

December 2, 2017 Meeting



Speaker Andrea Baston
Photo Credit - Martin Keenan

Topic: “Exile Air” World War II’s “Little Norway” in Toronto and Muskoka

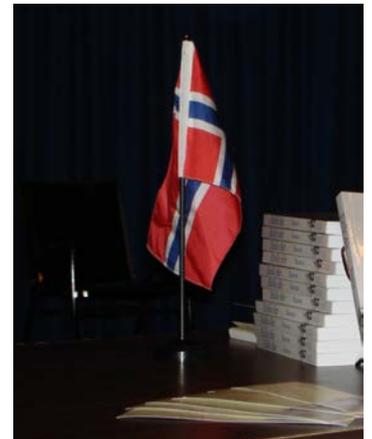
Speaker: Andrea Baston

Reporter: Gord McNulty

Chapter President Sheldon Benner welcomed members and guests to our annual Christmas Gift Exchange, featuring an excellent presentation on an inspiring saga. Bob Winson introduced Andrea Baston, who grew up in Gravenhurst, ON. A lawyer, she obtained a B.A. (Hons.) in English Literature from York University and an L.L.B. from the University of Ottawa. Andrea practised law with Ontario’s Ministry of the Attorney General in Toronto until retirement, after which she began writing about Muskoka’s local history. Her book *Curing Tuberculosis in Muskoka: Canada’s First Sanatoria* was

published in 2013. Since then, she authored *Exile Air*, the fascinating story of how Canada served as a refuge for the Royal Norwegian Air Force first at “Little Norway” in Toronto and then at Muskoka Airport near Gravenhurst during the Second World War.

Andrea brought along several copies of her fine book, published in 2017 by Old Stone Books Ltd. (oldstonebooks.com). The 240-page softcover is well researched, well written and has many good photos. Contact Old Stone Books Ltd. at T. (647) 965-5397 or E. info@oldstonebooks.com. Andrea credited Candis Jones, Gravenhurst teacher and artist, for providing photos and photographic editing.



Book Signing Table
Photo Credit - Martin Keenan



German invasion routes into Norway.
Note in the insert Oscarsborg Fortress
Photo Courtesy - Andrea Baston

Andrea began by tracing the situation in Norway after the Second World War erupted. Hitler attacked Norway on April 9, 1940. Norway’s armed forces were poorly equipped, partly due to a pacifist attitude common across Europe after World War I. Norway lacked a separate air force. Instead, the army and navy each had an airborne division called an air service. Most of the aircraft were antiques by the standards of the day, such as 45 Fokker C.V biplanes flown by the Army Air Service. One fighter squadron had 10 Gloster Gladiator biplanes. A handful of these aircraft battled German aircraft in dogfights, but they were no match for the Luftwaffe. As a German flotilla approached Oslofjord, the fortress’s guns and torpedoes sank the brand-new German heavy cruiser Blucher. The sinking delayed the capture of Oslo, allowing the king, government members and protectors of the treasury to escape before all of the targeted Norwegian cities were in German hands.



Vidkun Quisling C. 1919

That evening, a Norwegian fascist, Vidkun Quisling, declared that the Nazi-style National Unity Party was Norway's new government and he was the new prime minister. Over the years, Quisling's name would become synonymous with the word "traitor." Norwegian and Allied forces were driven north by the better-equipped Germany army and Luftwaffe. The Allies redeployed all their troops in France. King Haakon and government members sailed to Britain, where they formed a government in exile. On June 10, Norway surrendered to Germany. King Haakon VII brought the merchant marine, third-largest in the world, with him and put it at the Allies' disposal. The merchant marine made a huge contribution to the Allied war effort, with many ships sailing from Halifax. However, the cost was great. During the war, the Norwegian merchant marine lost 570 vessels and 4,000 seamen.

Norway's navy and army were mainly based in the U.K. under British command. It wasn't easy to find a new home for Norway's air services. The RAF needed all U.K. airfields for its own purposes. Canada became a likely choice for several reasons. U.K. aircrew were already in Canada under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan and Norwegian pilots were able to take BCATP courses in advanced flying too. Norwegian officials travelled to Toronto to inspect the Island Airport as a possible location for an air training centre. In September, 1940, Norway and the Toronto Harbour Commissioners agreed to allow Norway to use the airport. The Commissioners made land available on the mainland, just west of Bathurst Street, rent-free, where the Norwegians could build a training camp. It was built on 6.7 acres, with Maple Leaf Stadium to the north. Barracks and messes, a hospital, a ground school, a gymnasium, offices, other buildings and a parade ground were constructed.



Vidkun Quisling with German officers

Toronto welcomed the Norwegians with open arms. Invitations to parties and dances and dinners in private homes poured in. The Royal York was a favourite place for off-duty airmen, as was the bar at the Piccadilly Hotel on King Street West. Servicemen from all forces gathered in canteens staffed by women volunteers. Performers entertained with free shows on Sundays and dances were held twice a week. Knitters produced socks, mittens and sweaters for the airmen. One knitter, Rita (Abel) Hiorth, told Andrea the group mended boxes and boxes of socks, "some with holes as big as oranges." Another knitter was Janna Ullmann, mother of actress Liv Ullmann. Liv's father, Erik, was an aircraft engineer. The family had lived in Tokyo before the war but moved to Toronto when Erik joined the air service. Liv was two years old at the time and would spend the next four years with her family. Unfortunately, Erik was seriously injured when he walked into a spinning aircraft propeller. He was reassigned to New York City, but died of a brain tumour in 1945. Liv Ullmann later said she was in Toronto "during the worst and the best times of my life." More than 10 per cent of the airmen who trained at Little Norway would marry Canadian women.



Aerial view of Little Norway just south of Maple Leaf Stadium and RCAF planes at the Toronto Island Airport
Photo Courtesy - Andrea Baston

Men came to Toronto from everywhere to join the Air Service. Arne Skretteberg had been at sea on a whaling ship when the Germans invaded Norway. The ship arrived in Lunenburg shortly after April 9. Arne could have stayed with the merchant marine, but joined the Norwegian Army Air Service. Sgt. Skretteberg, a gifted athlete, became Little Norway's physical training instructor. The team competed against civilian and military teams in charity soccer games, track and field meets and ski jumping contests. Harald Olafson had been a civil engineer in Argentina when Norway was invaded. He was a second lieutenant in the Air Service Reserve when he was ordered to report for duty ASAP. Olafson boarded a steamer in Glasgow as part of a 100-

ship convoy to North America. The Luftwaffe attacked the convoy but luckily, no serious damage was done. Harald arrived in Montreal around July 2, 1940 and became chief flight instructor at Little Norway.

Many recruits risked their lives just to get from Norway to Toronto via escape routes called either the "Hard Way" and the "Easy Way." Refugees who escaped the hard way sailed in small boats across the treacherous North Sea to Britain. If they were lucky, it would take them two or three days to reach the Shetland Islands. Many escapees died on these journeys, killed by mines, enemy vessels or drowning. The easy way involved crossing the long mountainous border between Norway and Sweden. If Swedish police caught someone crossing illegally, they would be arrested and taken to a refugee camp. German and Norwegian police patrolled Norway's side of the border and escapees could be shot. Local Norwegians, called "border pilots," often helped people escape to Sweden. Once in Sweden, escapees then travelled half-way around the world to get to Canada, a journey that could take six months or more. In Norway, the Norwegian Resistance had formed. British-trained secret agents were committing acts of sabotage. Hitler, deciding the country needed a strongman, put Josef Terboven, reputed to be ruthless, in charge. The war brought food shortages and a climate of repression and fear. Nearly half the Jewish population was deported to Germany's concentration camps.

In those early days, the Army Air Service used eight Fairchild PT-19 open cockpit aircraft as basic trainers. The Navy Air Service began with two Stinson Reliant seaplanes. Before the war, Norway had ordered aircraft from the U.S. that hadn't been delivered by April 9, 1940. These aircraft included Douglas 8A-5 attack bombers, Curtiss P-36 Hawks, and Northrop N-3PB Nomad scout and bombing seaplanes. Late in 1941, Fleet Aircraft in Fort Erie began production



Little Norway Toronto Aircraft L-R - Curtiss P-36 - Douglas DB8A-5 - Fairchild PT-26 - *Photo Credit - forsvretsmuseer.no*



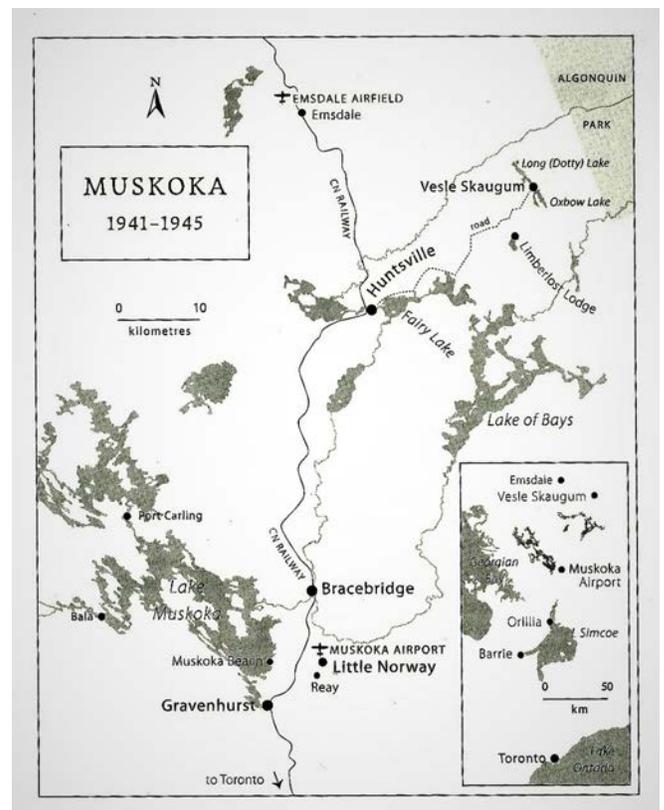
The Spirit of Little Norway the first PT-26 purchased by the Little Norway Camp members - Photo Courtesy - Andrea Baston

of an enclosed cockpit version of the PT-19, the PT-26 Cornell, with many Cornells arriving at Little Norway. Every day, Toronto residents heard aircraft flying overhead. Some pilots were thrilled to fly low over the city. Chief Flight Instructor Olafson was concerned about overconfidence. Little Norway's airmen found ways to help the government in exile. For Norway's Constitution Day, May 17, 1941, all members of Little Norway pledged a portion of their pay towards a Spirit of Little Norway Fund. It was used to purchase three Cornells, named Spirit of Little Norway I, II, and III. In addition, other trainers were donated by Nordic organizations in the U.S. and South America. The Island Airport was becoming

crowded, so the Norwegian Army Air Service moved its elementary flying training school to Emsdale Airport, about 28 kilometres north of Huntsville, in the summer of 1941. Emsdale was used for only a year, however, it had limited space and was too far from Little Norway.

In 1941, the Army and the Navy Air Services were merged into one body known as the Royal Norwegian Air Force. LCol Ole Reistad took over as Little Norway's commanding officer. A former Olympic athlete, he was greatly respected by those under his command. Concerned about airmen spending so much spare time in Toronto's bars and saloons, he preferred they enjoy nature, ski, hike and swim. Reistad found a solution in an old fur trading post 25 kilometres northeast of Huntsville. In the spring of 1941, the Norwegians bought the land and named it "Vesle Skaugum," in honour of the Crown Prince's home in Oslo. "Vesle" means little. A new wing of the lodge was built for dining, sleeping and recreation. To save money, construction timber came from the nearby woods. To save time, logs were left in their natural rounded shape rather than being flattened.

Little Norway's first fatalities occurred in 1941. By the time Vesle Skaugum opened, 11 airmen had been killed. The most famous accident occurred on June 20, 1941. A passenger ferry, the Sam McBride, was sailing across Toronto Harbour toward Centre Island. A Northrop Nomad seaplane took off about a half-kilometre away, heading straight for the ferry. At the last minute, it zoomed up, hitting the upper level of the ferry and slicing off the roof of a pilot house. It crashed into the harbour and sank. Both pilots died. Luckily, no one on the ferry was hurt. At the inquest, the coroner told the jury RCAF plane crashes were



Little Norway facilities in Muskoka 1941 - 1945
Photo Courtesy - Andrea Baston



Opening ceremonies of Muskoka Aerodrome May 4, 1942

Photo Courtesy - Sawdust City

becoming quite frequent. He said it would be a miracle if one of these inexperienced pilots didn't crash into a Toronto street. Clearly, Little Norway needed to leave the city. Reistad had visited Muskoka Airport and decided it would be good for a new home. Muskoka Airport had been built by the federal government as a make-work project during the Depression. As an emergency landing field, part of the Trans-Canada Airway System, it had opened in 1936. Reistad thought it would be much safer than Toronto Island, as it didn't have much air traffic and was far from the city's temptations and diversions.

Early in 1942, the Norwegians leased Muskoka Airport from the federal government for the duration of the war. They also bought an adjacent farm, where they built a camp. A lovely two-storey building was constructed to house an airmen's mess, kitchen and sleeping quarters. Whole logs taken from trees growing on the site were used in the construction, as happened with Vesle Skaugum. Opening ceremonies took place on May 4, 1942. Crown Prince Olav and Crown Princess Martha stopped in Gravenhurst on their way to the camp. They received a rousing ovation from a crowd of 2,000 people. The camp ceremonies were attended by 200 people, dignitaries and guests. RCAF and RCAF flags were raised and Cornells flew overhead. A two-year-old barn was remodeled to create a barracks for 80 men. There was also a gymnasium, guard house, ground school, Link Trainer building, workshops, garages and offices, as well as a swimming pool. Little Norway had guard dogs and sled dogs, but the most remarkable animals were at least three orphaned bear cubs raised by the RCAF. A black bear cub named "Funny" wrestled with the men in the evenings and loved to drink beer and Coca-Cola. Olafson once returned to find Funny sleeping in his bed, put there by mischievous recruits. When the war ended, Reistad brought the sled dogs and three bears to new homes in Norway.

Reistad wasn't altogether correct in his belief that moving Little Norway to Muskoka would remove the airmen from Toronto's temptations. The airmen's girlfriends took a train from Toronto to Gravenhurst every Friday night to visit their boyfriends. It was dubbed the "Passion Train." The Norwegians dated local women, meeting them at places like Vincent's Restaurant on Gravenhurst's main street. The relationship between Gravenhurst citizens and Little Norway was superb. Some local people worked at the camp in various roles.



Ground School at Muskoka - *Photo Courtesy - Sawdust City*

One fatal accident occurred at Little Norway in Muskoka. Two pilots died on August 26, 1944, when their Cornell crashed into a swampy area near the camp after a wing broke off during aerobatics. Gravenhurst also housed a German prisoner-of-war camp, known as Internment Camp 20 and designated for German officers. While the presence of Nazi soldiers in Gravenhurst irritated the Norwegians, Reistad said it boosted their morale because they could see their enemy in prison behind barbed wire. A Norwegian Squadron left Norway for active duty overseas in April, 1941. Naval Squadron 330, based in Iceland, operated under the RAF Coastal Command and flew reconnaissance and convoy escort in the Arctic. Also in 1941, a second unit composed of Army Air Service personnel, left for England. Squadron 331 flew fighters to escort Allied bombers. Aircrew regularly left Little Norway for duty overseas. In November 1941 another group of Army Air Service personnel headed to England to join a second Norwegian fighter squadron, No. 332. Both 331 and 332 squadrons performed well during the Dieppe Raid in 1942, downing 15 per cent of enemy planes destroyed. In 1943, the RAF named No. 331 its top-scoring Allied fighter squadron, while 332 came third. At first, the squadrons flew older model Spitfires that were often downed by Luftwaffe fighters that could fly at higher altitudes. But the arrival of more powerful, higher climbing and faster moving Spitfire Mark IXs enabled the RAF to more than meet the Luftwaffe challenge.



*Fairchild PT-26s at Little Norway Muskoka Airport WWII
Photo Credit - forsvretsmuseer.no*

The RAF established a new Norwegian naval squadron, No. 333, in 1943. It had two flights: A Flight with Catalinas, and B Flight with Mosquitos. Both flew U-boat patrols. A Flight also flew secret missions, dropping spies and supplies behind enemy lines. B Flight became Squadron 334 in 1945. Rolf Hauge, who now lives in Collingwood, trained at Little Norway as a flight engineer and

air gunner. He served in 333 A Flight. In 1944, Rolf was a gunner on a Catalina returning from a patrol over the Arctic Ocean. Unknown to Rolf, and the others in his crew, an RCAF 162 Squadron Canso had battled a German U-boat. Both the Canso and the U-boat were taking fire and sinking. The eight-man crew of the Canso was led by FLt David Hornell, of Toronto. They escaped to a life raft, with room for only four. The desperate men, taking turns on the raft, managed to catch the attention of Hauge's Catalina on their third flare. Hauge spotted the flare. For the next 15 hours, the Catalina flew over the raft as it was too rough to land. By the time a rescue boat arrived, Hornell's men had been in the raft for 21 hours. Hornell had given his place on the raft to another man. He died on the rescue ship and was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously. If Hauge had not spotted the flare, and the Catalina had not spent 15 hours directing the rescue, all eight members of Hornell's crew would likely have died.

This event is also described in Flypast Volume 40 No. 8 May 2006 p. 2 viewable on www.torontoaviationhistory.com/newsletters

Little Norway graduates served in other roles in the RAF, including Bomber Command, as well as Norwegian squadrons. On D-Day, June 6, 1944, Squadrons 331 and 332 were assigned to protect the beaches while Allied troops landed. They didn't meet any resistance on June 6, but suffered losses as the invasion proceeded. Norwegian squadrons flying from French airfields participated in liberating Belgium and the Netherlands. In 1944, the RCAF transferred all personnel to England to prepare to return to Norway after its liberation. However, before the



Formation flying practice - *Photo Courtesy - Sawdust City*

RCAF left, they held a special ceremony to say farewell to Canada. On Feb. 17, 1945, more than 1,000 guests gathered at the Little Norway hangar for the official closing. Guests felt relief that the war was coming to an end, but the day was tinged with sadness at the departure of the Norwegians. Ole Reistad told the crowd Canadians would "forever occupy a special place" in Norwegians' hearts for "the care and support that was given their flying sons on foreign soil in a dark hour." He offered thanks and spoke of the friendship between the two countries that would go stronger. At sunset, the RCAF and RCAF flags were lowered. Four days later, fire broke out in the officers' mess. Volunteer fire brigades from Gravenhurst and Bracebridge fought the blaze. Unfortunately, that beautiful log building was destroyed. With the unconditional surrender of Germany on May 7, 1945, May 8 was VE Day or Liberation Day as Norway called it. On that day, Josef Terboven blew himself up with dynamite. Vidkun Quisling was arrested and convicted of high treason, murder and other offences and executed by firing squad on Oct. 24, 1945.

RCAF airmen returned to Norway in May and June in 1945. Many Canadian women, married or engaged to them, travelled to Norway to rejoin their partners and begin their new lives. People searched for ways to honour Little Norway. The first commemoration took place in September, 1976, at Toronto's waterfront. A gift from Norway was unveiled --- a 1,360-kilogram granite boulder which sits on three smaller rocks. A message of gratitude to Canada is engraved on top. In 1987, Toronto created the lovely Little Norway Park, in the Harbourfront area, at the site of the first Norwegian training camp. The boulder monument was rededicated and moved to Little Norway Park. Vesle Skaugum was sold to the Toronto Kiwanis Club in June, 1945, for use as a summer camp for children. It's now owned and operated as Olympia Sports Camp. A stone pillar on the site reminds visitors it was once home to the RCAF. The Little Norway property was purchased by the federal government for use as a minimum security prison, Beaver Creek Institution. It opened in 1961 and now serves as a medium and minimum security facility. In 2002, Norwegian WWII training in Canada was designated as of national historical significance. In 2007, the Muskoka Airport terminal was remodelled to include a museum dedicated to Little Norway called the Little Norway Memorial. Further information on the museum can be found on the website www.muskokaairport.com/memorial

During the war, 3,323 personnel trained at Little Norway, nearly 2,000 of whom went overseas to fight the enemy. Some 309 RCAF members died. Canada helped Norway at a very bleak time in its history and Canadians can be proud of that. Our country welcomed the Norwegians in many ways.

We're fortunate that many Norwegian veterans returned to Ontario and settled here, raising families and contributing to our society. Both Norway and Canada have been enriched by mutual friendship, sacrifice and remembrance.

The audience greatly enjoyed Andrea's comprehensive overview. Chapter volunteer, Bob Winson, in thanking Andrea, noted her presentation was especially valuable in providing the Chapter, for the first time, the complete story of Little Norway.



A painting of Norwegian Fighter Squadron Spitfires WWII



Muskoka Museum Sign