

**BUSH PILOTS,  
CHANGE AND BRITISH COLUMBIA  
SOCIETY  
1910-1984**

**By Ray Bartsch**

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**Dr. Jean Barman**

“Zooming across the sky  
Like a great bird you fly,  
Airplane.  
Silvery white  
In the light.  
Turning and twisting in the air,  
When shall I ever be there,  
Airplane,  
Piloting you  
Far in the blue?”<sup>1</sup>

Many a young man at some time in his life has experienced the desire to fly. Poems have been written about it and songs have been sung extolling the virtues of flight. Only a seemingly chosen few though have actually experienced the romance and the mystique that shrouds airmen. One particular aspect of flight where this is true is that of bush flying.

Perhaps the most dangerous and challenging area of aviation, it was this form of transportation that made the taming of the BC Wilderness a reality. For the bush pilots the infrastructure was already there. Lakes and rivers in abundance became the landing and take-off strips. All that remained to bring about the opening up of the wilderness was the development of technology that would carry one from one place to another. Bush pilots both early and later were men who loved to fly. They were and are men who possessed a healthy regard for the dangers always present and at the same time gambled with life and death for the sheer pleasure of flight. The purpose of this paper shall be to trace the birth and development of bush piloting in British Columbia and by examining the trend and changes in the nature of the work, seek to discover what if any are the changes that have occurred in British Columbia society over the same time period.

The use of aviation as a means of transportation is directly tied to the development and opening up of the province of British Columbia<sup>2</sup>. Remote communities that were started for one reason or another could only be maintained by keeping that vital link to civilization open. Bush pilots held the key to the means of survival for these communities. In turn the development and opening of British Columbia was directly related to the exploration and exploitation of resources. Coastal fisheries and forestry, interior mining and prospecting all created pockets of unconnected

civilization that required the Bush pilot for their way of existence. The study of this topic can best be accomplished by looking at three different time periods period they are the inter-war years comma World War 2 to the mid 1960s an from the mid 60s to the present.

The early years of aviation in British Columbia were shocking to say the least. Roads were few, maps were non-existent and airplane technology was in its infancy. After World War One there were planes an ex-Air Force personnel who had no jobs to come back to and who loved flying. These men were willing to take chances, wanted desperately to fly and were waiting in on the “wings” for an opportunity to get off the ground. Navigational aids did not exist, there were no real airports, no radios and no organised search and rescue services<sup>3</sup>. In 1919 an Air Board was created by the Canadian government to regulate and oversee all post war aviation<sup>4</sup>. The first air base established in British Columbia was established at Jerico Beach and most of the early work consisted of aerial photography<sup>5</sup>. During the 1920s and 1930s new technology developed in the airplane itself, and major changes were brought to the opening up of the province. A new generation of Bush planes, the Fairchild FC-2 and 71 series, the Fokker Universal, Waco and Norseman and various German Jonker aircraft were introduced. Built for the needs of northern Canadian climates, these vehicles changed the whole situation.

Further remote an previously inaccessible areas became realistic opportunities. At first along the coast and later spreading in land, aircraft and pilots slowly pushed back the shroud that had previously hidden the explorer from its riches. Or the communications were done with carrier pigeons an pilots had to be very precise as to where they were going. Getting lost or downed due to mechanical failure could be and many times proved to be fatal<sup>6</sup>. Indeed planes continued to be lost or crashed at alarming rate every year.

Aviation during the depression years took a slightly different twist. With little or no money for mineral exploration, the mining companies just discontinued looking and using the air services to aid them. Many pilots desperate to pay the bills and put food on their tables, took to given rides to anyone who would pay for them. Pilots would land wherever they could raise a crowd. Usually that would be on the farmers field and that he would give joyrides to the curious and collect whatever few dollars he could. This led to the use of the term “barnstorming”.<sup>7</sup> For desperate pilots however it provided a little cash and still filled the almost childlike fascination to fly carefree through the air.

During the late 1930s and 1940s, communications were improved, and useable radios were developed. With this innovation the Bush flying industry took on a transformation period suddenly the great risk to life and limb was reduced and the pilots could rely on some what on other colleagues if necessary. This communications development paved the way for even greater advances during the years of World War 2.

The Second World War launched British Columbia into rapid development. Bush flying played an integral part in this development of the northern interior period the building of the

Alaska Canada highway could not have been completed as quickly as it was if it were not for bush planes period airstrips were opened up every 50 miles or so were supplies and manpower were stationed to do the work of road building. Several of those are still in use today, Watson Lake being one period with the completion of the highway came the development of even more<sup>10</sup> remote communities. The technology explosion that came because of the war was an added plus. More sophisticated communication systems were available and much more of the interior of the province was charted and safety became more of a reality.

From the post World War Two years to the mid 1960s there was a boom time for resource development and there arose a lot of opportunity for Bush pilots. Along with mining and oil and mineral exploration, a lot of work was done through the government agencies in charge of water resources and forestry. In forestry, Bush pilots would spend a lot of time flying road planners and managers to evaluate stands of timber and plan possible access routes. As well they were put to hard going by the forestry whenever there was a forest fire. Planes needed to ferry supplies and fuel to the men on the fire lines.<sup>8</sup>

Another important development that grew rapidly in the post war years was the medical evacuation service that Bush pilots provided. If an individual was hurt or needed medical attention, a radio call would summon a Bush pilot to fly into the area and bring the person needing attention to the larger centres where they could be properly attended to.<sup>9</sup>

Several individuals gained great fame for their exploits as bush pilots in this time period and earlier. Notably three of these were Don McLaren, Grant McConachie and Ernie Harrison. Later these men became involved in major commercial air companies.

From the mid 1960s until today has probably been the most dramatic change wise for the Bush pilot. The very nature of the work of the Bush pilot has changed. The job was never as romantic as it seemed. The summer was always the busy season. A pilot could easily put in up to 200 hours a month flying whereas in winter 20 hours would make a good month.<sup>10</sup> This was largely due to the longer sunlight hours in summer and winter cold temperatures being many times too restrictive. A pilot would often spend an hour loading his plane then fly for 20 minutes and then have to unload himself for another hour or more. When delivering barrels of fuel or heavy awkward mining supplies the job got to be extremely difficult and laborious. Many times on the go there was no time to stop and eat. Pilots were usually up and going at 5 AM, only snatches of coffee and sandwich while airborne and go until 10:00 PM, usually seven days a week.<sup>11</sup> today the hours are equally as bad but the muscle work has been dramatically reduced. Over the last 15 years the helicopter has overtaken the Bush plane. It is safer because it can fly slower in bad weather and can fly almost as fast as a fixed wing aircraft and carry almost the same payload. The big advantage is that the helicopter can place a charter customer with a sling full of his supplies to almost exactly the spot where he wants to make camp. There is no need to spend a whole day packing supplies half a mile up a hill away from a wet lake shore.<sup>12</sup>

Today another noticeable shift has occurred. Most of the flying is done for big game outfitters and remote fishing lodges.<sup>13</sup> north Americans have taken to spending large sums of money in the pursuit of pleasure and recreation. A return flight from Vanderhoof to a remote lake for a weekend fishing trip for four could easily cost \$1200 just for the flight.<sup>14</sup> in an average summer it is not unusual for the small Bush plane company in Vanderhoof to ferry 400 to 500 individuals solely for hunting and fishing. It is interesting to note however that with the economic difficulties over the last two years, there has been a dramatic decrease in the amount of tourist traffic. This is also partially due to the limited entry for big game tags in this area.<sup>15</sup> with the simultaneous decline in resource development, the Bush pilots have had it difficult.

Bush piloting however despite this change in users is still an essential service. Local doctors still fly to remote locations every month to provide clinical services to chiefly native peoples. Medical evacuation services are still in operation and use on a frequent basis particularly out of Fort St. James. Miners and prospectors as well still use the service of Bush pilots and behind the big game outfitters, are the second largest user.<sup>16</sup>

Changes have come about in the Bush flying industry and changes have occurred in British Columbia society. Many of these have come with the advanced growth of technology. Our machines allow us to work faster and more efficiently. As a result we have more time for leisure and more money to spend on ourselves. This in part accounts for the change in the user of the bush flying services. It must be stated as well that many of those who use the service are Americans looking for sport in the ever illusive "Great White North". Affluence or rather the lack of it would also at least in part explain why the flying industry in the Bush has declined in users over the economically depressed last two years. As resource development grew in the 1960s and with it came people in search of good paying job, the Bush flying industry simply provided the means whereby this could be accommodated. With the decline in the mining sector of the economy and the downturn in the forestry sector many people have lost their dreams of quick wealth and have left northern communities.

As the secondary infrastructures of forestry roads, rail lines and highways pushed their way ever increasingly into previously remote areas, the truly out of the way places will soon be found in the very far north or the Yukon and North West Territories. In these "remote" areas you can still find "pioneers", the lovers of the ever present danger of man pitted against nature, with little more than a flying machine and a consuming love to fly, driving him onward.

### Notes

- 1) James Tippet, "Up In The Air", as quoted in *Childcraft Encyclopedia Vol 1* (Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, 1964, Toronto) p. 210
- 2) Justin de Goutiere, The Pathless Way (Vancouver, Evergreen Press, 1968) p. 17
- 3) Dennis Duffy editor, The Magnificent Distances (Victoria, Queens Printer, 1980) p. 50

- 4) Ibid., p. 15
- 5) Ibid., p. 16-17
- 6) Ibid., p. 17
- 7) Ibid., p. 47
- 8) Corney Reimer, Personal Interview, Cassette Tape (Vanderhoof, 1984)
- 9) 9-16) I did.

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