

Flying classrooms – for radio operators

By Brian R. Page, N4TRB

When my company sent me to Toronto a few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to pop into the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum. There, amongst the world's largest collection of operational vintage aircraft, I discovered an interesting little plane with a radio, though not ham radio, connection.

One of the airplanes that wasn't in flying condition was a pleasant little two-seater called the Fleet Fort Model 60K which has the distinction of being the only aircraft completely designed and built by Canadians during World War II. Canadians made plenty of airplanes during the war years, but these others were all British or American models manufactured under license. The 60K, however, was all Canadian (figure 1).

The Fleet Fort was originally intended as a transitional trainer, filling the gap between the Tiger Moth biplanes in which new pilots earned their wings, and fighter aircraft such as the Hawker Hurricanes they would fly into combat.

Unfortunately, the 60K was a sweetheart, and an easy one at that. It was too easy to fly. It didn't sufficiently challenge the student pilots destined for the high-performance fighters. But, by 1941, the Royal Canadian Air Force was stuck with some 100 Fleet Fort 60K aircraft. What were they to do? The solution: turn the Fleet Forts into flying classrooms – for radio operators.

Instead of being a pilot trainer, the rear seat was outfitted with radio equipment and budding combat radio operators took to the skies. The main radio (figure 2) was a 5-band receiver manufactured by RCA Victor Company Limited. It

has two antenna connections, one for a main antenna and another for a "sense" antenna which allowed for radio direction finding (RDF) – an important skill needed to guide long-range bombers such as the Avro Lancaster back to base at the end of a bombing run over Nazi Germany.

Other equipment in the cockpit includes a Station Box to select functions such as transmitting or RDF, along with what

appears to be a Bendix Radio remote control head for a transmitter, and power supply controls.

It's impossible to look upon this relatively primitive equipment and fragile little aircraft without feeling immense respect and gratitude to the young men who trained as wireless operators and then flew into battle where the odds were stacked against their safe return.

Other photographs from my visit may be found on my web site at: <http://n4trb.com/Aerospace/CanadianWarplane/CWHM.html>



Figure 1.



Figure 2.