

Jeanne Muldoon interviews **Herb Davidson** who was one of the first instructors at No. 12 Elementary Flying Training School.

### **Excerpt 1- Origins of No. 12 Elementary Flying Training School and finding instructors**

**HERB DAVIDSON (H.D.)** - The war had reached the state where training could no longer be done in England because the Germans were coming over and the pilot trainees could be, could be just sitting ducks for the great calibre of aircraft that the Germans had. So the flying clubs of Canada were approached to see whether they would take over the management of the various Elementary Flying Training Schools. Kitchener-Waterloo, it happened, was asked if they would take over the operation of the Goderich Elementary School, which was just being [tape repeats]. .. Manager of Sky Harbour No. 12 and the three, the three instructors, flying instructors at Kitchener were to come up to Goderich. Eddie Jessop, you may recall, he was secretary, I think of the flying club, and he was brought up in a capacity. So it ended up that Harvey McPherson and Jim Davidson were to be, in that order, Chief Flying Instructor and Assistant Chief, and Hopkinson was to take over the ground school.

They recruited other people to take over different subjects. Harold Bettger for one. Harold was, I guess, because of his mathematical background, he was encouraged to take over the navigational teaching assignment.

So from the other end, the next problem was people to fly as instructors on a daily basis and look after the instruction of the students that would be later coming in. So I think at the time Kitchener didn't have very many people. No one school had very many people that had enough hours to go in and qualify as instructors. They had, I think, Bob Moore, was one person from Kitchener-Waterloo. There were others that were in various stages of training that had to take a little bit more time to reach that point of development.

**JEANNE MULDOON (J.M.)** - Right, I understand.

**H.D.** - So I was approached at Barker Field with my limited commercial pilot's rating. I was asked would I be interested in the instructional business. So, wanting to be in the Air Force, I was quite happy to agree, to take the course. So with about an hour of instruction on a Tiger Moth at Sky Harbour, we were asked to report to Trenton, so in, I think it was late August of 1940, we, a bunch of us were assembled at what was called Course 16 at Trenton and oh, there were possibly 20 or 30 of us but seven of the group, it turned out, did eventually come to Goderich. We spent about three weeks in Trenton, as a matter of fact, it was quite dramatic too because the first two days we were there, there were three fellows killed. Not in our group but on the station.

## **Excerpt 2- Ferrying aircraft to Goderich in snowy conditions**

**HERB DAVIDSON (H.D.)** - After three weeks we qualified as flying instructors and we were shipped immediately to Goderich. It was October 11 in 1940 that I came into Goderich, walked up East Street from the old Canadian National and coming from the City of Toronto, Goderich was a pretty forlorn looking place at that time but it's nevertheless a wonderful town. On the same course as myself, coming to Goderich were Bob Moore, from Goderich, myself Herb Davidson, Nels Seeler, Hank Henry, Jack Cochrane, and there were two Americans, one was Bud Fuller, and the other was Keith "Georgia" Gilbert, who came Georgia, had the accent to prove it. Anyway, and so, the next thing we had to do was to bring our aircraft in. At the time when we got here, we were hanging out at the old civilian hanger on the south east end of the field, you may recall that.

**JEANNE MULDOON (J.M.)** - I certainly do.

**H.D.** - And the number one hanger to be the Air Force hanger was under construction. So in the mean time, we had to bring aircraft in so, we would have, we would go down five in a car. I remember going down with Frank Roads, through Goderich Motors. I guess they had rented a car from Stan Previtt, the Ford dealer and Frank drove us down to Fort Erie and we picked up our aircraft and we ferried them back to Goderich. So we all had a few trips ferrying the aircraft that we're going to use for instruction in. As a matter of fact, one of the trips coming in, it was, this had to be one of the early snowstorms, and quite a bad snowstorm, oddly enough in October. And we, the bunch of us, there were three aircraft, I guess, coming in on that group, the fellow who was leading the flight was the, was Flying Officer Johnny Jordan, and Johnny, possibly, had the least experience of any and he kept... We were flying through squalls all the way up and in a form of a semblance of order and I remember Kenny Parr was in one aircraft, I was in the other, and Johnny had Roy Faulkner as a passenger. Roy was the Corporal Disciplinarian for the students to be. And anyway, John would all of a sudden go in to presumably land in a field somewhere because the storm was bad, then he'd change his mind and head off and we'd go shooting off after him. And all the time we were being forced north and north and north and we'd ended up north of Tiverton. And I remember our gas tanks were just about empty and it was getting dark and we knew that we were north of Goderich but we didn't know exactly where because Goderich area was fairly new to us. And I remember all of a sudden the other two aircraft made a turn, and I lost the two aircraft in a snowstorm and so I never did see them again. So I went in and I forced landed in a farmer's field up north of Tiverton and so I learned later that the other two aircraft had landed within about a half a mile where I was also, successfully. Well...

**J.M.** - And you didn't have any radio contact.

**H.D.** - We had no radio. As a matter of fact, a lot of the aircraft we brought up, there were production problems and some of them came up without cowlings, so they ran very cold during the winter months.

**J.M.** - Right.

**H.D.** - Some of the instrumentation was missing, limited as it was complete. And so you couldn't do much.

**J.M.** - You were flying by the seat of your pants.

**H.D.** - You were definitely flying by the seat of your pants. I know it was very rough, it was stormy. I did a lot of swearing at Johnny Jordon from, all the way from, it started to snow in the Hamilton area and then I thought we would have gone into Hamilton. And then I thought for sure we'd go into Kitchener but he persisted in going and he was leading the flight, so we stuck with him but I bet I called him everything under the sun. But, anyway...

**J.M.** - It's a good thing you didn't have radio contact.

**H.D.** - Probably, knowing the way I handle things, is I probably would have called him.

**J.M.** - Well I bet there was several others that were in the same mood.

**H.D.** - Yeah, well anyway, I know Roy Faulkner was pretty scared. But that gives an indication of the kind of conditions we encountered back at that time. As I mentioned, the war wasn't going well for the British, so came the official opening of Sky Harbour and I can't just be sure what the date was but it was after the 11<sup>th</sup>, the date that I arrived. So, it was around the time of the official opening that the first group of students came into Sky Harbour and there were 35 in all. All inexperienced people. There were seven of us to do the labour and so they gave us five students a piece. The students were all in need of instruction so it meant that you couldn't spell off and you have to work pretty long hours, pretty long days and it turned out we were working seven days a week. So finally we reached the point that we got where those that could qualify to solo to that point, then another course came in, but this time we had two or three replacement instructors. We had the likes of the Schneiders and the Parrs, and the Fittons, the MacIntyres. They came in so they were able to takeover. Some of the people we have trained, we retained. I retained three of my original five then they gave me two new people out of the second course to come in so that you could balance off your flyings. You could have someone doing some solo practice while you were teaching the other. Because at that time, usually, each course took half a day of ground school, half a day of flying, so you had your senior course possibly in the morning and your junior course in the afternoon.

**J.M.** - Did you go up for about an hour and a half?

**H.D.** - Yeah, you couldn't make your flights too long. You had problems. You had, it's like ones who could sail without feeling sick and ones who can be out in choppy water. So you have to bear in mind that they can only absorb so much, you have a lot to teach them and you teach according to their degree of reception. And anyway, I can remember, not in either one of these courses, it was a little later course, having one, I had two students, one of them turned out to be a definitely above average student, he's from the west and the other one was just a borderline type of student, with a lot of guts and determination. And I think one of the early flights with this student, who turned out to be above average was, I think it was the first day I taught him what they call incipient spinning and prior to a spin, or maybe giving him just an introduction to a spin and when we came down, he hadn't said anything but he had a paper bag in his hand that was full and he said, "Where will I put this sir?" He had brought up. He hadn't complained, so with that particular student, you use discretion. And it turned out that it definitely paid dividends because I had correspondence from him when he went overseas. Lloyd Elliot was his name from one of the Western provinces. He was a flight lieutenant at that time and he'd seen a lot of action over there so it definitely did pay off. You can use the term babying, just using good common sense goes to save a tremendous pilot.

**J.M.** - But he had to have the time to be able to become a pilot

**H.D.** - You had to use common sense and discretion. Some people would have, I know of some that would have taken delight in terrifying them and I couldn't see that that was our goal. Our goal was to produce a good product, so that was one instance where there was that little humorous side to it.

### **Excerpt 3- Testing students**

**HERB DAVIDSON (H.D.)** - They used to test the students at this point in time, they'd give them a twenty hour progress test and they'd give them a 50 final test. And this other fellow, he, I can remember I had an awful job getting him solo. He'd make a fairly respectable take-off and then he would make, maybe next time, make a fairly safe landing. But he could never put the two together. And anyway, you couldn't, you knew that you wanted him so badly to make it and you knew he so badly wanted to make it. He had lot's of determination, lot's of pluck and anyway he, it was to the point when I kept stalling the examining officer. I finally get him solo but I kept stalling the examining officer off, and I had him up to 40 hours before he got his 20 hour test and the examining officer was going to scrub him and he said, well he's so close to 50 hours, we'll let him go to 50 hours then we can wash him out then. Well I think I built him up to about 60 hours and he just scrapped through by the skin of his teeth. And anyway, he went to Brantford to Service Flying on Ansons, and as luck would have it, the instructor he got there was from his home town. He came from Fort William, Ontario and so the instructor treated him

with the same kind of kid gloves that I did. And he graduated but he never did develop into a really alert pilot and he ended up as a drogue pilot down in Jarvis.

#### **Excerpt 4- Trying to find a missing student**

**HERB DAVIDSON (H.D.)** - But an interesting thing happened during that time, we used to give them a dual cross-country flight before we sent them solo. And usually it was over the same course, so they had, there was little risk of them getting lost, little risk of them smacking up an aircraft or killing themselves. And so down we went to London on a dual instructional trip. And while we were ready to take off he said, "Sir what'd you say we come back here next Saturday?" He said, "Glenn Miller is going to be at the university here and we could listen to Glenn Miller." Well that was typical of his spirit. He was a good guy.

**JEANNE MULDOON (J.M.)** - He wanted to come and do a little dancing.

**H.D.** - Well, it came time for the kids to do their solo, of course. So, he was given an aircraft and went over to the check out. This was first thing in the morning and there was usually quite a group signing out at the same time. And, anyway, I can remember going over there and I was standing behind waiting my turn and I remember Harvey McPherson, the Chief Flying Instructor, coming out and he said there are reports of bad weather and ground fog south of Goderich down London way, so if you encounter any bad weather, turn around and come back. Well, everyone took off for various programs and I remember I took a student up and I gave him, I had him up for almost two hours. I gave him a bunch of things, aerobatics probably, the student was getting close to graduation. So I came back down and I hardly had a chance to get out of the aircraft and Harvey McPherson was there and he said, you'd better get down to London. He said, the weather's bad down there and they can hear this, Murphy, circling the Crumlin airport and everyone else turned back but Murphy, he can't get in, the weather has just socked right in. It was raining, and fog, and low cloud. So I just went in and grabbed my map and I just drew a course, like a track line along from Goderich to London, knowing that I'd be flying over the top of soup and so I graduated at the half way mark, and the quarter and the three quarters so I could establish, like some of the compasses were really way off, so I could establish a definite course to fly before I lost site of the ground. So I was able to see well enough that I had my course determined and I knew which compass heading to follow to take me down in the area of Crumlin. Well it wasn't long, the three towers, the three radio towers at Clinton, you could just see the tops of them and everything was fogged right into the ground below that. So I was able to take my time to the first quarter mark which meant that I could multiply that by four and it would tell me when I was over Crumlin approximately. So, and then I could start to look and hope that the weather would clear and maybe see Murphy and bring him back. But anyway, so I flew on and there was no sight of the ground at all. Beautiful up where I was, nice and bright, but when I reached my estimated time of arrival, we were still

over solid fog so looking well to the right, I guess as a civilian pilot I'd been to the old Lambeth field, and looking well over to the right, I looked and could see what looked like a few breaks, scud clouds. So I flew over there then I tried to get in under but I was flying up the main streets of London at hydro wire level and I couldn't get through at all so I had to, I come back out and of course. So I out above of the cloud and then a civilian aircraft from the old Lambeth field, which I was familiar with, thinking that I was Murphy, he was searching for Murphy, so anyway, he motioned back to the Lambeth field, well I knew where Lambeth field was and I went in and of course, after I landed, they realized that I was also looking for him and I thought of course that they had some word on Murphy, which they didn't, so with that I taxied out to take off and anyway, just about the time I was running up the engine to take off, a car came steaming out across the field and he said Murphy has landed all right, he's okay, the aircraft's okay, and it didn't dawn on me where because that was the most important thing. He had made a good forced landing somewhere. So back I go to Goderich, and as I mentioned, the compasses were sometimes really ropey, and so I, not knowing, where I would, whether the bad weather had extended up to Goderich, or whether I would be able to see anything on the way back, I decided to fly on a north-west course by the compass, about three one five, and anyway, first thing I knew, I was at Strathroy, the compass is about 45 degrees off true, so I identified in the smog and fog and scud cloud, I identified the Strathroy name on the railway station, so I was able to map read, I found a road that was leading approximately north, so I took the compass reading, and I didn't care what the compass read as long as I knew I was flying north by map reading, that was the reading I had to hold to get back to Goderich. So anyway, the weather cleared just north of Bayfield, and I landed. It was about one o'clock, all the rest of the staff were coming back from lunch and as I got out, some of them were having their own little joke about Wrong Way Murphy and I said, "Well he got down alright didn't he?" And they said, "Yeah, but do you know where?" And anyway, he had landed on university grounds, on some of the open areas around the university. And so anyway, his course was graduating, I think, within about a week of that time. And Murphy, the weather was still kinda bad down that way and Murphy hadn't returned yet, because there was aircraft, I guess, he was to bring it back. And anyway, so came graduation day and ship out day, the rest of the class, his class, got in touch with Murphy and said they were leaving without him, so Murphy came back but he almost got to see the Glenn Miller show that he had been so intent on seeing. And it was almost as though it was deliberate but as I always said, he lacked a lot in the way of ability but he had that drive and initiative. And if they had said you go out tonight and you bomb Hannover in Germany he would have been the last one to turn back. He had a lot of guts and determination, you bet.