

# Lives Lived

## ZEBULON LEWIS LEIGH

*Aviation pioneer, first Air Canada pilot, father of Air Transport Command. Born in Macclesfield, Cheshire, England, on June 19, 1906; died in Grimsby, Ont., Dec. 22, 1996, aged 90.*

**B**ROUGHT to Lethbridge, Alta., at the age of three by his parents, Zebulon Lewis Leigh — Lewie to those who knew him best — left school at 14. His father's house-building business suffered in the postwar slump, and the eldest son went to work delivering groceries with a horse and wagon. By 1929, he knew that he wanted to spend his life in the precarious new machines called airplanes, and he began saving money from his job as a postal clerk for lessons. A friend estimated that when he retired in 1957, Mr. Leigh had logged two years of flying time. "And I loved every minute of it," was his comment.

It's a wonder he made it out of the early days of Canadian aviation with no more than a sore back. Mr. Leigh once became so frustrated with his Command-Aire 3C3 biplane — the engine wouldn't turn over, no matter how hard he spun the propeller — that he kicked a hole clear through its lower left wing. Cruising at night, at up to 135 kilometres an hour, he sometimes had to check the instruments in his open cockpit with a flashlight.

Often the only guide he had to go by was a map scrawled on the back of a cigarette pack. Airstrips were usually just open fields, and the only sure way a pilot could judge his location was to buzz the town he was passing over and read the name painted on the grain elevators below.

After operating a flying school in Medicine Hat and working as a pilot in Nova Scotia and Manitoba, Mr. Leigh joined Canadian Airways in 1934. Based in Fort McMurray, Alta., he had a parish that included the Barren Lands of the Northwest Territories and the Mackenzie River district all the way north to Aklavik. He sometimes flew, in an open cockpit, when the temperature on the ground was as low as -50.

A typical trip involved flying prospectors, mining machinery, food and dynamite in, and flying injured miners, ore and sick locals out. He flew to parts of Canada, such as Yellowknife and Great Bear Lake, where planes had never been. He brought his bird down on water, ice, snow and the occasional golf course.

Dispatched to California to learn instrument flying — until then pilots relied only on what they could see from their cockpits — he passed on the technique to other Canadian fliers. In 1937, he joined Trans-Canada Air Lines, the first pilot for the company that would later become Air Canada.

After three years of scouting routes and piloting passenger flights for Trans-Canada, Leigh joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. During the Second World War he flew antisubmarine patrols off the East Coast and became the driving force behind the Air Transport Command. Typically, he flew the first flights into the battle zones personally. His was the first transport plane into Normandy to pick up casualties after D-Day. On one particularly tense flight across the Atlantic he staved off disaster by using chewing gum to seal the leaking fuel tank of his B-17.



Zebulon Lewis Leigh in 1932.

After the war Mr. Leigh held commands on both coasts and in Ottawa, then retired to his Grimsby fruit farm in 1957. But even after his many hours in the cockpit were a memory, he continued to feel the need for speed. Sitting down behind the wheel of his car, Mr. Leigh would look the dashboard over as if it were an instrument panel. On the Queen Elizabeth Way, he would fly past every other vehicle until his companion made him pull over and promise to slow down. And he would — for a few kilometres.

After he retired, Mr. Leigh kept active as the director for the Canadian National Air Show. He was dedicated to charity work, which he carried out in his trademark low-key style. His wife, Lin, whom he married in 1931, died in 1984.

If being recognized for his contributions embarrassed Lewie Leigh, then he must have spent a large part of his life that way. He received laurel after laurel, starting in 1944 with the Order of the British Empire. He won the McKee Trans-Canada Trophy, Canada's highest civilian flying award, two years later, was awarded the U.S. Legion of Merit in 1948, was named to Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame in 1973 and was made a member of the Order of Canada in 1989.

The accolade he was proudest of came in 1987 when Max Ward, founder of WardAir and a former bush pilot himself, broke a bottle of champagne over the first WardAir A3130 Airbus and christened it the Z. Lewis Leigh.

"I was determined to fly, and fly I did," Leigh wrote in summing up his life. May he soar in peace.

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