

Ford provided United Keno's air support

By JANE GAFFIN

Keno, the venerable old gentleman mine, refuses to die a natural death as long as a probable hundred million ounces of silver keep its heart beating. Yet, the federal government is bent on subjecting the mine to euthanasia.

I believe the mine deserves a dignified burial.

In a series of articles being published in the *Star* each Friday, I'm saying last rites and farewell to a great mine that served as the Yukon's lifeblood off and on for more than 80 years.

Here's part 16.

Chuck Ford began providing helicopter support to United Keno Hill almost from the moment Robert "Dutch" Van Tassell established the exploration department in Whitehorse in 1969.

About the same time, Ford went into partnership with fixed-wing pilot René Leduc, who later flew helicopters, too.

It was fitting that their Yukon Airways Ltd., one of Canada's oldest class-four carriers, primarily serviced mineral exploration companies from its two bases at Whitehorse International Airport and the Dease Lake airstrip in northern British Columbia.

The aviation company's roots dated back to 1927, when it was founded as a fixed-wing service to the mining industry at Mayo, Keno Hill and Dawson City in a roadless Yukon. One of Yukon Airways' early visionaries, instrumental in bringing commercial flying to the territory, was Clyde Wann, a mechanic and businessman, although he was not an aviator.

The modern-day Yukon Airways expanded into a fleet of fixed-wings, including a Cessna 206 designed for heavy bush work, and established its helicopter division with Hiller 12E pistons and a Hughes 500C in 1972.

Their aircraft whirred into motion for fire suppression and surveys for almost every government agency, such as the game branch, RCMP, customs, fisheries, as well as for independent prospectors, outfitters and photographers.

Yukon Airways was stringent about its hiring policies. Pilots had to have 1,000 hours of mountain flying and sling experience before going for a grueling check ride.

Finding men and women who could perform expertly in the mountainous North was a task. Ford and Leduc worked as hard at finding top pilots as they did in fulfilling contracts for their customers.

Van Tassell cited "excellent safety record" as one good reason for renewing the flying contract every field season with Ford, who, by 1977, had logged 10,000 accident-free hours in a 20-year career.

When a company needed a chopper based out in the weeds for the season, the customer got a two-for-one deal with Ford. Besides being one of Canada's best pilots, he was a qualified mechanical engineer who did all his own maintenance.

Van Tassell described Ford as a modest, ethical man, reliable and serious about life — the strong, serious type.

"He can look at my exploration budget and tell me where to save a dollar because he knows the mining operations inside out."



Photo by JANE GAFFIN

AH, THE ROMANCE OF BUSH FLYING — Yukon Airways president and pilot René Leduc wobbles fuel into wing tanks of a Cessna 206 at below-zero temperatures, spring 1975.

Ford has high expectations of people, but he only expects what he is prepared to give, Van Tassell added.

"To him, a job well done is serious business. To sum it up, Chuck Ford is damned good."

Ford was meticulous, a perfectionist about minute details, and the crews liked him.

In a day's work, Ford could be called on to move a two-man prospecting crew; bring in food supplies or barrels of fuel to base camp; fly out boxes of drill core and empty fuel drums; move an entire camp; bring in drill rods; sling a diamond drill rig on the hook to a new location; or fly an emergency medical case to the Whitehorse hospital.

Ford wasn't one to become attached to mechanical items, but he staunchly defended and relied on his Hiller 12E as a tremendously-efficient piston-equipped utility helicopter for bush work.

Much of his helicopter work involved slinging diamond drills and other mining exploration equipment into and out of tight spots.

When he secured a contract, the first thing he did was familiarize the client, drill crews and prospecting parties with the capabilities of the machine and variables relative to altitudes, weather and loads.

He didn't want a passenger getting excited and "losing his head", so to speak. He articulated safety precautions to be exercised at all times when working around the invisible blur of



CHUCK FORD

the huge blade rotating overhead and the smaller rotor assembly on the tail.

Ford, who never saw flying as a job but rather as a challenge and a career, began flying relatively late in life, according to unwritten rules in aviation circles.

He was age 26 when taking private-pilot fixed-wing training in 1957, in the northern B.C. town of Fort St. John. He continued his commercial training in Edmonton, then advanced to helicopter training in Fort Worth, Tex.

Some of his instructors had personalities like avalanches, he said. But they "wrung him out", and he quickly carved out a reputation as one of the best and safest pilots flying North of 60.

It was in the early 1950s when the helicopter was fast becoming recognized and appreciated as a transportation vehicle that could shrink the rugged and remote north country by light years.

In 1952, Pat Callison brought these strange contraptions into the Yukon. It was the year Ford came to the Yukon to serve his welding apprenticeship on the gold creeks for two dredging companies, Yukon Consolidated Gold Corp. and Yukon Gold Placers.

Within three years, he was responsible for all maintenance and repairs. "Fortunately, the gold fever didn't rub off," he said in a 1975 interview.

But the flying fever did.

Ford was transported to and from the creeks by Callison, the Dawson City-based owner-operator of Klondike Airways.

It was those flights which brought back boyhood memories of Ford's first ride in a noisy open-cockpit plane which had been barnstorming at a Sports Day in Bear Lake, Alta.

Flying with Callison rejuvenated Ford's boyhood ambition.

He went pressure welding on a pipeline in Fort St. John, where the construction company was using a Bell G-2 to move equipment. Ford realized the stupendous future for these machines.

After he learned to fly helicopters, he returned to Dawson City in 1960 and flew five years for Callison. He flew the Yukon boundary to boundary on a forestry contract while earning his aircraft engineer's ticket.

When Klondike Helicopters sold out to Foothills Aviation of Calgary, Ford took a holiday from his Bell G-2 and Hiller 12E.

"After a year's travels, I returned to the Yukon feeling like a million dollars; I had eight," Ford chuckled, wryly.

In 1966, he went flying for about four years for Proctor Construction Co., which had a little yellow office building standing alone out in a field in the vicinity of Second Avenue and Jarvis Street.

A fixed-wing and a helicopter were on the late Leo Proctor's equipment list. His legendary road-building prowess and mining interest sent Ford all over the Yukon and beyond.

Proctor was most remembered for improving the environment. His crews cut a 1,129-kilometre winter access road up the Wind River and through the wilderness to accommodate Amerada-Hess, which was oil drilling above the Arctic Circle.

Today, two-leg and four-leg critters can easily trace the trail into the inhospitable northeastern Yukon. Lush green, healthy vegetation and wild flowers have sprouted where the permafrost was disturbed by vehicle tracks 40 years ago.

According to former *Star* publisher Bob Erlam (*Star*, June 28/96), Proctor was hauling timbers out of the bush to the Keno Hill Mines in the early days when he learned that compacted snow was the best and cheapest road-build-

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Summer supply hauls were boated 16 km

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ing materials.
Erlam remembered Proctor's generosity. In 1966, a scientist looking for another research grant reported the 5,010-metre (16,700-foot) Mt. Steele in the St. Elias Icefields was surging forward at 15 metres a day.

Proctor donated his helicopter and pilot Chuck Ford to fly Erlam and his reporter wife, Rusty, over the Galloping Glacier to take pictures to illustrate a newspaper story.

After leaving Proctor's employment, Ford freelanced for a year before joining René Leduc in Yukon Airways.

The two men were opposite personalities. Leduc, the company president, was quiet-spoken, laid-back, unflappable; Ford, the company consultant, was wired tight as a banjo string.

But they complemented each other. Both were ace pilots, handy with mechanic's and carpenter's tools, ethical and forthright with clever business minds.

Ford said the first thing a person should have done when starting a business in the Yukon was go to Vancouver and find a banker, accountant and a lawyer.

During the 1970s, United Keno Exploration's big-ticket item was the DEF copper deposit. Access to it was a 15-minute helicopter flight from Minto Landing where Ford set up a camp trailer and prepared a heliopad for his Hiller 12E and the huge pesky mosquitoes and saw-tooth black flies.

ASARCO's helicopter also was based at Minto in 1974, servicing the syndicate that owned the other half of the deposit.

Minto Landing had been a wood-supply station for steamboats, a stop for the winter stagecoach route and an early Mounted Police post on the east bank



Photo by JANE GAFFIN

OLD AND NEW TRANSPORTATION METHODS MEET — Yukon Airways' ski-equipped Cessna 206 is met at MacMillan Pass by the late Bruce Johnson's dog team. The animals would haul the mounds of freight the rest of the way to the isolated camp, in the spring of 1975.

of the Yukon River. It is located a mile inward from the North Klondike Highway, about 80 kilometres north of Carmacks.

Some of United Keno's summer supply hauls from Minto Landing were boated 16 kilometres down river where track vehicles pulled the loads the last

10 kilometres overland to DEF camp.

In winter, supplies were freighted by Cat train across the Yukon River ice and on west over the tote road.

In 1977, Yukon Airways invested in a sophisticated, turbine-powered, four-place Hiller 12E with a Soloy conversion. The powerhouse was so quiet,

passengers didn't need headsets to talk. The machine, identified by call letters C-GYAL, was the only one of its type operating in Canada, although the design was very popular in Alaska and the western United States.

Joe Soloy of Chehalis, 112 kilometres south of Seattle, Wash., had received approval from United States federal aviation authorities to replace the Hiller's original Lycoming 540-piston engine with an Allison 250-C20 turbine.

In addition to developing 400 horsepower, the engine changeover reduced the 12E's empty weight.

C-GYAL could handle up to 450 kilograms (1,000 pounds) on a hook and carry extra cargo in the outside racks mounted on either side of the machine.

Since more than half of the Hiller's work involved slinging heavy equipment into and out of tight spots, the high installation of the 12E's tail and main-rotor assembly offered maximum clearance to avoid rotor strikes when working in rugged, high bush terrain.

Jane Gaffin is author of Cashing In, a definitive history of the Yukon's hardrock mining industry, 1898 to 1977. You can e-mail her at janegaffin@canada.com or visit her at www.diArmani.com.

Next week: conservationists had never seen the DEF mining property but that didn't stop them from attacking it.

FREE INFORMATION WORKSHOP LOAD SECUREMENT STANDARD



The load securement workshop date has changed to December 13th and 14th, 2004.

Changes to the federal load securement standard take effect January 1st, 2005.

All transportation industry persons responsible for load securement are affected.

To learn more, plan to attend the Department of Highways and Public Works' FREE information workshop.

Where:
Transportation Museum, 30 Electra Crescent (next to the Beringia Centre on the Alaska Highway)

When (NEW DATE):
Monday, December 13th, 2004, 9:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m., and Tuesday, December 14th, 2004, 9:00 a.m. - noon

Please register your attendance, call (867) 667-5832 or 1-800-661-0408 (ext. 5832).



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