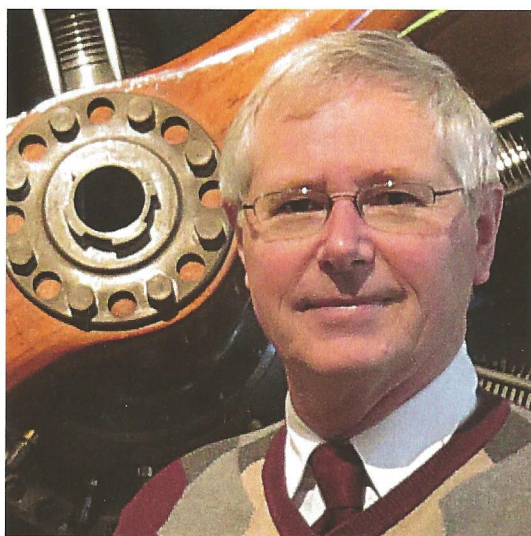


DEFINING NORTHERN AVIATION

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What exactly is northern aviation in Canada? The answer varies, depending upon who is asked. Some think of small float aircraft operating out of breathtakingly scenic lakes, perhaps with someone holding up a trophy fish on the dock. There are those who connect it to the perils of being on the frontier side of aviation, as dramatized in television shows such as *Arctic Air*. Still others view it simply as the local bus and delivery truck into their isolated community; or, even more importantly, as the local ambulance service. To some, the term creates visions of prospectors or scientists being transported into the barrens, or perhaps out onto the sea ice.

So, what's the true picture? Actually, it's a meld of all of the above. Any one of those evocative images I've described is still a reality today. Yet although the climate, vast distances and unforgiving terrain can still bring the frontier to mind, northern aviation today is increasingly recognized as an efficient, modern and integrated transportation system.

Times are changing. In most areas you can no longer hear the sound of a piston aircraft; in particular, the distinctive sounds of the radial engine are waning. Many mourn their passing, but in the North the turbine engine is now king. Climb into the cockpit and you are likely to find the latest in navigation equipment; in several cases, you'll see full glass instrument panels.

Now, mind you, don't expect to see the very latest cutting-edge aircraft everywhere. Shorter gravel runways in many locations, along with the inescapable economics of servicing long thin routes to small communities, pretty much preclude that. The North will always rely on the aftermarket; however, that no longer means long outdated aircraft. It now means sophisticated, relatively modern machines. The Beech 1900D, King Air 350, Dash 8, and ATR42 are becoming more the norm. Even the larger jet carriers serving the North are moving away from the venerable B737-200 to newer variants, on routes where runways permit.

Gone are the days of a community being ecstatic about getting twice-weekly service, or taking days to travel to a major city in southern Canada. Now, you can get to most locations at least five days a week. In a day, you can get from Pond Inlet, Nunavut, to Ottawa, or from Vancouver to Norman Wells, N.T. Well, that is assuming the weather cooperates! Old Man Winter can still turn that trip into a journey of several days.

Apart from weather, today's northern operators still face many challenges. The top five are:

1. **Weather Reporting.** Many locations do not have 24-hour weather reporting, even in today's high tech world. The North can be a vast, data-sparse area, particularly at night. Often, flights are delayed or cancelled simply due to the unavailability of adequate weather information required for dispatch.
2. **Airport Infrastructure.** Many airports in the North are still served by shorter gravel runways. This limits the types of aircraft that can service them. Many of the more modern and efficient aircraft are unable to use these runways. In addition, the ones that do use them sustain gravel damage on a regular basis, driving up the cost of operation.
3. **Instrument Approaches.** There are very few instrument landing systems in the northern and remote regions of Canada; and what ground-based approaches there are tend to be old non-directional beacon circling ones. Here, GPS, and in particular GPS/WAAS, has been a godsend. Unfortunately, we are still waiting on many approach designs to be completed. In most locations, the limits are still high due to runway approach lighting and classification issues.
4. **Fuel.** At a number of locations, there are issues with the supply of adequate aviation fuel. Sometimes it's a lack of storage capacity; other times, it's re-supply delays, unanticipated demand, or equipment and personnel issues. When problems arise, it usually means higher costs, as fuel is tankered and payloads drop to compensate. In the worst case, flights are cancelled.
5. **Southern Competition.** Competition is healthy and northern carriers can compete with the best of them, if the playing field is level. What they can't deal with is unfair practices, such as thinly disguised predatory pricing from the majors. When a major carrier charges a joint fare such that the northern sector portion is effectively priced below the cost of fees and taxes for that sector, there is a problem.

Despite all this, flying in the northern and remote reaches of Canada has never been safer or more convenient. This fact is a real tribute to the maturity and sophistication of the operators serving these areas. But don't worry, the bush pilot spirit is alive and well in the North. It's still needed to overcome the challenges of flying there, however the times may change. 