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# Flying Into History

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## Wop May and the First Aerial Police Chase in Canada

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Galloway Station Museum  
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In the early morning hours of Saturday, August 30, 1919, Constable William Leslie Nixon of the Edmonton Police was walking his beat close to city centre when he approached a man loitering near the Twin City Transfer Company building. Const. Nixon began to question the stranger when, without warning, the man pulled a handgun from his jacket, fired at the officer and fled.<sup>1</sup>

Const. Nixon was struck in the left side but was able to fire three rapid shots in the air – the standard distress signal – before losing consciousness. A patron of a nearby coffee shop heard the shots and called the police. Nixon was found by fellow officers and rushed to the Royal Alexandra Hospital where he was able to describe the assailant.<sup>2</sup> The constable died the next day, August 31, 1919. At the age of 29, he was the second Edmonton Police officer to die in the line of duty.<sup>3</sup>

Edmonton Police Chief George Hill then dedicated every available police officer to the task of identifying and capturing the murderer. Alberta Provincial Police were also involved in the search, as were former soldiers from Nixon's unit who volunteered their services. Nixon was a decorated and well-respected soldier who fought in WWI with the Alberta Dragoons' special services squadron in Europe until February 1918.<sup>4</sup>

Const. Nixon's description of the shooter matched that of John Gundard Larson (or Larsen), a man recently released from prison after serving three years for forgery and who had also been identified as the culprit responsible for a recent spate of armed robberies.<sup>5</sup>

While conducting a search of rooming houses on 101<sup>st</sup> Street on the evening of August 31, police determined Larson had purchased a train ticket on the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway line that had left Edmonton at 10:30 pm, bound for the busy mining community of Mountain Park, south of Edson, Alberta.<sup>6</sup> In an effort to reach the Coal Branch before the fugitive, Chief Hill made the historic decision that the Edmonton City Police would employ the services of a pilot to fly Detective James Campbell to the town of Edson.<sup>7</sup>

Wilfrid Reid 'Wop' May was a decorated WWI pilot who's run-in with the notorious Baron Manfred von Richtofen ('The Red Baron'), in what was to be the Baron's last dogfight, made him a well-known Canadian hero. Wop's skilled aerial handling and marksmanship - which enabled him to take down at least 13 enemy aircraft - further cemented the talented young ace's name in Canadian history.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A.J. Mair, *E.P.S. The First 100 Years: A History of the Edmonton Police Service*, (Edmonton, Alberta: Edmonton Police Service, 1992), 40-41.

<sup>2</sup> Sheila Reid, *Wings of a Hero: Ace Wop May*, (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 1997), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Mair, *E.P.S. The First 100 Years*, 40-41.

<sup>4</sup> "Policeman Nixon, Shot by Gunman Saturday Morning, Succumbs to Wounds; Murderer Still at Large", 1919.

<sup>5</sup> Mair, *E.P.S. The First 100 Years*, 40-41.

<sup>6</sup> "Policeman Nixon, Shot by Gunman Saturday Morning, Succumbs to Wounds; Murderer Still at Large", 1919.

<sup>7</sup> Mair, *E.P.S. The First 100 Years*, 40-41.

<sup>8</sup> Reid, *Wings of a Hero*, 31.

After the war, Wop May and his brother, Court May, started May Airplanes Ltd. in Edmonton. May Airplanes flew three different Curtiss JN-4s – two ‘Canucks’ and one ‘Jenny.’<sup>9</sup>

The aircraft themselves have a rich history. The JN-4 Jenny, manufactured by the Curtiss Aeroplane Co. of Hammondsport, New York, was the predominate aircraft of the U.S. Army’s air training program during the war. The Royal Flying Corps Canada (a training organization of the British *Royal Flying Corps* located in Canada during the war) also contracted with Curtiss Aeroplane to create a variation on the Jenny, the JN-4 Canadian (or Canuck) which was manufactured by Canadian Aeroplanes Ltd. in Toronto.

The Canuck and the Jenny have a few differences, including the Canadian version having a lighter airframe and ailerons.<sup>10</sup>

With these aircraft and others, the May brothers created a successful business performing ‘low-flying daredevil antics,’ and became a featured attraction in Edmonton and the surrounding area.<sup>11</sup>

It was no surprise that when Chief Hill was looking for a skilled pilot to take part in a daring chase, Wop May’s name was first to come to mind – it was also no surprise that Wop immediately agreed to help. However, there was a problem: the aircraft was in pieces.

According to *E.P.S. The First 100 Years, A History of the Edmonton Police Service*, by A.J Mair, the aircraft in question was identified as a Curtiss Jenny, however in July, 2019, Byron Reynolds, the Reynolds Heritage Preservation Foundation Director at the Reynolds Museum, confirmed through photographs that the aircraft in question was a Curtiss JN-4 Canuck, registered as G-CABT.<sup>12</sup>

The G-CABT Canuck had only just arrived the night before on a freight train from Saskatchewan where it was painted.<sup>13</sup>

Undaunted, the May brothers took up the challenge to reassemble the aircraft as quickly as possible. Every available mechanic was called in to work on the machine. Thanks to their efforts, Wop and James Campbell, Edmonton’s first flying detective, took off bound for Edson at 3:30 pm on September 2, 1919. This was the first aerial police pursuit in Canada and possibly in North America.<sup>14</sup> However, despite the Edmonton police chief’s forward thinking and the diligent work of many mechanics, the alleged murderer Larson still had a two-day head start.

The next challenge was finding a place to land in Edson because, with a population of only 800 at the time, the town did not have an airport.<sup>15</sup> Being an old hand at barnstorming, Wop managed to land

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<sup>9</sup> Denny May, *More Stories About "Wop" May*, (Edmonton, Alberta: Maycroft, 2011), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Neil Taylor, *Curtiss JN-4: Jennies and Canucks*, Alberta Aviation Museum, Edmonton,

<sup>11</sup> Reid, *Wings of a Hero*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> “RE: Curtiss JN-4 G-GABT.” *RE: Curtiss JN-4 G-GABT*, July 18, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Mair, *E.P.S. The First 100 Years*, 40-41.

<sup>14</sup> Mair, *E.P.S. The First 100 Years*, 40-41

<sup>15</sup> “Alberta Municipal Affairs Archived Population Lists”, 1919.

on a very small grassy area between the telegraph wires close to the train station, much to the surprise of the residents.

Wop later stated that the trip to Edson was the most hazardous and dangerous he had taken to date.<sup>16</sup>

Sheila Reid illustrates the scene in *Wings of a Hero: Ace Wop May*:

The unfamiliar drone of an airplane motor in the sky brought everyone in Edson outside to see what was going on. By the time the plane had landed, Wop had himself an admiring crowd. The detective, clearly not the subject of the admiration, climbed out of the passenger's seat unnoticed and headed over to the station to catch the train for the Coal Branch. The townspeople kept Wop busy with their questions ... And because it was his machine and he was proud of it, Wop answered all the questions, responding warmly to their excitement.<sup>17</sup>

While Detective Campbell made his way to Mountain Park to apprehend the fugitive, Wop was trying to find an area to use as a makeshift runway to get back to Edmonton. One of the Edson locals suggested using Main Street and Wop agreed that it might work. Many members of the community helped get set up for takeoff. Two men held the wings of the Curtiss while Wop taxied up the road, but although Main Street was 80 feet wide the wing of the plane clipped the pump situated in the middle of the street (at 3<sup>rd</sup> Street). The damage was minimal, and after yet another resident supplied Wop with gasoline to refuel, he was able to get airborne.<sup>18</sup>

The trip home was not uneventful. Because of strong headwinds, Wop had to make an emergency landing in Wabamun to refuel. After another hair-raising takeoff Wop made it back to Edmonton without further incident.<sup>19</sup>

Wop's brother and business partner, Court, who was familiar with the dense bush and rolling hills of the Edson area, had said he was sure that the only way the plane would make it back to Edmonton would be on a flatcar – he thought there would be nowhere to land without crashing.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, Detective Campbell had reached Mountain Park, successfully located his quarry, and arrested John Guddard Larson at the Cadomin Collieries (a coal mine together with its physical plant and outbuildings) on September 3 – just four days after the shooting of Const. Nixon.<sup>21</sup>

The morning of September 4 was spent unsuccessfully trying to locate a cache of weapons hidden by Larson in the area. However, by the evening Campbell, Constable C.A. McElroy of the Provincial Police, and their handcuffed prisoner were on a gasoline powered speeder (a small railway maintenance vehicle – presumably borrowed from the Grand Trunk Pacific as was often done in

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<sup>16</sup> "Chief Hill Reports Speedy Arrest of Larson", 1919.

<sup>17</sup> Reid, *Wings of a Hero*, 30.

<sup>18</sup> Reid, *Wings of a Hero*, 31.

<sup>19</sup> John Chalmers. CAHF, "The First Police Pursuit by Air- Re-creation of John Chalmers' Article in The Flyer."

<sup>20</sup> "Chief Hill Reports Speedy Arrest of Larson", 1919.

<sup>21</sup> Mair, *E.P.S. The First 100 Years*, 40-41.

emergency situations) heading back to Edson. It was a cold, rainy night and they were moving fast on a steep grade when Larson, in an act of desperation, rolled to the edge of the vehicle and threw himself into the dense bush.

By the time the two policemen were able to get the speeder stopped (it took about a mile of track), their prisoner had disappeared.<sup>22</sup> Larson had escaped.

The two officers were forced to return to Coalspur where Campbell sent a telegram to Chief Hill telling him of the escape. The men worked through the night and a search party consisting of Edmonton City Police, Provincial Police, Royal North West Mounted Police, Dominion park rangers, Dominion forest fire rangers, Grand Truck Pacific fire rangers, section foremen, and local trappers and traders was rapidly created to find the fugitive.<sup>23</sup>

Makeshift search headquarters were centered in a section man's shack (a worker who was responsible for maintaining a section of railway track) near Coalspur, south of Robb, where the track divided and headed either southwest to Cadomin and Mountain Park or Southeast to Lovett.<sup>24</sup>

On the afternoon of September 6, the men gathered at the shack to reorganize before they set off in two gasoline speeders to continue their search.

The fugitive Larson, who had made a seven mile loop in the wild central Alberta forest since his escape, had backtracked and watched the searchers depart down the track. Grasping a pointed iron survey stake as a potential weapon and looking for shelter from the rain and cold, the escapee entered what he thought to be an empty building – only to be greeted by the muzzles of guns held by Campbell and McElroy.

Thinking that Larson might be in the area looking for respite from the weather, the two officers stayed behind and laid in wait for the escaped prisoner.<sup>25</sup>

He was taken back to Edmonton – an uneventful trip this time – and was charged with four counts of robbery and one count of murder for the shooting of Const. Nixon.

Larson continued to make headlines even after his arrest. In the early morning hours on September 25, Larson, in the company of two guards, asked for a drink of water before returning to his cell and was handed a large cup with a sharp rim. He then complained that the shackles on his ankles were too tight and one of the guards, Constable Little, bent down to check them. While Const. Little was bent over, Larson slashed the officer's neck in a bid to escape. Const. Little was bleeding badly but luckily his attacker narrowly missed his jugular vein. Larson was quickly apprehended by the other officer in attendance.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Mair, *E.P.S. The First 100 Years*, 40-41.

<sup>23</sup> "Larsen (sic) Rearrested Friday By Detective Campbell and Const. McElroy", 1919.

<sup>24</sup> Mair, *E.P.S. The First 100 Years*, 40-41.

<sup>25</sup> "Larsen (sic) Now Behind Bars in Edmonton", 1919.

<sup>26</sup> Mair, *E.P.S. The First 100 Years*, 40-41.

In addition to his other charges, John Gundard Larson was now facing an attempted murder charge for his attack on Const. Little.

Due to lack of eye witnesses, he was never convicted of the murder of Const. Nixon, but appeared before the Honourable Justice Simmons in Alberta Supreme Court in early 1920 and was found guilty of armed robberies and the attempted murder of Const. Little and was sentenced to life in prison.<sup>27</sup>

In June, 1921, Larson, who was imprisoned at Stony Mountain penitentiary in solitary confinement since his sentencing, was declared ‘dangerously insane’ and transferred to Ponoka Asylum, although local police warned against it.<sup>28</sup>

Larson escaped from that facility only one month later and travelled 15 miles before being recaptured the same evening.<sup>29</sup>

According to the Edmonton Bulletin (September 4, 1919) Const. William Nixon’s funeral was one of the largest attended funerals in Edmonton at that time. He was buried in Ingersoll, Ontario. In 1999, The Constable William Nixon Memorial Training Centre in Edmonton, Alberta was completed.

Wilfrid ‘Wop’ May continued to have an illustrious aviation career which included helping authorities hunt for the infamous ‘Mad Trapper’ of Rat River in 1932 and many missions of mercy.

For more information on Wop May visit [www.wopmay.com](http://www.wopmay.com).

With many thanks to Denny May, John Chalmers, Byron Reynolds and the City of Edmonton Archives for their invaluable help and plethora of information and research.

The aircraft flown by Wilfrid May in the first aerial police chase, the G-CABT – Curtiss JN-4 Canuck was sold by May Airplanes to J & R Neilson on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1922 and was destroyed by a fire in the air and burned out on landing near Edgerton, Alberta, in November of the same year. The pilot and passenger were not seriously injured.<sup>30</sup>

When G-CABT made the Edson flight the aircraft was a medium shade of blue with red engine cowlings and rudder, red trim accents and with wheel covers and lettering in white.<sup>31</sup>

The Reynolds Museum donated the fire damaged spar and also one of the engine side cowlings complete with traces of the original red paint to the Edson & District Historical Society and the pieces remain on display at the Galloway Station Museum & Travel Centre.

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<sup>27</sup> Mair, E.P.S. *The First 100 Years*, 40-41.

<sup>28</sup> “Edmonton Police Again Have As Their Guest John Gundard Larsen, 1921

<sup>29</sup> Larsen, *Dangerous Criminal Lifer, Is Recaptured at Morningside, 1921*

<sup>30</sup> “RE: Curtiss JN-4 G-GABT.” *RE: Curtiss JN-4 G-GABT*, July 18, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> “RE: Curtiss JN-4 G-GABT.” *RE: Curtiss JN-4 G-GABT*, July 18, 2019.

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