

ANDREW RICHARD WILLIAMS (1942–2026)

Andy Williams was Canada's premier high altitude mountain pilot and a Yukon legend. During his 40 years of flying he made countless glacier landings at 5330 m on Mt Logan and throughout the Icefield Ranges. Though fearless, he was no daredevil. When not flying he managed Kluane Lake Research Station near Silver Creek (Fig. 1).

Andy was born 11 April 1942 in Bath, England, and began his schooling in Bristol. His young life was saddened by the early death of his mother and the family disruptions that resulted. He attended a succession of schools, ranging from a village school, where Welsh was spoken, to a boarding school in Bristol, where he enjoyed the rugby. Andy was especially close to his older sister, Terry Rees, whom he adored. Though not a star student, he was a voracious reader and very smart. Andy's life was probably not that envisaged by his teachers, but he did receive from them a foundation on which he later built the skills he needed.

Soon after completing his formal education, Andy enlisted as a Royal Marines Commando and received training in wilderness survival, cliff assault, close combat, and much else. When he completed his military service, he was hired as a meteorologist with the Falkland Island Dependencies Survey, now British Antarctic Survey and passed the next two years at Halley Bay base on the Brunt Ice Shelf in the Weddell Sea of Antarctica. He and a teammate, each with a sledge and nine dogs, mapped the nunataks at each end of the Theron Mountains, some 250 miles inland. Surveying provides the perfect excuse to head for highpoints, and Andy managed to ascend eight unclimbed peaks while completing the survey.

Upon his return to England, Andy accepted a job at McGill's Sub-Arctic Research Laboratory in Shefferville, Quebec, as manager, meteorological advisor, and seismologist. Before departing for Canada, he worked briefly as an instructor at the Outward Bound school in Aberdyfi, Wales, near his sister's farm. This decision would prove to be momentous. There, he met a young sociology student, Carole Behenna, who was at the school to study the social dynamics of one of the student groups. Andy and Carole grew close, but Canada called. Following three years in Shefferville, he moved west and, in 1971, became Senior Instructor at the Canadian Outward Bound Mountain School, in Keremeos, British Columbia. This was the first Outward Bound school in Canada and Andy was one of its first instructors. Throughout this time, Andy and Carole were conducting a transatlantic relationship while Carole finished university. Upon her graduation they married, and Carole joined Andy in Canada; their life adventure began.

In 1973 Andy became the manager of the "Kluane Base," the Kluane Lake Research Station, Arctic Institute of North America (AINA). Established in 1961, Kluane Base boasted rudimentary accommodations, a brilliant glacier pilot, Phil Upton, and a Helio Courier aircraft that, in Upton's words,



FIG. 1. Andy Williams standing with his daughter, Sian, outside his Icefields Discovery office. Photo: Patricia Cunning.

was the "safest, most rugged, and best short-takeoff-and-landing aircraft built." Later, to support the High-Altitude Physiology Project near the summit of Mt Logan, AINA acquired a second Helio Courier. As manager, Andy worked closely with Phil and noted that a huge amount of money was being spent on aircraft maintenance carried out by distant mechanics. He could help secure the future of Kluane Base by qualifying as a certified Aircraft Maintenance Engineer and doing most of the service from his doorstep. So, Andy became base manager and the station's aircraft mechanic (Fig. 2).

There was still the problem of finding a suitable pilot for the second aircraft. After some unfortunate experiences, Upton concluded that it was easier to teach a person how to fly than how to improve their judgment. Starting with someone who possessed excellent judgment was the key. Andy became his protégé and, within 20 hours of training, was performing glacier landings at 5330 m on Mt Logan.



FIG. 2. Andy Williams inspecting his airplane on the ground at the Kluane Lake Research Station. Photo: Fritz Mueller.

Soon after, he received his pilot's license and a new chapter in his life began.

Andy loved the mountains in their many moods, and a calm settled in when he was flying through the Icefield Ranges. Few of his passengers would realize that he was solving puzzles at the same time: where to land safely if his engine failed, and, thinking ahead, take off safely after repairing his plane. You could detect this mind work when he was flying through tricky landscapes like the Steele Glacier valley, where good choices were scarce. He used all these skills on several occasions and twice replaced a failed aircraft engine at high elevation in the icefields. These feats required small teams of strong and accomplished Yukoners. When the mechanical work was completed there were no test flights. Everyone squeezed onto the wounded plane and hoped for the best. Much of this is documented in Andy's wonderful book, *Mount Logan & The Icefields: Yukon Flying Adventures* (2021).

Andy saved some lives and improved many more. His flying skill and deep knowledge of the dangers and vagaries of weather, mountains, and glaciers were revered. Less known was his gift for radio communication. As manager of the Kluane Lake Research Station, he was responsible for the well-being of small research camps scattered throughout the boreal forest and Icefield Ranges, as well as for alpinists aiming for high summits. Contact was maintained using short wave radios and was essential to the safety and smooth operation of these remote camps. Andy was the sole link with the outside world. Most of the time things went well: weather updates were shared; food and replacement parts were ordered; and conversations with Andy resembled an amusing stage performance. For those at Kluane Base, it was the nightly entertainment. On rare occasions, crises would arise and the tone darkened. Communication relied on the uncontrollable condition of Earth's ionosphere, and radio connection could become challenging. Andy was the master of decoding hopelessly garbled speech and distinguishing between problems and catastrophes. For those in the remote camps, he was the kindly spirit shielding his flock. We all felt secure under his watch.

One thing that Andy took to heart from his years at a Welsh boarding school was the importance of fair play and the awareness that those with power do not always play fair. He brought these values to his roles as Chair of the Greater Kluane Land Use Planning Commission (the work of which helped lay the foundation for Yukon's historic land claims settlement) and as the Governor General's appointee to the Environmental Impact Review Board. He also served as director of the Yukon Conservation Society and chair of the MacBride Museum's governing board. Andy was far more interested in contribution than in recognition. Nonetheless, he received the Canadian Confederation Medal, the President's Award of the Alpine Club of Canada for exceptional service to mountaineering, and was made a Fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society and the Arctic Institute of North America. Most dear to him,

we think, was the Order of Polaris inducting him into the Yukon Transportation Hall of Fame for "meritorious service in Yukon in the field of aviation."

Conversations with Andy were a delight. He was well informed, articulate, and witty. He never cracked jokes or laughed at the expense of others. Rather, he found the humour in every situation and accepted that all of us are flawed but most of us have value. Above all, Andy loved his family: Carole, his wife of 54 years, his daughters Sian and Megan, and grandchildren Bronwyn, Aidan, and Logan. Sian and Megan did not fall far from the tree. Sian is a pilot, Chief Operating Officer of Icefield Discovery, and de facto manager of the Outpost Research Station near Silver City, Kluane. Megan is heritage manager for Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and lives in Old Crow.

Andy Williams passed away 17 May 2026. He will be missed by family, friends, and admirers, but his legacy will outlive us. The life he led was perfectly matched to the times. We'll not see the like of him again.

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