

February 1, 2020 CAHS Toronto Chapter Meeting

Topic: Remembering Russ Bannock

Speaker: Ted Barris

Reporter: Gord McNulty

An excellent turnout of around 50 people, including several new guests introduced by Chapter Director Eric Roscoe, attended what turned into a special meeting in honor of famous aviator Russell (Russ) Bannock. Chapter 1st Vice President John Bertram noted none other than Russ had been scheduled for the meeting. Sadly, Russ passed away on January 4 as noted in the February issue of *Flypast*, Vol. 54/No. 4. At John's suggestion, we kept the focus on Russ's outstanding career. John found an ideal presenter in military historian, prolific author and lecturer Ted Barris, a Chapter member who previously made impressive presentations to the Chapter about the Canadians involved in the Great Escape and the Dambusters Raid. Ted's ability to bring history alive by highlighting personal stories is unrivalled. His latest book, *Rush to Danger: Medics in the Line of Fire*, was inspired by and partly based on the experiences of his father, Alex, during the Second World War.

Ted was honored to thank Russ Bannock. As Ted noted, the attendance of close to 1,000 people at Russ's funeral in Toronto on January 10 showed a remarkable connection between Russ, his church community, his aviation community, and in fact an extraordinary number of communities. Key highlights of Russ's life were covered in the *Flypast*. Rather than attempting "a CV version" of Russ's remarkable life, Ted chose to "dash and dip" across some momentous times. Last fall, Ted learned Russ, CAHS #2491, was about to celebrate his 100th birthday on November 1. Russ's Granite Club curling buddies held a party for him. Over lunch, Russ offered a few stories with Ted and Doug McWhirter, who is active in the club. Russ mesmerized Ted and Doug by creatively zooming over the salt and pepper shakers at the table to describe the action as he recalled his low-level night sortie in a Mosquito at Bourges Avord airfield in France in June, 1944. The intruder operation, code named "Flower," involved Russ and his navigator, Robert Bruce, flying alone to Luftwaffe bases to attack night fighters returning from opposing Allied bombing raids. Around midnight, they attacked a Messerschmitt Bf-110 as it landed. It exploded. Then the entire airfield lit up "like the CNE" as coloured lights zeroed in on the Mosquito from all directions. Russ did a tight 180-degree turn at 100 feet. In fact, he turned hard left so tightly that the Mosquito went into a high-speed stall and flicked over to an equally tight right hand turn. The natural impulse to correct it with aileron would have been fatal so close to the ground. Instead, he just let go and let it unstall itself. Russ chalked up the expert piloting to his extensive experience as a British Commonwealth Air Training Plan instructor.

Ted interviewed many BCATP instructors for his book, *Behind the Glory*. He said they invariably described living "between the quick and the dead in training." It was always tricky for instructors in deciding how long they should let a student make an error, hoping that he'll learn to recover and keep hands off, before they had to take control. The skill Russ displayed at Bourges Avord was a typical example of what Ted called the BCATP dividend.



Speaker - Ted Barris
Courtesy Gusair.com



John Bertram
Courtesy Gusair.com

Russ's story began in the North. In 1937, he boarded the SS Distributor, a steam boat delivering essential goods and passengers along the Mackenzie River. About that time, the bushplane began to overtake the steamer. Russ was a bar steward on the Distributor but he had an engineering background. When he heard about a job for a mining engineer in Yellowknife, NWT, he had to get there quickly --- by bushplane. He boarded legendary pilot Stan McMillan's Fairchild 71 at Fort Smith, NWT, for a flight to Yellowknife. Russ watched McMillan packing the Fairchild and wondered whether there'd be room enough for a passenger. "I thought I was supposed to go on this flight," he said to the pilot. "You are," McMillan said. "Where am I going to sit, then?" McMillan pointed at the freight compartment, with just enough space for a man to lie flat between the pile of freight and the roof of the airplane. "Just climb on top of the load," he said. All Russ could remember of his first plane ride was the cramped space and the rough 90-minute ride to Yellowknife. "The weather was bad, so we flew across Great Slave Lake and never got above a hundred feet. I'll never forget it." But Bannock was smitten by aviation --- albeit from a horizontal position!

Russ acquired his commercial pilot's licence in 1938. He joined Yukon Southern Air Transport, operated by the famous Grant McConachie, and met the challenge of flying over the vast terrain of the Far North. There are very few landmarks to see and it is even more difficult when the water is iced over.

In 1939, Russ became part of the BCATP. At its inception, the plan had just 298 officers, 2,750 airmen, an auxiliary

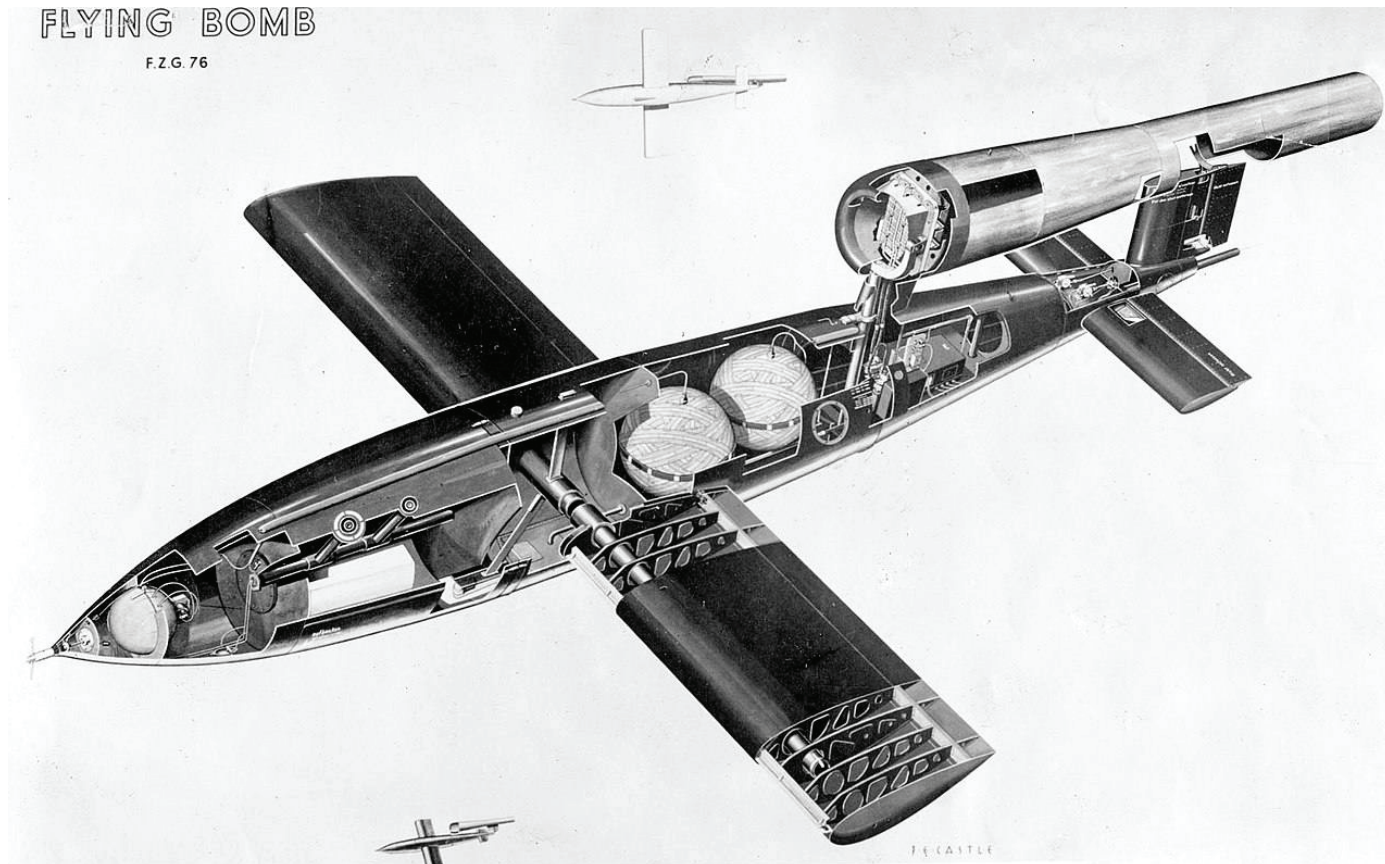
force of 1,013 and only 270 aircraft. At its peak, however, the plan administered 231 schools training pilots, navigators, flight engineers, wireless radio operators, bomb aimers, air gunners, riggers, fitters, and all of the other ground and instrument crew. It involved not only the Commonwealth countries, but also airmen from Norway, Czechoslovakia, Free France, and the United States. Russ received his air force wings and was then assigned as a BCATP instructor. As Ted noted, it was one of the myths that instructors were chosen from the also-rans at the graduating ceremonies. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the 5,000 to 6,000 instructors were the crème de la crème of the BCATP, the men who graduated in the top 10 percentile. They were pivotal as Canada produced 225,000 aircrew in six years. It was our largest wartime expenditure, at \$1¼ billion. Churchill described it as the decisive factor in winning the Second World War.

Despite his initial disappointment at being pulled off the Britain-bound convoy to go overseas, Russ was proud to have been selected an instructor. He realized he had to be a better pilot than the others. Teaching other pilots to be instructors appealed to him. They flew a variety of aircraft including Tiger Moths, Fleets, Harvards, Yales, Ansons and Oxfords. Russ compared the work to "being in a factory. We started at 8 a.m. and finished at 5. You would take a student up for an hour, debrief him, then you were up for a while in another one --- probably six different flights a day." Russ noted about 150 aircraft were operated at the



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Trenton aerodrome, just a large grass field then. It became a skating rink in the winter. There were no radios and no control towers. Control officers, in little huts on a van, flashed green, red and yellow lights at the end of the runway. Russ said it wouldn't be uncommon for 100 aircraft to land between 11:45 and noon and not have a single mishap. It was extraordinary.

Hollywood soon came calling in 1941 with the wartime epic, *Captains of the Clouds*, starring Jimmy Cagney, Dennis Morgan, Alan Hale, Brenda Marshall, and George Tobias. Air Marshal Billy Bishop was featured in a climactic speech to the assembled graduating class. The flying really made the movie, with plenty of excellent air-to-air, ground to air, and air to ground photography. The movie was filmed at Trenton, Uplands, Jarvis, North Bay and elsewhere. Warner Bros. brought two American stunt pilots, Paul Mantz and Frank Clarke, to do the flying. Mantz and Clarke were so impressed with the calibre of the instructors that they bowed out to their expertise. Some of the action scenes showed aircraft with instructors and students taking off in formation and flying in every direction. That would never be done in reality, but Hollywood wanted the drama. The BCATP instructors nonetheless performed an impressive formation takeoff at Trenton. Russ recalled a day when close to 100 aircraft were flying in formation over the aerodrome.

At Uplands in 1943, Russ was really impressed when he saw a demonstration of the versatile new Mosquito by de Havilland's chief test pilot, Geoffrey de Havilland. From then on, Russ wanted to get overseas to fly the Mossie. Although the RCAF felt the instructors were too valuable to leave the BCATP, Russ somehow managed to get overseas. Just as he was about to leave Ottawa, Russ's mother asked him to get a portrait photograph to leave for the family. Russ happened to notice the signboard for Yousuf Karsh. The renowned photographer sat with Russ for two hours before taking one of his famous personality shots. Russ was now among the extraordinary people photographed by Karsh. In June, 1944, the Nazis launched the V-1 flying bomb "terror weapon" against southern England and London. In a description of the V-1, courtesy of a *World War II Heroes* video by the Calgary Mosquito Society, Russ noted the V-1 could fly at up to 400 mph.

Russ, and navigator Robert Bruce, members of No. 418 Squadron, were assigned to intercept V-1s over the English Channel. Spitfires were deployed in the day and Mosquitoes at night. At first, the Mosquito wasn't able to catch a V-1 flying at 2,000 feet. So the crew would climb to 10,000 feet and dive on the V-1, giving them about 30 seconds for the attack. They would take the Mosquito to as fast as 440 mph to overtake the V-1. They quickly learned to shoot down the V-1 from an angle, to avoid debris from the high-explosive weapon as it blew up. The debris could knock out the radiator in the leading edge of the wing, resulting in a rapid loss of coolant, an engine seizure and a fire. The V-1s would arrive in waves of 10 or 12 V-1s. Russ recalled he probably shot down one in each wave. Russ's exceptional success in destroying at least 19 V-1s earned him accolades as "the Saviour of London." He shot down 25½ enemy aircraft including the buzz bombs.

Russ had compiled some 2,000 hours of flying as an instructor before he came to the Mosquito. Most combat pilots might have had 200 or 300 hours. He was posted to 406 Squadron as Wing Commander. The squadron flew night fighters to intercept Luftwaffe bombers. Russ's job was to convert the squadron to low-level night intruder operations. Russ noted the squadron didn't have a very good reputation when he came in, but his leadership turned the squadron around.

After returning to Canada, Russ soon joined de Havilland Canada as chief test pilot. He was quickly involved with the Mosquito again. The Government of Nationalist China purchased a batch of Mosquitoes and sent 25 pilots to be trained on the aircraft. Russ trained the Chinese pilots, but it wasn't easy as they couldn't speak English. In addition, he flew various aircraft at DHC from the Chipmunk to Lancasters being converted for peacetime RCAF duty. On Aug. 16, 1947, he made the first flight of the DHC-2 Beaver. An oil return valve had been installed upside down in the engine and he had to glide in. That was the first of what became several challenges in test flying the Beaver.

As recounted in *The Chosen Ones* by Sean Rossiter, the elevator hinge was a recurring problem. Russ almost had to bail out of a production Beaver because the elevator jammed on him while he was doing stalls. As he recalled, "The elevator was jammed. I shook and shook and shook. Fortunately, I was up at around 4,000 or 5,000 feet. Eventually I found that by getting both feet on the control column I could push it enough that, with a little bit of power, I felt I could control it.

"Fortunately, I was still at about 3,000 feet when suddenly it let go. It had a box full of sandbags at the back and a lot of these sandbags came up and hit me, because suddenly it pitched forward. Well, then it jammed the other way. With it jammed the other way, I, with a little bit of power, could steer it in onto the long runway and land it." The problem was traced to a piece of piano wire that held the elevator tab. Unfortunately, de Havilland engineers didn't pinion it at each end.

In addition to demonstration and sales flights in the Beaver, Russ flew the DHC-3 Otter and the DHC-4 Caribou. He rose to become the company President and CEO by 1975. He left DHC in 1978 to return to Bannock Aerospace Ltd., a company he established previously. His many accolades included the Distinguished Service Order; the Distinguished Flying Cross and Bar; member of Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame; Order of Ontario; and French Legion of Honour. As Ted said, Russ left an incredible legacy of great memories and countless friendships during his remarkable life. Ted's fine presentation covered all of the bases and was thoroughly enjoyed. Ted generously donated a signed copy of *Rush to Danger* for the book draw. A souvenir poster of Russ was given to Ted as a token of our appreciation.
