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History of Flight in BC

The History of Flight in British Columbia

Because of the mountainous terrain, BC's aviation pioneers faced a challenge their counterparts east of the Rockies were spared. Aircraft in the first two decades did not have the power to fly over the mountains, nor the instruments to fly through clouds, consequently there were no scheduled services before the 1930s, except for the overwater flights between Seattle and Victoria.

The first heavier-than-air flight in British Columbia took place on March 25, 1910, when a tiny Curtiss pusher biplane sputtered into the air over Lulu Island, near Vancouver. The stands of Minoru Park race track were filled with 3,500 curious Vancouverites who had come to see Charles K. Hamilton and his flying machine. The famous American stunt pilot had done a considerable amount of exhibition flying for airplane designer and builder Glenn Curtiss. Now on his own, and working his way around the larger cities of the northwestern United States, he recognized that a market for his talents existed in British Columbia. On the following day, Hamilton topped earlier efforts by flying to New Westminster and back, a total distance of 20 miles. The flight took only 30 minutes.

British Columbia had its own aviation pioneer. In 1910, William Wallace Gibson of Victoria - without formal training - designed and built the first successful Canadian aircraft engine. This truly remarkable achievement, carried out on the basis of his own experiments, was followed by the design and construction of two aircraft of advanced design. The first machine, which Gibson called a "twinplane", had wings both in front of and behind the pilot. Powered by the inventor's engine, the aircraft made a successful flight on September 8, 1910, flying a distance of 200 feet at a height of 20 feet.

Regrettably, the publicity that Gibson received led to his being the object of considerable ridicule around Victoria. Though somewhat daunted by this reaction he pressed on and produced a second airplane which was appropriately called the "multiplane". A large number of airfoils, which looked much like venetian blinds provided the lift. Using the same 40-horsepower engine employed earlier in the twinplane, Gibson hoped to prove that a new type of lifting surface could be equally effective as more conventional wings. The aircraft flew on several occasions in 1911.

There were other aviation pioneers in the province. Three young Vancouverites - William McMullen, and Bill and Winston Templeton - produced a tractor-type biplane based on information found in American periodical publications. The engine and many of the aircraft's parts were purchased in the United States where they were more readily available at the time. Only a few flights were made in 1911 before a fire destroyed the machine. Sadly, funds were lacking for a replacement.

Charles F. Walsh made two flights in Victoria a month later, damaging his Curtiss-Farman when he clipped a tree. Engine trouble forced a cancellation on the second day and Walsh, quite sensibly, refused to fly on the third when a spring gale blew in off Juan de Fuca Strait.

High speed and danger tend to appeal to a certain type of individual, so it was hardly surprising that a well-known Vancouver auto racer, Billy Stark, took up flying. Since there were no flying schools in Canada in 1911, Stark went to San Diego, California, to enroll in the only aviation school on the Pacific coast. Glenn Curtiss, the world-famous aircraft designer and builder, was giving expert flying instruction in the hopes of selling his airplanes to successful students. Stark progressed through the complete course, learning aircraft handling and repair and basic engine maintenance. In an era when aviation mechanics and riggers were all but nonexistent, each pilot had to know enough to keep his machine operating efficiently and safely. His life depended on it.

Billy Stark returned to British Columbia with his pilot's licence and a new Curtiss "Flyer." On April 24, 1912, Stark took Daily Province sports editor Jim Hewitt up for a flight. Hewitt, who was British Columbia's first air passenger, related his impressions of the flight to his readers.

Later that same day, Olive Stark became the first woman airplane passenger in Canada. She sat beside her

husband on the lower wing of his Curtiss, bundled up against the cold, looking both proud and apprehensive.

Stark's Curtiss was typical of pre-World War 1 machines. It was a "finely tuned" mass of wire, bamboo, interplane struts, and spruce, covered by stretched and doped fabric. The engine was a six-cylinder, water-cooled "V"-type, which was fueled by a gasoline tank mounted above it to permit gravity feed. A single steering wheel controlled height and direction of flight. Flying wires stretched between the wings had to be properly tightened to ensure structural strength. Very light in weight, these machines were easily damaged in their all-too-frequent crashes. Stark was injured late in 1912, after making numerous personal appearances at events around the province.

The well-known husband and wife team of John Bryant and Alys McKey Bryant visited British Columbia in 1913 during their tour of the Pacific Northwest. Alys, like Billy Stark, had been trained by Glenn Curtiss, and had made her reputation as an excellent pilot before her marriage. Taking to the air on July 31 at Minoru Park, she became the first woman to pilot a plane in Canada.

Over Victoria on August 6, John Bryant was the first aviator to fly over the downtown area of a British Columbia city. That same day he exchanged his wheeled undercarriage for a float and took off from Victoria harbour in gusty wind conditions. Over the city, one of the wings collapsed and the machine crashed onto the roof of a building near the waterfront. Bryant was killed instantly - Canada's first aviation fatality. His wife never flew again.

In 1914, when war broke out in Europe, few aircraft were being used for military purposes. The Royal Flying Corps, which had been established in 1912 as part of the British Army, was formed largely because some of the continental powers, including France and Germany, had done so. It was not long, however, before the airplane's value in reconnaissance became apparent. Less vulnerable than captive observation balloons and much more useful because of their ability to range over a larger area, airplanes were soon used to report enemy troop concentrations and movements.

In September 1915, the newly organized Aero Club of British Columbia undertook to train British Columbians who hoped to join the Royal Flying Corps. Stark's Curtiss was purchased by the club and Stark himself was hired as the instructor. Fifteen student pilots were soon enrolled and training began. Unfortunately, with only one machine available, the scheme was impractical; when the Curtiss was damaged, training had to be suspended. The BC Aviation School Limited was established in December 1915. Training was carried out in a number of locations, notably Vancouver and Pitt Meadows, and a few students were qualified before both aircraft were destroyed in landing accidents. The program failed, and while some flying did take place in British Columbia during the rest of the war, the hope of British Columbia becoming a major air training centre did not come to pass.

By the war's end, aircraft had been transformed. They were no longer frail, slow machines, capable of flying at only a few hundred feet and carrying one or two people. Now they could carry several crew members, a payload of hundreds of pounds and travel long distances at altitudes up to 20,000 feet. Engines were rated at up to 400 horsepower, and some aircraft had as many as four. Conditions were better for the aircrew too. The cockpit was now often enclosed within a fabric-covered fuselage with windshields, and the pilot had numerous instruments to monitor the performance of the plane.

The other major legacy of the air war was manpower. Large numbers of air crew were available for new aviation activity - over 12,000 in Canada alone. Many of these men were eager to continue working in aviation, either in the armed forces or in commercial roles. The Aerial League of Canada was established immediately following the war to promote aviation, and one of the best means of doing so was to hold air shows. On June 11, 1919, at Willows Camp in Victoria, the league staged an "Aerial Meet" which featured formation flying, and dogfights using surplus Curtiss JN-4 "Jenny" trainers.

There were other important aviation events in British Columbia in 1919, all of which involved the carrying of mail. In March, William E. Boeing, president of Boeing Airplane Company, and Eddie Hubbard carried the first international air mail in North America between Vancouver and Seattle, using a Boeing-built C2 seaplane. The Aerial League, once again using JN-4 "Jennies", carried mail and undertook long distance flights between Vancouver, Victoria, Seattle and Nanaimo, on several occasions. Captain Ernest Hoy, a former Royal Air Force pilot and a member of the Aerial League, flew from Vancouver to Calgary in August 1919, an impressive feat considering the extreme difficulties and dangers involved in flying over mountains.

Travel in British Columbia has always been extremely difficult because of the rugged terrain and the distances involved, and aircraft were seen, by some at least, as a way to overcome these obstacles. The same farsighted people saw the commercial possibilities of aviation. Air mail, for instance, could be carried over very long distances and over all kinds of topography, and Eddie Hubbard proved that it could be done so commercially. On October 15, 1920, he undertook the first scheduled international air mail service between Seattle and Victoria flying a Boeing CL-4S seaplane.

Other attempts at commercial aviation were also brief, often due to accidents. The Pacific Aviation Co. of Vancouver, Vancouver Island Aerial Transport, and the Commercial Aviation School of Victoria, all of which

operated Curtiss JN-4s, all went out of business when their aircraft crashed.

Flying On The Coast

Following World War 1, Canada was left with a considerable number of usable aircraft. The British Government had donated 80 airplanes and 14 flying boats to Canada, and the United States Navy, which had been training Canadians in the closing months of the war, turned over 12 HS2L flying boats and 25 spare Liberty engines. Half of these machines - single-engine biplanes with 74-foot wingspan - were to serve in British Columbia.

An Air Board was created by the Canadian Government in July 1919 to govern post-war aviation. Based on international rules of air navigation, air regulations were passed by an Order in Council. In February 1920, a second Order in Council laid the basis for the re-establishment of the Canadian Air Force which had been disbanded shortly after the armistice. A new Air Board evolved in April 1920 with more formalized, wide-ranging powers than its predecessor. Its orientation was toward civil aviation even though it had the Canadian Air Force as part of its responsibilities.

The Canadian Air Board established bases across Canada and Vancouver's Jericho Beach was chosen as their west coast base. In February 1920, temporary canvas hangars were erected. British Columbia's wet climate soon proved to be too much for the canvas structures and they were soon replaced by others of wood and metal construction.

Five of the HS2Ls acquired a short time earlier from the U.S. Navy were assigned to Jericho and went into service quickly. In an era without airports, the ability to operate off water was vital. Coastal waters and lakes large enough to accommodate a flying boat with a landing speed of about 50 miles per hour could be used as a base. It was necessary, however, to haul the boat-hulled aircraft ashore periodically to ensure that the wooden hulls didn't become waterlogged. Performance could be drastically reduced if this were allowed to happen.

Most of the aviation work that had been done in British Columbia up to 1924 was done in conjunction with the Air Board, then the Canadian Air Force and finally the Royal Canadian Air Force which came into being April 1, 1924. The RCAF withdrew from patrol duties despite its success in this role. A few of the people who had been flying for the military until this time decided to strike out on their own. They wanted to form independent companies, and still make a living doing what they enjoyed most - flying. Don McLaren was one such person and he formed a company called Pacific Airways, in February 1925.

On being awarded the fisheries contract, Pacific Airways set up a base at Swanson Bay near Princess Royal Island. They operated from this location until they were purchased by Western Canada Airways in May 1928. Boeing flying boats replaced the HS2L. Immediately after the purchase, McLaren became manager of the British Columbia operations of the new company and later, its successor, Canadian Airways.

In 1936 gold was discovered on the west coast of Vancouver Island. This discovery proved to be a great boost for flying companies on the coast. There was so much mining activity going on that several companies - including Ginger Coote Airways and Canadian Airways - were transporting eager miners.

The First Airfields

As commercial use of aircraft increased, the need for regular airfields became apparent. The first licensed airfield in British Columbia, and the first scheduled passenger service in the province, came into being together. Since William Wallace Gibson's 1910 flight, aircraft had been operating occasionally from the field on Lansdowne Road in Victoria. The field was purchased in 1927 by the newly-founded British Columbia Airways. The company, backed by Victoria businessmen including Cecil and Ernest Eve, started a flying school.

The Ford 4-AT Trimotor was the largest land-based commercial airliner then available. BC Airways purchased one in 1928 and put it into service on the Vancouver-Victoria-Seattle run. It began scheduled passenger flights on August 16, 1928. It had scarcely begun service when, on August 25 it crashed into the sea near Port Townsend, Washington.

“A Dollar Here and A Dollar There”

In 1929 the Depression hit North America and flying enthusiasts were left struggling to find some way to make a living. Like their comrades all across the continent, pilots in British Columbia began to fly around the province, stopping at various towns and enticing people to go for a spin in an airplane. They would set up anywhere they felt they could attract a paying crowd. A farmer's field was ideal, and for a fee to the individual farmer, the pilots were able to provide joyrides for all who were able to pay. The usual location of these activities led to the term “barnstorming.”

Into The Bush

Aircraft proved invaluable in the development of British Columbia's northern interior. They carried survey teams to chart the landscape. They ferried miners and prospectors in search of mineral wealth, and brought supplies to their claims. They brought remote settlements just a bit closer to civilization. And they could parry

large payloads over previously impassable natural obstacles.

A new generation of “bush planes” - such as the Fairchild FC-2 and “71” series, the Fokker Universal, the Waco and the Norseman - started coming into service in the late 1920s and early 1930s, as did a variety of German Junkers aircraft. Many were designed especially for the North American wilderness - rugged aircraft incorporating such features as heated, enclosed cockpits, improved freight capacity, and high-mounted wings for easier loading of cargo. In addition, alternative undercarriages - wheels, skis or floats - were available, giving the aircraft landing ability regardless of season. However, in the beginning there were no navigational aids, no accurate maps, and no organized search and rescue service. In this mountainous and inhospitable environment, the pilots were very much on their own.

“A Definite Change in the Times”

The period from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s saw considerable change in Canada's aviation industry. As the country began to recover from the Depression, more money became available to put better aircraft to work. While passenger flights were becoming more common, a trans-Canada airline did not exist - and could not, until proper facilities were established and a company came forward to operate such a service. Canadians in a hurry were heading south to make use of the trans-continental airlines operating in the United States. It became clear that an all-Canadian service was necessary, desirable and feasible.

In 1936, C. D. Howe, the Minister of Transport, proposed several schemes for the creation of this service. One proposal was that the Canadian Pacific Railway, which had been granted permission to operate aircraft as early as 1919, should run the airline. Another possible operator was Canadian Airways, which was already providing regional services in many parts of Canada.

Ultimately, neither the Canadian Pacific Railway nor Canadian Airways would accept the government's conditions. C. D. Howe decided to create a new federal government crown corporation to handle the service. It was incorporated in April 1937, as Trans-Canada Airlines, known since 1964 as Air Canada.

While Trans-Canada Airlines provided flights north and south - and slightly later, to the east - other carriers such as Canadian Airways, Ginger Cootie Airways, and Yukon Southern continued to handle most of the traffic within British Columbia. In 1942, the Canadian Pacific Railway did create a new airline which absorbed these three companies, But by that time, the Second World War had begun.

Wartime necessities helped to improve air services in British Columbia. Armed forces stationed in the north needed supplies. As did the construction crews on the Alcan highway. Commercial carriers were kept busy despite difficult conditions and general shortages.

The increased use of modern multi-engined airliners capable of maintaining scheduled long-distance passenger service necessitated the establishment of better airfields, radio navigation aids and maintenance facilities. By the 1940s, aviation in British Columbia had acquired a sophistication undreamed of only 30 years before, when Charles Hamilton made the province's maiden flight. But a change of attitude was required of the pilots and staff who were schooled in a less regulated and more individualistic era. Progress demanded that they adapt to the requirements and faster pace of the post-war years.

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