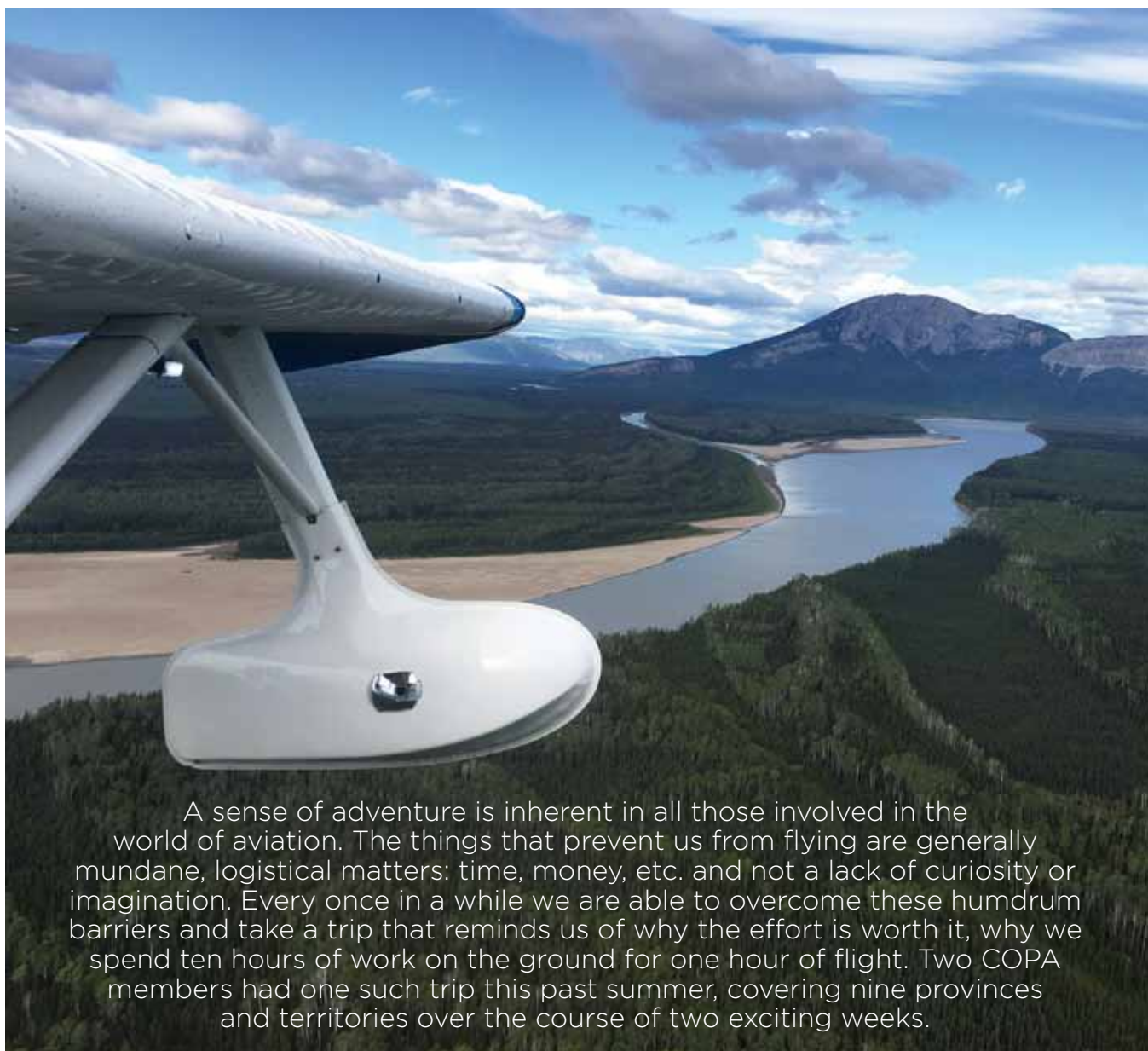


# FIVE THOUSAND MILES IN A SEABEE

ONTARIO PILOT STRIKES ONE OFF HIS BUCKET LIST

STORY BY LAUREN NAGEL / PHOTOS BY TASHA ESAU & EUCLID BENOIT



A sense of adventure is inherent in all those involved in the world of aviation. The things that prevent us from flying are generally mundane, logistical matters: time, money, etc. and not a lack of curiosity or imagination. Every once in a while we are able to overcome these humdrum barriers and take a trip that reminds us of why the effort is worth it, why we spend ten hours of work on the ground for one hour of flight. Two COPA members had one such trip this past summer, covering nine provinces and territories over the course of two exciting weeks.



Euclid Benoit of Tillsonburg, Ont. had long planned to do a cross-Canada trip of seven provinces and territories in his Seabee, and saw his 70th birthday as the ideal time to make it happen. Unfortunately, due to a variety of complications, the trip had to be cancelled and the idea was temporarily shelved. Two years later a new trip was planned: nine provinces and territories for his 72nd birthday, upping the stakes. Once again, Benoit was tested when his co-pilot's health began to deteriorate in the months leading up to the journey. Determined not to let this setback thwart his plans, he took a novel approach to finding a new co-pilot: Facebook.

For those not familiar with the website, Facebook includes a handy group where COPA members can share questions, photos, inquiries and more with other members. This is where Benoit posted his request for an experienced co-pilot to embark on a cross-country voyage with him. Within hours, he received several responses not only from interested parties, but also from members offering their support for the trip. The very first candidate to reply to his post also happened to be very qualified, holding his IFR, Commercial and Instructor ratings. Doug Tudor, the man for the job, considered this a chance for "a fascinating adventure". After a successful meeting and trial

▲ Many spectacular vistas were encountered along the northern flight legs.

flight in Tillsonburg, Benoit asked Tudor, "Are we on?", to which he replied, "100 percent".

As experienced pilots know, planning such a trip takes three times as long as flying it, this voyage being no exception. Years of plans drawn up by Benoit laid the foundation for the journey, but a definitive trip plan was not finalized until July 2018, shortly before their August departure. The timeline covered days with anywhere between one and 11 hours of flight in a 24-hour period, depending on the leg





of the journey. Included in the blueprint were plans for accommodations, spare parts, timelines, fuel, weather and more. While attempting to leave reasonable room for error, Benoit admits that if they lost a day of flying, a “domino effect of missed accommodations” would result. In addition to Benoit and Tudor, Benoit’s wife Jan and her friend Joan also joined the trip on day five in Ghost Lake, Alta, near Calgary. Benoit credits Jan with being “one of the biggest troopers he knows” as she is not a particularly avid flyer but decided to join the trip for the final 40 hours of flying anyway.

The trip took place over two weeks, covering 5437 nm or 10,060 km with a total of 63.3 hours of flight time. The 1947 Seabee was fitted with a Corvette engine that boosted its horsepower, allowing it to cruise at around 105 knots. The crew was also outfitted with matching Seabee hats, pins,

T-shirts and flight suits, calling themselves the ‘Seabee Republic’. The trip began in Tillsonburg, passed through Thunder Bay, Ont.; Winkler, Man.; Grand Prairie, Alta.; Fort Nelson, B.C.; La Biche River, Y.T.; Yellowknife, N.W.T.; Stony Rapids, Sask. and many other interesting locations along the way.

The only near-catastrophic obstacle faced by the crew was the loss of their tail wheel after hitting gopher holes near Maple Creek, Sask. The holes completely wrecked the tail wheel beyond the point of repair with the spare parts they had on board. Within two hours of sending out the signal for help, they heard from Brian Robinson, owner of a Seabee maintenance shop in Lindsay, Ont.; he had parts couriered to them the next day. Bob Gilchrist and Tom Udal of the Maple Creek (Sask.) Flying Club hosted Benoit and Tudor for the following 72 hours while the repairs were completed. This obstacle

and triumph were representative of the helpfulness they received all throughout the trip. Says Tudor, “We enjoyed the Canadian tradition of hospitality — general aviation style.”

The group of aviators had no shortage of adventure along their journey, from seeing dozens of polar bears overhead East Pen Island in Nunavut

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to flying safely overhead thousands of beluga whales near Moosonee, Ont., to walking from Manitoba to Nunavut during the ebb tide at Hudson Bay. These experiences remind us how privileged we are to be a part of such a fantastic community and to live in such a magnificent country. All the while, both pilots agree that the best part of their trip was meeting so many amazing people along the way. “We couldn’t have been more well treated,” said Benoit, reminiscing on all the kind people who lent them vehicles, helped them get from points A to B when no weather data or GPS signal existed, and kept them going after losing the tailwheel.

Benoit and Tudor are already planning another trip for next year to cover the same number of miles on the other side of the country. Their advice to other aviators considering a similar adventure: “Just do it. You wait any longer and you might not be allowed to do it.” These wise words are much needed in a society where our everyday lives tend to get in the way of the things we love to do the most. You never know where your next adventure might pop up: at work, at home or on Facebook. 📸