

FLY NORTH



NEWSLETTER OF THE NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO AVIATION HERITAGE CENTRE

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



NOAHC News ...

NOAHC Board Elections.

At the NOAHC Annual General Meeting held on November 22, 2021, the following members were elected to the board.

Executive:

President: Elizabeth Wieben

Vice-President: George Holborn

Executive Secretary: Denise Lyzen

Treasurer: David Sutton

Board Members: Archie Gribben, Mary-Alice Isaac, David Kemp, Don McRae, Gary Sartain.

Three of our previous board members have decided to retire.

Jim Milne was one of the original NOAHC Board members, instrumental in the creation of the Centre. He served for 8 years as President of NOAHC and until recently maintained the organization's membership list. His broad knowledge of aviation at the Lakehead was a major asset to the Centre.

David Bryan spent more than a dozen years on the Board. During that time he made a significant contribution to the development of the organization by steering it through two 5-year plans. He was also instrumental in setting up the software to record and catalogue artifacts and donations to the Centre in proper museum fashion. Recently he has acted as a very successful marketing manager for the two books that the Centre has produced.

Gerry Bell is a former bush pilot who spent many years flying out of Red Lake hauling supplies to remote communities before moving to Thunder Bay as a pilot on medevac flights and a training pilot for one of the local airlines. Tales of his experiences as a bush pilot, particularly when flying the Norseman, probably his

favourite plane, have appeared in several issues of the newsletter. Gerry served as Vice-President for part of his time on the Board.

NOAHC has been fortunate to attract such accomplished members to its Board. It thanks them for their contributions and wishes them the best in their future endeavours.

Covid.

With the reduction in restrictions required to combat the covid virus, the Centre is once again open to the public. However, until further notice, visits to the Centre will be appointment only. To book a tour, please call NOAHC at 623-3522 and leave a message or e-mail noahc@tbaytel.net. Arrangements will then be made to suit requested day and time. All current covid protocols, including proof of vaccination and masking, remain in place.

Zoom Presentation

NOAHC is preparing a Zoom presentation to be given by David Kemp on March 24, 2022 at 7:30 pm. He will talk about the Elementary Flying Training School which operated from Fort William Airport during WWII. The school trained more than 1200 pilots who went on to contribute to the war effort in various parts of the world. Additional information will be supplied shortly.

E-newsletter

NOAHC is exploring the possibility of publishing *Fly North* as an e-newsletter, in addition to the current paper version, if there is enough interest among the membership. Let us know what you think by e-mailing noahc@tbaytel.net

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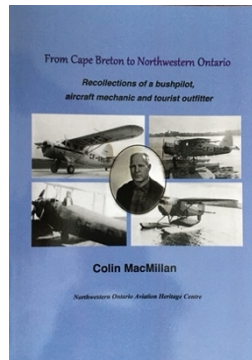
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NOAHC's latest publication

In the 1920s and '30s, northwestern Ontario was sparsely populated. The main settlements depended upon the railways, but there were also many smaller isolated communities with no established land connections with each other or with the larger settlements on the railways. Except around the Lakehead, roads were



“ From Cape Breton to Northwestern Ontario Recollections of a bushpilot, aircraft mechanic and tourist outfitter.”

**by
Colin MacMillan**

sparse. Indeed, until the early 1950s, there was no road link between Sault Ste. Marie and Port Arthur or Fort William at the head of Lake Superior. Travelling by land to western Canada involved a detour of 500 miles or so around the southern side of the lake through the United States.

It was into this picture that the iconic Canadian “bush-pilot” appeared. In northwestern Ontario local airlines sprang up in the 1930s, with one or two small planes operating year-round on wheels, floats or skis as conditions required. They were hired by mining or forestry companies and delivered supplies to northern indigenous communities. At about the same time, the Ontario government created the Ontario Provincial Air Service to provide fire detection and search and rescue patrols across the north. All of these services were provided by a group of men who flew aircraft that were not always the most up-to-date, in open cockpits in harsh winter conditions, without modern instrumentation and little in the way of weather forecasting or air traffic control. Colin MacMillan was one of these men and his memoirs provide a fascinating account of what it was like to be a bush-pilot in northwestern Ontario in the 1930s and '40s.

Colin MacMillan was born near Sydney, Nova Scotia, only a few years after the Wright Brothers' first flight. With the growing interest in flying in the 1920s, the Cape Breton Flying Club acquired a field on the MacMillan family farm and established a base from which it

could conduct its flying activities. After learning to fly at the Club in the early 1930s, Colin also obtained an air mechanic's certificate and flying instructor's licence. Armed with these credentials, he was successful in gaining employment as a pilot with one of the small flying companies that were beginning to emerge in the fledgling Canadian aviation industry. Business was difficult for these small companies and many did not survive, including the one for which Colin worked. When it folded he was out of a job. However, by the end of the decade, with the spectre of war looming, the demand for trained workers in the aviation sector grew. As a result, he was able to move north to Fort William, where Canadian Car and Foundry (Can-Car) was setting up a plant to build aircraft. There he worked on the Gregor Fighter and later the Hawker Hurricane line. When war broke out, Colin tried to enlist in the RCAF, but was told he was too old – at age 29! Wanting to fly, rather than continue on the assembly line at Can-Car, he joined the Ontario Provincial Air Service, being stationed at Pays Plat on the north shore of Lake Superior for much of the time. There he was involved in forest fire fighting, search and rescue, as well as maintaining the base. When the paper mill was established along the coast at Marathon he moved there to become a



Changing over from skis to floats, a seasonal chore for bush-pilots in the northwest

pilot for the paper company, flying company personnel and customers in and out of the town. He also organized the hunting and fishing trips that the company used to reward its best customers and the camps he established were the first of what became an important feature of the tourist industry in the region.

After spending nearly 30 years in the northwest Colin retired in 1968, and in 1986 recorded his memoirs, which are now available in this book. His writing is clear, often humorous and full of detail that would not make its way into conventional books on aviation. He was willing to turn his hand to any task in which his help was needed, but did not suffer fools gladly, particularly when lives were at stake, during forest fires or search and rescue missions, for example. It is important that personal histories such as this, prepared by those who participated in the events described, be made available to a broader public, which is the intent of this publication.

The book is on sale at the Centre, priced at \$20.00, with the normal 10% discount for members.



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Thunder Bay Airport

The right approach

Fairview Aircraft Restoration Society Canso stars in a TV movie

The Fairview Aircraft Restoration Society (FARS) Canso started life as a Canso PB5Y-5A, a Canadian built version of the Consolidated Catalina. Built in 1944, it flew originally as RCAF 11094 before being converted to a water bomber that spent several decades protecting Canadian forests in Newfoundland/Labrador and NWT from wild fires. In 2001, while flying with Buffalo Airways as C-FNJE, fighting fires in the Inuvik area it sank in Sitidgi Lake. It sat on the shore of the lake until 2008 when members of FARS recovered it and hauled it to Fairview. After hundreds of hours spent on the project by the members of the Society and other volunteers, C-FNJE flew again at Fairview on June 18, 2017 (see *Fly North* vol 9; no 2, April-June 2017). Since then, it has appeared in flying displays and air-shows in Alberta and Saskatchewan as well as local events in Fairview.

Recently, it became involved in show business as a prop in a made-for-TV movie. In September 2021 the Canso was flown to Boundary Bay, B.C. for use in a TV movie being produced by Warner Bros. DC's Legends of Tomorrow is a sci-fi series involving a time machine which in the Canso episode, 'A Woman's Place is in the War Effort', drops the cast into a wartime aircraft factory in Seattle, where 'Rosies' are assembling aircraft. The plane was repainted, in removable battleship grey paint with US decals, to represent a USAF PB5Y Catalina. Don Weiben and Bill McLaren, both originally from Thunder Bay, represented FARS at the filming and were impressed by the interest that the film-makers showed for the Canso. It returned to Fairview in mid-October with the battleship grey paint removed and the plane in the 'same as before' condition and ready for a new season of displays.

The episode DC's Legends of Tomorrow "A woman's Place in the War Effort" has already aired, but is now available on demand on Crave TV!

For further information on the Canso and Fairview Aircraft Restoration Society see www.savethecanso.com



Canso PB5Y-5A (C-FNJE) on its first post-restoration flight out of Fairview on June 18, 2017

(Bert Reynolds/FARS)



Ontario Provincial Air Service planes in the northwest in the 1930s and '40s



*The logo used on
Air Service planes
in the 1930s*

The Ontario Provincial Air Service (OPAS) was formed by the Government of Ontario in 1924. Ontario's forests were seen as an essential resource for the province's future development and the OPAS was designed to protect them through the aerial detection of forest fires, aerial transportation of fire crews and equipment, map making, aerial photography and forest inventory. With its vast forests and great distances, northern Ontario was a major focus of OPAS's activity.



Stinson Reliant SR9: Considered by many pilots to be the best aircraft in the OPAS inventory in the late 1930s

← *Washing a Stinson at the OPAS main base in Sault Ste Marie*



← *Buhl Air Sedan: One of two assembled under licence at the OPAS facility in Sault Ste. Marie. Described by Colin MacMillan as "noisy and awkward"*

*DH60 Gypsy Moth (front) and
Buhl Air Sedan (back) on the
beach as Marathon. →*

*The DH60 was considered an
excellent little plane for
instruction and observation*

*All photographs from the
NOAHC Colin MacMillan
Archive*

