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# YUKON NEWS

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## Planes, crashes and memories

Monday August 3, 2009

By Tor Forsberg

Paul Tubb/Yukon News



A Lake amphibian takes off during the Governor General's Cross Canada Cup in Watson Lake on the weekend.

There was a traffic jam at Watson Lake airport on Saturday.

As well as fire bombers and helicopters running back and forth to the forest fires in the area, there were 15 light aircraft participating in the Governor General's Cross Canada Cup.

This rally, which covers 11,500 kilometres in 17 days, involves pilots from all over the world, flying into every province and territory in Canada. It was organized to co-ordinate with the 100 years of flight celebration.

The pilots, from Australia, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, the US and Canada, were sitting around chatting before dinner.

The best part is meeting people in the communities, said one pilot. "We'd never have an opportunity like this if we were travelling on our own. The communities have been so welcoming."

"The scenery! To someone from Detroit, this is unbelievable," said another. "These miles and miles of mountains and trees with no signs of human habitation."

During the community dinner held under a big tent at the airport, event organizer Catherine Tobenas managed to wrangle the only amphibious craft in the fleet to fly Rhonda Rosie to her isolated bush home. The forest firefighters had commandeered the Beaver which was to have taken her to the remote lake where she and her husband live. It would be hard to say who was more pleased by the arrangement, Rhonda, to be getting home, or Chris, the pilot, who was flying her there.

The town of Watson Lake hosted the flyers with a dinner catered by Brenda Leach of BJ's and live music provided by Gerald Edzerza and Norman Jack. Several local boat owners were taking people out on the lake for rides

and there were booths selling hotdogs, cotton candy and soft drinks.

On this day, there was also a memorial service. In addition to speeches by the mayor of Watson Lake, Nancy Moore, and deputy premier Elaine Taylor, there were two very special guests. Kenneth Quarton of Toronto and Gerald Quarton of Whitehorse – cousins who were meeting for the first time on this historic day – were eager to talk about the significance of this service.

Gerald, or Gerry as he is known, was living in Watson Lake many years ago, working for Dave Kalles replacing the windows of the control tower at the airport. While he was there, his wife happened across a monument at the airport commemorating the American Lend Lease program. But the aircraft it was commemorating actually had nothing to do with this program.

Gerry knew this, because his uncle flew one of them.

“I just wanted it made right, so I began researching, cross-referencing serial numbers with information from the Veterans Affairs office,” said Gerry.

His uncle had crashed in a military plane.

“And the first thing that is important to note is that these three military airplane crashes were assumed to be part of the American Lend Lease program,” he said. “But they were not — they arrived after the Americans had pulled out.

“They were the Winter Experiment Establishment, a joint British and Canadian endeavour in which they were testing British designed and built aircraft for cold weather flying. There were Sea Furys, Lincolns and Meteors. They only flew between Watson Lake and Edmonton – they didn’t go anywhere else.”

“The Sea Fury was the fastest prop-driven aircraft built,” Ken added. “And the only ones to have shot down MIGs in the Korean War.”

“I got in touch with Colum McCready, the town CAO, and he was interested, willing to do whatever was necessary to redress the situation with the monument, and the misinformation about the program,” said Gerry. “He was a great help, and I am grateful to him.”

The memorial service was poignant for Ken. “It was my first meaningful encounter with my father,” he said. “My twin brother and I were only three months old when he was killed and I’ve always felt the lack of his presence in my life. My mother, in England, is thrilled by this, too; it is a long overdue recognition for what happened here in this remote place.”

“It’s a sort of closure for me, personally as well as historically,” said Gerry. “Even the veterans at the Legion in Whitehorse had no idea that three servicemen died while in active service in the Yukon.”

Gerald Quarton was killed in a Sea Fury on January 17, 1948.

Ernest Vern McWilliams died in a Lincoln on November 10, 1948 and William Walter Mollen in a Sea Fury on January 29, 1951.

Tor Forsberg is a freelance writer living in Watson Lake.

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2°C

**Light Rain**

**Sunrise** 8:19 am

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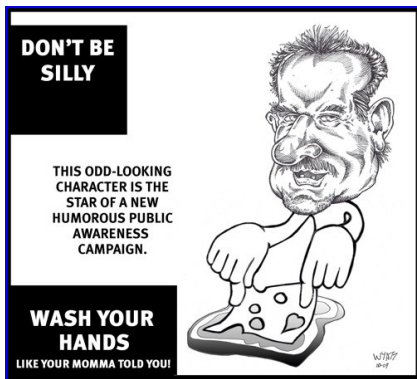


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