

Riding for a Wing and a Prayer

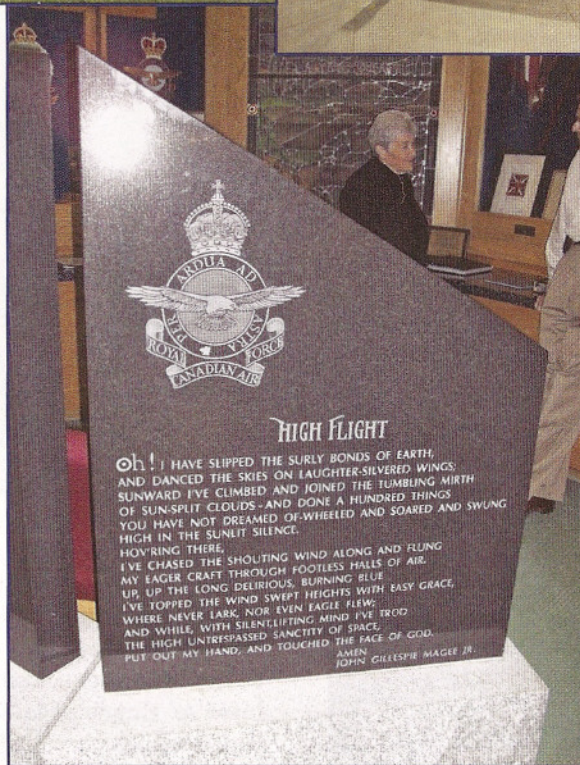


A visit to the Royal Canadian Air Force National Museum

Robert Laford

“High in the sunlit silence; Hov’ring there I’ve chased the shouting wind along, and flung my eager craft through footless halls of air”. That poetic statement is an excerpt from the poem High Flight by WWI & WWII Canadian Pilot Gillespie Magee. The first time I read that poem I was instantly transported to my motorcycle. The feelings that the author put on paper from being a pilot were similar to those feelings that I have when I am in the saddle of my motorcycle.

The Royal Canadian Air Force National Museum of Canada at the Trenton Air Base in Ontario, Canada was the place I first read Mr. Magee’s words inscribed on the pilot’s memorial. My “need to ride” dipstick was getting low and with a recently minted passport that was itching to be christened by a ride across the Canadian border, a revisit to the museum and the memorial was in order. Looking at the maps of the northeastern United States and our nearby neighbors in Canada, the decision was made to venture into Ontario. The late summer days of September are a perfect



time to travel through New England, New York, and the eastern Canadian Provinces. The mornings are cool, but the days quickly warm with a welcoming sun. Summertime traffic of traveling vacationers have weaned as children have returned to school, offering the rider less congested roads and more space to be alone with your thoughts along your path. The rural views are relaxing and invigorating at the same time. Fields full of crops planted by the farmer are working towards the completion of their growing season. The roadside sights, sounds, and smells join the wind and weathers caress to peak all your senses. The wildflower fields, rows of corn, acres of planted sunflowers, as well as the horses, sheep, and cattle all enjoy their peaceful hillsides.

The route from New England to Ontario passes through New York’s Adirondacks. A haven for motorcycles, the Adirondacks offer miles of well maintained roads through pristine wilderness and many welcoming communities. Ranging from the St. Lawrence River and the Tug Hill Plateau in the

west, to Lake Champlain and Lake George in the east, the region contains over six million acres and is the largest wilderness area east of the Mississippi River. Whether the rider is looking for solitude through winding mountain roads or combining the beautiful vistas with watching the two-legged life forms in towns like Lake Placid, Saranac Lake, or Tupper Lake the Adirondack Region can easily be a destination point for a riding vacation in itself.

The planned crossing point from New York into Canada was at Ogdensburg, NY. New York Route 37 leads to Route 812 and the border crossing - turning into Highway 16 in Johnstown, Ontario. The actual crossing is over the Ogdensburg-Prescott International Bridge, a suspension bridge, also known as the St. Lawrence Bridge, a few kilometers east of Prescott, Ontario in Canada.

Highway 401 is a major east-west highway, but as with any Interstate-type road it is high speed and high traffic. A few miles west from the border crossing, the opportunity arose to take the Thousand



Islands Parkway. The Parkway extends from near Brockville to Gananoque, Ontario. It is a two-lane road (posted at 80km/h) that follows the north shore of the St. Lawrence River. It is a very scenic ride along the shores of the river and offers a peaceful alternative to the nearby Highway 401. Evidence of the recreational aspects of the area abound. The parkway is also home to an adjacent bicycle trail where bicyclists, picnickers, hikers, and others enjoy this stretch of scenery.

The parkway also interchanges with Highway 137, an extension of



US Interstate 81, which serves as the Ontario approach to the international Thousand Islands Bridge before ending in Gananoque with Highway 2.

Traveling further west along Highway 2 we pass through several towns and also the city of Kingston. Traveling through the more populated communities you frequently see references to "Loyalist" in names of businesses, roads, and organizations in the area. American Loyalists were people loyal to Britain who fled the Thirteen Colonies during and after the American Revolution. Approximately 40,000 people fled to Canada and formed the basis of the English-speaking society in Canada. They primarily settled in Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia. The area along the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario offer the history buff a plethora of chances to learn about the Canadian viewpoint of the American Revolution and the development of the relationship between the two countries. It is easily surmised that similarities in our heritages between those of us in the 'States' and our Canadian cousins far outweigh our differences.

Once through the city of Kingston, Highway 2 brings us back to the rural character of the ride. Small villages, farms, and open land return to the view of the rider. The terrain of the area is relatively flat. The roads offer gentle curves and crests and dips opposed to the mountain roads of the earlier Adirondack Mountains.

Passing through Napanee, we approach the Bay of Quinte along the northern shore of Lake Ontario and through the Trent River Valley. Prince Edward County forms the area between the bay and the Great Lake, and the Quinte-West area rests to the north of the bay. In centuries past, the bay offered the traveling Native Americans and explorers a calmer waterway avenue from the St. Lawrence River towards the open waters of the lake.

One specific community within the Quinte's area that is reminiscent of this historical significance of the area is Carrying Place. This locale was even thought to have a better future than Toronto when water transport was the principal means of travel. It is situated on the narrow neck of land separating the western end of the bay from Weller's Bay on Lake Ontario. Both ends of the old portage route were well-developed to accommodate the needs of the travelers that were passing either by foot or by water. "Carrying Place" refers to the piece of land that divides the Bay and Lake Ontario. Used for centuries by the natives and early settlers it was where travelers "carried" their canoes from the bay to the open waters of the Great Lake.

Our ride along Highway 2 turns south in Belleville to follow the road along the southern edge of the Bay of Quinte along County Route 3 and through Carrying Place up into Trenton along the western edge of the bay. Trenton is the administrative and commercial center of the city of "Quinte West." Quinte West is an amalgamation of the city of Trenton, the village of Frankford and the townships of Murray and Sidney that took place in the 1990s. Trenton is home to the Trenton Air Station and the RCAF National Air Force Museum, and the destination goal for this above-the-border ride.

The museum boasts the largest number of aircraft on static display and the most skilled team of restoration volunteers of any military museum in Canada with over twenty aircraft on display both inside the museum and on its 16-acre airpark adjacent to the museum building. The museum also tells the military aviation story via a wide variety of artifacts, displays, and photographs to compliment the aircraft that are on site.

One of the gems of the museum is the WWII Halifax Bomber. In April 1945, Halifax NA 337 left England to drop supplies to the Norwegian resistance. Returning after the successful sortie, it was hit by German anti-aircraft fire and ditched on Lake Mjosa in Norway. All but the tail gunner would succumb to hypothermia in the frigid waters. The Halifax lay under 750 feet of water until recovered in 1995 by the Halifax Aircraft Association. Over a 10-year period, the plane was fully restored by the "The Halifax Aircraft Restoration Team." Of the 6,178 Halifax bombers built, only 3 exist today.

During the early steps of the restoration I had the opportunity to view the progress over several years during the middle years of the project. To see the completely restored craft is awe-inspiring of the dedication of the restoration volunteers and the countless airmen that flew this craft and its American counterpart. The team did an extraordinary job in restoring the aircraft to be technically correct as originally built. This exhibit tells the full story of this particular bomber, from its design stage to operational use dur-

HIGH FLIGHT

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
 And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
 Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
 Of sun-split clouds - and done a hundred things
 You have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung
 High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there
 I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
 My eager craft through footless halls of air.
 Up, up the long delirious, burning blue,
 I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace
 Where never lark, or even eagle flew -
 And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
 The high untresspassed sanctity of space,
 Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

*Pilot Officer Gillespie Magee
 Killed 11 December 1941 • No 412 squadron, RCAF*

ing the Second World War including a step by step view of the life of NA 337 2P-X and the destiny of its aircrew.

Intertwined in the airpark with aircraft on display are a number of memorials to the different units, squadrons, or trade specialists that have served over the years. There are also over 9,000 individual memorial stones placed along the airpark's walkway. These stones have been placed on behalf of Canadian airmen and airwomen who have served, or are serving, in one of Canada's Air Forces. Bearing the words "Ad Astra" and adorned by an Air Force Roundel, the stone reflects the person's name, their hometown, province and the years of birth and death. Each offers its visitor the opportunity to contemplate and honor the contributions made by those men and women who have served not only in the Canadian Military, but those individuals that all of us hold dear, no matter where they served.

It's time to retrace our steps back towards home - to once again enjoy the countryside in solitude with our thoughts. And as we leave the museum to throw a leg over our ride, the words of Mr. Magee that are etched in the museum's memorial echo in my head.