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» No. 6 RCAF WW II FLIGHT SCHOOL

[MILITARY HERITAGE]

(April 26, 2010) **Dunnville Airport** in Haldimand County was the site of one of Canada's 28 **Service Flying Training Schools** during World War II. Rob Schweyer has written a fascinating article about that busy and dangerous time, which we feature here. It first appeared in **ROAR of the Harvard**, the **Canadian Harvard Aircraft Association** newsletter. Today, **No.6 RCAF Dunnville Museum** is located at the airport.



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The museum opened on July 5, 2004 and aims to preserve the history of the No.6 Service Flying Training School. The airport in Dunnville is one of the few remaining bases from the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP).

## RCAF Dunnville - No. 6 SFTS

By Rob Schweyer

Typical of the almost 30 service flying training schools operated in Canada during World War II, was No. 6 SFTS. The school was of the single-engine type, employing Harvards and Yales for fighter pilot training with Ansons added into the mix for navigation instruction.

Located on the west bank of the Grand River near Dunnville and half a mile from Lake Erie, the station boasted five steel-framed hangars, double triangular runway layout and a camp area consisting of some 50 acres. Official opening ceremonies took place on November 25, 1940. Under the watchful eye of G/C Allan H. Hull, Officer Commanding, the first class commenced training on December 6 with course members graduating a scant nine weeks later! Surprisingly, that first class received most of its instruction on Yales which outnumbered Harvards at Dunnville in those early days.

Flying training at the school was divided between two squadrons, each squadron comprised of four 'flights'. Each 'flight' employed 10 instructors each of whom were each responsible for four to five students at any given time. The school graduated a class each month, taking in a fresh course every 28 days.

The curriculum seemed like a lot for a 19 year old to absorb in just 16 weeks, the length of conversion time to Harvards in 1943. It included taxiing, straight and level flight, climbing, gliding, stalling, spinning, medium turns, steep turns, climbing turns, precautionary landings, formation flying, navigation, circuits, cross country, map reading, instrument flying, dive

bombing, aerobatics, forced landings and night flying. Bombing practice was done over the school's target in the Grand, five miles northwest of the main aerodrome.

Night flying and practice take-off and landings were carried out at relief fields in Kohler and Welland. At its peak in 1943, personnel on the station totaled nearly 1500 including 150 members of the RCAF Women's Division and almost as many civilians. Aircraft on strength during the same period included 64 Harvard II's, 36 Harvard IIB's and 8 Mk II Ansons, with 6 Harvards in storage. The school's large quantity of NA 64 Yales by this time had been relegated to the role of wireless trainers, painted yellow and flown off the base to RCAF wireless schools throughout Canada.

Noteworthy visitors to Dunnville during the war included A/M William Avery "Billy" Bishop, VC, DSO, MC, DFC; F/O George 'Buzz' Beurling, DSO, DFC, DFM and W/C A.G. 'Sailor' Malan, DSO, DFC. Distinguished graduates of the school included the likes of A/C/M Sir David Evans, CGB, CBE, CBIM; W/C Bill Swetman, DSO, DFC (the youngest RCAF commanding officer to serve in WW II) and F/O Wally Floody who later helped engineer the Great Escape from Stalag Luft III in 1944. Of the original intake of 2,746 pilot trainees, 2,436 received their wings. The station had the distinction of graduating the first New Zealand pilots in Canada under the BCATP.

During the four years the school operated, 47 men died. Of these, 25 were pilot trainees, 18 were instructors and four had other duties on the station. There were 373 accidents, 30 of which proved fatal. The terrible summer of '42 saw five fatal crashes in the month of September alone. Fully 80% of accidents were a direct result of pilot error, carelessness and disobedience.

When taking into account the number of close calls and near misses, the toll could have been much higher. On March 12, 1944 for instance, an instructor and student darted across the runway and pulled an unconscious pilot from his burning plane seconds before it erupted into a ball of flames. For their selfless actions, F/O R.P. McLean received the Order of the British Empire and LAC N.F. Wolgast (RNZAF), the British Empire Medal.

How much flying was actually done at Dunnville in those four years? Someone at DND took the time to tally it all and came up with a six-digit figure. It's a mind boggling statistic that's best illustrated as follows: If you took off in a CHAA Harvard and if you could fly the equivalent number of hours logged by both instructors and students at No. 6, that Harvard would fly non-stop, 24 hours a day and would not land again for 36 years! Credit for this remarkable feat is due in no small part to the aero engine mechanics, the riggers and other men and women making up the ground crews who laboured around the clock to "keep 'em flying".

No. 6 SFTS disbanded as a unit of the BCATP on December 1, 1944. It did however remain open as a subsidiary to No. 6 Repair Depot, Trenton, until 1964. Even at that late date I can remember as an eleven year old, seeing Harvards and Lancasters parked on the tarmac. Today the airport is home to the No. 6 RCAF Dunnville Museum as well as a variety of businesses.

#### **ROAR of the Harvard**

CHAA, Canada's grassroots organization devoted to keeping 'em flying  
[www.harvards.com](http://www.harvards.com)

#### **No. 6 RCAF Dunnville Museum In Dunnville**

Its preservation ensures that future generations can learn how the BCATP contributed towards the freedom we all enjoy today.

The museum is dedicated to the more than 2,500 men and women who served at the school from 1940-1944. Uniforms, pictures, memorabilia and artifacts of this era are displayed in the museum. There are also a North American Yale, Harvard, DeHavilland Tiger Moth and Fleet Finch on display in the hangar.

Free admission - donations appreciated.

The museum is open weekends and holidays from Victoria Day weekend to Labour Day weekend.

536 Regional Rd #11, (Port Maitland Rd.), Dunnville, 905-774-0544

Saturday 10 am to 5 pm, Sunday 1 pm to 5 pm, and Remembrance Day 1 pm to 4 pm.

Weekday, school and group tours can be arranged.

[www.dunnvilleairport.com/museum.php](http://www.dunnvilleairport.com/museum.php)





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Thursday June 2, 2011

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