

PREFACE

The evolution of aviation in the Yukon was born of necessity and nurtured by the needs of its far-flung residents. The citizens of Whitehorse signed a petition in 1920, which in turn was flown, to Dawson City the Yukon's (then) capitol by the first aircraft in the Yukon, the four deHavilland DH4B bombers of the U.S. Alaska Air Expedition. The petition declared that "we hope soon to see mail-bags substituted for bomb's." Yukon Commissioner Mackenzie's reply, delivered to Whitehorse by air on the expedition's return trip, found the commissioner in complete agreement.

"I was in receipt of your kind letter of petition three hours and ten minutes after it was delivered, (from Whitehorse) a convincing argument in itself in support of your proposal that the time is now ripe for the inauguration of aerial mail communication in the Yukon. I beg to assure you that I am in hearty accord with the view so well expressed in your communication and will do all in my power to advance the matter"

The airplane holds a unique place in the history of Yukon transportation as the first transportation form to mount an effective challenge to remoteness, a problem that had plagued the territory since the days of the fur trade. Admittedly, the airplane did not entirely eliminate this problem. The movement of heavy freight, for example, continued to be an unwieldy proposition. Nevertheless, the airplane did materially reduce the gulf that had existed between the territory and the rest of the country. As one observer, conscious of historical parallel, wrote: "much in the same manner as British Columbia was more firmly united with other Canadian provinces through the establishment in 1886 of a transcontinental railway service, the Yukon need no longer be considered an outpost of Empire"

In the Yukon, the airplane found a functional application that was quite distinct. Whereas the airplane was forced to vie with other forms of transportation as a "competitive means of luxury travel" in those areas that were densely populated, it served as a "common vehicle of all-season transport" in the Yukon. This function was facilitated by the economics of aviation making the airplane particularly well suited for northern use. The airplane was adaptable and it could move easily, something that was not true for a river, road or railway track. The capital cost involved in aviation was limited, investment in transportation facilities, especially for development purposes, has always been a high-risk proposition. At the same time, the demand for transportation, especially for developmental purposes, has been high as a result of the non-renewable resource base of the territorial economy. Because the airplane was adaptable in all seasons and represented a limited fixed capital cost, it proved remarkably well suited to the needs of the Yukon's transportation requirements.

Chris Weicht