

February 2, 2019 CAHS Toronto Chapter Meeting

Topic: Plane Spotting & Aircraft Identification
Speaker: John Bertram, Military Historian,
1st Vice-President, CAHS Toronto Chapter
Reporter: Gord McNulty

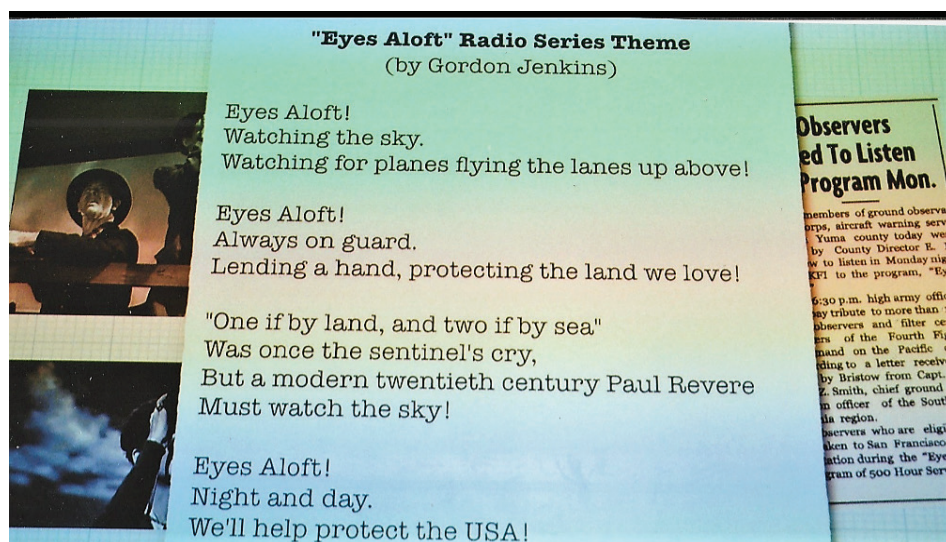
A lively presentation by John Bertram made the Chapter's first meeting of 2019 colourful and informative. It was my pleasure to introduce John, a Toronto-based writer/director who has worked in many facets of film, television and stage for more than four decades. As a freelance director, videographer and photographer he has completed multiple camera and editing assignments for many corporate, educational and arts-related clients. John was the primary guest director, for all of five seasons, on the original CBC/PNS Series Degrassi Junior High/Degrassi High. He directed 13 episodes in total, and edited three.



Speaker John Bertram
Photo - Gord McNulty

As an independent filmmaker, John has created short films (comedic, experimental, and documentary) which received repeated network airings in prime time; awards from several film festivals; distribution to Cineplex theatres and schools throughout Ontario; and screenings organized by L.I.F.T. (the Liaison of Independent Film Makers of Toronto, a co-op) and the Art Gallery of Ontario.

In conjunction with his videographic work, John has amassed considerable experience in digital photo editing and visual design. He's involved in projects exemplified by documentaries called "Plane Crazy!," a high-speed flypast through the uplifting world of Aerosthetics, with frequent stops en route to get to know the many different communities of aircraft and aviation enthusiasts who inhabit it; and "Just One Life," a personal search for the story of one air crew member in the Second World War, a Canadian-born-and-raised great-uncle who spent the summer of 1944 serving aboard B-24 Liberators with the USAAF in Italy. It was a mission from which he sadly would never return, and whose unique story was slowly being lost to time. For each, John has been researching, interviewing, filming and acquiring an extensive archive of visual material. In addition to serving on the Toronto Chapter Executive, he is an active member of the YYZ (Toronto) Airport Watch Group.



He began his presentation with a short wartime USAAF broadcast featuring a rousing, patriotic "Eyes Aloft" theme song, underlining the value of aircraft spotting in helping "protect the U.S.A." The series was broadcast Monday nights on West Coast radio stations, saluting 150,000 volunteer observers and Filter Centre workers who monitored the Pacific Coast round the clock to watch for enemy aircraft. Actor Henry Fonda was

introduced in one segment as "one of the most famous ground observers" in the Aircraft Warning Service. "Two few are doing too much," Fonda, an observer at Redwood, California, told the host. Fonda said he

took the night shift, midnight to 4 a.m. He complained about any observer who wouldn't take the time to file a concise, accurate report of a plane and filed a garbled message instead.

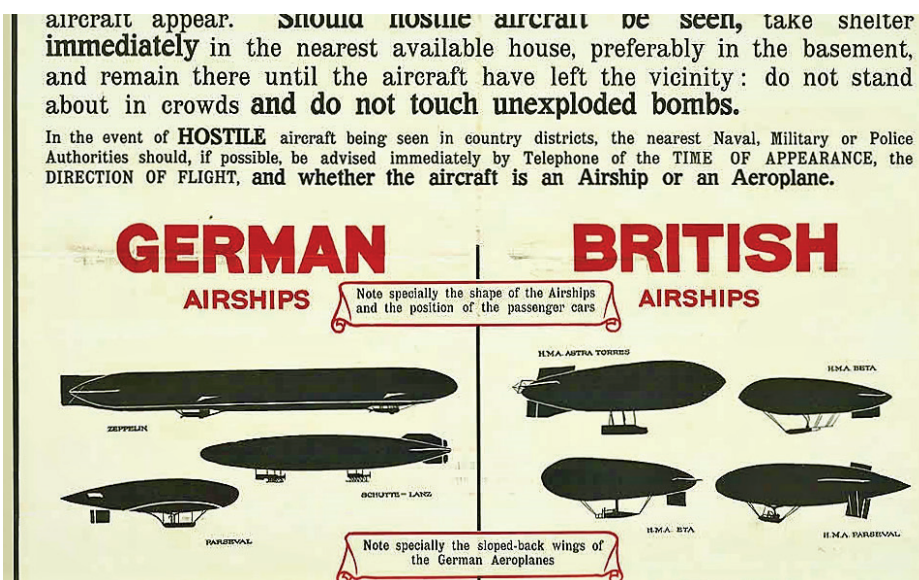
John approaches this ever-changing subject from a cultural, esthetic viewpoint. He's especially intrigued in badges, flash cards, posters, colouring books, etc.

John tends to associate aircraft identification more with military training and plane spotting more with civilian hobbyists.

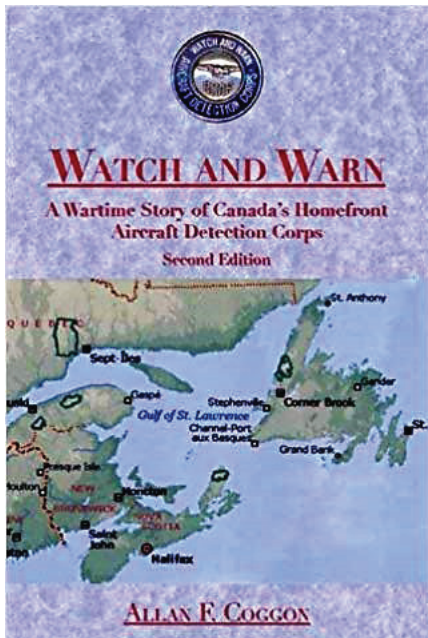
Civil defence spotting is strongly associated with the Second World War, as shown by a Public Warning poster circulated in Britain to identify the silhouettes of German and British combat aircraft. It was the *Flypast* cover

page for this meeting. However, John traced spotting to the First World War, when German airships threatened Britain. Posters traditionally used silhouettes. If hostile aeroplanes or airships were seen, civilians were advised to take shelter in the nearest available house, "do not stand about in crowds" and last but not least, "do not touch unexploded bombs."

First World War field guides or recognition books, both British and German, are still bought, sold and traded. John purchases them on eBay. The *Aircraft of the World* and *Observers Book of Aircraft* series exemplified peacetime handbooks enjoyed by hobbyists for decades. Aircraft recognition handbooks are still being produced today by major publishers, such as Jane's. John found some small pre-World War I colour cards, sponsored by cigarette companies. Moving into the 1940s, Sweet Caporal cigarettes were advertised in collector cards, one aircraft at a time. The price of a card, bought and sold on eBay, depends on its condition. It can range from \$2 to \$10 or \$15. Virtually every country with a stake in aviation is covered in the market.



There was some type of ground observer corps in most countries. All kinds of armbands, buttons, certificates and insignia for participants and volunteers can be traded. True to form, John put his airport watch cap on, complete with some pins. Observers were honored in the covers of magazines from *Chatelaine* to *Life*. John collected vintage ads showing a B-24, the type flown by his great-uncle. Companies that contributed to the war effort in any way promoted their products by saluting observers who learned "to know friend from foe." Some spotter cards were produced as playing cards. As such, card games were exemplified by "Squadron Scramble," the authorized air youth game of the National



Aeronautic Association in the U.S., and “Zoom.” Various creative devices and kits were marketed to aid spotters. Board games, such as Spot a Plane produced in 1942 by Toy Creations Inc., were popular too. Spotters also appeared on the back of vintage cereal boxes, such as Kellogg’s Pep wheat flakes. Colouring books appeared in many forms to encourage the kids to be observers. Magazines, such as the wartime Aircraft Warning Volunteer, appealed to spotting enthusiasts. Manuals for both civil and military aviation were popular and they continued well after the war.

In Canada, close to 30,000 people volunteered as official observers for the Aircraft Detection Corps (ADC), organized and administered by the RCAF during the

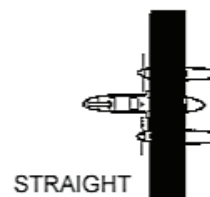
war. Longtime Toronto Chapter member Neil MacDougall, CAHS #169, became a chief observer in his hometown of Abbotsford, B.C., and began recruiting volunteers. Neil, who was much younger than most of the observers, used diagrams on a poster to teach people to identify Japanese and Allied aircraft. He assigned each observer a time slot of when to be on duty. 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 story of the ADC, based on an excellent War Amps documentary, “Watch and Warn,” was presented to the Toronto Chapter in October, 2010. The documentary itself was based on the book, “Watch and Warn” by author Allan F. Coggon. See *Flypast*, Vol. 45, No. 2, for a full report. Neil was in the audience for John’s presentation.

There were different schools of thought as to the best method of teaching observers. John said the British conceived the very analytical WEFT --- wing, engine, fuselage, tail --- system of aircraft identification during the war. The British considered the wings of an aircraft as the leading identifying feature. Posters and information about WEFT can be readily found on the Internet. John was privileged to meet accomplished artist Steve Remington, a high-ranking member of the American Society of Aviation Artists, on a trip to California. Remington, a Korean War veteran who serviced helicopters during his lifelong aviation career, lived in Santa Barbara. He opened Collect Air, an extensive and diversified aviation model store/art gallery/private museum, in 1987. John made an appointment to spend a day with Remington. As John recalled, Remington appeared to have just about

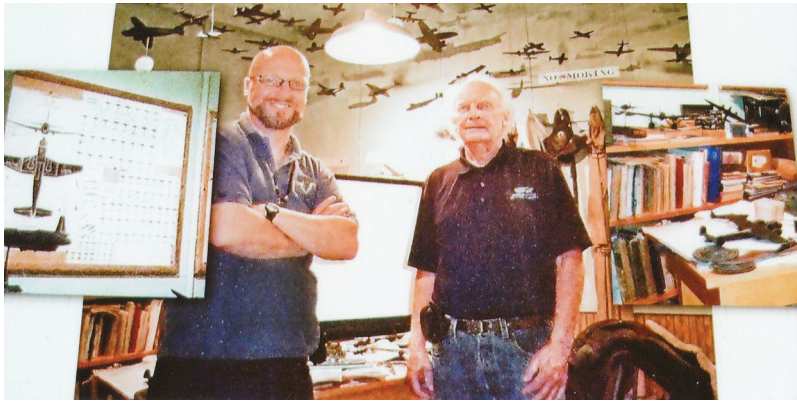
WING POSITIONS



WING SHAPES



every aircraft identification model, every wall chart, every teaching device, and more, that was ever produced. John recorded two hours of video at Collect Air. He was saddened to hear that Remington had died a couple of years ago. "I'm still trying to contact someone to find what became of his collection," John said. "It was very unique and had a lot of educational value. I'm hoping it stayed together."



John and Steve Remington at *Collect Air* in California.

During his California trip, John also enjoyed visits to the Palm Springs Air Museum and the Planes of Fame Air Museum. Displays of playing cards and large posters intrigued him at the Planes of Fame. These posters, in really good condition, sell on eBay for \$50 to \$100. Caricatures of aircraft also played a novel role in identification as artists used exaggeration to emphasize the most distinctive parts of a bomber or fighter. Little poems would accompany each caricature. For the Messerschmitt Bf

109 F, a poem read: "Willy's gone and made another. Something like its elder brother. Wingtips rounded, spinners bigger. Unbraced tailplane ends its figure. 100 F is its name. F for futile, not for fame."

John engaged in an identification quiz of warbirds with the audience. The fun was enjoyed by all. In the 1950s, the Topps Wings series of trading cards were introduced, followed by Jello airplane coins. John had a complete set of Jello coins, along with a booklet describing each of them, for the Toronto Aviation and Airline Collectibles Show in September where CAHS Toronto had a table and display. John recommended a light, nostalgic article about Jello coins, "My Childhood Obsession," by Dave O'Malley of Vintage Wings of Canada (www.vintagewings.ca)

In the 1960s, civil aircraft became more prominent in spotting and identification. Airport watch groups emerged in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal and elsewhere. In fact, airport security managers began to regard spotters as allies who provided an extra set of eyes for unusual activity, rather than a nuisance. Members of the YYZ Airport Watch have enjoyed escorted in-field bus tours at Pearson. On the very first one, they were in a good position for the arrival of the Airbus A380 on August 26, 2016. Other behemoths like the Antonov An-225 and An-124 invariably draw a crowd of spotters at YYZ.

John noted dedicated spotter parks have emerged at several airports. They include Montreal (Jacques-de-Lesseps park), Vancouver (Larry Berg Flightpath Park, with excellent displays), Dallas-Fort Worth (Founders' Plaza), San Francisco (Bayfront Park, which parallels the main double runway), and Washington, DC (a park just north of the main runway at Reagan National Airport).

Of course, well-known Maho Beach in St. Maarten is probably the most famous of them all. John enjoyed a visit to Maho during a cruise ship vacation. Most of the international airliners tend to arrive later in the day. John observed that while "you're really not that much closer to the airliners than you would be on Airport Road," the idea of watching jetliners in close proximity from a sandy beach on a sunny tropical day is special. John packed a lot of information into his comprehensive and entertaining overview. It reflected considerable research on his part. He delivered it with his customary flair and passion. I presented John with a gift in appreciation on behalf of Toronto Chapter Executive, members and guests.