

October Meeting

Topic: "Watch and Warn --- Canada's Home Front Aircraft Detection Corps"

Special guest: Neil Macdougall

Reporter: Gord McNulty

CAHS Toronto Chapter members gathered for the first time this fall to enjoy an excellent War Amps documentary, "Watch and Warn --- Canada's Home Front Aircraft Detection Corps." The 57-minute video traced the untold story of ordinary Canadians who, in the daily routine of their lives, volunteered to keep a close watch for enemy threats to our country during World War II. Part of the War Amps "Never Again!" series, it was based on the book *Watch and Warn* by Allan F. Coggon, ISBN 141203192-3, published by Trafford.

Housewives, school children, fishermen, lighthouse keepers, railway workers and more became official observers for the Aircraft Detection Corps (ADC). It was organized and administered by the RCAF but also served the army and the navy. Adopting the motto "watch and warn," ADC observers scanned the skies and seas and reported any suspicious sightings of aircraft and vessels --- even spies. There wasn't any radar alert system when the war erupted. The Corps was initiated in 1940 and close to 30,000 Canadians volunteered their services. Community leaders, such as politicians, chiefs of police, labour leaders and school principals, led the promotion and recruiting. People who were already in uniform, including police and firefighters, were automatically enrolled.

Many areas across our vast land were vulnerable to enemy attack, including Halifax Harbour, the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the Hudson Bay area, the strategic canal locks at Sault Ste. Marie and the extensive B.C. coastline. As producer Cliff Chadderton, Normandy veteran and longtime Chief Executive Officer of the War Amps, stated: "Twenty-three ships were sunk in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and an Allied vessel was torpedoed a mere 15 miles from Halifax Harbour. For those who think that

Canada was not in danger, just consider that again."

Interviews with Allan Coggon, who was a flight lieutenant in the RCAF, former observers, citizens and RCAF personnel were combined in the video with archival images to convey those anxious years when the war came very close to home. The observers also helped in guiding friendly aircraft that were in trouble to safely and, if they crashed, rescuing the crews. Doug Betts of Wentworth, Nova Scotia, was typical of teenagers who were fascinated with aircraft. He saw his service in the Corps as a dream come true. While on duty, he felt "as much a part of the air force as the next guy."

Observers trained in aircraft identification at air force stations closest to them. All were given a set of instructions to follow, including a kit with a direction indicator. They were required to record everything they saw or heard. This would include the code name of their observation post, the magnetic direction, the time of the sighting, distance of planes from the observation post, the number and altitude of planes, the number of aircraft, whether they were monoplane or biplane, and the number of engines. Special reporting would be made for anything unusual, such as proximity to a submarine or a crash site. Telephone party lines were used at the time but local operators gave top priority to a call from an observer. In fact, once people became accustomed to the system, all of the families living on a certain road would volunteer for duty on a certain day of the week. Students would be discharged early from school when they were scheduled for duty. Information was also transmitted by telegraph or wireless. RCAF personnel would receive the reports in an operations room or sub-filter station and send them to a main filter centre, where the precise location would be determined.

Allan Coggon noted the filter centres were set up along the same principles of those in the Battle of Britain. It was an operation where nothing could be left to chance. One observer recalled the RCAF sending Hudson bombers to check out a report of potential submarines in the

Gulf of St. Lawrence. They found it was a dead tree trunk with a branch sticking up like a periscope. On another occasion, an unusual aircraft was suspected to be a potential Blohm and Voss reconnaissance flying boat. It turned out to be a Canso, but from a certain angle it looked like the German aircraft. As it turned out, some of the most valuable contributions of the ADC involved saving the lives of Allied crewmen. Mrs. D.M. Aitken, an observer on watch, focused her binoculars on an Anson flying at low altitude. To her horror, the aircraft banked, then crashed in the town of Port Alice, B.C. After she gave an instantaneous report to ADC headquarters, ADC observers quickly responded, risking their lives attempting to save the crew members from being burned to death in the wreckage. As the war progressed, the enemy threat came not from the air, but from the sea. The most effective observers beyond our shores were fishermen, who were considered already trained. Sometimes they would go 90 miles offshore, and they might stay overnight at sea depending on the success of their catches. They were capable of detecting the sound and shape of vessels, including in adverse conditions such as fog and rain squalls. While at sea, they developed signals by exposing hatches on their vessels. At night, they would shine a light upward from the hatch, and aircraft could spot these lights when they flew over on patrol.

In the early spring of 1945, crewmen of Hitler's Navy came ashore at Nova Scotia's Sable Island --- a lonely, windswept place in the North Atlantic. The young lighthouse keeper in charge that night watched in disbelief as an officer of the German submarine approached in the darkness in full uniform, followed by three armed submariners. Not a word was spoken. The officer examined his logbook while the others searched the lighthouse, not waking the two lightkeepers asleep upstairs. Then they left. The duty lighthouse keeper, who was only 18, was shaking when he told his friends about the incident. They refused to believe his story until he took them the next day to the shore, where he showed them the marks left by the German dinghy when it was dragged across the sand.

The Germans were desperate for weather information that could affect Allied bomber flights. They went to great efforts to develop weather stations that could be operated remotely for months. They had one in Iceland and one at the northern tip of Quebec, on the Atlantic side. The remains of that station are at the Canadian War Museum.



Gulf of St. Lawrence map Map data © Department of Natural Resources Canada. All rights reserved.

Allied convoys that sailed the Atlantic from Quebec with troops and cargo would take the Strait of Belle Isle, between Newfoundland and Labrador. It provided a shorter route south of Greenland and Iceland or perhaps north to Russia. The Germans caught on quickly and the U-boats went into action beginning in the summer of 1942. More than 300 sailors from the RCN and the Merchant Navy were lost among the 23 ships that went down in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The closest attack came within 13 kilometres from the Gaspé Peninsula. Canada was forced to close the Gulf to merchant traffic and the U-boats moved to other waters. They returned in 1944 when the Gulf reopened to trans-Atlantic vessels. Strict measures were imposed on the entire Gaspé Peninsula to prevent the enemy from detecting light sources which would allow German submarines to navigate Canadian waters. Homeowners could not have lights on unless they drew the window shades first. The upper part of car headlights had to be blacked out with painted black half-circle. Hundreds of miles of new telephone lines were installed across the Gaspé and more volunteers were recruited as the war came

dangerously close to home.

On the night of Nov. 8, 1942, Nazi spy Werner Janowski was delivered by submarine to the south coast of the Gaspé. He kept his radio equipment with him. He was trudging along in the morning when he encountered a man returning from a job. Janowski told him he wanted to go to the hotel in New Carlisle. Some of the family members who owned the hotel were ADC observers and they were immediately suspicious of the stranger. He stayed a few days, then bought a train ticket to Montreal. The father, who had been a seaman, noticed the smell of diesel engines on the stranger, a dank odour which was common to submariners. Right after Janowski left for the train station they went to his room and they found various personal items including matches and cigarettes that were from the Axis side. When police arrested Janowski, they found a radio transmitter, a gun and other suspicious items in his valise. Janowski confessed and became a double agent.

The ADC story had surprising aspects. For example, the Hudson's Bay Company was heavily involved in ADC information gathering. With its fur trading posts, the company had the only organized radio communication system in the remote North that could flash news of enemy planes or vessels to the government. Fur traders, Inuit hunters, company personnel, and government radio operators were all active observers. In 1942, when German air power was at its peak, the United States was concerned about protecting the shipment of iron ore for the steel industry from the upper peninsula of Michigan through the canal locks at Sault Ste. Marie. If that supply was cut off, the production of munitions would have been severely compromised. Many people don't realize that the ADC was very active at Sault Ste. Marie. It was an international effort, as U.S. National Guard troops were sent to man defences at the Sault. Huge barrage balloons and anti-aircraft guns with searchlights were set up, barracks were established at the locks and throughout the city, air raid siren and blackout exercises were conducted regularly, and

security was exceptionally tight.

On June 20, 1942, a Japanese sub surfaced two miles off the coast of Vancouver Island. It shelled the lighthouse and wireless station at Estevan Point near Tofino. One of these shell fragments is on display at the Maritime Museum of British Columbia. Although no damage was done, ADC members were on alert. Neil Macdougall was 15 at the time. Building model airplanes was the favourite hobby of this aviation fan, who was also teaching aircraft recognition in the army cadets. He became a chief observer in his hometown of Abbotsford, B.C., and began recruiting volunteers. In fact, his first recruit was his mother. The family home became ADC headquarters for the area. Neil rode his bicycle from house to house, signing up volunteers. He used diagrams on a poster to teach people to identify Japanese and Allied aircraft, and assigned each observer a time slot of when to be on duty. After that, the observers were on their own. ADC observers monitored the coast from Alaska to Washington and also the strategic Fraser Valley. It was a main air route to the East and also provided a potential backdoor way of attacking American cities such as Seattle and Portland. Observers looked for suspicious aircraft, ships, and spies and they became very proficient in identification skills. Most of them were 20 or 30 years older than Neil, some were 40 years older. The observers included a retired army captain from World War I, five or six housewives who reported from their homes, a service station owner, and others. Neil described the dedicated housewives as by far the most effective. There weren't enough air force fighters to maintain continuous patrols along B.C.'s coastline, so there was a heavy reliance on the ADC for early warning and tracking. The newly formed Pacific Coast Militia Rangers --- a talented, gung-ho group of hunters, miners, woodsmen and other forestry workers --- assisted them. They knew of every bridge and trail and could readily blow them up if they ever had to face the Japanese.

Lacking a long-range bomber, Japan created an unusual, inexpensive alternative in

1944: the balloon bomb. Hydrogen balloons, with incendiary bombs attached, were released with easterly winds to float 5,000 miles across the Pacific to North America. The balloons could maintain an altitude of 28,000 to 32,000 feet, making use of a strong current of winter air that later became known as the jetstream. Although their potential for destruction and fires was large, the bombs caused little damage. Some came down in the interior forests of B.C. and the U.S. northwestern states, as far east as Manitoba and even Michigan. In the U.S., six lives were tragically lost on May 5, 1945, when a pregnant woman, Elsy Mitchell, and five children found a balloon bomb on a picnic in the woods in Oregon. The weapon exploded when they approached it. A few balloons set minor fires, but they didn't do any real damage. The ADC was disbanded toward the end of the war when the action in the Pacific moved closer to Japan and the advancement of radar along the coast made observers unnecessary. Canada could indeed be thankful for the essential contribution to the country's defences by the devoted volunteers of the ADC. The observers received a badge in late 1943 or early 1944, and they wore it with great pride. Nonetheless, the ADC has been overlooked and the video certainly provided overdue recognition of its service to the country.

Chapter President George Topple then introduced none other than the aforementioned Neil Macdougall from the audience. A longtime member of the CAHS, #169, Neil graduated from the University of British Columbia in chemical engineering. He is a well-known, prolific aviation writer, who has contributed to leading aviation magazines for many years. Neil has been a pilot since 1964, has flown 300 different types of aircraft in more than 20 countries, and has piloted a Cessna 182 for the U.S. Civil Air Patrol in Texas during the winter months for several years. Neil answered questions and reminisced about his time in the ADC. He recalled seeing Japanese balloons on two occasions and attempts by RCAF Kittyhawks to intercept the high-flying, strange little weapons as best they could. The aircraft

that he observed were overwhelmingly Canadian but he saw the occasional C-54 and P-38 Lightning on a rare occasion. At times the ADC would report low-flying aircraft. One memorable incident occurred at Abbotsford, which is situated in a deep ravine maybe 300 feet deep. Neil heard a howling sound coming from the centre of the city. He dashed out onto the front lawn to watch five Lysanders pull up out of the ravine and fly over the main highway. Bob Winson presented a gift to Neil on behalf of the Chapter for his insight into the ADC.



Sec.-Treas. Bob Winson thanking Neil with Chapter President Dr. Topple looking on.

Photo - Neil McGavock

Jim Trautman, who spoke to the Chapter last December about the 40th anniversary of the first Pan Am Boeing 747 trans-Atlantic flight, said the Pan Am Historical Foundation and Pan American employees will spend a week in San Francisco this month commemorating the 75th anniversary of the first China Clipper trans-Pacific flight, with Fred Noonan as the navigator. He has also learned, from a former Pan Am stewardess who is co-owner of a production company, that a pilot series on Pan American, starting in the mid-1960s, has been sold to ABC TV. The production company and Sony now own the rights to the Pan Am name, brand, logo, etc. If the pilot series picks up, they hope to produce flashback aviation stories going back to the 1920s, 1930s and Vietnam.

Brian Munro noted that the fuselage of

the ex-RCAF Canso A 9825 which had been at Harold Carlaw's Memorial Military Museum at Campbellford for many years, was shipped to the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum recently. Brian happened to see the prized commodity as it was being trucked along the Don Valley Parkway to Hamilton. 9825 has a complete nose turret, which will be installed on the CWHM's existing Canso.



Bill Wheeler with Chapter President Dr. George Topple at Aero Club of Buffalo 100th Anniversary Celebrations

Photo - R. Winson

Bill Wheeler named to Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame

A round of applause erupted when George Topple made the special announcement that Bill Wheeler, one of the original founding members of the CAHS (No. 5) in 1962, longtime editor of the *CAHS Journal*, a past president of the CAHS, and member of the Toronto Chapter has been named to Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame.

This exceptional and richly deserved honour originated with a recommendation that George, Bob Winson, and Howard Malone made earlier this year to the Nominations Review Committee of the Hall, based in Wetaskiwin, Alberta. The application noted that Bill, over a period of 45 years, elevated a simple newsletter into a world-class historical journal.

An excellent artist and educator, Bill edited and published a vast range of material covering the history of aviation, including previously unpublished photos from both private and government collections. He gave preference to Canadian content, including first-hand accounts of those who created Canadian aviation history as well as thoroughly researched articles by aviation historians.

In addition to being a dedicated and talented aviation historian, recognized internationally, Bill is a gentleman of the first order. Anyone who has contributed to the *Journal*, or asked Bill for information, has always found it a pleasure to work with him. Bill joined several members of the Toronto Chapter who attended the Aero Club of Buffalo's 100th Anniversary Celebration on Oct. 14 and it was fitting that he was publicly recognized on that occasion for his Hall of Fame citation. Bill was particularly honoured by the invitation to sit at Aero Club President Stanley A. Nowak's table.

Bill, a graduate of the Ontario College of Art, has published numerous publications in addition to the *Journal*. These include *Images of Flight: A Canadian Aviation Art Portfolio*, 1992; *Skippers of the Sky: The Early Years of Bush Flying*, 2000; *Flying Under Fire: Canadian Fliers Recall the Second World War*, 2001; *Flying Under Fire Volume Two: More Aviation Tales from the Second World War*, 2003; and the *Flypast Special Anniversary Edition*, celebrating a Century of Powered Flight in Canada, 2009.

Congratulations, Bill!

We'll let Bill tell about his interest in aviation in his own words:

"Every kid who grew up in the thirties, the era of record-breaking and distance flights and of Don Winslow and Tailspin Tommy comics and "big-little" books was to some extent interested in aeroplanes. From where I lived in Port Arthur it wasn't that far to the waterfront and the mouth of McVicar's Creek, where a red Stinson SR-9 Reliant was moored. Occasionally this a/c would fly over our house

and I was impressed by its distinctive wing shape. I tried to carve one from orange crate wood. Ever since, the Reliant has been one of my favourite a/c. A few years ago I got to know Bert Phillips, who was the mechanic on that Reliant. Somewhere I have a picture of Bert standing on the spreader bar in front of the engine.

During the war my buddies and I would listen for aeroplanes and count the Can Car product we saw --- Helldivers and Hurricanes. As well, No.2 EFTS operated at the Fort William airport. When my chum's dad had saved up enough gas rationing coupons to go for a Sunday drive, we would visit the airport and park by the fence to watch the yellow Tiger Moths. They seemed to be everywhere, landing surprisingly close to the hangars and bouncing. I was amazed that you could treat an aeroplane like that --- and that they didn't collide.

Later, when I got my bike, we would ride down to the Current River seaplane base to look at Lands and Forests Norseman. I have a picture of myself standing on one of the floats wearing my "Sinatra" jacket. A few years later, I would work a couple of summers at the shipyards south of the base. One lunch hour, we saw a Fairchild Husky, being tested by Ontario Lands and Forests, taxi out. Apparently they liked it, but decided to buy Beavers and Otters instead. About that time, a friend and I paid for an hour's joy ride with Orville Weiben in a Cessna 182. We flew out of the Fort William airport, around the Mountain and down the lakeshore to Current River and back. This was the route that Shorty Hatton had flown when production testing those Hurricanes and Helldivers we watched as youngsters.

Such was my introduction to flying in Port Arthur. I didn't get to fly much in Toronto, although my father-in-law did spring for a Viscount ride from Malton to Crumlin to visit them. Pat and I also took a Viscount ride and later a Vanguard to Thunder Bay. In each case I wrangled a visit to the flight deck. When I was illustrating, I did quite a bit of work for the old *Toronto Star Weekly* including most of their illustrating of aircraft and ships. I also

illustrated a boy's book on WW I flying for MacMillan's *Knights of the Air*, which went through about eight printings in at least two editions, making it a bestseller. I was also going to do one on WW II but the first author copped out and the second, Jack Harris, who wrote *Knights*, died. Jack had flown Stirlings and had been shot down. He spent four years "in the bag."

After we launched the CAHS, I became friends with Charlie Catalano, who would later become the Toronto Chapter president, a post he filled for many years. Charlie owned a succession of a/c, including an Aeronca Chief. I went up many times with him, out of Buttonville and later out of Markham. Sometimes he let me fly, but this didn't work well --- the Chief was too tight a fit for me. He also took me up in a Champ and let me fly that as well. I've been up with quite a few friends who have let me take the controls, including Doug Anderson in his Reliant and Clark Seaborn in his Waco. The Reliant seemed a very stable aeroplane compared to the Waco. It seemed that you had to turn the Waco a long way and hold it there before anything much happened.

My early history of the CAHS picks up there... Suffice to say I was often the catalyst in many events. For instance, I lined up Doc Oaks, Sam Tomlinson, Jack Dillon, Jock Jarvis and quite a few other Chapter speakers. Getting Doc Oaks as a speaker gave us a lot of credibility as a very new group. Although I didn't say it, the *Journal* was always a labour of love, as Ray Lank once commented. Amen."

