

RICHARD MICHAEL DEBLICQUY (1930–2021)

Some people achieve legendary status in their lifetime. One such was Dick deBlicquy, a master practitioner of the art of “off-strip” flying, that is, operating bush aircraft off unprepared ground in the treeless Arctic. A quintessentially Canadian invention and practice, it involves both flying skill and correct assessment of terrain from the air, particularly in places where no one had landed before. In this field of endeavour, Dick had few equals.

Richard Michael deBlicquy was born on 10 March 1930 in Winnipeg to immigrant parents, Irish-born Lillian (née McMullen) and Belgian-born Michael duRoy deBlicquy. Michael deBlicquy learned to fly in the Belgian air force before emigrating in 1925 to Canada, where he flew first as a bush pilot in northern Ontario and Quebec, later in WWII as a test pilot on the De Havilland Mosquito. Son Dick grew up in Sioux Lookout, Trois Rivières, and Montreal. In 1948 he joined the RCAF, trained as a navigator and served on an air photographic squadron active in the North. However, Dick soon realized he wanted to fly planes himself so began flying lessons at the Carp, Ontario, flying club. He resigned from the RCAF in 1954 and was invited by Russell Bradley, whom he had met in Carp, to join his company, Bradley Air Services (BAS), as a pilot. A year later, Dick found himself flying a Cessna 180 between radar sites of the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, which was under construction on the northern mainland coast of Canada and with which BAS had a contract.

Dick was kept busy on the DEW Line, flying night and day, year-round, until late 1958. In the meantime, the multi-talented and innovative pilot-engineer Welland W. (Weldy) Phipps was perfecting his brainchild, the large, low-pressure tundra tire, which was to revolutionize bush flying in the Arctic (Matheson, 1991). In 1959 Weldy joined forces with Russ Bradley as chief of operations at BAS. The first aircraft Weldy fitted with the “big wheels” was the Piper PA-18 Super Cub. In the summer of 1959 Dick flew one of two Super Cubs thus equipped, under contract with the Geological Survey of Canada, on Banks and Victoria Islands. The two Cubs made some 460 off-strip landings.

Dick soon transitioned to larger aircraft fitted with big wheels, such as the De Havilland Canada DHC-2 Beaver and DHC-3 Otter. He further expanded his aeronautical horizon when, on a skiing holiday in Switzerland, he met Hermann Geiger, a Swiss pilot famed for operating light aircraft from glaciers. Geiger took Dick along on several glacier flights in the Alps. The next year Dick applied the experience gained to glaciers on Axel Heiberg and Ellesmere Islands in the Canadian High Arctic (Mikkelsen, 2006).

Meanwhile Dick had obtained his helicopter licence and in 1962 began flying helicopters outside the Canadian summer months in New Zealand. In fact, it was in New Zealand in 1963 that Dick married Lorna Bray Nichols, a Canadian woman pilot whom he had met in Ottawa.



Dick deBlicquy at the controls of a De Havilland Canada Otter, 1961 (Photographer unknown).

In the period 1963–65 most of Dick’s flying was in helicopters in Ontario and, in winter, in New Zealand. In October 1965 Dick and Lorna settled in Timmins, Ontario, where Dick was base manager for Pegasus Helicopters. Their daughter Elaine was born in 1966.

In the spring of 1967 Dick returned to his first love—fixed-wing flying in the Arctic—and the deBlicquy family moved to Resolute on Cornwallis Island. Dick and Lorna joined Atlas Aviation, which Weldy Phipps had founded after leaving BAS in 1962. Weldy checked Dick out on the twin-turboprop De Havilland Canada DHC-6 Twin Otter (also fitted with big wheels) in May 1967. Over the next 28 years Dick was to log nearly 17,000 hours on the Twin Otter, sometimes with Lorna in the co-pilot’s seat (Mikkelsen 2006).

Dick remained with Atlas until 1972, when Weldy sold the company to Kenting Aviation and retired. Dick rejoined and bought a financial stake in BAS. As well as continuing to fly in the Canadian Arctic, Dick became increasingly involved in Twin Otter operations in Greenland. During his years with Atlas Dick had made several trips to northern Greenland, in both the Otter and the Twin Otter, supporting scientific fieldwork and expeditions. Farther south, the rugged, rocky terrain of western Greenland presented difficulties for building conventional airstrips, and large helicopters were used for moving people and goods between communities—at considerable expense. The Canadian mining company Cominco had asked Dick to advise on the

feasibility of servicing their mine near Marmorilik with STOL (short take-off and landing) aircraft. He found two off-strip sites suitable for the Twin Otter near the mine and, further afield, identified places near several communities served by helicopter, where inexpensive, short airstrips for the Twin Otter could be constructed. However, while acknowledging that the cost savings realized in using Twin Otters in place of helicopters were significant, the Danish-Greenlandic authorities rebuffed Dick's proposals, citing concerns with possibly inadequate airport facilities as well as, perhaps, lacking a full appreciation of the Twin Otter's STOL capabilities (Mikkelsen 2006).

Yet Dick did not return home from his Greenland venture empty-handed. At the Søndre Stromfjord airbase (Kangerlussuaq) he noted the massive, four-engined Lockheed C-130 Hercules transport aircraft used by the U.S. Air Force for re-supplying the two DEW Line sites on the Inland Ice of Greenland. Realizing that the C-130 could be replaced by the Twin Otter, Dick proposed a demonstration. The upshot was the award, by the USAF, of a lucrative contract to BAS that ran for 2½ years, until the local airline, Greenlandair, purchased their own Twin Otters (Mikkelsen 2006).

Dick continued to fly in the Arctic and elsewhere for another 21 years, sometimes together with Lorna. In 1986 they flew a Twin Otter in famine relief in Ethiopia. Sadly, their marriage did not last; it was dissolved in 1992. A true trailblazer in women's aviation, Lorna carved out a career of her own, winning the Trans-Canada (McKee) Trophy for her aeronautical achievements in 1993 and the Order of Canada in 1995. She died in 2009.

Dick's flying career ended in 1995, when he retired with a phenomenal 33,000 hours in his logbook (Mikkelsen,

2006). In retirement Dick haunted the public libraries wherever he lived and pursued many interests, such as solar, wind, and tidal energy and climate change, particularly in the Arctic. For much of the time he lived in southern Wales with his great friend Margaret Jones, who owned a cluster of holiday cottages that he helped to maintain. In 2017 Dick settled in Uxbridge, Ontario, to be near his daughter Elaine.

Dick contracted bacterial meningitis in the summer of 2021. After a brief illness, he died on 8 August, aged 91. He is survived by Elaine deBlicquy and his longtime friend Margaret Jones (Manordeilo, Wales).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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