

West
Bush Pilots – Main
By Bruce Masterman
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They returned from the First World War with a thirst for adventure and a passion for flying.

Spirited young pilots went from deadly dogfights with enemy aircraft to new, equally formidable challenges as bush pilots opening up Canada's last frontier in the Far North.

Men like Wilfred "Wop" May, Roy Brown, Clennell "Punch" Dickens, Harold "Doc" Oaks, Stuart Graham and Leigh Brintnell pioneered bush flying in Canada, providing communication and transportation for people living in largely unmapped northern regions.

In low-tech war surplus bi-planes and tri-planes, the pilots delivered mail, medicine and other supplies. They ferried prospectors, foresters, surveyors, trappers and teams of fighting huskies in blizzards and minus 50 temperatures. They drained the oil from their engines at night to keep it warm, and then replaced it before taking off the next morning.

Sometimes they traveled with an engineer who served as mechanic, and sometimes the pilot did both. No matter, the pilot was always boss.

In a speech in 1962, Punch Dickens defined bush flying as "a pilot and mechanic, who are ready and willing to take any kind of a load to any destination, on or off the map, within the limits of their aircraft, and the financial resources of the customer."

Bush planes were adapted for all kinds of weather: pontoons for landing on lakes and rivers, skis for frozen lakes and snow-blanketed tundra, and wheels for crude airstrips carved into the rugged land. Visiting places where dog teams and canoes had been the only modes of transportation, bush pilots became the link between the isolated northern and civilized southern regions of Canada.

"Bush pilots of the 1920's and 30's pushed the frontiers of Canada's North," says Shirley Render, a pilot, author and executive director of the Western Canada Aviation Museum in Winnipeg.

Bush pilots are sometimes portrayed as derring-do swashbucklers of the skies, who gamble with their lives on every flight.

But Render believes that although the early bush pilots had a sense of adventure, and knew they were pushing the limits of their planes and themselves, they were not devil-may-care people. Instead, she says, they took pride in overcoming what others perceived as obstacles.

Render, author of *No Place for a Lady: The Story of Canadian Women Pilots*, notes the second generation of bush pilots after the Second World War included many women.

Some have been inducted into Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame, and into the Order of Canada. The more famous female pilots include Ontario's Vi Milstead Warren and Alberta's Dawn Connolly Bartsch and Molly Reilly.

Donna Hohle, 56, has been bush piloting for 30 years from a base at Leaf Rapids on the Churchill River, 1,000 kilometres north of Winnipeg.

She taught husband Rene LeBrasseur, an aircraft engineer, to fly. Their six children all helped out with office and ground crew duties.

The grandmother of 18 says she decided as a young woman that she'd rather be a pilot than a passenger. For three decades, she has hauled cargo and people into remote settlements and lakes, carried out tonnes of whitefish and furs, been stranded by bad weather and helped the RCMP search for lost trappers and hunters.

Despite the hardship, she says she wouldn't choose another vocation if she had the chance.

"It's been very exciting," Hohle says. "I liked it when I started and I still love it."

That kind of spirit motivated Canada's first bush flight way back in June 1919.

Pilot Stuart Graham, accompanied by his wife Madge and an engineer, flew a HS-2L Flying Boat, a float-equipped bi-plane owned by the Canadian government, from Halifax to St. John up the New Brunswick coastline.

At the time, flying a seaplane over land just wasn't done.

An American flyer, Admiral Byrd, wryly observed: "Flying seaplanes over land is suicide, taking a woman along is criminal."

With Madge navigating, Graham was at the controls for two hours. When they landed, the mayor gave them the keys to the city of St. John and invited them to the opera. But only Madge could fully hear the performance because she'd worn earplugs during the flight and the others hadn't.

The trio took off for Quebec the next morning. They finally landed at Trois Rivieres four days after departing Halifax. A crowd of 10,000 watched while they delivered a letter from the governor of Nova Scotia to the Quebec premier, the earliest known aerial mail delivery in Canada.

Afterward, they flew to Grand Mere, where they dropped leaflets about fire prevention. The plane, later named La Vigilance, was the first used in Canadian forest fire prevention.

Later in 1919, bush planes were used to make aerial surveys of timber reserves in southern Labrador. The next year, bush pilots in northern Quebec were spotting forest fires and ferrying men and equipment to put them out. In northern Ontario, bush pilots were helping conduct photographic surveys for aerial map making.

One of the earliest recorded commercial bush flights occurred in October 1920, when a fur buyer walked into the Canadian Aircraft office in Winnipeg. He requested a flight back home to The Pas in northern Manitoba, 800 kilometres from Winnipeg. The flight passed over lakes, forests and swamps, and proved that remote northern areas could be reached by airplane.

Soon, airmail was a common service to logging camps and trapping outposts. Bush planes were turned into air ambulances to fly out sick workers, trappers and hunters.

By 1921, Imperial Oil set up an air service to supply oil-drilling crews along the Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories. On the West Coast, airplanes were used to spot fish poachers and nab illegal whiskey makers on the Gulf Islands.

By the late 1920's, bush pilots and their planes had become an integral part of northern life.

Bush planes entered a new era in 1926 with the introduction of the American made German Fokker Universal, a single-seat monoplane that was faster and more stable than the old war planes. The Universal hauled passengers and cargo in an enclosed cabin under the wing while the pilot flew in the open forward cockpit.

The plane employed a shock absorber system consisting of bungee cords, enabling it to land on uneven landing strips. It could be equipped with flats or skis.

The Canadian-made Noorduyn Norseman, the first aircraft designed and built for bush flying, made its debut flight in November 1935. The 10-passenger Norseman was designed with a large cargo area and door that could accommodate a 45-gallon fuel drum, important for hauling fuel to remote communities and for keeping the Norseman running.

About 900 Norseman aircraft were built between 1935 and 1959. Many are still flying today.

Today's bush pilots fly a variety of planes, including Beech Staggerwings and Bonanzas, Piper Super Cubs and Cherokees, Cessna 190s and 206s and the rugged de Havilland Beaver, a versatile and reliable aircraft.

Not surprisingly, an industry built on the chutzpah of young men fresh from war has spawned its share of legends.

An Edmontonian, Wilfred "Wop" May, is perhaps the most famous. (**see related story on Page XX**).

Called Wop because a young cousin couldn't say Wilfred, May returned from the First World War a decorated war hero for his role in shooting down infamous German ace Manfred von Richthofen, more commonly known as The Red Baron.

The northern skies beckoned and May and his brother, Court, started May Airplanes Ltd., Edmonton's first air service.

Soon May was flying furs from northern Alberta to Edmonton. He flew the first airmail service to the Arctic in 1929.

May's wartime heroism extended to the north. He delivered life-saving anti-diphtheria serum to a northern Alberta community and later helped the RCMP track down cop killer Albert "Mad Trapper" Johnson in the Northwest Territories.

May and others provided the inspiration for many famous figures in Canadian aviation, including Edmonton's Max Ward, who began as a bush pilot and went on to own Canada's third largest commercial airline.

In his autobiography, *The Max Ward Story – A Bush Pilot in the Bureaucratic Jungle*, Ward writes: "My whole idea of adventure, of living, was tied up in the notion of joining their ranks some day in a magnificent flying machine."

Ward learned to fly in the Second World War, where he served as an instructor with the Royal Canadian Air Force. After the war, he pursued his dream of bush flying by forming Polaris Charter Company, to fly gear for prospectors looking for gold around Yellowknife, NWT.

The company had an inauspicious start.

Ward crashed his first aircraft, a single-engine Fox Moth biplane, on his first flight. He walked away. After the first of many run-ins with the federal Air Transport Board over licensing, Ward headed back to Alberta and eventually went into house building at Lethbridge.

Bush flying's siren song lured Ward back to Yellowknife, where he joined Associated Airways in 1951. Six months later, he crashed during a winter storm at

Bathurst Inlet in the High Arctic and spent five days fighting the cold until he was rescued.

In 1953, Ward purchased his first de Havilland Otter for \$100,000, twice the cost of average bush planes of the day. The first Otter used in Western Canada, it was bigger, faster, had a heavier payload and was capable of ranges of 600 miles (966 kms), three times the range of his first Fox Moth.

The Otter is credited with helping develop the North because it could hold sheets of plywood and 16-foot-long pieces of lumber. It also easily moved in and out of lakes.

That same year, Ward obtained a licence in the name of Wardair Limited. Over the next 36 years, Wardair expanded from a bush pilot operation into Canada's third largest airline before Ward sold to Pacific Western Airlines in 1989.

As Max Ward discovered, flying in the north was a dangerous proposition back then and still is today. It is wild, unforgiving country, and bush pilots are at the mercy of their own skills and unforeseen circumstances.

"If I ever crash, they'll never find me," proclaimed legendary pilot Chuck McAvoy way back in 1964.

His dark prediction almost came true.

McAvoy was flying two American geologists in his 1938 Fairchild 82 near the Arctic Ocean on June 9, 1964 when they disappeared in heavy snow. Despite extensive air searches, they remained missing for almost 40 years.

On August 3, 2003, a helicopter crew flying for a mining company found the wreckage, human remains and McAvoy's identification.

But bush pilots don't like to focus on perils.

"It's no more dangerous than driving in your car," says Tom Johnston, an energetic 79-year-old bush pilot from Lac Du Bonnet, 62 air miles northeast of Winnipeg.

The owner of Whiteshell Air Service has had his fair share of close calls since he started flying in the early 1940's. But he's never been badly hurt.

Johnston has helped salvage planes that have crashed in deep northern lakes, and he's retrieved bodies of pilots and passengers.

He's known many accident victims, including his son Allan, who crashed while piloting a helicopter. Tom's two daughters are both licensed pilots.

Despite technological advances such as global positioning systems, radar, emergency locator beacons and radio, Johnston says a bush pilot still has to rely on basic skills.

"Everybody thinks there's a real magic to it but there isn't," he notes. "You have to know your airplane and you have to know how to navigate."

Johnson decided to fly when he was growing up on a farm south of Portage La Prairie, Manitoba. As a kid, he'd watch biplanes buzzing by overhead and knew that's what he wanted to do when he grew up.

More than six decades later, he's logged almost 32,000 flying hours – the equivalent of three years, seven months with his feet off the ground.

He's still going strong.

