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West  
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## **Some Other Groundbreaking Canadian Bush Pilots**

### **Wilfred Leigh Brintnell (1895-1971)**

Brintnell piloted an historical bush flight later linked to development of the atom bomb that destroyed Hiroshima and ended the Second World War in August 1945.

In 1929, Brintnell flew prospector Gilbert Labine to Great Bear Lake in the Northwest Territories. While flying completely around the lake – Brintnell was the first pilot to do this – the prospector saw signs of radium and uranium deposits along the shore.

Labine staked the claim, leading to the development of Eldorado Mines, which used the world's largest uranium deposits to produce radium for treatment of cancer.

During the Second World War, the Canadian government expropriated Eldorado Mines. Canada provided uranium to the U.S. secret project at Los Alamos. It was used to fuel the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima and ended the war.

As a pilot for Western Canada Airways, the Ontario-born bush pilot is known for many other aviation achievements.

He completed an historic 15,000-kilometre flight in a Fokker tri-motor aircraft to inspect the company's bases from Winnipeg north through the Northwest Territories, to Great Slave Lake, then followed the Mackenzie River to Fort Norman. From there, he flew north to Aklavik, on the Arctic coast, and completed the first across-the-Rockies flight from Aklavik to Dawson City, Yukon. He proceeded to Prince Rupert, on B.C.'s west coast, and returned to Winnipeg via Edmonton.

In 1932, Brintnell formed Mackenzie Air Service Limited in Edmonton, and began flying passengers into the Northwest Territories and Arctic.

On March 19, 1935, he and fellow pilot Stan McMillan took off from Eldorado Mines in a Bellanca Aircruiser with the first shipment of radium concentrates aboard.

It was just six years after Labine had staked his history-making claim.

### **Harold "Doc" Oaks (1896-1968)**

Oaks was one of the first pilots to recognize the potential to make money in the rocks and forests of the Canadian Shield.

During the First World War, the Ontario-born pilot earned a Distinguished Flying Cross with the 48<sup>th</sup> Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps. After the war, he thought it would be possible to use aircraft to find minerals in isolated parts of northern Canada.

After studying geology at Queen's and the University of Toronto, Oaks searched for gold in northern Ontario and Quebec, and then became a pilot for the Ontario

Provincial Air Service in 1924. He logged hundreds of hours on fire patrol while piloting a U.S. surplus HS2L Flying Boat. He eventually quit to pan for gold in northern Ontario.

The move paid off, but soon the air beckoned and Oaks joined Patricia Airways and Exploration Ltd, flying prospectors in the Sioux Lookout area of northwestern Ontario. They all knew him as Doc, a nickname he'd picked up as a kid because his father was a doctor.

During this time, Oaks designed and built the first portable nose hangar, now universally used by bush pilots and engineers to service aircraft engines in severe weather in remote locations.

A few years later, he shared his vision of low cost air transport over wilderness to Winnipeg grain broker and industrialist James A. Richardson. That led to the creation in 1926 of Western Canada Airways, Canada's first major airline service. Oaks became the manager.

### **Moretta Fenton Beall “Molly” Reilly (1922-1980)**

Reilly was determined to fly with the Royal Canadian Air Force in the Second World War, but was denied the chance because of her gender.

She was one of the first recruits when the Women's Division was founded in 1941, immediately enrolling as an aerial photographer. After earning her pilot's licence after the war, Reilly piloted Douglas DC-3's and twin Beech aircraft for Southern Provincial Airlines in her home province of Ontario. In the late 1950's, she was promoted to the position of captain – the first female in Canada to hold this position.

In 1959, Peter Bawden Drilling Services in Calgary hired her. She spent several years flying to major oil fields in western and northern Canada, including Frobisher and Resolute bays in the Arctic.

In 1965, Reilly moved to Edmonton to join Canadian Coachways (later known as Canadian Utilities) and soon became chief pilot. She had modifications made to her Beechcraft Duke twin-engine plane to improve its operation in the Arctic.

When Reilly finally retired, she'd flown more than 10,000 hours as pilot-in-command – all without a single accident.

### **Russell Baker (1910-1958)**

“His unflagging efforts to provide safe, reliable, all-weather air service to the residents of Canada's western reaches and northern frontier, have been of outstanding benefit to Canadian aviation.”

So says the tribute to Baker when he was inducted into Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame in 1975.

Born in Winnipeg, he went to the University of Manitoba for two years before deciding he wanted to be a pilot. A few years later, he was a bush pilot flying mercy flights in northern Western Canada.

In 1946, he formed Central B.C. Airways at Fort St. James, B.C. His company began buying up smaller airlines to better serve areas where access was difficult due to weather and terrain.

Baker once flew a young Vancouver Sun cub reporter named Pierre Berton to the South Nahanni Valley in the Northwest Territories, an untamed wilderness where no plane had ever landed in winter.

The flight took place in the middle of winter, with temperatures plunging below minus 60. They flew in 160-kilometre stretches, and Berton filed dispatches to his editor by radio.

In 1957, Baker took over Canadian Pacific Airlines in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Prior to his death, he laid the groundwork for airbus service between Calgary and Edmonton, and for daily service from those cities to the Arctic Islands and beyond.

### **Clennell Haggerston “Punch” Dickins (1899-1995)**

Dickins achieved several aviation firsts that helped open up Arctic Canada.

Known as The Snow Eagle and Canada’s Air Explorer, he piloted the first flight across the Barren Lands of the Northwest Territories, and flew the first prairie airmail circuit linking Winnipeg, Regina, Calgary, Edmonton and Saskatoon.

Dickins was the first pilot to fly the full 3,200-kilometre length of the Mackenzie River, which he did in two days, becoming the first pilot to cross the Arctic Circle. He also flew an historic 16,000 kilometre air survey flight of Northern Canada.

Not bad for a prairie boy from Manitoba who earned his wings with the Royal Flying Corps and earned a Distinguished Flying Cross in the First World War.

After the war, Dickins joined the Canadian Air Force and became one of the original officers when the Royal Canadian Air Force was formed in 1924. He conducted high elevation experiments that proved all-weather flights were possible, and flew forestry and aerial photography flights.

In 1927, he joined Western Canada Airways and proceeded to do his part to open up the North.

The following year, a mining company president hired Dickins to take him on a 6,400-kilometre exploratory route to inspect potential mining sites across Canada’s unmapped Barren Lands in the NWT.

Dickins’s only map had the word UNEXPLORED printed over most of it. They lacked radio communication for most of the trip. They safely completed the trip in a Fokker Super Universal floatplane

In 1929, Dickins flew to Fort Good Hope on the Mackenzie River and picked up the first shipment of furs ever shipped by air to traders in Winnipeg.

In 1968, three years after he retired, Dickins received the Order of Canada for introducing the air age to northern Canada.

## **Vi Milstead Warren (1919-)**

Toronto-born Milstead earned her pilot's licence at age 20, and had 1,000 flying hours before she joined the British Air Transport Auxiliary in the Second World War.

For two years, she ferried 44 different types of single and twin-engine aircraft between England and Europe.

After the war, Milstead worked as a flight instructor in Ontario until 1947, when she married fellow pilot Arnold Warren. They moved north to Sudbury to fly for Nickel Belt Airways. Between bush flights to remote areas in a Fairchild Husky, Milstead taught flying on floats and skis.

She was featured as one of Canada's first female bush pilots in several national aviation publications. *Chatelaine* magazine once called her "Bush Angel."

Milstead and her husband retired in 1973. She was awarded the Amelia Earhart Medallion by the first Canadian chapter of the 99's, an organization of women pilots.

In September 1995, a heritage group in Sudbury honored Milstead.

As the granite plaque was formally dedicated, several bush planes equipped with floats roared overhead in a ceremonial fly-by.

It was a fitting tribute.