

COWBOYS OF THE SKIES

HOW BUSH FLYING OPENED THE CANADIAN NORTH

In 1920, the Canadian North was something of a “wild west” — rugged, uncharted territory that was hard to get to and barely explored. Bush flying changed that, opening up the wilderness in new ways. While aviation was relatively new, World War I pushed its development, leaving Canada with improved technology and newly experienced pilots and aircraft mechanics returning home from war.

Unlike the U.K. and U.S., which quickly repurposed military aviation technology for commercial use, Canada hesitated. With a smaller population and less immediate economic benefit, the Canadian government was reluctant to subsidize a fledgling aviation industry. However, one thing was needed: a way to traverse the vast and largely uncharted North.

“Bush flying was primarily about natural resource management and exploitation,” explains Erin Gregory, Curator of Aviation and Space at the Canadian Aviation and Space Museum in Ottawa. “The first bush plane in Canada was a Curtiss HS-2L called *La Vigilance*.”

The surplus war aircraft was initially used to monitor forestry holdings of Laurentide, a pulp and paper company. “Throughout the 1920s, bush planes were used to explore and service the northern areas of the country that were not accessible by other means of transportation,” Gregory says.

These versatile “flying trucks” quickly became indispensable for a variety of rural tasks, from firefighting to monitoring illegal logging and managing natural resources. “Their rugged and versatile design, often equipped with floats or skis, allowed them to land almost anywhere, making them perfect for the challenging Canadian terrain,” Gregory says.

Even the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) recognized its value, as military pilots, referred to as “bush pilots in uniform,” became adept at navigating the remote northern wilderness.

Today, a faithful reproduction of *La Vigilance* is on display at the museum, alongside the recovered hull of the original plane. The original aircraft crashed in 1922 and was considered disappeared until its wreckage was recovered from Foss Lake, Ont., in 1967. It took nearly two decades to restore using parts from three other planes and original materials.

La Vigilance is far from the only bush plane you'll see at the museum, among its 8,500 objects including over 130 aircraft. The museum's bush flying collection, part of the “Bush and Northern Flying gallery,” showcases aircraft evolution to meet changing needs. The Noorduyt Norseman, developed in 1935, filled a crucial gap as bush flying needs evolved and supported Canada during World War II. Its robust design made it more of a “flying truck” with robust radial engines, large doors, and the ability to be fitted with skis or floats, ideal for mining and



▲ A de Havilland DHC-6 Twin Otter on display at the Canadian Aviation and Space Museum in Ottawa.

▼ The Bush and Northern Flying gallery focuses on northern development through aviation.



remote access.

Another iconic aircraft is the De Havilland Canada Beaver, developed in the 1940s. “The Beaver is arguably Canada’s

most successful bush plane,” says Gregory. Designed initially as a civilian bush plane, even the U.S. military ordered it and used it during the Korean and Vietnam wars. The Beaver’s all-metal construction, special flap design for short takeoff and landing, and cargo capacity made it a flying pickup truck. Over 1,600 Beavers are still in operation worldwide, one with a fully electric engine owned by Harbour Air.

This development wasn’t limited to Canada. Countries facing similar geographic challenges, including Russia, Australia, and the northern US, also innovated bush flying techniques.

The Canadian Aviation and Space Museum hosts famous bush planes, highlighting their role in developing the North. In the coming years, the museum will be delving deeper into the human stories behind bush flying, including Indigenous contributions. Gregory emphasizes the importance of these stories, saying, “These people flying north were brave, but they weren’t completely alone. Indigenous people often saved these pilots when things went wrong and those stories get lost.” Like much of Canada’s history, the impact on Indigenous communities in the region is complex. The museum aims to share a balanced view, recognizing these various aspects of bush flying’s legacy. 🛩️

PHOTOS: CANADIAN AVIATION AND SPACE MUSEUM ARCHIVES