

Flight in C-FCES, North Bay, Ontario to Lumby, B.C.

June 10-17, 2018

It seems to me that an airplane is for travelling. I bought one two years ago because, where I fly from, there are no longer airplanes for rent and I'm not getting any younger. Kori Ibey, long standing and respected aviation figure at the airport, had C-FCES in his shop for its annual inspection. Leaning his head towards the plane, he said "Larry, this is for sale". A 1965 Cessna 172 with about 3,000 hours total time, quite low for a plane of that age. So I bought it and began to think seriously about a trip to B.C. The summer of 2017 brought extensive forest fires to southern B.C. so I abandoned the idea for that year. But local trips to Kingston and Ottawa kept the idea alive, thanks to the sense of freedom that comes with covering distances in one third of the time that driving takes, along with the marvelous view.

An airplane is a magic carpet. As the craft accelerates down the runway, a hill of air is created for the wings to climb. You climb the hill as high as you want (naturally, within the capabilities of the machine), decide your summit altitude and watch your progress, cross-checking between charts, GPS and other navigational instruments in the plane. You maneuver the plane to line up with the runway at your destination airport and come back to Earth. There is a modest but distinct feeling of accomplishment, a cross-country flight completed.

I learned to fly in Texas, where airports seemed to be located on 10 mile centers. In Canada airports are, by comparison, far and few between. But are they ever friendly, even when no one is around. My first landing after leaving North Bay was Chapleau. I had crossed 200 miles of Canadian Shield, watching Sudbury pass far in the distance to the south, myself moving farther and farther into the hinterland of the boreal forest. Over such terrain, how can the light plane pilot not think about having to land not at an airport? The list of choices is short; forestry roads are widespread but narrow and winding; bogs are also common but known to be soft. Then I began to think: why not head for the stunted trees that often fringe these open areas – the short trunks would absorb much of the incoming energy before the wheels actually contacted the bog surface.

It was Sunday but the airport office was staffed and the attendant came out the minute I stopped at the fuel depot. It was a reception that typified the entire trip – people simply willing to be helpful. The other impression common to all the airports was the sense of open space and, amazingly, the quiet. One has to face the fact that general aviation is a world of the elite. What a privilege it is to view the Earth from a plane you are controlling and landing at places that seem to serve such a small segment of the population. But an airport really serves the entire population. When available, it offers the quickest way of bringing in medical, military or civil help. I was so glad that I was able to take in some of the atmosphere around at least a couple of these airports on my trip.

From Chapleau I continued to Marathon, located just inland from the Lake Superior shore. Slightly to the north of my track, the Hemlo Gold Mine came into view, reminding me that this flight would probably offer many opportunities for seeing geology. The open pit is deep, a fresh exposure of Canadian Shield rock, layering visible even from several miles away. The mining area is flanked to the east with an even more extensive tailings pond, really a lake, coloured reddish brown through to greenish blue. When you look down on the Earth, you also get to see what people are doing. From the ground, a fringe of trees hides logged off areas, mines and housing developments, even whole towns.

The airport really was deserted this time but the smart little terminal building was open, at least on the air side, with a telephone and very clean washrooms, even a tray of candies on a table. This airport is right beside the Trans-Canada Highway, a motel visible just across that road from the field, very convenient if you needed a place to stay. I was planning to camp if I got the impression that this would be OK. Marathon would be a good camping choice as the extensive tie-down area offers lots of open grass and presumably the washrooms would be available. But it was only early in the beautiful afternoon and I was keen to continue on one more leg, to Atikokan.

Take-off westward from Marathon takes you over gently rising terrain, giving an extended parade past the shaggy dark green to almost black spruce of the boreal forest. Then Lake Superior comes into view and for quite a while you get to watch the rocky shores pass beneath, the water pale green changing to turquoise then to deep blue, shoals mimicking this progression. At my altitude of 6,500 feet, I am eventually obliged to contact Thunder Bay Approach, the air traffic controller who keeps an eye on any aircraft high enough to conflict with those inbound or outbound from that airport. Like Sudbury, I could see the city off to the south and only received a brief word from the controller as I left his area.

The terrain around this part of Lake Superior is dominated by mesas and cuestas, flat-topped to gently sloping elevations terminating in cliffs, formed by erosion-resistant layers of magma that intruded existing sedimentary rock. The intrusions have been dated at 1.1 billion years and yet exist almost unchanged from that time, never deformed or metamorphosed since. Here, you are in the interior regions of the Shield, stable for a billion-plus years, while on the peripheries of the proto-continent, blocks of crust have continued to be sutured on. The Appalachians and the Cordillera were all far in the future when the rocks forming these tablelands were injected.

Somewhere below, as I leave the lake behind, is the portage across the height of land separating the Great Lakes drainage from the Arctic Ocean drainage that the Northwest Company would have used, competing with the Hudson Bay Company. My track took me just south of Lac des Mille Lacs

with its myriad arms, the first large lake on the Arctic side of the canoe route. Once, on a trip across Canada, I did find this portage where it crossed a forestry road, a faint but distinct path. It would have fallen into disuse with the Northwest Company's amalgamation with the HBC in 1821. Modern day canoeists seem to be keeping it resurrected. The labyrinth of lakes continues; how could fur traders not need to enlist the aid of native people as guides? Then Atikokan comes into view. I know the wind has picked up and become even a bit gusty; you could see the roughened surface of the lakes. Crossing the runway to enter the downwind leg, I glimpse what I recognize as the flooding open pit of the long-out-of-production Steep Rock Iron Mine. I will hear much more about this next day.

The landing is twitchy, in a crosswind rolling across the bordering shrubs and trees. Off the runway there is a wide apron with the fueling depot on one side and lots of tie-downs on the other. I immediately notice the grass around the apron edge and think that would make for a good tent site. There is an A-Star helicopter resting beside an enormous orange octagonal hoop, 60 or 70 feet across. The people with the helicopter crew are geophysicists carrying out an electromagnetic survey for minerals in the area. It's Rio Tinto doing the work and the geophysical crew remark on the upswing in exploration that is underway. They do not see any problem with my camping – the airport manager lets them do whatever they want. But they won't be flying this evening, given the winds; I hope to see the raising of the surveying device tomorrow morning.



Camping at Atikokan Airport

Atikokan Airport has no facilities besides the fuel and a payphone. There is a small terminal building but it is clearly under renovation, confirmed by the manager next day. I had noticed a small lake on the airport map in the Canadian Flight Supplement (directory of airports in Canada) and so headed down the road to find it for a swim. After about half a km I found the lake, immediately suspicious that it had something to do with the mine as many dead tree trunks protruded from the surface. But the water seemed clear and I noticed several turtles coming up to breath. Whatever the case, it was so refreshing and certain to make for a sound sleep.

Next morning it was getting to be broad daylight under a clear sky by 4 am – I had forgotten the time change between Thunder Bay and here. On that payphone, I found out about a cold front out of sight to the west. Anticipated low ceilings confirmed that I would be likely spending the day in Atikokan. So, just another example of the pilot's dilemma. Over you, perfect flying weather but over the horizon, words and symbols in the briefer's description and on the graphical forecast that you have to turn into a mind's eye view of what they would be like to fly in. "Anticipated low ceilings" was enough to scare me off. And a word for the aviation weather briefers. Every time I called, I received generous, informative, interpretive service, not to mention the subtle conveyance of advice that must accrue from their experience and knowledge of aircraft and pilot capabilities.

I started to walk into Atikokan but before long, the helicopter crew came by and offered me a ride. I asked that they drop me off "in town" and a couple of minutes later they did. I had intercepted the airport manager earlier that morning on his daily inspection of the field and he refueled the plane. He was going to have an invoice mailed to me so I made my way to the municipal office and paid my bill. They knew where the museum was but it was before the 10 am opening time so I ranged around the adjacent park dotted with artifacts from Atikokan's past. Prominent was a Shay logging locomotive as well as mining tools and accessories from the Steep Rock. Though I had no idea Shays had been used this far west in Ontario, it made sense. These sturdy, powerful locomotives were ideal for negotiating hastily laid, temporary tracks.

The museum itself is a marvel, partly for the carefully preserved memorabilia and partly for the staff. Nancy, the assistant curator and Lois, in charge, are encyclopedic in their knowledge of how things were done in the region, ambassadors for the maintenance of our cultural resource. Why do we need these places? I'm working on documenting the life history of a Gwich'in friend from Inuvik. When he and his contemporaries are gone, maybe in about 10-20 years, no one will know that there was a family at the mouth of every major tributary to the Mackenzie River 80 miles upstream of where the Dempster Highway ferry now makes its crossing. Why is this important? There may be some envy involved. More people participated in securing their own sustenance in the past than is the case now. We want to know how well our own ancestors coped with their times.

The museum dog, really Lois', came around the corner as soon as I entered. It is a Spitz, but maybe with some Corgi, at any rate a dear creature, blind but always aware of your whereabouts. Nancy couldn't help enlarging on anything I showed particular interest in. The mine was the big thing. The very rich iron ore, in a steeply inclined panel, required a deep open pit for mining. But the ore was also beneath a lake. One hundred meters of bottom sediments had to be dredged and then the lake pumped out. With the lake drained, mining could begin. It was a massive project for the times, urged on by a World War Two shortage of steel. With prices falling and mining getting more expensive, Steep Rock closed in 1979. Now the vast open pits are gradually filling and are predicted

to begin overflowing in 2070. These waters contain substances released by chemical breakdown of all the rock exposed by the mining, a situation that the provincial government is deciding how to deal with.

Brought tea and cookies by Lois, I sat at a table looking through the record of an aviation exhibit the museum had mounted. Atikokan was a hot bed of activity in the 70s, boasting a flying school and a community of pilots. I also learned about the White Otter Castle, a three-story log house built single-handedly by a trapper and fisher on an out-of-the-way lake north of Atikokan, in the early 1900s. The appealing tale was that the builder would send for a wife who would live with him there. Nancy put this story to rest – the builder only wanted to display his talents and skills – a kind of impressive feat and place to entertain visitors. I was reminded of my Inuvik friend who has something of the same inclinations. Among other accomplishments, he erected a 60 foot pole complete with lighted Christmas decoration to amaze summer and winter travelers along the Mackenzie River.

So an enforced weather delay taken up by a day which simply evaporated. By this time clouds were moving in from the west. That night it rained for about an hour, quiet heavily at times. The rain kind of vindicated my decision to stay. In the morning, the overcast was still low but with breaks in the distance. The tendency seemed to be toward a rising ceiling. My briefing suggested that there was still low cloud about, but mostly to the north of my route to Steinbach, just southeast of Winnipeg. So I returned to the air and could actually see sunny cumulus far, far ahead, past Lake of the Woods. There were one or two very light showers as I approached the lake but by Steinbach, I was into those wonderful scattered puffy clouds.



Out over the Prairies

Over Steinbach I received a courteous reply on the aerodrome traffic frequency as to the preferred traffic pattern. There are two Steinbachs, North and South, about 5 miles apart. I was over North but I suspect the reply was issued from an instructor in the pattern at Steinbach South as it seemed

busy and no one was working the North. Once on the ground, I found a list of contacts to call about fuel. On the second number, another courteous, friendly reply, letting me know the codes for fueling. I almost felt guilty for just arriving and then leaving right after my weather briefing but by this time I had alerted my cousin in Brandon that I was getting close and wanted to be as sure as I could of reaching there this same day.

Climbing back to 6,500 feet would bring me into Winnipeg Class C airspace so I was with them shortly after confirming my take-off time. They made sure I was aware of two special use airspace allotments, right on my track from Steinbach to Brandon, by simply advising me to stay north of the Trans-Canada Highway. Of course, that took me right into Brandon. I was to be there two days as another front worked its way through but I was visiting my cousin anyway. I could have almost walked to their farm as it comes right up to the fence around runway 08. The airport also hosts the Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum with its memorial wall listing all Canadian aviators killed in WWII. They have my dad's logbook, observer's wings and his illustrated diagram for egress from a ditching in the Consolidated Canso he would be navigating.

My cousin farms about 3,000 acres. The crops had sprouted and he needed to spray at the time I visited but winds were holding him back – no desire to have the spray drift onto a neighbour's field. However, the wind was not strong enough to discourage flying and the next day I was able to take my cousins for an hour flight over Spruce Woods Provincial Park to the southeast of Brandon. But not before we discovered that the Brandon Flying Club staff had pulled the plane into their hangar for the night. The front moved through the second day as I was mowing their extensive lawns but I only received a one minute burst of rain. To the south of Brandon, golf ball-sized hail had accompanied the frontal passage. Farming and flying have something in common: for both the weather rules.

The next day I was hoping to get to Lethbridge via stops in Weyburn and Swift Current. There was something going on in southern Alberta, a concentration of thunderstorms that appeared to be strengthening. But the weather looked fine as far as Swift Current so I departed after taking a picture of my cousins by the plane and taking leave of the two airport cats. One I had noticed patrolling the hangar and the other pretty much stayed on the receptionist's counter to greet anyone coming by.

Puffy clouds were again gracing my route; it was easy to spot the particularly concentrated array of lakes constituting Moose Mountain Provincial Park. There is so much to see geologically, crossing the Prairies. The retreat of the last continental ice sheet treated the Prairies like a clean slate. Out from beneath the ice emerged hummocky deposits of sand, gravel and boulder debris called moraines and sinuous ridges called eskers, consisting of gravel deposited by under-ice streams. In

front of the retreating ice, large temporary lakes formed, filling in with silt and clay. And wide rivers took the meltwater away, leaving major channels that today are dry, save for little remnant winding creeks. So much of how Canada looks is the result of the erosion and deposition performed by the ice – seldom is the pilot or passenger out of sight of the glacial legacy when crossing Canada.

Weyburn was another spic and span airport but with no one around. From there, course was set for Swift Current. The cumulous clouds were building a bit so I climbed to 8,500 feet, thinking this altitude would clear the tops. But I began grazing them and for a few minutes was completely out of sight of the Earth. The whole cloud system was rising in the afternoon warmth so as soon as I came over the next openings, I descended back to 6,500 feet and continued below most of the clouds. I was just south of Old Wives Lake and noticed the abandoned Mossbank RCAF station on the chart. Soon I spotted it through big gaps in the clouds, the faint but typical triangular runway pattern plainly visible along with several white squares, the remnant concrete floors of the hangars. My dad trained there in navigation and gunnery in 1942.

Swift Current showed off many tie-downs paralleling an extensive apron and a very new-looking terminal building. The airport manager was in his office and welcomed me, letting me into a room with a telephone for closing my flight plan. Not only that, but he pointed out a car parked down the apron which I was welcome to use for a bit of replacement fuel. This started to look very attractive after the briefing about the strengthening thunderstorms over the provincial boundary in Alberta. I decided to stay put and take advantage of the car to take me into town in search of a hotel. I spent all of the next day in Swift Current but returned before noon to the airport just in case someone else needed the car. The only visitor was a pilot picking up keys in the terminal. He just sat down with me and began telling me about his experiences as a geophysicist in the oil patch, bush pilot, and farmer. He knew about the heritage of the Swift Current RCAF base and let me know about an Avro Anson 'skeleton' that had been retrieved from a farm gully and was under restoration. After he left in his Cessna 170 I wondered over past the remaining RCAF hangar and found the plane. Gosh, lots of wood was



On the ground at Swift Current

incorporated in the construction. There will be lots of work to bring those remains back to exhibition quality but I expect there is lots of help available still – the museum at Brandon has a restored Anson.

I was up very early next morning, forgoing the breakfast included in the night's stay. I had had an encouraging briefing. The thunderstorms were gone. There was still some cloud banked up against the mountains on the B.C.-Alberta border, but just there. Lethbridge was just fine. My thinking was that I would have Medicine Hat and Pincher Creek to bail out to, if things started to get plugged up ahead. At Lethbridge the very helpful Lethbridge Radio advisor gave me a refueling choice; I just went to the nearest one. Again, an attendant came out; I was still getting used to that. Inside there was another cat fast asleep in a lounge chair, a big orange fellow. I was keen to keep going and the briefing was still encouraging. There was coffee in the lounge so I had some while I read framed newspaper pages detailing the origins of the Lethbridge airport.

From Lethbridge, vast fields of wind turbines came into view but many not in motion – the characteristic winds were staying light. I could see the rising ground ahead but the mountain tops were in cloud. What really kept me going was my geographical knowledge of the Crowsnest Pass area. My first field work with the Geological Survey of Canada in 1968 was here. I was familiar with the series of coal mining towns strung along the Alberta approach to the pass and with the Frank Slide – I flew right over it. Immediately to the north I tried to spot the mountainside that had been draglined to follow a coal seam but the view was shadowy. Strip mining is a harsh assault on the Earth's surface but I remember the exposure seen in good lighting. What a magnificent look into the subsurface, the coal seam and enclosing strata, repeated by the faulting that is responsible for these mountains – really a geological monument, much like the other surface mines I had seen.



Approaching Crowsnest Pass

I couldn't safely spare much time looking for old coal workings. The pass was coming up, signaled by Crowsnest Lake. I spotted the small brick building that had been the Summit Inn. A B.C.-Alberta border monument was right outside and legend had it that when closing time came on the Alberta

side, you could just move into B.C. for another hour of drinking. A few thin veils of rain and then I could see Sparwood and on the right the huge stripped mountain top of the Teck Elkford coal mine. Again, the light was poor so it was hard to see the geometry of the rocks and how the mining was coping with the Rocky Mountains style of deformation. Thinning cloud was opening up the route to the Rocky Mountain Trench and soon I was cutting off the corner for the final descent towards Cranbrook.

Cranbrook was sunny and bright under what had become a scattered cumulus layer. I walked over to an operations building behind where a helicopter had just landed. It was letting out a family that had just enjoyed a Father's Day aerial tour. I just wanted to know where I could find a telephone and in no time I was in the pilot's office receiving my next and last briefing – I was now within one leg of my destination. Now I was really following valleys and happy to do so as they harboured the only chances for an off-airport landing, not to mention the few airports along the way. There was no trouble reaching 8,500 feet again, still well below the scattered clouds. This altitude also allowed me the option of cutting more corners while keeping close enough to any valley bottom open area that a glide to one would be possible. But soon I was crossing the last ridge before coming out over Kootenay Lake, a few bumps taking me up a few hundred feet than back down a couple of hundred. There is really nothing flat along either lakeshore, perhaps the most daunting section of the mountain part of the flight. I briefly considered near-level segments of ridge, opened by being above tree line or burnt over. But what kind of air currents would you find? Perhaps an updraft on one side and rotors on the other. Any ridge I had crossed, I had kept well above.

Soon, though, the Kootenay Lake ferry was in view and Nelson would be just around the corner with its in-town airport, not to mention the scheduled airline runway at Castlegar just a bit further on. Then the Arrow Lakes stretch to its ferry with some comforting fields nearby and the final low pass leading to the Okanagan Valley. Now my final landing site was in view or at least the town of Lumby just to the south. I knew the air park where my sister teaches hang-gliding would be monitoring 126.7 MHz and so I gave a call. The owner of the airpark came on. He was in the air and remarked that there were about 20 hang-gliders and parasails in the air. Even though they would be keeping largely to the west side of the landing



At Freedom Flight Park, Lumby, B.C.

area, I wasn't about to test my ability to keep track of them all. My flight plan was filed to Vernon anyway, so there I went, descending to the specified 1,200 feet pattern altitude, required because of the encroaching high terrain around the airfield.

A couple of hours later, after another friendly welcome from the airport manager, which included the codes for gaining access to airside, I heard from my sister that everyone had landed and that there was a break in flying until a towing session started up in the early evening. I headed back and once on the downwind leg for the 2,000 foot grass strip, received the advice to land long of a ditch about 500 feet from the runway end. That was no trouble and I rolled to a stop well before the end of the runway. My sister was at the corner with the taxiway and rode her bike back to the hang-glider set-up area where I was to tie the plane down. It was hugs for two aviation-minded, very close family members.

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