

# Blatchford Field: The Emergence of Aviation as a National Fact During the 1920s

By Ken Tingley

The history of aviation in Edmonton began in 1909 when Edmonton carpenter Reginald Hunt flew his self-designed and hand-built aircraft for 35 minutes over the provincial capital. In 1911 two American daredevils, Hugh Robinson and "Lucky" Bob St. Henry, flew their plane at the Spring Horse Show. But it was not until after the Great War of 1914-1918 that returning veterans with wartime experience in the Royal Flying Corps really began to establish Edmonton as the Gateway to the North. From this time on aviation would play a central role in the opening and development of the northern Canadian resource frontier.

In February 1918 Walter Sporle's St. Albert Stock Farm buildings, located south of the



Edmonton, Dunvegan and British Columbia railway station, and a landmark on the St. Albert Trail for a decade, burned down. This location would become the future site of the first "air harbour" in Canada. In 1919 brothers Wilfrid "Wop" and Court May, with George Gorman, began flying out of a grassy air strip on the Walter Sporle farm in their wartime Curtiss "Jenny", the "City of Edmonton." The following year John "Jock" McNeill and Captain Keith Tailyour incorporated the Edmonton Aircraft Company, having built a hangar on the Hagmann Estate in

the Summerwilde neighbourhood.



During the 1920s the federal government was becoming more involved in the development of Canadian aviation, and by 1924 aircraft were prohibited from landing anywhere except on federally licensed aerodromes. In 1924 "Wop" May and Harry Adair approached Mayor Ken Blatchford, requesting a proper airport to accommodate their Curtiss Jenny. City Engineer A.W. Haddow wrote to the Department of National Defense Air Service on 23 June 1924,

informing them that Edmonton "has under consideration the establishment of a Civic Aerodrome...." This would be on land located on a brushy quarter section of grazing land about two miles from the city centre. The old McNeill hangar remained on the site in a dilapidated condition.

The proposal did not come before City Council until 10 May 1926. The City already owned the Hagmann property, having come into possession when it was relinquished by the failed Edmonton Airplane Company for non-payment of taxes, common during the 1920s when many land speculators from the pre-war boom were left holding the bag when the real estate market crashed. City Council decided in 1926 to upgrade the facility.

Mayor Blatchford applied for a license for the "air harbour" on 28 May 1926. City Council then authorized construction of three runways. License No. 72, for the first municipal Air Harbour in Canada, was issued to the City of Edmonton on 16 June 1926.



City Council passed a resolution on 22 November 1926 to name the air harbour "Blatchford Field", in honour of Mayor K. A. Blatchford, who had played such an important part in having the airport established. The Geographic Board of Canada accepted the name in January 1927.

In the years that followed, Blatchford Field would become an important jumping-off point for the north.

Heroic rescue flights, historic explorations, ambitious commercial endeavours, and the opening of the northern resource frontier all would benefit from its establishment, as would Edmonton. While bush flyers did not initiate the opening of the northern resource frontier, as is

sometimes suggested, it is important to acknowledge that they certainly accelerated the process considerably.

“The example by your City in establishing this flying field is one which I trust will be followed by every other city in the Dominion,” G. J. Desbarats, Deputy Minister, Air Service, had written in December 1926. As the aviation age progressed rapidly during the following decades this proved to be an accurate prediction.

### **Historical Introduction**

It is important to bear in mind that the story of the Edmonton airport remains part of a broader national story. At the end of the First World War little infrastructure existed in Canada to accommodate the first tentative penetration of the vast northern regions to improve the scale of natural resource extraction. At first, there were only two “air harbours” in Nova Scotia, for “flying boats,” and seven in central and southern Ontario used for Royal Air Force training. None of these bases were established for northern bush flying.

Many young flyers back from the war bought surplus Curtiss Jenny aircraft and began to introduce the public to flight through barnstorming. These “dollar a minute” pilots led the government to the conclusion that aeronautics would need regulation, and it introduced such legislation into Parliament. *An Act to Authorize the Appointment of an Air Board for the Control of Aeronautics*, also known as the Air Board Act, received Royal Assent on 6 June 1919. It provided for appointment of an Air Board with representation from the Department of Militia and Defence, and the Department of Naval Services. The Air Board was given many responsibilities, which included aeronautical research, construction of air stations, regulation of aircraft, and the negotiation of international air rights. Its powers extended to regulations for the licensing of pilots, aircraft and air bases; conditions under which passengers, freight and mail could be carried; prohibition of flying over certain areas; establishment of air routes; and safety rules. The Air Board Act was typical of laws granting broad powers being adopted around the postwar world.

The beginning of air transportation into the Canadian north began on 15 October 1920, when Hector Douglas and Frank Ellis piloted a 500-mile “bush flight” from Winnipeg to The Pas.

Further west, Imperial Oil was the earliest firm to appreciate the value of aircraft in the western Arctic and sub-Arctic regions, as it launched its exploration in the Mackenzie River Valley using two Junkers JL-6 all-metal monoplanes piloted by George Gorman and Elmer Fullerton. Their first expedition, the 1921 tale of G-



CADP, has been told many times, with its dangerous winter flight, forced landings at Fort Simpson (damaging the propellers of both aircraft), the manufacture of a replacement propeller using local materials and a departure from Fort Simpson just ahead of spring. Imperial Oil Geologist W. Waddell also was flown from Peace River to Fort Norman by Edmonton pilots George Gorman and Elmer Fullerton, with air engineers Pete Derbyshire and William Hill. The search for oil in the Mackenzie River basin during 1921 also led a pair of Vancouver and Los Angeles entrepreneurs to suggest using a 32-passenger dirigible to connect Edmonton and Fort Norman. F.G. Erickson also was reported to be planning a regular flying boat service throughout the Mackenzie area, beginning in May 1921. The north seemed on the verge of an airborne invasion.

By 1922 more extensive aerial forestry patrols were under way in Quebec and Ontario, to survey and photograph vast, otherwise inaccessible tracts of their northern hinterland. N.R. Anderson, who was an Air License Inspector for the Board in western Canada, reported the state of the nascent industry’s self-regulation in the west that year, lamenting the lack of the most basic maintenance of log books:

*The majority of commercial aviation firms operating in Western Canada do not keep their log books up to date, and in many instances have no information whatsoever about repairs or replacements to aeroplane and engine during the previous flying season. The practice of keeping flying time in rough note books and on separate pieces of paper is mainly responsible for this neglect. Such note books and bits of paper usually appear to be of no importance if left scattered about and are, therefore, lost, or if kept in a safe place, the accumulation is so great at the end of the flying season that it is a very weary task to copy the whole into the log books and usually it is left undone. If log books were carried in the machine and entered up after each day's flying it would only be a five minute task, and the information about repairs and replacements would be accurately remembered and put down. In case the machine was being left out overnight the logbooks could easily be carried to his room by the pilot, instead of being left out to perhaps get rained on, or taken away as souvenirs by some prowler in the night. The importance of having available for inspection, a detailed history of the aeroplane and engine, both in regard to flying time and repairs, is absolutely necessary - for at the present time commercial aviation personnel seem very reluctant to give the Examiner any information which could be of assistance to him in carrying out his inspection.*

Despite the general *laissez-faire* attitude of the early flyers, the grander promise of the future began to emerge among early planners and visionaries. As early as January 1919 Major K.E. Clayton Kennedy, involved in transport flying between London and Paris, identified the important air routes still to be developed in Canada. He correctly guessed that Edmonton and Winnipeg would be the hubs of these routes.



Bush flying was a national endeavour, and many of the pioneering efforts into the northern reaches of Canada were carried out in Ontario and Quebec. For example, Elwood Wilson and Stuart Graham began with a handful of flying boats and veteran pilots operating in the St. Maurice - Lac St. Jean areas in Quebec. Their Laurentide Air Service, chartered in 1922, soon was the largest commercial air operator in Canada, flying in both Ontario and Quebec. Its most important aircraft was the Curtiss HS2L flying boat, but it also tried

using a Loening Air Yacht, Vickers Viking, Westland Limousine and a de Havilland DH.9. At its largest in 1923, the firm had 12 aircraft, 10 pilots and 8 to 10 air engineers. Laurentide Air Services suffered a heavy blow in 1924 when it lost its forestry patrol contracts in Ontario; the Department of Lands and Forests organized its own air service; and the Ontario Provincial Air Service and a professional RCAF were both established on 1 April 1924. Laurentide struggled on, but went bankrupt attempting to give winter services to the Rouyn gold fields. This pioneering effort preceded any on this scale in Alberta at this time.

The most notable forestry service in the private sector in 1920 involved Price Brothers and Company, a Quebec-based pulp and paper company. They established a summer service, first with a float-equipped JN-4 and then with three Martinsyde Type A aircraft. The firm used aircraft to support their forestry operations in the Lac. St. Jean - Saguenay area. Price Brothers disbanded its aerial arm in 1923, purchasing flying services from specialized firms instead.

Jurisdiction over air services was also a significant early issue. Of course, the British North America Act (1867) had not anticipated this question. The Maritime Provinces, Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia all had jurisdiction over their own natural resources. The Prairie Provinces, however, had no such authority until 1930. Thus, the survey, protection, and administration of those forests were a federal responsibility. The Air Board's forestry work in Quebec and Ontario only lasted from 1920 to 1922. Air Board and RCAF operations in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta began as experiments but continued as core operations until the Depression.

Once the federal government surrendered its control of western resources to the provinces, aerial protection continued under new masters. The handover coincided with the large federal budget cuts of 1932, during the Great Depression, which saw the RCAF budget drastically reduced. It is not surprising to find that the Manitoba Government Air Service, formed in 1932, very closely

resembled its RCAF predecessor, using the same bases, Vedette aircraft carrying civil registry rather than air force markings, and many of the same people who the RCAF had let go.

In 1921 forestry operations were carried out from the Vancouver Air Station (fire patrols, photography, survey), Kamloops, British Columbia (fire patrol), High River, Alberta (fire patrols and some reconnaissance work in Jasper Park), Victoria Beach, Manitoba (fire patrols between Lake Winnipeg and the Ontario border and around the northern ends of Manitoba's largest lakes), Sioux Lookout, Ontario (mainly surveys) and Roberval, Quebec. The Forestry Branch also was anxious to extend coverage in British Columbia, Manitoba and Alberta.



In 1922 the Air Board carried out several photographic surveys of the Alberta forests. In Manitoba, Squadron Leader B.D. Hobbs directed a force of 37 men in aerial forestry operations. The F.3 flying boats employed, however, were unwieldy to handle when mooring on small lakes or rivers. The establishment of temporary bases at The Pas and Norway House proved very successful in extending aerial coverage, and the idea of the detachment soon was accepted in photographic and forestry patrols. Early operations clearly

demonstrated the value and practicality of aerial forestry patrols. In 1923 Ontario and Quebec took on all responsibility for such operations within their jurisdictions. The federal government then concentrated on the western forests for which it was still responsible.

When the federal government handed over natural resources to Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba during 1930-1931, Manitoba soon organized its own air service, modeled on the Ontario Provincial Air Service [OPAS]. Aviation historian Hugh Halliday describes the chores of early fire patrols such as occurred over Alberta lands during the period:

*The aerial fire patrols of the 1920s and early 1930s were much more complex than the term suggests. Whether it was the RCAF, OPAS, or a private firm, the fire spotters were not limited to locating and reporting fires. Often the pilots became involved in fire suppression as well. Until the appearance of water bombers about 1947, this could be done only by men on the ground. Suppression flying entailed getting a handful of fire fighters with equipment (pumps and hoses plus food) to a lake close to an outbreak. That was simple enough, but some pilots went further. Fred Stevenson, in his OPAS days, was reported to have moored his HS2L and personally joined the firemen battling a blaze. In 1929 the RCAF attempted (unsuccessfully) to have Flight Lieutenant Frederick Mawdesley awarded the McKee Trophy; among his exploits cited were numerous flights to transport and resupply fire crews; in some instances he landed a wheeled aircraft on ice pans in the middle of lakes to get the men to their destinations.*



By the late 1920s aviation in Canada had evolved to the point that it was becoming an indispensable part of national life. The creation of Blatchford Field in 1927 would be at the cutting edge of this development.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Ken Tingley became the first municipal Historian Laureate in Canada when he was named to the position in April of 2010. During his two-year tenure, Tingley published "Ride of the Century: The Story of the Edmonton Transit System" and "My Heart's in the Highlands: The Building of a Historic Edmonton Community".*