

October Meeting

Topic: “The Early Airfields of Toronto: de Lesseps to deHavilland and Beyond”

Speaker: Dr. Robert Galway

Reporter: Greg Winson

Chapter President Sheldon Benner opened the meeting and introduced our speaker, Dr. H. Robert Galway. Dr. Galway had previously spoken to the Chapter at our December 2014 meeting about the famous northern bush pilot, “Captain Roy Maxwell – The Forgotten Pilot of Canada’s North”. Hugh Robert Galway was born 7 January, 1937, in Kenora, Ontario. He grew up in the small gold mining community of McKenzie Red Lake Gold Mine in the Red Lake area of northwestern Ontario. His father was on the original Gilbert Labine Exploration Party flown by C.H. “Punch” Dickins to Great Bear Lake in 1929, when the radioactive uranium-rich mineral Pitchbende, now known as Urainite, was discovered at Pine Point near Great Slave Lake.



Speaker: Dr. H. Robert Galway

Dr. Galway attended Red Lake High School until the early 1950s. He also played “hookey” regularly to load bush planes at Green Airways and Chukuni Airways, to earn a ride to commercial fishing camps and trappers’ camps in the area. He first flew an aircraft at age 15, a Stinson Reliant SR9 registered CF-BGN. Dr. Galway left Red Lake permanently in 1955 for school in the east. He graduated from the University of Toronto in 1958, with studies in Economics and Geology. He worked for ten seasons as a geologist/geophysical operator throughout northern Ontario, Quebec and Labrador, employed by mining exploration companies including Franc Joubin Assoc., Prospector Airways, Falconbridge, and Labrador Mining and Exploration.

Dr. Galway returned to Medical School during one of the periodic economic downturns in the mining industry. He graduated in medicine from U of T in 1963 and McGill post-grad 1967-68. Completing specialty training at U of T – Surgery, in 1970, he was admitted to the Royal College of Surgeons Canada, in November 1970. He practised Orthopaedic Surgery in Toronto, from 1971 to 2008 and retired in 2009.

Dr. Galway obtained a pilot licence with a float endorsement and IFR rating. He owned Cessna 182 Skylane CF-ZBB and shared in ownership of Cessna 210 CF-YCP. He now lives part time in Collingwood and enjoys skiing, boating on Georgian Bay and golf. Writing is a large part-time hobby. He and his wife, Anne, enjoy their children Sean and Gina plus grandkids Dylan and Jordan. Son, Sean, a survey engineer with a specialty in Oceanography and Lidar Aerial Survey Technology, teaches at the British Columbia Institute of Technology.

Dr. Galway began his talk by explaining how the project grew in scope. “When I first embarked on this project I thought that I was just going to deal with the three aerodromes that were built at the time of the Royal Flying Corps establishing aviation training bases in Toronto,” said Dr. Galway. The project, however, developed a life of its own. “It’s expanded substantially to the point I have had to retitle it “The Early Airfields of Toronto, starting in 1909 and ending with the selection of Malton for the Toronto International Airport (now Pearson International Airport).” The unraveling of the mysteries of aerodynamics by the Wright Brothers in 1903 added the wing to the wheel as one of the great discoveries in the field of human transportation. Canada joined the march to the heavens with the founding of the Aerial Experiment Association in September 1907 under the leadership of Alexander Graham Bell. His wife Mabel actually funded the association from an inheritance in the form of a

\$25,000 grant (\$1M in 2015 dollars). The first flight in Canada took place off the ice of Bras d'Or Lake in Baddeck, Nova Scotia on February 23, 1909 piloted by association member, JAD McCurdy.

“Several airfields have historical markers for the growth of Canadian Aviation during the formative years of air transport in Canada,” explained Dr. Galway. “it is a bit like going to the cemetery and reading the tombstones, and then putting the story together from the inscriptions you read on the headstones in several small towns.” In many instances, the aviation activity that took place in Toronto would later give rise to larger stories of both a regional and national nature. Dr. Galway credited the CAHS for its work in documenting the early airfields of Toronto, including Barker Field and the Toronto Flying Club field. “Your society, 50 years ago this year, through the authorship of the late Don Long in your Journal, actually put out a small two page article on the 12 airports that he had identified at the time,” said Dr. Galway. Long was helped by Fred Hotson. Larry Milberry turned over Hotson’s folder with his original writings that served to provide some of the source material in Dr. Galway’s presentation. “It is my pleasure to be able to add to their historical work, particularly 50 years after the first article came out in your Journal.” Dr. Galway added five airports to the original list of 12, including one that recently came to his attention.

The first exhibition in North America and the first flight in Toronto took place at Scarborough Beach Park in September 1909. Charles Willard, a pilot trained by Glenn Curtiss, flew the Curtiss designed “Golden Flyer.” The space provided was so narrow that he had to put runners down to guide him out over the lake. He took off over the beach but crashed on his first attempt. He took off over the beach and crashed again on day two. Willard was finally successful on his third attempt, circling over the lake for about five minutes. The crowd was so excited – they crowded the beach, leaving him with no place to land, forcing him to crash into the water once again. He came back a year later. Willard was asked why he came back. He said, ‘I really love the newspaper reporting in Canada. They’re so honest.’ An account in the Toronto Globe of Willard’s first flight read, “Willard went up, Willard went down, Willard got wet, Willard went home.”

The following year, an international air meet was held at the Trethewey Model Farm (near the modern-day intersection of Weston Road and Jane Street). This was just the second air meet in Canada and third in the world (after events in France and Montreal). The hero of the meet was Jacques de Lesseps, son of the developer of the Suez Canal, and his plane “La Scarabee”. He was joined by the Wright Demonstration Team and others. In all five machines and five “airmen” were present. The owner of the farm, W. G. Trethewey, had made his fortune with a successful silver mine in Cobalt, Ontario, and went on to become Canada’s first organic farmer.



Dedication of Barker Field by Billy Bishop 1931. Barker’s widow and daughter are standing behind Bishop
Photo - City of Toronto Archives.



Toronto Flying Club on Wilson Avenue 1930’s -



DH60 Moths at de Lesseps Field c. 1928-29 *Photo - CASM*

de Lesseps did the first circuit ever over Toronto in an aircraft, flying south from Trethewey Farms down to Lake Ontario, across the city's waterfront, turning up Spadina Avenue and eventually back to the farm. During the course of that meet, de Lesseps met the founder of the Toronto Street Railway company, Sir William Mackenzie. He later met Mackenzie's daughter, Grace. He wined and dined her and later she accompanied him on a flight over New York. They were married in London, just before the start of World War I.

de Lesseps became a hero of the French Air Force during the war. He later came back to Canada to Quebec to fly at Gaspé with la Compagnie Aérienne. He went on to develop a photographic aerial survey career in Quebec. The company refused to register with the Canadian Air Board, leading to a constitutional crisis in Canada. Quebec won a judgement saying that they had the right to control aviation. The decision was appealed to the Privy Council in 1931, and Canada was given control of all airspace. In the midst of this controversy, de Lesseps was killed in a crash during a flight over the Gulf of St. Lawrence in October, 1927. In 1928 the Trethewey farm site was renamed deLesseps Field in memory of the count.

In late July 1911, a resident of Hamilton, E. M. Wilcox, and a local citizens committee promoted a flying exhibition near the Beach Road, Hamilton. Charles Willard, John McCurdy and James V. Martin were invited to the exhibition. The flying displays were reasonably successful over several days. After the meet concluded, a race to Toronto was staged between Willard and McCurdy. Willard was given a head start and later both pilots ran into fog. Willard was forced to land near the CNE grounds, while McCurdy landed on a sand spit at Fisherman's Island (near the foot of Cherry Street) and won the race. McCurdy wound up landing near a birthday party. It happened to be McCurdy's birthday as well, so he joined in the festivities. The next day at an air meet at Todmorden Mills, McCurdy and Willard put on fine displays. The meet ended with McCurdy having Toronto's first plane crash, crashing off the runway.

Aviation activity began in 1912 in Toronto Harbour at Hanlan's Point. deLesseps had flown over Hanlan's Point during his flight over the city in 1910. From Buffalo came another aircraft flown by Fred Eells. Walter Dean, who built canoes and ice boats as well as airplane parts for Curtiss Aviation and who later owned the Palais Royale, bought into a small commercial operation on Toronto Island. T.C. McCauley took up the first passenger – Toronto Star reporter Lou Marsh – on a flight from Toronto

to Hamilton in a plane owned by Dean. Dean retired soon after. The aviation activity of the harbour was taken over by Glenn Curtiss. The company had signed a contract with the British government to provide JN4s for them, and as well Curtiss had to supply flight training, which took place at Toronto Island and Long Branch. Curtiss also established other activities, such as building hangars, at Long Branch.



Toronto Air Harbour 1930's Photo VIA Don Evans

Dr. Galway applauded the efforts of CAHS to commemorate the Long Branch site. “The sign that marks this historically important site is a product of your society, namely the plaque at Hydro Road and the Lakeshore in today’s City of Mississauga. It took a long time to get this site commemorated. There are no signs commemorating de Lesseps Field or Trethewey Field. Long Branch didn’t start as a Royal Flying Corps airbase until 1917, in which the Royal Flying Corps, Canada, was created. It was the first training centre for Royal Flying Corps (RFC) cadets in the British Commonwealth. The airport expanded rapidly, but turned out to be not suitable for flight training purposes. Two further aerodromes were built in Toronto as a consequence – Leaside and Armour Heights. Long Branch continued as munitions factory for the balance of the war.

Armour Heights was built on land donated by real estate developer Fred Robins as his contribution to the war effort. The CAHS Toronto Chapter meetings are now held on the site of the Robins family estate home. The building of the aerodrome was led by Major Jack Leach, who had lost a leg while fighting in the trenches at the Somme. He would later become a pilot.

In early 1918 Armour Heights was turned into a school for special flying, a school to instruct the instructors in a training method known as the “Gosport System”. The Gosport training system was developed at the Gosport RFC base in southern England. The RFC had found that graduate pilots had insufficient knowledge about flight in unusual attitudes, spin recovery practices and other advanced flying techniques that led to unnecessary losses of aircraft and pilots. At the time, the fatality rate for Royal Flying Corps cadets was so high that the Star and Telegram were calling for the cancellation of the project. Instituting the Gosport system, and producing pilots of higher skill reduced fatalities to a politically acceptable level. Amelia Earhart’s interest in aviation was piqued during her time in Toronto as a nursing student at the Spadina Military Hospital. She would often seek out places of aviation interest such as Armour Heights.

The Leaside Aerodrome was a primary training base for both ground services and flying services. The land used for Leaside was developed by Sir William Mackenzie. The accident rate was high at Leaside. It led to the creation of the first air ambulance at Leaside for injury evacuation. Leaside was the site of Canada’s first air mail. Captain Brian Peck got bored one weekend, and suggested to his commanding

officer that he go to Montreal to recruit some young people for the Royal Flying Corps. Peck wanted to fly to Montreal (Quebec was a wet province) to buy some whisky for one of his other cadets friends who was getting married. In Montreal, three friends suggested flying back some mail from Montreal. One was connected to the post office, and was able to get the delivery sanctioned. Weather delays allowed for around 120 letters to be culled for the flight. Peck flew back to Toronto in an overloaded JN4 (because of the old Malt Whisky), just under the railway wires and barely clearing the tracks because the plane was so overloaded. One of the letters from this first air mail delivery recently sold at auction for \$16,000. The University of Toronto made important contributions to aviation in the WWI period. Troops were billeted at Burwash Hall, and schools of aircraft rigging, schools of observation, and schools of mapping all took place at various centres of the university.

The Exhibition Grounds also became a centre of aviation activity. American pilot Ruth Law raced her Curtiss Pusher biplane against a race car in 1918 at the CNE Stadium. She lost the race but won the hearts and minds of Canadians. Meanwhile Jack V. Elliot used two of his aircraft in 1924 to fly over the exhibition grounds to advertise his radio station and for his air activities in Hamilton. The mid-1920's was a low point for commercial aviation. At this time, Elliot had more aircraft registered in his name in Canada than any other organization save for the provincial air service. Elliot's was one of only eight aircraft companies in operation in 1924, and just 30 pilots in civil aviation. One of Elliot's pilots, Harold Farrington, suggested to Elliot that they go up and join the Red Lake gold rush in 1926. This was a pivotal episode in aviation history. Commercial aviation in Canada had no limits from that time on.

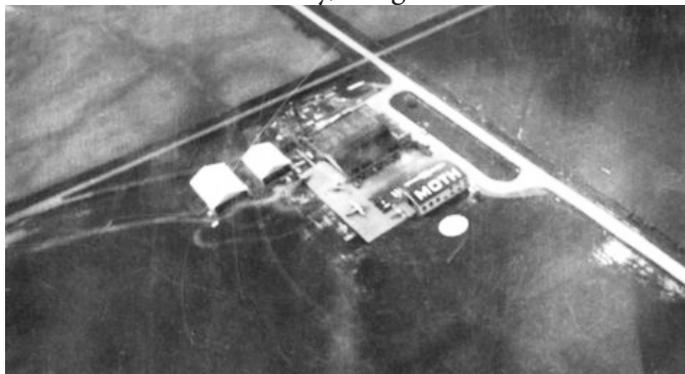
One of the most interesting occasional air fields was present day Berwick Avenue in 1919, pilot Roy Maxwell landed a JN4 to deliver Santa Claus for the Eaton's Santa Claus parade (This was Don Long's first experience of seeing an aircraft in action). Willowdale Airfield was established by Howard Watt. Watt had been the second pilot with Elliot and Farrington in the Red Lake gold rush. After sustaining a concussion in a crash at Red Lake, he came east to establish Willowdale Airfield. Flax was grown and harvested in the fall. Watt ran the operation for a number of years. He was the only person in Canada who owned a Ryan Monoplane. Newtonbrook (a part of Willowdale) was also the home of Lester B. Pearson (Canada's 14th Prime Minister). Lester trained as a Royal Flying Corps pilot in England after leaving the trenches as a medic officer. But, just before he was to be awarded his wings, he was hit by a London bus, fracturing his femur and ending his career as a pilot. Elliot moved from Hamilton to Toronto and got the distributorship of the Laird Swallow in 1928. While in Toronto, he trained the first female pilot in Canada, Eileen Vollick. The trainers tried unsuccessfully to drive her out of aviation with various stunts, but she preserved. Her son became a pilot in WWII.

William Barker was one of Canada's most distinguished pilots in WWI, earning the Victoria Cross. He and Billy Bishop ran an operation out of the Armour Heights air base for two years but the venture went bankrupt and the airfield was closed. Bishop was instrumental in having an airfield named after Barker. Located off Dufferin Street, (near the present day Yorkdale Mall), Barker Field opened in 1931. Barker's widow and only child were present at the dedication of the airfield. Among the aircraft flying that day was the Pitcairn Auto Gyro, flown by Godfrey Dean, Walter Dean's grandson. The Toronto Flying Club (TFC) was initially established at the old Leaside air base in April 1928 after incorporation in October 1927 under the Dominion of Canada Government scheme for Flying Clubs. The scheme promised training aircraft to licensed clubs with the further promise of payment of \$100 for each student who qualified for the Private Pilots Certificate. The Toronto Flying Club was the most active in the country in spite of the Great Depression that massively affected the economics of Canada. In 1931 the club moved to its own air base at Dufferin Street at Wilson Avenue. The club was as much a social outing as an aviation experience, even having an active "Women's Wing" comprised of pilot's wives and women pilots. The 'Wing' sponsored social gatherings including book reviews, travel talks and garden teas. All facilitated by a spacious clubhouse at the airfield. However, when WWII erupted, the TFC

and other clubs in Canada provided a vital pool of experienced pilots who would go on to serve as active combat pilots or as instructors for the vast BCATP air training plan.

de Havilland's entry into Canada began with Roy Maxwell's purchase of four Cirrus Moth planes from the de Havilland factory in England. Maxwell assured them that the plane could be configured to handle floats. Not long after, officials with de Havilland decided to bring manufacturing operations to Canada. They received guidance and ultimately purchased land from Fred Trethewey, the grandson of W.G.

Trethewey, that formed the initial headquarters and manufacturing facilities of de Havilland Canada. They began operations in 1928 on the site appropriately named "deLesseps Field". The company subsequently moved to Downsview in 1929. Also, in 1929, Toronto was developing the Toronto Air Harbour at the foot of Scott Street as an aviation centre as seaplane-based activity appeared the way to go. The first Canadian scheduled air service was run by Laurentide out of Toronto.



Aerial View of de Havilland Plant at Downsview
Photo - Don Long VIA CASM

Dr. Galway recently discovered the existence of one other airport in the early years, the Imperial Flying Club of Scarborough. It earned the unenviable record of lasting only 48 hours. They bought an Avro Avian. They had a Saturday demonstration for all new members. On the Monday, the chief flying instructor took it up, hit a crosswind, dug a wing into a tree. The accident wrote off the plane, for which there was no insurance,



Four de Havilland Tiger Moths for delivery at Downsview WWII c. 1940 *Photo - Fred Hotson*

which bankrupted the club. The Avion was rebuilt at the Toronto Flying Club, relettered with a new registration, and disappeared from sight in the early 1930's. Chapter member, Les Balla, is currently rebuilding the same plane and it is expected to fly once again next year.

A 1935 flight taken in a Dragon Rapide owned by E.P. Taylor played a significant role in Toronto's aviation history. Pilot Harry Humphrey was called by Maxwell and told to take a bunch of suits from Ottawa up flying in the Toronto area, no questions asked. Among the 'suits' was Federal Minister of Transport C. D. Howe. Humphrey followed his directions without knowing the purpose of the mission.



TCA Lockheed 14 at Malton Airport 1940 *Photo- Courtesy CASM*

After they landed, Howe took Humphrey aside and said to him, “you might be interested to know that you’ve just helped to pick out the site for the new Toronto airport.” The airport, located in Malton, would eventually become Canada’s largest and busiest airport (now known as Pearson International Airport). Chapter volunteer, Bob Winson, thanked Dr. Galway for a most enlightening talk and presented him with a gift on behalf of the Chapter members.



The plaque in Mississauga marking the location of Canada’s First Aerodrome. The plaque largely came about through the efforts of the Canadian Aviation Historical Society
Photo - Wayne Adam