional carrier serving all of northern Manitoba, northwest Ontario and the central Arctic between supplying the North West Company's stores and providing passenger service for the remote communities. Northland was well aware of the C-46's economics from Transair which had a couple for its DEW Line work in the late 1950s as



Figure 21 - Canadian Pacific Airlines C-46  
(RAMWC Collection)

well as from Lamb Air who operated three, one still decorating the approach to runway 09 in Churchill. Air Manitoba got its first C-46, C-GIXZ owned by Ilford-Riverton, through the receiver and brought it back from Churchill to Winnipeg; it ended its days at Shamattawa.

By then Tom had joined Air Manitoba becoming its Director of Maintenance and he went shopping. CF-FNC was acquired from Everts in Alaska, still a C-46 operator today; it was later lost in Africa with Relief Air. C-GTPO also came from Alaska, via Texas and today is owned by Buffalo Airways. C-GTXW was bought from Southern Air Transport of Texas. C-GIBX was rescued after ten years sitting derelict in Wakeham, Ohio. The last one, C-FAVO, came from Seattle. In the busy summer of 1985, a seventh was leased.

Tom shared a story about five days before Christmas in 1986 when the fleet had been grounded for some days by weather, all six C-46s were loaded and crews on standby. Once the weather broke, all six were in the air at the same time, delivering Christmas to the northern remote communities.

Tom reported that they could buy a C-46 for \$250,000 and have it paid for within six months. Then Lazarenko sold half of Air Manitoba to the Deluce family, flush from their sale of Air Ontario, formerly Austin Airways, to Air Canada. They also owned several HS748s they wanted to keep busy so the C-46 fleet was wound down. Once they controlled all of Air Manitoba, Bill Deluce found a use for some of the C-46s by taking three to Africa as Relief Air in the mid-1990s. IXZ was left in Sudan but TXW and IBX were repatriated and sold to Garden Hill First Nation to form Commando Air, operating from Gimli. Commando did very well, especially when the winter roads failed in 1997. But by early 2001, TXW was lost on a belly landing in Red Lake after an engine failure on take-off. Garden Hill, experiencing difficulties with their main operation Ministic Airlines, took the insurance cash to keep Ministic going; Buffalo bought it from the insurance company and repaired it sufficiently to ferry it back to Yellowknife. Unfortunately, the legal troubles at Ministic eventually forced the shutdown of Commando.

## Air Manitoba C46 Fleet

Registration	Manufacturer	Model	Serial #	Action	Date	Owner
<a href="#">C-GIXZ</a>	Curtiss-Wright	C46F 5CU	22495	Delete Aircraft	12/5/1994	Air Manitoba Limited
<a href="#">C-FAVO</a>	Curtiss-Wright	C46D	33242	Cancel C of R	12/1/1994	Air Manitoba Limited
<a href="#">C-GIBX</a>	Curtiss-Wright	C46F	22472	Delete Aircraft	8/15/1994	Air Manitoba Limited
<a href="#">C-GTXW</a>	Curtiss-Wright	C46A-45CU	30386	Delete Aircraft	8/15/1994	Air Manitoba Limited
<a href="#">C-FAVO</a>	Curtiss-Wright	C46D	33242	Cancel C of R	7/13/1993	Northland Air Manitoba
<a href="#">C-GTPO</a>	Curtiss-Wright	C46F	22556	Cancel C of R	7/12/1993	Northland Air Manitoba Limited
<a href="#">CF-FNC</a>	Curtiss-Wright	C46F	22388	Delete Aircraft	9/10/1990	Northland Air Manitoba Limited

“My” C-46, C-GIBX, Serial Number 22472, was USAF 44-78649 registered in July 1945 as N74171. It was then leased to Pan American from August 1946 to January 1953. Pan Am operated ten C-46s for its Latin American cargo division from its base in Miami. The next operator was Westair Transport (part of Aviation Corp of Seattle). Westair flew 14 C-46s between July 1948 and going out of business in 1959, operating both passenger and cargo charters in Alaska and in the Caribbean. 22472 reported a belly landing in North Platte, Nebraska 6 August 1958. It was next taken on by Ortnor Air Service Inc. of Wakeham, Ohio in 1964 but ended up registered to C46 Parts Inc. of Miami by 1976, having been declared “derelict” at Wakeham by August 1976. Northland Air Manitoba acquired 22472, after it had sat in Wakeham for ten years, in March 1985.

It was registered to Nunasi-Northland in August 1988 for Arctic work after Northland had acquired Nunasi to get a northern base; this was back when routes and bases were still tightly regulated. Registration was changed back to Northland Air Manitoba in November 1989 and finally just to Air Manitoba when the company was allowed to shorten its name.

Retired from active service, it was registered as 5Y-IBX and taken to Africa as part of Relief Air Transport in August 1994. It was repatriated to Canada and sold to the Garden Hill First Nation for a new cargo airline, Commando Air Transport, in October 1996, along with C-FTXW. After a few good years, even with only IBX as its fleet, Commando Air was forced to cease operating in 2001 due to a legal dispute in connection with the Ministic Airlines failure.

## FNT Inc. or “Ice Pilots South”

C-GIBX remained parked at Gimli for two years until it was acquired by SASCO, a trucking company operating as First Nations Trucking. It formed FNT Inc. to apply for an air operating certificate. SASCO already had been doing the North West Company winter road re-supply in Manitoba. The idea was to develop year round work for the NWC by trucking freight as far as possible, then going intermodal on more expensive air transport for the shortest air distance possible. FNT’s operating base at Gimli saved twenty per cent of the air miles, versus the traditional resupply base of Winnipeg, and with the economy of the C-46, FNT Inc. was able to give the NWC rates competitive with the other carrier’s subsidized Food Mail rates.

This is where I came into the picture as SASCO needed an aviation person to run the new airline. At first it was just a part-time consulting services oversight role running seasonal charter services for home building projects. But then SASCO won the contract for year round supply of the four communities in the Island Lake area, the NWC’s busiest Northern Stores. By the end of 2005, with a DC-3 added for back-up, it became a full time job. In 2006, with continuing charter projects, we added a second C-46, C-GTPO, when Buffalo decided to get out of C-46 services. We then inherited a second DC-3, CF-QHY on attractive terms from Plummer’s Arctic Lodges. We were well on our way to rebuilding the old Air Manitoba!

FNT had a successful six year run, growing to two C-46s as well as two C-47s, serving all eight of the North West Company’s Northern Stores on the east side of Lake Winnipeg on a twice weekly schedule, as well as continuing charter work for building projects.



C - 46 "The Flying Truck"  
Cargo Hold 48'x9', 2300 cu ft, up to 15,000lbs

A combination of cascading challenges forced FNT to cease operations in July 2009. The C-GIBX registration was changed to the FNT holding company which has listed it as “Stored” since December 2009. Today C-GIBX remains stored at Gimli, but Tom Phinney, the former engineer who has looked after IBX for twenty years, estimated it could be put back into commercial service for less than \$50,000.

The above picture, used for our home made business cards, was taken the first occasion that #1 engine was fired up after a two year hiatus. It could be done again.

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Fred Petrie has been a life-long aviator, from growing up in an Air Force family, to becoming a Navigator hunting Soviet submarines over the North Atlantic during the Cold War. After his tour, he completed his Commerce degree and joined regional airline Transair doing route development. He joined Central Region Airports as the first Supervisor Market Development which launched a forty year career making airports pay for themselves.*



Figure 22 - Fred Petrie

## Who shares the hangar? EAHS Member Organizations

Air Cadet Museum & Archives  
Civil Air Search & Rescue Association  
Edmonton Homebuilt Aircraft Association  
504 Blatchford Field Royal Canadian Air Cadets  
180-20<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment Royal Canadian Army Cadets  
700 (Edmonton) Wing Air Force Association of Canada

Alberta Aviation Museum  
Edmonton Soaring Club  
Ex-RCAF Air Alliance  
Ex-RCAF Women's Association  
418 RCAF Squadron Association  
Ventura Memorial Flight Association



## A VERY SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR SPONSORS



Alberta Lottery Fund



“In Formation” is a publication of the Alberta Aviation Museum

Executive Director – Jean Lauzon  
Assistant Executive Director – Erin Hoar  
Museum Curator – Lech Lebieadowski  
Administrative Assistant – Barb Frazer  
Communications Coordinator – Steve Finkelman  
In Formation Editor – Neil Taylor

Address: 11410 Kingsway NW  
Edmonton AB T5G 0X4  
Phone: 780-451-1175  
e-mail: [info@albertaaviationmuseum.com](mailto:info@albertaaviationmuseum.com)  
Web site: [www.albertaaviationmuseum.com](http://www.albertaaviationmuseum.com)