

Summer students and full-time firefighters worked hard at controlling forest fires. Often no docking facilities or sandy beaches existed, but nevertheless, they never hesitated to wade waist deep into the chilly northern Ontario waters.





Passengers of all kinds

En route to Canada in an Air France Airbus 340, I reached for another sliver of sliced smoked salmon and paused to study my fellow travellers. One, a businessman, tapped on a laptop displaying a graph. The pattern, I noticed, resembled the rapidly rising sales of Norseman burgers in Red Lake’s Lakeview Restaurant. Across the aisle, a woman closed an attaché case as a flight attendant made her rounds with chocolates.

On such long hauls, the dreary hours aloft provided plenty of time to recall passengers I’d moved—in everything from taped-up Piper PA-18 Super Cub seaplanes to corrosion-dotted Douglas DC-3s. Most thoughts dealt with the happy types such as a pair of Kentucky-born day-trippers at Labrador Airways’ base in Goose Bay. Like many

“Southern Frieds,” who scuffed the surface of Beaver CF-OUZ’s Edo 4580 floats, their camping equipment consisted of countless cardboard cases of Canadian beer and Hershey bars in plastic bags.

After landing on Park Lake, 65 miles southeast of the Goose, I returned that afternoon to pick them up. Instead of the six-fish legal limit, they proudly posed beside two garbage sacks bulging with trout. Naturally, the overstressed bags burst in the back of the company’s typically spotless Beaver, smothered the floor and soaked seatbelts in slime. On the shoreline, nature would likely take care of the Hershey wrappers in time, but the glistening glass of pulverized beer bottles remained forever to litter the once pristine wilderness. Later, I considered venturing to Kentucky and desecrating their backyards. At least these two left Canada in a “we’re coming back, you-all” mood—words any air service owners dearly love to hear.

Other blithesome memories included hours transporting outdoorsy young women who returned to Kenora, Ontario, each summer as student lake surveyors on 10-day wilderness sojourns. Usually, they reserved a cache of fileted pickerel for me each time I hauled them back to civilization. Once, however, a call came in to retrieve a team near Sioux Lookout after only four days in the field. “Strange,” remarked base AME Nelson Scutt, “but our dispatcher mentioned a medical emergency.” As I sailed the big yellow Stoneboat backward onto a sandy beach, neither of two girls on the shore showed any signs of distress.

As the students helped secure a boat to the airplane’s left side racks, I asked why they requested the flight. Laurie, a tanned blonde wearing blue-jean shorts and the top half of a two-piece bathing suit, unwrapped a tissue on her right hand to reveal a gigantic three-prong fish hook which looked so deeply embedded between her reddened fingers that I felt certain surgery or amputation would be necessary. In spite of what had to be extreme pain, she never complained and, more surprising,

worked with us lifting her share of gill nets, sample pails and paddles into the aircraft. As the great novelist Charles Dickens wrote, she seemed “uncommonly lively” climbing the Otter’s three-step ladder into the cabin. “A tough northerner,” the attending Kenora doctor remarked later.

Few of my passengers endured pain so stoically. In -35°C , two Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources timber cruisers had no choice but to plod several hundred yards through deep snow into a 25-knot wind to board my idling Turbo Beaver. As one approached, I was startled to see an incredibly serious case of frostbite. Cheeks, forehead, nose, ears, chin and neck looked like the top side of an Ellesmere Island glacier. His partner evidently knew how to take care of herself for only a tiny patch of sparkling white crystals appeared beside her lips.

Soon after takeoff, with heater full open, the man’s frozen features began thawing. Although a Pratt & Whitney PT6A-20 engine at maximum power unleashes considerable noise, his screams penetrated my headset and never ceased until long after we landed. Next day, he did not return

to work, nor did his supervisor send him out for cold weather duties the rest of the season. His partner accompanied me into the bush nearly every day.

In northwestern Ontario's summer days, timber cruisers sometimes kept us busy from early morning to late afternoon. Loads of eight or nine occurred frequently, and unfortunately for them, their work areas included tick-infested meadows and swamp grass. En route back to base, they would compete with each other to see who had attracted the greatest number of these insidious eight-legged parasites. One woman counted 40, and another delighted herself by flinging the blood-sucking creatures down my neck until I caught her in the act. A reflexive backward slam of the control column accidentally stood the airplane on its tail, and the subsequent quick push forward cured my passengers of such tricks forever.

Not all who rode beside or behind me played pranks. Some never complained, threw up or criticized my flying. Once, the Ontario Provincial Police requisitioned a Turbo Beaver to move a suicide victim, and by sunset, a black hearse arrived

at our skibase to collect the deceased—he'd been hastily enclosed in a blood-stained vinyl body bag. Three days later, Dryden-based dispatcher Lois Jones advised us to stand by again. This time, the same passenger had to be returned to his village near the Minnesota/Ontario border. The chrome-handled casket did not fit a Turbo Beaver, but luckily our wheel/ski-equipped Stoneboat handled the job—the only time I'd transported the same body twice.

Outstanding, too, were three who climbed into my Piper PA-31 Navajo C-GVPP for a winter night flight to a settlement south of Hudson Bay. Two tough, well-armed policemen, barely visible in parkas, mitts and mukluks, came along to arrest a woman who'd gone on an axe-wielding rampage. One reminded me of Dirty Harry and the other seemed like a character out of *The Godfather*. The final passenger in our northbound aluminum tube turned out to be a petite nurse carrying a frayed army surplus packsack marked with a fluorescent red cross.

In spite of the firepower, straitjacket and nurse's tranquilizer-filled syringes aboard the air-

craft, the forthcoming return with a wild woman did not strike me as a fun flight across Canada's winter wonderland. However, when the princess—axeless by now—arrived at the plane under the care of two male nurses, she remained calm, frothed only a little and enjoyed caramels fed to her by one of the policemen. At 8,000 feet in cloud with de-ice boots pulsing, I almost forgot about what she had been doing shortly before stepping into the Navajo.

Some of the saddest travellers came from Native reserves during the 1960s and 1970s. Recognizable by tin cans with sputum samples sealed inside and large manila envelopes containing x-rays, tuberculosis victims did not return to their families for years, if ever again. In Beavers and Cessna 180s, they looked longingly down at the tarpapered, log-sided boxes of the only homes they had ever known as we tracked south to sanitariums.

At The Pas, Manitoba, a man and his wife belted themselves into Cessna 180 CF-SLJ. A friendly pair, they asked about the airplane and what circumstances brought me to Lamb Airways as we cruised the 40 miles to Moose Lake. We ar-

rived over the Cree settlement and spotted a cluster of boats and canvas canoes several hundred yards from the community dock. The figures in them used long wooden poles to push sheets of floating ice away, and idling outboard motors created white swirls in the water. Circling, we watched as many hands below lifted a long narrow object into one of the boats. "I wonder what that thing is?" I asked.

"That's my father," said the man beside me. "He drowned and they've just found his body."

Not all reverie at Flight Level 330 in the Airbus included unhappy, mad or thoughtless passengers. Hand-holding newlyweds, dedicated conservation officers and, most enjoyable, giggling female Junior Rangers were always a pleasure and sometimes, an inspiration. Often, the "JR girls," as we called them, keen with their first exposures to wilderness, invited me to share their lakeshore lunches. Although stale peanut butter sandwiches hardly compared to the Lakeview's fare, I would never have traded those dried-up chunks of bread and the company that came with them for anything.

The nasal cabin speakers and subsequent smash down airline-style landing in Toronto brought me back to reality. Soon, I'd be on the road to Red Lake, inbound for the famous Lakeview. Seated in that hallowed place under the watchful eyes of owners Ron and Joyce Gangloff and sipping coffee prepared by star staff such as Belinda Sayeau and Monica Boland, I would continue reflecting on other characters who'd crossed my path. Perhaps, if awakened gently from my reverie, I might remember to place my standard generous tip upon the table.

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Right: Most Junior Rangers came to northern Ontario from southern parts of the province. Few had experienced wilderness overnights, trail work and brush clearing before arriving at bases like Atikokan, west of Thunder Bay.

