

PHILIP P. UPTON
1919-1984



Phil Upton relaxing after a flight, Kluane Lake airstrip, summer 1976. (Photo: Jim Stone).

Some years ago, after 20 consecutive seasons of flying in the Saint Elias Mountains, Phil Upton was being interviewed by a journalist for a proposed article which was to appear in a national newspaper. The journalist had extracted the basic facts of Phil's career, and was probing anxiously for anecdotes that would give him the "real story": a near-miss, perhaps a crash, a tale of daring. He made the huge mistake of hinting that his editor was unlikely to find competence very interesting. Phil gave him a most peculiar look. "It is our policy," he said, a trifle pompously, "to make each flight as tedious an experience as possible."

The journalist departed in despair. Phil and I sat on the steps of the Kluane Base mess hall, admiring the flight of the swallows. "Yet another chance at fame and fortune rejected," he said with relief. "You might consider salvaging something with my obituary. You, of all people, are unlikely to confuse competence with luck."

Phil was from New England, and came to Canada in 1939 to volunteer for the Royal Canadian Air Force. He was commissioned as a Pilot Officer, and served with distinction in the Coastal Command, flying Catalinas and Liberator bombers.

The only war story he ever told was of executing a barrel roll in a flying boat while his hungover First Officer was using the head at the rear of the aircraft. His postwar career was a series of eclectic experiences. He found various employment as a flying instructor, salesman, farmer, radio show host, and San Francisco taxi dispatcher. In 1960, he was invited to join the Arctic Institute's Icefield Ranges Research Project as a pilot.

It was an inspired choice, for Phil's contributions and loyalty to the Arctic Institute and the Kluane Research Station were immeasurable. He made the Saint Elias Mountains his "parish", and became the finest mountain and glacier pilot in North America. He explored countless landing sites throughout the range in support of Arctic Institute research projects and private mountaineering expeditions.

Phil knew and loved this vast region in all its moods, from the cold, clear evenings — his favourite times to fly — to the violent storms pounding in from the Gulf of Alaska. Flying with him was a pleasure, for he exuded an aura of safety and control. Relaxed yet alert, he planned each move with an alternative option in mind. Skill he had in abundance. Of greater importance, his judgment was superb, his intuition uncanny.

For 24 years he operated without serious mishap, tempering courage with caution, understanding fully the limits of himself and his machine.

In 1968 he made the first landing on Mount Logan, at an altitude of 5300 m asl. This and subsequent landings that season inaugurated and developed the Institute's capability to run the High Altitude Physiology Study. It was an astonishing feat, and we who followed had the enormous psychological advantage of knowing that it could be done, and the benefit of his advice and leadership. During the ensuing 12 years of the project, Phil made some 500 trips to the Logan High camp. His professionalism and distaste for drama made the entire effort appear quite routine, and few noted that three trips to the mountain in a day left him physically and emotionally drained. To the eternal credit of Philip and the Institute, the safety record of the HAPS project was without parallel. After 12 years of operations, and after passing a considerable number of research and support personnel through one of Earth's more inhospitable sites, not one serious injury was sustained.

Crises there were, of course, and although I took a larger share of the flying in later years, it was always Phil who chose to plough the aircraft into deep powder snow after a storm, who made the quite dreadful approach over the Northwest Col when the wind demanded, who picked his way over the undercast to a sick climber.

Phil was a complex and sensitive man and could, at times, be infuriating. His hatred of paperwork, in a world that thrives on the wretched stuff, left a confusing trail. His verbal assaults on sloth and idleness were frequently delivered from a reclining position on the Kluane beach. However, his languid and relaxed style was affected and deceptive, though no less frustrating to more aggressive individuals. The point he was always trying to make was that aggressiveness had no place in the environment in which we worked. On one memorable day in 1976, a neophyte pilot had wrecked one aircraft at 3500 m in the middle of the range, and, hours after having been extracted from that mess, had stuffed the other aircraft, with a blown engine, firmly up a particularly rocky creek bed. With the season poised on the edge of disaster and amid considerable gnashing of teeth, Phil was discovered taking his customary after-lunch snooze in his cabin. Yet within four days we had one aircraft back in service and the second in Calgary for repairs.

His sense of humour was seldom depressed, though I tested it sorely at times. Following our first dual flight to Mount Logan, I became disoriented and came steaming out of the range down the wrong glacier and in quite the wrong direction. After some time he turned to me: "It is often a good idea," he remarked kindly, "to explore new ways out of the mountains." I was sufficiently unnerved by this to land on the gravel airstrip at base camp with the skis still down, a noisy and embarrassing mistake. The ensuing silence was long and pregnant, but the following day, in a grand gesture of pilot solidarity, he did the same skis-down landing himself before a large crowd of onlookers.

Phil's last years were marred by the frustrations of irregular bouts of illness. The uncertainty and gathering weakness were

appalling to him. Death he could face with equanimity, but he dreaded infirmity and loss of vigour. With the diagnosis at last confirmed, and death imminent, he became the tough, cheerful, ironical Upton I knew so well, who found it fitting that he should succumb to a disease both rare and slightly exotic. We seldom spoke of the past, for he was not a nostalgic man, and he came to the end with great courage, humour, and dignity.

Many of us will retain a special memory of a loyal and generous friend. Mine is of our final flight together: Philip, bringing the Courier into Kluane in a screaming crosswind, the man and his machine as one, slats hammering, rain lashing the windscreen, the plane crabbing at an impossible angle; Philip, his lips pursed in the tuneless whistle that was ever his only outward sign of tension, one massive hand clamping the control wheel, the other engulfing the throttle. Totally in control. Sic transit Upton.

Andy Williams

Corrigendum: In the June 1984 issue of *Arctic*, the artist who made the drawing of Pat Baird which illustrated his obituary was identified as "unknown". In fact, the artist is Françoise Masson Dansereau, who served as both expedition artist and quartermaster on the Arctic Institute 1950 Baffin Island Expedition. We apologize for this oversight.