

Places With a Past

by Stu Simpson

"Where do you wanna go today?" I asked Botting.

"Well, we should go some place, I guess," he replied with deadpan humour.

I peered over his shoulder at the pretty yellow Vagabond glowing in the morning sun. A propane heater hissed as it spewed warmth up into the Vag's engine cowling. It didn't really matter to us where we went, so long as we were flying.

"How about south?" I asked. "Have you ever been to Ron Laverty's strip east of Vulcan?"

"I suppose we could try that," Al said thoughtfully. "What about going to the old Vulcan RCAF strip, too?" Al's a talented historian who rarely passes up a chance to visit places with a past.

The Vulcan RCAF airfield certainly qualifies. It was active during World War II, training bomber crews in the fine arts of their deadly trade. It sits twelve miles southwest of the Vulcan townsite.

"Sure. How about we head up to Linden after that?"

Al nodded his agreement. He'd be flying with a co-pilot, Elmer Dyck.

We each finished our pre-flights, mounted up and took off south.

This day was faultless, a prairie pilot's dream. The wind was a whisper, the early March sky a dazzling blue that forbade any intrusion of cloud. Perfectly portioned rectangles of black summer-fallow occasionally interrupted the sandy coloured earth below, and a few patches of brilliant snow clung desperately to the remains of winter.

Such days are to be revered, for later in March the sun would climb higher and heat the earth so that mid-day flying would be a violent ordeal much akin to a boxing match on a trampoline. But not today. Today was satin and silk.

The Bow River soon passed by, rushing on to its destiny with the Hudson's Bay. Huge ice ledges along the banks hung precariously over the water, waiting tensely to crack and fall beneath the weight of spring's imminent warmth. On the horizon, the town of Vulcan sat as a faint silhouette slightly left of our course. It gave us something to steer away from to find our destination.

RCAF Vulcan's giant white hangars, six of them still standing, eventually appeared from nearly 20 miles back. How many young bomber crews had shared that same view of the field? Within minutes we were overhead and choosing our landing direction.

Runway 33 it would be. I curved around to short final on the infield runway. Ancestrally speaking, it's really a taxiway. But the actual runway, running parallel a few metres to the east was still under upgrade after having become overgrown with bushes and weeds. But someone was clearly working hard to clear it and restore it to useable condition. It wasn't far off now.

I touched down, taxied back to the end and cleared onto the button of 28, jumping out of Merl to look for Al and Elmer. Botting brought the Vag in just so, and settled artfully to the scabbled surface. Then he taxied over and shut down.

We normally park near the hangars at the north end, but we'd already seen them recently and we didn't plan to stay long anyway. I peered at them across the open expanse of the airport. They were still bright white but slowly succumbing to the creeping ravages of time. The large windows on the upper walls were speckled with broken panes, some of which were boarded over.

Al and I explored a couple of the hangars on our last visit. The inescapable history of them, and the whole airfield, was deeply moving. No one back in the 1940s really expected these simple but behemoth structures to last this long. Fortunately, they did last, and they still stand today, quietly commemorating an incomprehensible sacrifice.

A burgundy pick-up truck caught my attention as it approached from the direction of the hangars. The driver turned out to be the airfield's owner, John Sands. We spent a pleasant twenty minutes talking with him about the airfield. Botting indicated none too subtly that he and many others would like to see an excavation of the grounds to dig up the aircraft and equipment rumoured to be buried there. Sands talked proudly of his workings to turn the field into a thriving, self-sustaining airport again. He had plans to rent out the field to a sky diving operation in the coming summer. I very much appreciated him wanting to give Vulcan RCAF a future again, rather than just a past.

The topic of our immediate future arose and we told Sands of our next destination. He suggested that instead of flying east and then north, that we take a look at another ex-RCAF field halfway between Granum and Fort Macleod. Hmm. We hadn't really planned to fly that far south today, but it'd be someplace new to see, it was only 36 miles away, and we'd have the privilege to fly there in our airplanes.

Ah, what the hell, we agreed. Let's go. Sands offered up the coordinates from his GPS, and Al and I punched them into ours. A few minutes later we jumped into the sky again and turned south for a place we never knew existed until a few minutes ago. We weren't sure we'd land there, but we weren't going home without at least having a look.

In less than half an hour we were over top the strip. It was clearly another old war field with a triangular runway arrangement. But cattle, snow melt and mud covered the runways and we had no real desire to challenge any of them for landing rights.

Fort Macleod was up ahead, only a few minutes distant. I asked Botting what he thought of heading there. He politely checked with Elmer and it

was decided. We banked a few degrees to the left, settled on course and dialled in Macleod's radio frequency.

Ft. Macleod. It's where my mom is from and as a kid I spent lots of time there with my grandparents. But it was more than 20 years since I'd been near the place, seemingly a whole lifetime. What would it be like now?

We crossed Highway 3 inbound for the field. I glanced beneath Merl's left wing and felt a shiver of memory as my grandparents' old house slipped past the left wing. I shook it off and concentrated on ground features so we could find our way into town more easily. Strange that as a kid I never visited the airport here.

The outline of the RCAF station was a mere phantom on the earth after 65 years. The runway and taxiway outlines were still visible, but overrun with a new housing development. A smooth modern runway cut across the middle of the old ones like they were never there. It impressed me that two of the old hangars were still standing and in use as industrial buildings.

We soon landed, parked and started walking north into town. As we approached the industrial park at the south end of Ft. Macleod, we couldn't really see much of the town proper. But when we crossed the railroad tracks at the grain elevators I collided with a sledgehammer of memories.

Things had certainly changed, but I could still see - and feel - the way it was all those years ago.

Grandpa, a very cagey and competent businessman, owned a big chunk of the west end of town. He had a gas station, an A&W, a motel, a coin laundry, an appliance repair shop and a trailer court. I was thirteen when I helped him build his and Grandma's last house there. He paid me \$3.00 an hour that summer on my first real job. The house was enormous.

Now, more than 30 years later, the house seemed a little smaller, a little run down and was harder to see behind evergreens and dense

shrubbery. What was once a shabby baseball field adjacent to the house, and containing the town's landmark water tower, was now a residential subdivision. The water tower was long gone.

Grandpa and Grandma used to live above the back of the gas station, and it sat next to the A&W restaurant. I smiled remembering how many free root beers and french fries we grandkids consumed.

Al and Elmer and I wandered about Grandpa's old properties for a while, my wingmen generously patient with my sentimentality. We'd turn a corner and, something – maybe a fence, the back of a building, or an old alley - would trigger another roaring flood from my past.

A dam, holding back time, had fractured and burst, nearly drowning me in its deluge. I've never felt such a powerful memory force as I did that day. It was simply overwhelming.

It was also the first time I felt like a ghost, floating nearly invisible at the centre of a swirling storm of memory that only I could feel. No one there would know me now, nor give a whit about my memories of the place. Not even Al or Elmer could feel it. In the silent vaults of my history I was utterly alone.

Reluctantly, I admitted it was time to leave. We hiked back to the airport, giving me time to sort through the shards of my past. Then we fired up our planes and were quickly airborne once more.

Northbound for Kirkby Field a hundred miles distant, I reflected on what had led us here. We'd simply picked a direction to fly, a place to briefly set down, and then happily strolled hand in hand with fate to see where it would all lead. I contentedly watched Ft. Macleod drift away behind Merl's right wing. The town got smaller and smaller until it was soon just a distant speck of what used to be.

What sweet delight it was to fly that perfect March day; to take flight on a simple but incredible journey back through time. We'd indeed touched places with a past; some historic, some intensely personal. And our

voyage reminded us that there are some things we don't ever want to forget.