

Vintage airplanes soar into Dufferin for Centennial Celebration

Written By PAULA BROWN

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Aviation enthusiasts flew into Dufferin County for a special event commemorating the centennial anniversary of an aircraft pivotal to the history of aviation.

Members of the International Moth Airplane Club, also known as the de Havilland Moth Club, welcomed historic aviation enthusiasts at Martin Airfield in East Garafraxa on Saturday (July 5) to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the de Havilland DH.60 Moth, a British two-seat touring and training aircraft.

"A small percentage of pilots like vintage aircrafts. As a community, we take an interest in the mechanics, rebuilding them, putting them together and flying them, and we share the passion and knowledge with each other," said Dan Garyfalakis, who co-organized the event with Andy Scott. "To be able to bring us all together in a celebration of this genius man, Geoffrey de Havilland, 100 years later, and to see all his creations being loved and flown with this enthusiastic group is wonderful."

The DH.60 Moth is a British light biplane designed by Geoffrey de Havilland and was first flown in February 1925. The aircraft was built between 1925 and 1934 for both private use and pilot training, and was the original aircraft type issued to all flying clubs in Canada in 1928. The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) had 91 DH.60 Moth airframes from January 1928 to May 1948.

Roughly 35 to 40 planes flew into the local airstrip on Saturday to commemorate the 100-year milestone of the pivotal aircraft.

The oldest plane at the event was a 1928 DH.60 Moth owned by Garry Comber, which flew in from Gatineau, Que.

The DH.60 Moth in Comber's care was manufactured in England in 1928 and shipped to Canada for reassembly in 1929. The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) took possession of the aircraft on April 23, 1929 and posted it to High River, Alberta, for pilot training and forestry fire patrol. In 1930, the plane crashed in Saskatchewan and was rebuilt by de Havilland in Canada over a three-month period.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the aircraft found itself in the care of a number of hands, including the Hamilton Aero Club, Leavens Brothers Air Services and a private owner.

After years in storage, it was bought by Watt Martin, the namesake of Martin Airfield, and rebuilt from 1980 to 1989, during which it was refitted with a Gypsy II engine. In 2022, Comber purchased the plane from an American and had it restored to Canadian airworthiness standards at Martin Airfield.

"I have no personal tie to the Royal Canadian Air Forces, but I love history and airplanes. I wanted to do something for the aviation industry in Canada and I didn't understand why the plane was in the United States; it belongs here in Canada. I thought I could contribute and it's not often an opportunity like this comes around," said Comber.

The 1928 DH.60 Moth is considered the oldest airplane still flying that was once part of the RCAF.

Comber plans to keep the plane - also known as a Gypsy Moth - flying until it's 100 years old and will eventually donate it to the National Aviation Museum of Canada in Trenton.

Another unique plane showcased at the event was a Thuxton Jackaroo, owned by Steve Gray.

The Thuxton Jackaroo is a four-seat cabin biplane conversion of the de Havilland Tiger Moth that was developed in the mid-1950s. Only around 19 Tiger Moths were ever modified into the Thuxton Jackaroo.

Gray's Jackaroo was brought to Canada in 1970 by a British man, who ended up later selling it to two men in Guelph, who took on the restoration of the aircraft. As a youth, Gray recalled taking rides in the Jackaroo, but told the Free Press he never expected to one day own it.

Around 25 years ago, Gray purchased half of the plane's ownership and was later bequeathed the remaining half in a will.

"It's unique because it's the only one on this side of the planet. I never thought someday I'd own it, but I like to say the ownership is temporary and I'm looking after it until the next person. These airplanes should outlast the owners, and as a historical piece of work you want to keep it going," said Gray.

Today, there are only a handful of Jackaroos that are still flying around the world, and Gray's is the only one in Canada.

Margo and Gary Schroeder arrived at the 100th anniversary event in their 1940s WACO UPF7, part of their collection of antique planes.

The couple own and operate a scenic open-cockpit biplane tour company, called Canadian Barnstormers Inc., based out of Guelph.

Speaking with the Free Press, Margo shared why it was important for them to attend the centennial milestone celebration.

"We've made a living flying old airplanes, and de Havilland airplanes have been really good to us," she said.

Over the last two years, the tour company has flown over 1,000 trips. Their collection currently consists of two flying planes and six planes in the process of restoration.

"You're experiencing the last of the purest form of powered flight that's remaining," said Gary, who also pilots the planes. "What a gift to get to share this with people."

To close out the 100-year celebration, the members of the International Moth Airplane Club organized their Moth airplanes to create a "100," which could be seen from the sky.