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Remembering Denny May

We are gathered here today to pay tribute to our beloved Denny May, who is remembered from coast to coast by more people than we could ever know. Denny left us suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of 86 on October 3, 2021, and we have now come together to celebrate his life.

Denny Reid May was the only child born to his parents Wilfrid Reid May and Violet Aileen Bode. Wilfrid, named for prime minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier, became labelled with the childhood nickname of “Wop,” a name that stayed with him for a lifetime, a name that is still used today.

For me, Denny May was more than just a friend, he was also a colleague in aviation history, but there was something special about our friendship. When Denny’s father was the manager of No. 2 Air Observer School of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan during the Second Word War, right here in this building, my father was also here, training to be a navigator with the Royal Canadian Air Force.

The first comments I received from a mutual friend when we learned the news of Denny’s passing was the statement that, “He was truly a good steward of his father’s memory.”

Denny did not know that he would lose his father when Denny himself was only 17 years old. So he became a researcher and a scholar about Wop May. Denny has been involved with the publication of two books about his dad. One book, written by Denny’s sister-in-law, Sheila Reid, is a biography appropriately called *Wings of a Hero*, published in 1997. Denny then worked with Sheila to publish an updated version of the book in 2014.

Here in this building, in 2011, during the annual convention of the Canadian Aviation Historical Society held in Edmonton that year, Denny rolled out another book, *More Stories of Wop May*, in which he wrote about his father’s aviation experiences. Denny contacted many people who knew his father personally and asked them for stories about Wop, which comprise a section of the book that makes fascinating reading.

You may also know that Denny produced a web site, wopmay.com, called The Wop May Chronicles, in which he has documented his father's achievements. But Denny did not just record his father's amazing history. Denny himself lived it, and re-created it, and immersed himself in it in so many ways, from countless speaking engagements to being a Life Member of the Canadian Aviation Historical Society.

One of the famous events in Canadian aviation history occurred in January 1929 when Wop May and Vic Horner flew in an open cockpit biplane in freezing weather to deliver diphtheria serum to Fort Vermilion. Fifty years later, In 1979 as a pilot himself, Denny flew in an open cockpit biplane with Vic Horner's son, Bob, and flew the same route from Edmonton to Fort Vermilion, but with no medical emergency, as they were able to make the flight in June.

Another instance of retracing history was when Denny went with Marg, his son David and wife, Kimberly, to visit the exact area in France where Wop May and Roy Brown were involved in the famous aerial dogfight with Baron Manfred von Richthofen.

Related to that legendary battle is a comment received from Erwin Loewen of Edmonton. "My favourite memory of Denny occurred on a day I helped teach the grade six Theory of Flight class at the museum. I was doing a tour at the end of the class with a group of students and was at the German Fokker and Triplane aircraft artifacts explaining the Edmonton connection to the demise of the Red Baron and who exactly Wop May was.

"Totally unexpected, Denny came walking into the museum and up to the display. In amused shock, I said to the kids, "Hey look, here's Wop May's very own son coming to us now!" The students all turned around and had a look of surprise as they saw this senior gentlemen ambling up to them. I think the fact that he was a senior really helped them feel the sense of time and history while speaking about his Dad."

Recreating special flights were important events for Denny, but not his biggest adventures. His biggest and longest adventure was his marriage to Marg, which lasted for 40 years after they were married on March 17, 1981. Today we are pleased have Jon Hall with us, who was the best man at the marriage and has come from Nova Scotia to be with us today. Denny made a stained glass lamp for Jon when he was married, and that lamp is still in service today.

Jon and Denny had known each other for nearly 60 years, as Jon was only 12 when he first knew Denny. Jon recalls that in 1975 when he came to Edmonton to take on a job, he called to say hello to Denny at his Scouts Canada office, and was promptly recruited for volunteer work with Scouts, and then Jon soon found himself working full-time with Denny in Scouts Canada.

For Denny himself, working with Scouts Canada was a career lasting some 40 years. His travels for Scouts took him far and wide, and Marg would often travel with him, and attended jamborees with Denny. At other times, Denny would rent an airplane to fly with someone to attend meetings or events. Denny's sense of humour was evident on those flights, because at the end of the flight Denny would give his passenger a certificate from Fly By Night Airlines, and it was signed by Captain Hardly Able!

Another friend, Danielle Metcalfe-Chenail, also now living in Nova Scotia, sent this comment for us. "Denny was a generous and helpful colleague. He and Marg were warm and welcoming to this Edmonton newcomer back in 2010, and I am so glad they stayed in touch even after I moved away. I saw how much they delighted in sharing Wop May's stories with children, and how dedicated they were at preserving his legacy in an honest and unvarnished way."

Danielle went on to say, "Denny looked up to his father immensely, but he never let the legend eclipse the man. I get the feeling that his love for Marg and his family was his other big purpose in life. Recently he shared pictures of the warm socks Marg knits for disadvantaged folks and told me they got milkshakes and sat by the river on a warm September day. I imagine him sitting there in his signature brown leather jacket, spotting planes as they flew overhead."

We seldom saw Denny without Marg at his side, who helped and supported him over the years when Denny shared aviation stories with school children and adults alike.

Denny's interest in aviation was evident when he attended the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology in Calgary to study aeronautical engineering, knowledge that would serve him well. But he was soon hired by the Boy Scouts of Canada. Before long, he had become the Executive Director of Scouts Canada for Northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories. His interest in scouting had begun when as a young lad, Denny had been a Boy Scout himself.

Denny had a particular interest in air mail, and was a member of the Canadian Aerophilatelic Society. The first air mail in western Canada was flown by a young woman named Katherine Stinson, who flew her one-of-a-kind biplane from Calgary to Edmonton on July 9, 1918, bringing 259 specially stamped letters.

Volunteers here at the Alberta Aviation Museum built an exact replica of that unique aircraft in a project that took over 20,000 hours. Today, as you enter this museum, you can see that aircraft displayed with the likeness of Katherine Stinson.

The replica aircraft was ready to be rolled out to meet the public on July 9, 2006. But the rollout would not be just an airplane shown to the public. It was decided to re-enact that famous flight of 1918.

So Denny and his friend, Gordon Mallett, went to work to produce 259 specially stamped envelopes for letters to be carried on a flight in a Cessna light aircraft from Calgary to Edmonton. We recruited Audrey Kahovec, then a flying instructor at the Edmonton Flying Club, to be the stand-in for Katherine Stinson.

Audrey flew the mail from Calgary to Edmonton in her Cessna and then the vintage mail bag with all the letters was placed in the replica aircraft. Volunteers who helped build it then pushed the biplane out to a large and welcoming crowd and delivered the mail to representatives of Canada Post.

The rollout was so successful, that Denny and Gordon did it again! On July 9, 2018, again with 259 letters and specially-stamped envelopes that Denny helped create, the flight was re-enacted using a twin-engine WestJet regional carrier, a Bombardier Q400 – flown by a woman pilot and a woman first officer.

Gordon recalls what a great help Denny was to him in special projects. “Denny was so generous,” says Gordon, “both with his time and his willingness to share valuable artifacts in his possession, and has donated many of his father’s possessions to museums and archives.”

Next time you are passing through the Edmonton International Airport, look for a display case with Wop May’s parka, helmet and gloves that he used in bush flying, which are there as a result of Denny’s generosity. Other donations have been made to City of Edmonton Archives, and a great many to Canada’s Aviation Hall of Fame, of which Wop May is an original member.

Besides writing and publishing, Denny’s talents included his ability as an artist. He has created dioramas depicting historical events in aviation. His paintings have been used on the Christmas cards of Canada’s Aviation Hall of Fame, which both Denny and Marg served as members of the Hall’s operations committee.

Mary Oswald, who has been associated with the Hall of Fame since its early years, wrote to say, “Denny has been such a great help to me in so many ways. I remember when he would help with the Hall of Fame’s Christmas cards. We would fold them, stuff them into envelopes, put stamps and labels on them, then lick them closed, and toss them into a box for the post office. At the end of the job, Denny proudly carried the box to the post office!”

Mary also says, “Other ways he helped was with editing stories about Hall of Fame members. He could be counted on for his creative ideas on how to phrase a sentence or how best to link paragraphs to help a reader to understand the meaning more easily.”

I must tell you another little story about the May family that was given to me just a few days ago.

In 1907, Wop May's parents, Alexander and Elizabeth, built a cottage at Gull Lake, west of Lacombe, Alberta. When Alexander died in 1932, Wop and his wife, Vi, became owners of the cottage. When Denny was young, he would spend the summer with his mother at the cottage.

Wop and Vi sold the cottage in 1949. The new owners made a number of improvements to it, and then sold it in 1962. When that owner died in 1980, the cottage was inherited by their son, who made further improvements and still owns it today. But one thing was untouched.

The woodwork in the living room is virtually unchanged from work done by Denny's father and grandfather. The door frame from the living room to the dining room is still marked with the height, name, and ages of children, including Denny. So Denny is still remembered in a growth chart at a lake cottage that is now 114 years old!

And now, Denny is remembered in yet another way. A prize-winning 20-minute film about his father, called *Blind Ambition: The Wop May Story*, was recently produced in Edmonton and shown at the Edmonton International Film Festival this month. Denny encouraged production of that film, visited the set with Marg, and even appears in the film. The film is about Wop, and is now dedicated to Denny.

Today is Thanksgiving Day. We can give thanks for being here today in this temple of aviation, a building where Wop May worked and where Denny May remembered his father, and we can give thanks for having Denny May in our lives.

In closing, I will share a story with you that you may have heard before. In 1952, Denny was hiking in Utah with his father. At one point on the trail, Wop paused to rest, and told Denny he wasn't feeling well. He asked Denny to go on ahead and get some help. As he was about to go, Wop asked Denny to take a photo of him. It was the last photo ever taken of Wop May, because when Denny returned, his father had passed away at the young age of 56.

Last Wednesday a friend of Denny said to me, "Maybe Denny and his dad can finish that hike together now."

Boy Scout leader, husband, family man, pilot, friend, collector, artist, writer, historian, and a good son, Denny May knew his way around the trails, both on land and in the air, and has now joined his father on his final flight.

Happy trails, Denny, we remember you as your spirit soars among the heavens.