

# FLY NORTH

Volume 12, Number 2:  
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## NEWSLETTER OF THE NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO AVIATION HERITAGE CENTRE

**Preserving and celebrating the diverse history of aviation in the northwest, through the collection and preservation of artifacts and stories of the persons and events that made this region unique in aviation history**

### NOAHC News -----

#### A Note from the President

It seems longer than almost 3 months ago now that we closed NOAHC to all visitors and volunteers. So much has changed in how we look at our daily living and leisure pursuits. On behalf of the Board, I want to say that we appreciate the ongoing renewal of memberships being mailed in and your patience while we are closed due to Covid-19. After Heritage and Museums Centres are authorized to reopen by the Provincial government, we will gradually open in stages taking into consideration the safety of our volunteers and members. This will be communicated on our website, Facebook and by email. The best way to contact us during the pandemic is through email. [noahc@tbaytel.net](mailto:noahc@tbaytel.net).

Please stay safe, keep others safe, and we will beat this virus.

Elizabeth Wieben

#### Retirement

Long-time NOAHC board member Helen Kyle has decided to retire. Helen has contributed in many ways to the success of our organization. She has always been ready and willing to volunteer for the Centre's regular Sunday openings, take part in bingos and participate in special events. We are



happy to hear that, when possible, she will continue to do that. Along with David Bryan she was instrumental in setting up the computerized system that allows the accurate tracking of acquisitions and archival material essential for any organization claiming to preserve local history.

With her meticulous attention to detail, Helen was ideal for that task.

We thank Helen for her work on behalf of NOAHC and wish her all the best for the future.

#### Ninety-Nines Commemorative Stamp

The Ninety-Nines: International Organization of Women Pilots provides networking, mentoring, and flight scholarship opportunities for recreational and professional female pilots. It is organized geographically into sections and chapters, with Thunder Bay being the Sleeping Giant Chapter in the East Canada Section. NOAHC President, Liz Wieben is the Secretary of the local chapter.

The East Canada Section annually releases a Canadian Women Aviator Stamp as a fund-raising event. The 2020 stamp celebrates the achievements of Emily Crombez, the first female pilot to fly the Bombardier CL-415 water bomber.



Emily completed the requirements for her Private Pilot Licence by age 16 and from high

school and went on to attend the Aviation Flight Management program at Confederation College where she obtained a float flying specialty. This led to three seasons flying as a bush pilot in Northern Ontario before acquiring multi-engine skills with Bearskin Airlines. From there Emily went on to Captain's position with Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry originally flying the Twin Otter, but following Emergency Manoeuvre Training made possible by a 99s Scholarship she converted to the CL-415 and spent three seasons water bombing. She now flies a Boeing 787 Dreamliner for Air Canada on long-haul routes to Europe and Asia.

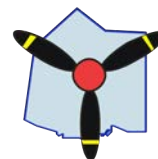
The stamp was launched at Tillsonburg Airport on June 19, 2020, the anniversary of Emily's first solo on floats.

The stamps are available only through the 99s organization, but are valid on Canadian mail. They may be ordered at <http://canadian99s.com>

*Fly North* used the commemorative stamps on the mail out for the current newsletter.

#### Inside this issue:

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### ***The Perils of Pilot Training:***

At 10:55 hours on May 13, 1944, LAC Willis, H.A., took off in Tiger Moth 1226 from No. 2 Elementary Flying Training School in Fort William, Ontario on a routine cross-country flight as part of his flight training program. The weather was clear and bright with unlimited ceiling and good visibility. When he failed to return in the time expected, the other students and instructors in his course, flying the school's Tiger Moths, began a search, which ended at darkness without success. The following day, several Avro Ansons were brought in from Winnipeg to join the search. In all 17 Tiger Moths and 5 Ansons quartered a large area in northwestern Ontario and northern Minnesota, from Grand Marais and Gunflint Lake in the south to the CPR line in the north and from Raith in the west to the shores and islands of Lake Superior. Despite this all out effort, four days went by with no sign of Willis or his plane. Finally, on the fifth day of the search, May 18, when the searchers were beginning to give up hope, his plane was discovered nosed over in Disraeli Lake, 60 miles NNE of Port Arthur (see page 4). Willis had been able to swim ashore and found a cabin in which he was able to shelter. When the search aircraft arrived he signaled to it from the top of a fire ranger's tower. Once the discovery had been reported, a Curtiss Helldiver, piloted by test pilot R.A. Reid from Can-Car, took off with emergency supplies, which were dropped successfully. Later in the day, a floatplane from the Ontario Forestry Service landed on the lake and picked up the pilot. He was uninjured and since he had found food in the cabin, his condition was good. As noted in the school's daily report for May 18, 1944, "...the day ended with a great feeling of relief on the part of everyone."

As it turned out, LAC Willis's crash was the last of 58 accidents that occurred during No. 2 EFTS's four years of operation, for on May 19, 1944, the day after his rescue, the school closed. The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP), of which No. 2 EFTS was part, was so successful that by mid-1944 there were sufficient aircrew to meet the needs of the RAF and RCAF and the Plan began to wind down.

In an operation that taught young men with no previous aviation experience to fly, accidents were inevitable. As recorded in the school's daily reports, they varied in severity. Those causing major damage, after which the aircraft was written off, were listed as Category A, whereas those with relatively minor damage, such as a broken prop or damage to wing ribs or fabric, which could be repaired on site, were listed as Category D. In between were Categories B and C in which the damage was greater and might or might not be repairable at the school. Most incidents occurred close to or on the airfield itself and included hard landings, ground loops or taxiing accidents. In July 1941,

for example, the daily report noted that "an inexperienced student made an extremely hard landing and bounced a considerable height without taking corrective action, which resulted in damage to his aircraft, including a complete write-off of the fuselage and various other components". Not all accidents were caused by the students, however. One instructor is reported as having attempted an exhibition of low level aerobatics, but ended up spinning into the ground sustaining a broken arm, damaged foot and cut face, which put him in McKellar Hospital. The CO of the school was obviously not amused, noting that "Sgt. Paul disgraced himself and is now lying in hospital".

Sometimes student inexperience and other factors such as weather conditions and the state of the field combined to cause accidents. On May, 13, 1941, for example, there were three minor incidents, two caused by the soft muddy field and one by the failure of the student to allow for a cross wind that made him strike observation lights. The muddy field caught one student taking off on his first solo, causing him to nose over on to his back, "resulting in no damage to himself, but a considerable amount to his aircraft". There were good days and bad days, some with multiple accidents and some with none. In one notable month, May 1942, no accidents were recorded.

The bad days were those on which fatalities occurred. During the four years in which No. 2 EFTS operated there were eight fatalities. Four were the result of mid-air collisions, three involved students on solo flights and one was caused when a plane came down during a snowstorm after striking telephone lines. Two of the eight fatalities were instructors. The first fatal collision took place over Bishopsfield on February 14, 1941, when a plane flown by a student under instruction collided with one being flown solo. (see page 4) The instructor and his student died at the scene and the second student was taken to McKellar Hospital with serious brain injuries. He remained there for a month before being transferred to Winnipeg, but the official record noted that "...it is not known if his recovery will ever be complete". Others were more fortunate. Following a mid-air collision between two planes being flown solo, in which one student pilot was killed, the other was able to take to his parachute and land safely.

There is no doubt that training to be an aviator in wartime was dangerous and it sometimes seems that while the school was in operation Tiger Moths were crashing in and around the Lakehead with great regularity. The number of crashes has to be set against total flying hours that regularly added up to between 1500 and 2000 hours per month and on several occasions exceeded 3000 hours. The intensity of the training was set high to meet the desperate need for airmen. Students and instructors responded to the challenge and in the end No 2 EFTS graduated more than 1200 pilots who went on in various ways to contribute to the war effort.

### ***Portship and Can-Car***

NOAHC member, Rod Spicer has drawn *FlyNorth's* attention to the little known contribution of Port Arthur Shipbuilding to the aircraft built by Can-Car during WWII. The Yard had many resources and skilled tradesmen available and at its disposal for all manner of manufacture even as it continued its main wartime task of shipbuilding and ship repair. Portship fabricated wing panels for the Hurricane and cabin sub-assemblies for the Curtiss Helldiver and the Harvard trainer in a building that was still called the Aircraft Shop by almost everyone when Rod began to work there in 1974. He writes, "It was a large building, single storey, on a concrete slab foundation, that would have been well suited to a production-line operation, producing light fabrications, such as wing assemblies. The designation of the shop as "The Aircraft Shop" is noted on page 133 of the excellent historical book, "Port Arthur Built" written by Dave Benedet, published in 1994, which covers the history of the Yard from its inception to approx. 1993".

*Fly North* has plans to include a more detailed account of Portship's aviation activities in a future newsletter and would be happy to hear from others who might have recollections of that aspect of the company's work. *Fly North* can be reached by e-mail at [noahc@tbaytel.net](mailto:noahc@tbaytel.net)



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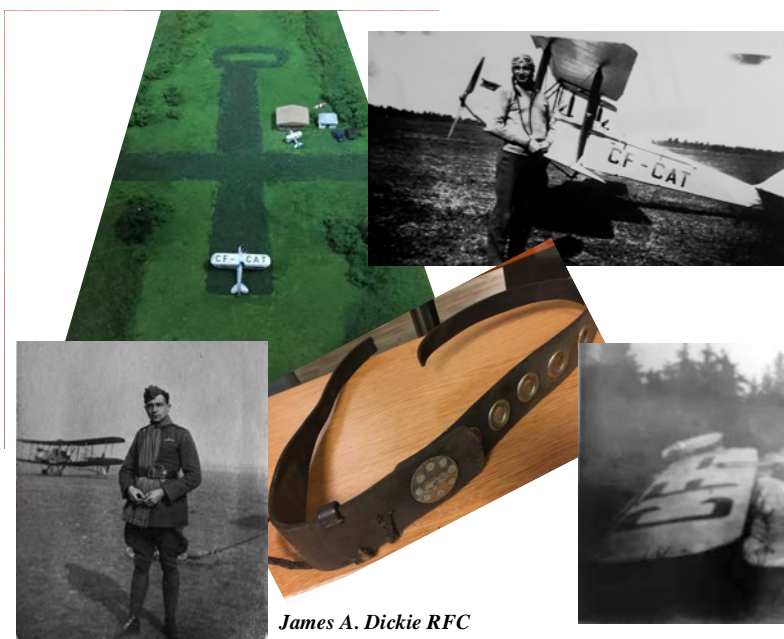


NOAHC continues to host a monthly bingo at the Superior Shores Gaming Association on Memorial Avenue. The returns from these events make an important contribution to the Centre's revenue.

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## Tragedy at Bishopsfield



**Marion Swaim,**  
trainee pilot in  
1930, age 18.

**James A. Dickie RFC**

One of the elements that was disrupted by the arrival of the Covid-19 was a display planned for the early aviation room. It will illustrate an accident that occurred in 1930 in which the Chief Flying Instructor of the Fort William Aero Club, James Dickie, was killed and his pupil, Marion Swaim was badly injured. Denise Lyzun, Mary-Alice Isaac and Dave Kemp have put together a display including a model of Bishopsfield as it would have appeared to a pilot landing from the west, pictures, storyboards, as well as a safety belt and windshield from the plane. The windshield will be on loan from the Thunder Bay Museum, with pictures and information from Cathleen Gibson, granddaughter of James Dickie and Sam Coghlan, son of Marion Swaim

## *Accidents at No 2 EFTS Fort William, Ontario*



*LAC Willis's Tiger Moth nose down in Disraeli Lake*



*Tiger Moth 4025 on its back following a ground loop on landing at the airfield in September 1941*



*Following the Category A crash pictured above the student pilot, who suffered a cut above his eye, spent a night in hospital and returned to his course the following day*



*(Above) The result of landing in a strong, gusty wind*

*(Right) The wreck of a Tiger Moth following a mid-air collision at Bishopsfield in February 1941 in which a student and instructor died. The pilot of 4209, flying solo, survived but with major head injuries*

