

April Meeting: Third Annual CAHS Toronto Dinner Meeting

The BCATP Story --- “The Aerodrome of Democracy”

Special Guest Speaker: Author & Historian Ted Barris

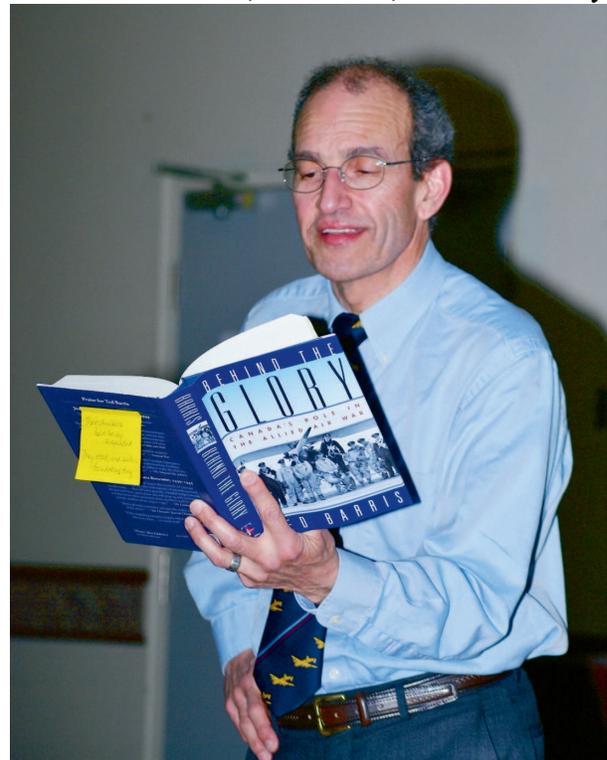
Reporter: Gord McNulty

Forty-five Chapter members and guests enjoyed our third annual CAHS Toronto Dinner Meeting, at the Royal Canadian Legion Branch #527 Toronto. The event was most successful, with good conversation and fellowship, and the Chapter executive was encouraged by the turnout. Chapter President George Topple, master of ceremonies, welcomed everyone. Tom Nettleton said grace, followed by a toast to the Queen. Everyone enjoyed an excellent roast beef or vegetarian lasagna meal, prepared by the hard-working staff of the legion. Joined by the audience, George extended wishes for a happy 90th birthday to longtime CAHS member Lou Wise, who is still flying. George thanked Bob Winson, his wife Bernice and son Greg for their efforts in organizing the event and he recognized Ken Churm for suggesting the choice of the Legion as the venue. George also recognized Chapter member Bill Bartlett, a Second World War Halifax flight engineer and BCATP trainee, and his family. Also recognized were immediate Past President Howard Malone and a former President, Tony Nelson. Special recognition was given to Bill Wheeler, named this year to Canada’s Aviation Hall of Fame. George reminded everyone of the much-anticipated Sixth Annual Wings and Wheels at Downsview Park, May 28 and May 29. The Toronto Chapter will have a display booth and volunteers are needed.

George then introduced special guest speaker, Ted Barris, of Uxbridge. An accomplished journalist, author and broadcaster, Ted is the author of 16 non-fiction books. For nearly 40 years, his writing has regularly appeared in the national press --- *The Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, as well as magazines as diverse as *Legion*, *Air Force*,

esprit de corps, *Quill and Quire* and *Zoomer*. He has also worked as host/contributor for CBC Radio network programs and on TV Ontario. Ted is a full-time professor of journalism at Toronto’s Centennial College.

Ted’s books include a series on wartime Canada: *Juno: Canadians at D-Day, June 6, 1944*; *Days of Victory: Canadians Remember 1939-1945*; *Behind the Glory: Canada’s Role in the Allied Air War*; *Deadlock in Korea: Canadians at War, 1950-1953*; and *Victory at Vimy: Canada Comes of Age, April 9-12, 1917*. All have received critical acclaim and bestseller status. His 16th book, *Breaking the Silence: Veterans’ Untold Stories from the Great War to Afghanistan*, was published in 2009 and is also now a bestseller. Ted’s non-fiction writing has also been twice short-listed for the Canada History Prize, awarded in memory of Pierre Berton. One of his books, *Making Music (Profiles from a Century of Canadian Music)*, was co-authored with his father, Alex (1922-2004), a television actor, broadcast journalist and writer. Ted is an active member of the RCAF Association, the CAHS, and an honorary



Speaker Ted Barris Reading From His Book
Photo - Neil McGavock

member of the Korean War Veterans Association of Canada. He has received many awards for his writing, contributions to Canadian military history and community service.

Ted began his dynamic presentation, illustrated with many scenes from the BCATP, by asking the audience to recognize all of the veterans. Focusing on *Behind the Glory*, Ted asked pilots, former and current, in the audience why they chose to fly. They gave various replies --- born to fly, wanting to defy gravity, doing something good for humanity, and claiming a piece of the sky. Ted noted that many aspiring pilots thought about having the greatest freedom and about the romance of flying.

The pre-World War II era was a time of pioneer aviators such as Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart. The great airship, the R-100, made a trans-Atlantic crossing in 1930, visiting places such as Toronto and Montreal. The first rotary winged aircraft --- Pitcairn autogyros --- arrived in Canada in the early 1930s. Barnstormers like Walt Leavens would take people for airplane rides, inviting passengers to "See Your Town From the Air" for the price of a penny a pound. In 1933, the Italian aviator General Italo Balbo brought a flotilla of Savoia Marchetti seaplanes from Italy to Chicago and back to promote fascism. Hawker Furys of the Royal Air Force toured Canada in 1934.

Ted told the story of Al Stirton, a dear friend who passed away last year, to show how young people caught the aviation bug. Stirton, in early 1940, became a flying instructor, one of the first in the BCATP, at the Elementary Flying Training School in St. Catharines. He probably trained 125 to 150 pilots. Among them was none other than P/O John Gillespie Magee, who wrote *High Flight* before he died at age 19 when his Spitfire collided with an Oxford in England in December, 1941.

Quoting from *Behind the Glory*, Ted noted that Stirton, a Saskatchewan farm boy, was smitten by flying entirely by accident. One day in the fall of 1930, he saw a small airplane land in a neighbour's stubble field. Lo and behold, the pilot offered him a ride, a thrill for a 12-year-

old boy. From then on Stirton dreamed of becoming a pilot. He learned to fly, but getting his pilot's licence was a painful experience.

Stirton gained his start when the Canadian government prepared for war by offering private flying clubs a \$100 grant for every student pilot who received a licence. He saw a newspaper ad, placed by the Moose Jaw Flying Club, offering to split the grant with any aspiring pilots. He managed to find a required \$150 cash to take a course and was soon airborne in a ten-year-old Gipsy Moth with Dick Ryan, a First World War fighter pilot who managed the club. After seven and a half hours of dual instruction, Stirton did his first solo flight. In November, 1938, he took his private pilot's test from an examiner visiting Moose Jaw from Edmonton.

In those days, Stirton remembered, no examiner dared risk his life by riding in the airplane with a student, but stayed on the ground and 'observed' the flight from the seat of his car. Stirton was told to climb above the aerodrome, do a medium turn to the left, then one to the right, followed by a steep turn each way; then put the aircraft into a spin and recover; then fly to a collegate about one and a half miles distant and back; then circle a water tower in figure-eight turns; then do a spot landing back at the aerodrome.

At one point, Stirton noticed the instructor, Bob Eddie, speeding towards the Gipsy Moth in his car. Eddie leapt out of the driver's seat and tore a strip off the pilot trainee for turning too close to the ground. The instructor advised him to side-slip to gain some height. Unfortunately, Stirton had never been taught how to side-slip. On the second approach to the field, he throttled back, turned the Gipsy Moth to line up with the spot marked by the examiner, noticed he had a bit too much height and lowered his left wing to slip sideways down closer to the ground.

"Suddenly, the aircraft stalled and sank like a brick," Stirton recalled. "I had forgotten to lower the nose to maintain flying speed as I came out of the side-slip, and the poor Gipsy Moth hit the ground so hard that the undercarriage was punched up into the fuselage.

The wings drooped onto the grass. And I cracked three ribs.” The crash nearly ended Stirton’s flying ambitions but he went on to gain his pilot’s licence. By May, 1939, he had accumulated 70 hours on airplanes at the Moose Jaw Flying Club. He earned his commercial licence before starting his distinguished BCATP career.

Established in December, 1939, the BCATP would become Canada’s largest expenditure in the Second World War. Canada spent \$1.75 billion on the plan between 1939 and 1944. Canada, the U.K., Australia and New Zealand were the four major countries. Prime Minister Mackenzie King was shown symbolically pinning wings on the first graduate out of a course in Ottawa in honour of the creation of the plan on Dec. 17, 1939. Why Dec. 17? Lo and behold, Ted discovered that Dec. 17 was Mr. King’s birthday! King wrote in his diary that he had, on a “memorable birthday,” established one of the greatest plans the war had ever seen. He was right, but he took far more credit than he deserved. Posters went up, recruits arrived and training stations opened at 231 locations across the country.

Canada operated as many as 11,000 aircraft and no fewer than 104,000 Canadians were employed from coast to coast. The Plan produced at least 131,553 trained aircrew over 5½ years. It was, Winston Churchill said, the most decisive factor in winning the war. U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a strong supporter of the BCATP, sent a congratulatory letter to King on its third anniversary. Seeking the best words, FDR turned to the Canadian embassy for help. Diplomat Lester B. Pearson famously coined a phrase lauding Canada as the ‘aerodrome of democracy’ which FDR used in the letter. An incredible consolidation of effort was involved to train teenaged recruits to become pilots, observers or navigators, wireless radio operators, gunners, riggers and fitters.

Ted said that every training station was a cookie-cutter replica of the next. The barracks buildings and hangars at Picton, Ontario, for example, were the same as those at Brandon, Manitoba, (now home to the BCATP Museum).

One of the first tasks of the recruits was to learn how to march. Marching drill seemed a long way from the air war over Europe, but the military brass insisted on it. The weather didn’t matter --- recruits marched in chilling cold and blazing sun. They were also assigned to guard the stations before moving to the next level at Initial Training School (ITS). Recruits were moved into streams as pilots, observers, gunners, and so on.

They learned how to master a stiff challenge --- the Link trainer. Although it made one of the greatest contributions to the BCATP, the Link trainer has tended to be overlooked. Edwin Link, its inventor, was the son of an organ manufacturer in upstate New York. The bellows, which force the air into the pipes, are the most important component in a pipe organ. Link considered the bellows to be an artificial piece of sky, creating a bellows of air beneath a vehicle that simulates a cockpit. By installing the same kinds of controls that would be in a real aircraft, you could train a pilot. If he “lost control and crashed,” so to speak, he would be safe in a simulator. Link demonstrated his simulator at amusement fairs, thinking it would impress the United States Army Air Corps (USAAC). Surprisingly, the USAAC wasn’t interested. However, the BCATP purchased hundreds of them. Link not only became wealthy, he also saved the lives of many pilots who otherwise would have died in actual flying mishaps.

After ITS, pilots went to Elementary Flying Training School. Conditions could be primitive,



Fleet Finch Mk. II

Photo - No. 6 RCAF Museum - Dunnville Airport

especially in the early years. Tiger Moths and Fleet Finches sometimes were flown out of muddy farm fields in the spring. Recruits went to Service Flying Training in aircraft such as Harvards, Yales and Battles. Multi-engined training was conducted on Ansons, Cranes, Oxfords, and Bolingbrokes. Airmen then went on to Operational Training Units in Canada and overseas, ultimately into Lancasters and Halifaxes.

Ted Arnold was born in Canada. His dad was a seismologist, involved in research looking for oil. Arnold, his father and family were doing seismic research in Venezuela when the war broke out. Arnold, 18 or 19 at the time, was eager to return to Canada and desperately wanted to become a fighter pilot overseas. After an arduous trip back to Canada, Ted enlisted in the BCATP. He graduated in the top ten percentile of his class, figuring that he'd soon be flying a Spitfire or Hurricane. It wasn't to be. Ted was so good that his file was stamped "too valuable to lose." The air force considered him so effective an instructor that he was kept in Canada. Arnold's case exposed what our speaker called one of the great myths of the BCATP --- the suggestion had always been that the worst pilots, navigators, wireless engineers or whatever stayed behind to become instructors. It was exactly the opposite! Most everyone who graduated in the top 10 percentile stayed behind to become the next generation of instructors.

Arnold liked to get down close to the deck in the Harvard. He would leave Dunnville and fly



Gate Guardian Harvard at Dunnville

to Port Dalhousie, site of a prisoner of war camp where the Germans would dig peat moss. Arnold and his buddies loved to simulate strafing runs to scare the Germans. Once, they flew so low that a German threw his shovel at the Harvard and almost brought the aircraft down, as the shovel embedded itself in the cowling. "Strafing" was extremely dangerous. On June 30, 1945, a Harvard was simulating a strafing run over an army truck convoy near Kingston. The captain in command of the army unit leapt on the cab of the truck to direct the defence of the convoy. The Harvard passed over the truck, struck him, and killed him. Then the Harvard crashed, killing the pilot. This incident was caught by a photographer moments before the captain was hit.

"Cap" Foster, another instructor, was a full-blood Mohawk. He was frustrated by being held back for two years as an instructor and liked to fly aerobatics. Once in 1941, Cap and a buddy actually decided to loop the Rainbow Bridge, off-limits airspace, just before it opened. As they were entering the Niagara Gorge, Cap realized the netting was still below the bridge, as the construction wasn't finished. Although there was very little room between the netting and the river, they managed to dive down and get away with a full loop under the bridge. They climbed back into the clouds and were gone before anyone could record the Harvard's number. Cap eventually managed to fly a Spitfire and won the DFC overseas.

The BCATP attracted as many as 6,000 Americans prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Many of those who trained here went back to the U.S. Army Air Force and became the nucleus of the aircrews who fought in Europe. The BCATP also attracted Royal Norwegian Air Force cadets, within four months of being driven from their homeland and across the English Channel in April, 1940. They trained at the "Little Norway" barracks on Toronto Centre Island. As many as about 1,000 young Norwegian airmen came to Toronto. In fact, the blond, blue-eyed single gentlemen became quite a distraction! Torontonians enjoyed taking the ferry across the channel to watch the young airmen train and

they invited them to parties and dinners. As boat traffic grew in the harbour, sooner or later there was bound to be a problem. One day in 1942, a Norwegian Northrop floatplane took off into the sun. The instructor and the trainee didn't see the ferry *Sam McBride* passing in front of them. The aircraft clipped the ferry, went into the water, and the airmen were killed. That was the end of Little Norway in Toronto. The base was relocated to Muskoka.

Women weren't allowed to be BCATP instructors, but there was one exception: Margaret Littlewood. She had been a hobby flyer, got her private licence, and started working at Gillies Flying Service out of Barker Field as an instructor. When the war began, all of the small private airfields were closed in order to meet the demand for military aviation fuel. Littlewood faced the prospect of returning to a department store for work unless she could find a job as an instructor. When a friend told her to send her resume to all of the Air Observer Schools, Littlewood sent nine resumes to nine schools. All but one refused her. The Edmonton AOS, managed by legendary bush pilot Wop May, accepted her. He recognized that her qualifications mattered much more than regulations. Littlewood went on to train airmen and airwomen for all of the years that the Edmonton AOS was open. The only woman instructor in the Plan, she recently celebrated her 95th birthday. Ted described her as a wonderfully vivacious, incredible woman, more than capable of handling any wisecracks from the men. She convinced the skeptics by her skill, sensitivity, calm demeanour and ability to teach student pilots to recover control on their own after making a mistake.

The BCATP soon attracted the interest of Hollywood moviemakers. Warner Brothers, like FDR, supported Canada's participation in the war, prior to Pearl Harbor, and decided that a feature movie about the BCATP would show their support. They produced a hokey script for *Captains of the Clouds* about a bunch of bush pilots in northern Quebec whose business was being hurt by the war. They would visit a BCATP training station, teach the young guys

how to fly, lead squadrons overseas to end the war, and return to business. James Cagney was one of the bush pilots. He and other pilots are shown in the movie arriving at Uplands to enlist in the RCAF after buzzing the station. They finally land, demand to lead the squadrons, and are told they are too old. But they are allowed to become instructors. The rest of the movie, produced in 1941, shows how they grappled with the realization that they couldn't fly in combat but could be instructors.

What is fascinating is that all of the air-to-air footage, all the air-to-ground footage, and ground-to-air footage was shot by BCATP instructors flying the actual training aircraft. The film didn't use models and simulated backgrounds that would normally be expected. Remarkably, Ted noted the instructors didn't get any credit at all in the movie. The BCATP itself was acknowledged, but not the instructors. Two Hollywood stunt pilots, Paul Mantz and Frank Clarke, refused to do the flying when they realized the instructors were better than they were.

In one Wings Parade scene, Air Marshal Billy Bishop pins wings on LAC Tom Wallnutt. Bishop gives credit to each recruit, wishes him luck, and gives a stirring speech about the importance of their contribution. It is an inspiring speech, apparently written by Bishop himself. The movie debuted in February, 1942 at the Strand Theatre in Times Square, complete with the RCAF Central Band and Precision Drill Team. Unfortunately, the film was somewhat overlooked as America was now preoccupied with responding to Pearl Harbor, but it was an extraordinary movie from a historical perspective. The flying scenes are incredible and the aircraft are really impressive.

Ted mentioned Charlie Konvalinka, who enlisted in downtown Toronto. He wanted to convince the recruitment officer that he was pilot material. The one question Konvalinka didn't expect was why he wanted to join. Konvalinka thought the guy wanted him to say "to shoot down Nazis." Instead, Konvalinka gave him an honest answer. He said that he passionately wanted to learn how to fly the great

aircraft in the Plan. The recruiter was convinced. Konvalinka graduated in the top ten percentile and served for nearly two years as an instructor at four or five stations. His favourite aircraft was the Harvard --- “the best training aircraft on the planet” --- and he became something of an expert on it.

Konvalinka eventually made it overseas. He told Ted of an incident when he and several hundred other former flying instructors were assembled for a briefing in a motion-picture theatre at the seaside town of Bournemouth. When the pilots had taken their seats, out came an RCAF officer --- a flight lieutenant like Konvalinka --- to begin the session. He proceeded to lambaste the instructors as a “bloody bunch of cowards” who didn’t “have the guts to do what we do. To fly on a straight and level when everybody’s shooting at you, or take on the enemy in a fighter one-on-one.” The theatre remained silent. Konvalinka felt his blood boiling. “We’re the brave ones. You’re not!,” the presiding officer continued. Konvalinka couldn’t restrain himself for another second. Before he realized what he was doing, he had called out, “And who, for Christ’s sake, taught you to fly? God?” The officer peered out into the theatre in search of the speaker: “Who said that?” he stormed. Konvalinka stood up immediately and said to the sea of astonished faces around him, “I did. I said it!”

That incident exemplified the problematic relationship between the men who fought the war and those who trained them. Ted said there was a sense that somehow instructors were lesser, or second-class, or people who had dodged the fighting. Of course, it wasn’t true --- the air force had made them too valuable to lose overseas. This lack of recognition inspired Ted to call his book *Behind the Glory*. The cover photo shows the first group of BCATP instructors at St. Catharines. Ted said many of these instructors, especially those who served for four or five years, probably had as many as ten times the number of flying hours that combat aircrew did. When instructors applied for airline jobs with TCA and Canadian Pacific

after the war, they were told the jobs were reserved for pilots who had flown in combat overseas. Instructors, Ted said, were not considered legal veterans if they did not leave Canada during the war --- even those who served in the RCAF. They didn’t get veterans’ benefits until they turned 65. One wireless radio instructor once received a call to fly to Newfoundland to help a crew get home. Newfoundland wasn’t part of Canada then. However, because he left Canada for one night, the instructor qualified as a veteran and received benefits! Ted noted he had heard of some exceptions, but generally speaking, that was the policy.

Some instructors became well-known. They included entrepreneur J.J. Barnicke, actor and broadcaster announcer Bill Walker, and CFRB announcer Bob Hesketh. Ted had to persuade a reluctant Hesketh to discuss his career as an instructor in Manitoba. Hesketh felt he wasn’t important. He had simply taught young men how to fly and that didn’t compare to the dangers faced by the aircrew overseas. Hesketh eventually told Ted that he had avoided reunions of air force veterans, as the discussion would inevitably focus on the combat experiences of fighter and bomber crews. Instructing seemed unexciting in comparison. Years later, Hesketh decided to get a physical at Sunnybrook Hospital. The young doctor, commenting on Hesketh’s service as an RCAF pilot, pronounced: “Were you one of those guys who rained death and destruction on those innocent people of Germany?” Hesketh held his tongue for a second, and then explained that he was an instructor. He added that he hadn’t been on Bomber Command over Germany, but if he’d had the chance to go, he would have. It was then that Hesketh realized what he had done was important and how proud of his contribution he was.

Ted, answering questions, said he interviewed probably 400 to 500 instructors. Although many had quietly disappeared into the woodwork, their stories are now on record as part of Ted’s research and determination to publish *Behind the Glory* and to ensure that

Canada's instructors are recognized. The book includes a full chapter on the making of *Captains of the Clouds*. Ted thanked Blue Heron books for bringing a full selection of his books. Sales were brisk and Ted was delighted to sign them. Bob Winson, presenting Ted with a gift in appreciation, noted that Ted had spoken to the Chapter seven years ago about his book *Juno: Canadians at D-Day*. Ted promises to be back, undoubtedly bringing more of his passion for the stories of Canadians at war.

