FLY NORTH

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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

Inside this Issue:

NOAHC News …

Wings of Time- wrap-up

Following the disappointment of the cancellation of the 2024 *Wings of Time* event, the 2025 version was judged to be a resounding hit. John Hill who had the original idea for the event, along with the sterling contribution of Denise Lyzun and a group of some 50 dedicated volunteers worked to make it the success that it was.

The weather cooperated on both days and more than 2000 visitors attended the event. The 1950s era Harvards were the main attraction, but the RCAF sent one of their modern Harvards for static display. Based in CFB Moose Jaw it is also a training aircraft like its predecessor, but seeing the two types together clearly it showed what 70 years of development can mean in aircraft design.

Also on display was a Bell H-13 helicopter, a type perhaps best known for medivac flights during the Korean War, (as illustrated by its role in the long-running TV show M*A*S*H), plus other military vehicles, all contemporaries of the Harvard IVs.

The pilots of the Canadian Harvard Aircraft Association, from Tillsonburg, Ontario, provided flights on both days and Geoffrey Brayne brought his Harvard in from Lethbridge for static display.

On Saturday, the Roy Coran Big Band played appropriate '40s and 50s music during the lunch hour and on Sunday the Macgillivray Pipe Band and the Thunder Bay Police Pipe Band provided the musical entertainment.

Thanks to the cooperation of Wasaya Airways all of the event activities took place on the Wasaya ramp or in its hangar.

Visitors to the Centre

Earlier this summer the Centre had a visit from relatives of Lionel Stewardson, a local aviator featured in one of our displays. He learned to fly at the Fort William Aero Club in 1929 and between 1933 and 1935 he operated a local air freight service. The Stewardson family earlier donated a number of artifacts, pictures and documents related to Lionel's aviation activities including his helmet and goggles, which are now on display at the Centre.

(l to r). ***Lionel's granddaughter Cyndi, great-grandson Michael, daughter Gayle, great-grandson Graham.***

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Summers as a pilot's daughter...
by
Kelly Johnson

News of forest fires burning across the country has me reminiscing about my summers as a child.
My dad was a pilot, for many years flying waterbombers for the Newfoundland government, fighting forest fires. This resulted in a different way of life for our family compared to most.

Earle Johnson at the controls of his water bomber over Labrador

From the time I was about 5 yrs old, my dad left home at the beginning of April every year to complete training in Newfoundland. In the beginning, he didn't return home to southern Ontario until nearly the end of September. Later on, he was able to return home for a month or so before fire season started (if he could afford the air fare) but then he was gone again. During the time he was away, we only connected through Sunday night phone calls. Long distance calling was expensive and there was no such thing as the internet.

As soon as school ended, my mom, brother and me would make our way to Labrador where my dad was based. Some years we would fly, sometimes we would drive, sometimes we had to take a 36-hour ferry ride from Newfoundland to Labrador. Back in those days, we travelled whichever way was cheapest. There were a few years when we didn't go because we just couldn't afford it.

Once we got to Labrador, we lived in a two-bedroom hotel room for the duration of our stay. It wasn't until the kids stopped going that the government allowed my dad to rent a house rather than the hotel room. My brother and I would take turns rotating between the twin bed in the bedroom and the pull-out couch in the living room. I remember those summers being long. I watched a lot of *Days of Our Lives*. We rarely made friends - we wanted to be with our friends at home. We tried summer camp once and that lasted about a day. In the early days we didn't have a car so when we could find a ride, we would swim at the indoor community pool, but only in the evenings when my dad wasn't on duty. The hotel hired my brother to cut the grass and me to water the flower pots. My brother collected beer bottles to make extra money and one year my mom and I dove into Christmas ornament making to pass the time.

Some years, we would arrive in Labrador, only for Dad to be called elsewhere in the province or even other provinces to help fight fires. We'd be left with no transportation, riding our bikes to haul groceries home and to whatever activity we could find to occupy the time. I don't recall, but my mom remembers one summer where my dad was only with us for a few days of the entire summer and it rained almost every day, holding us hostage in the tiny hotel room Even when my dad was in town, he might be on "red alert" and have to sit at the airport all day waiting for a fire call. Our daily schedules revolved around the alert level of the day and the length of time my dad had to get to the airport if he was called.

Other times there would be fires nearby when other crews had to be called in. I remember these as more exciting times - the radio my dad carried around 24/7 would be a flurry of activity. Once we had a car we could sometimes drive to where they were picking up water and watch, proudly knowing that was our dad piloting the plane, and sometimes we were close enough that we could go out and watch the fire burn. In the evenings all the crews would gather at the hotel for a barbecue and some drinks, and always lots of laughs and stories of flying jobs across the country. It was a bit like having summer visitors - the other pilots were much like extended family after so many years.

During slow times, a "test flight" was required every few days and we would all excitedly pile into the plane for a ride. The plane was stationed at a military base so we had to go through a security gate to walk onto the tarmac - although not security like we know today, just a friendly wave on through. As kids I think we felt special that we had this privilege. We'd fly for an hour or so, looking at the countryside and my dad showing us different landmarks. Occasionally we'd take turns in the right seat, co-piloting for my dad. It was likely on these flights that my brother fell in love with flying, eventually becoming a commercial pilot himself. It wasn't until we were a bit older that we eventually experienced the thrill of landing on a lake to pick up water. My dad and his co-pilot would steadily guide the plane down onto the water, the engines would roar, and the force would press us back against our seats. Or if it was our turn to be up front, the wall behind my dad's seat where we held on tight and enjoyed a front row seat. And then it would be time to dump the load out over the forest. The doors in the bottom of the plane below the tanks would bang open, and it would be as if the plane suddenly stilled in the air as the load was released. We loved it and always asked to do it again!

(continued on page 3)

Our corporate supporters…

Summers…continued

Kelly in a water bomber: certainly not business class.

It wasn't a luxury aircraft though. There were times when we'd catch a ride elsewhere in the province. It was loud, and smelled like jet fuel, and was uncomfortable, the seats being only a bench with little padding. Inevitably, the barfing would ensue shortly after takeoff when we knew we were stuck on there for hours.

Life as a waterbomber pilot wasn't all that glorious. Lots of time away from home, and the crews were never hailed as heroes like most first responders. Fires could rarely be put out in a day, so it was long and hot work in the plane, yielding miniscule results against Mother Nature most days. It was always the rain that got the credit for making any significant impact. But these men (and probably some women these days) and their families live lives many wouldn't choose. As a child, this wasn't necessarily the lifestyle I would have chosen either - I would've rather been at home with my friends in the summers, but then and even now I'm immensely proud of the career my dad chose, only retiring at 70 yrs old as a highly respected waterbomber pilot. I know he's watching the news and events unfold, also reminiscing about years gone by – maybe of the times spent in the aircraft, or in old motels away from home, or the long days of waiting around for something to unfold, or of the colleagues who became friends in the absence of family, or maybe of the time he lost from his family having chosen this career path, but more likely he is simply back in the left seat, window open to let in some air to blow through his hair, aviators on, gliding down onto the water, ready for the challenge of another fire.

Kelly Johnson is a Lakehead University graduate. She has taught in different parts of Canada, including the Arctic, and has travelled extensively to out-of-the-way places in Australia, China, Africa, Mexico and elsewhere. She currently lives in southern Ontario where she works at the St. Clair Region Conservation Authority and runs a very successful cat rescue outfit.

Wings of Time Montage

Taxiing out for a flight

Landing after a flight

Geoffrey Brayne's Harvard

Harvard II RCAF 156113 at Thunder Bay

Leaving Thunder Bay *CHAA*

Smoke … On!

Wasaya

With special thanks to Wasaya Airways for use of their ramp and hangar, plus organizational and logistical help

A musical interlude with the pipe bands *Gerry Bell*