

The CAHS Regina chapter notes the passing of long-time local member Gustav “Gus” Feitzelmayer on April 6.



By Will Chabun

Gus’s aviation story had an usual backdrop. As he told the chapter in a 1991 presentation, he was born in Germany, but raised in the Fort Erie area, joining air cadets and in 1959 earning his private pilot’s licence through the air cadet scholarship program. He later he entered the RCAF through the Regular Officer Training Program (ROTP) and after some 70 hours pilot training on Chipmunks and Harvards “recoursed” to navigator.

On May 11, 1966, fresh from a year at the Air Navigation School in Winnipeg, which included 236 hours in Dakotas, Gus found himself going straight to on-the-job training with 405 Squadron at Greenwood. Skipping the usual course at 2 (Maritime) OTU at Summerside on Neptunes, he had the additional bonus of going directly overseas. After an airshow at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, his crew was off across the Atlantic to RAF Stations Kinloss (Scotland) and St. Mawgan (Cornwall). The trip to the UK also involved the filming of *100 Watchful Eyes*, a documentary by CJCH-TV Halifax. This round trip included visits to London, Gibraltar, Lajes Field (USAF) in the Azores, and NAS Key West, Florida. Between May 1966 and July 1970 Gus was to make some 60 trips away from home in the Argus. Some were RON (rest over night) as long as 18 days. A favourite, he reported, was Lajes Field in the Azores, with 24-hour service on a par with any of the finest restaurants.

Many visits to Keflavik, Iceland, were cherished too, though Gus noted the financial requirements of the Viet Nam War left it more rundown with each visit. Multiple visits were made to the USN at Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, and Bermuda, as well as to the RAF in Northern Ireland (Ballykelly and Londonderry) and Scotland (Kinloss).

Gus painted a fascinating word-portrait of life in an Argus squadron in those days.

Flight Engineers were senior NCOs, whereas pilots, navigators and ROs (Radio Operators) were commissioned officers, usually about 23-26 years old and single. Some of the senior pilots, who were in their thirties and forties, appeared quite ancient to young crew members.

There was a lot of flying to do because of Canada's NATO commitments. Joint exercises, anti-submarine warfare training, and open ocean surveillance were the rule rather than the exception in those days.

One unusual trip that stood out was one to Dusseldorf to examine the Argus' potential in troop rotation. They rotated one soldier!

Six days on and three days off was the usual work rotation, unless they were away from base. As a rule, one hour of flying earned 1 1/2 hours rest so that a sixteen-hour patrol resulted in 24 hours rest.

The longest patrol Gus remembered was 19 hours off Greenland looking for a downed Russian aircraft.

A typical day usually began at 2 a.m. for breakfast. By 3 a.m. the crew was at base operations for briefing and to collect documentation, which included tactical publications, classified communications, books, maps, nav tables, charts safety and survival gear and service logs. They also had to verify equipment (sonobuoys, Julie depth charges, smoke markers, weapons etc.). Then it was off to the aircraft to do external and internal pre-flight checks and be ready for the 5 a.m. take off.

There were 116 external checks on the Argus, 186 internal, besides 71 at the flight engineer's station. The cockpit crew handled 109 checks including 12 pre-start and 18 pre-taxi checks, followed by 8 run-up and 25 pre-take off checks. Besides these flying checks there were many in-flight checks involving the aircraft systems and weapons and equipment.

After takeoff the crew would settle into the routine of work and rest according to their aircrew trades. Returning to base around 9 p.m., there was still the paper work to clean up and the debriefings (official and unofficial!) to be dealt with. With luck, they would get to bed by midnight.

Typically, Maritime Command Headquarters assigned an area or track for patrol. This would be based on the latest information available about surface or sub-surface sightings. On a line patrol, the aircraft's crew would investigate visually all contacts within a specific distance of the track. Occasionally, they would photograph an interesting sighting or drop a sonobuoy to listen for anything interesting until the aircraft was out of range.

On an area patrol, the aircraft would sweep the area visually or perhaps lay a pattern of sonobuoys, which would be monitored through the hydrophones as they picked up sound from the various depth settings. If anything interesting was heard, then the crew's attention was directed to attempting to make a positive identification. This could be done by visual or radar contact, hydrophone, electronic emission or any means that could give a clue to the contact's identity. This procedure continued until the contact was lost and the search could begin for another.

The only time it was possible to know for sure that a submarine definitely was around was on anti-submarine exercises. This involved practice with anti-submarine frigates, helicopters and other aircraft against "friendly" submarines. It was a chance to hone those tracking skills and awaken a submarine crew with a small explosive charge!

The Argus was a large and roomy aircraft, but noisy and smelly, and the heating left much to be desired. The full galley enabled the crew to cook meals for themselves, but the layout of the galley and dining area, with the rest area bunks behind, caused some concern as it was directly opposite the engines. At full power, the aircraft noise and vibration was particularly bad. Gus remembers how the vibration could move a cup off the galley table. At full power, the three exhaust stacks of each engine would emit a ten- or twelve-foot flame. At cruise or patrol power, the engine noise was reduced to a pleasing rumble.

Like most aircraft the Argus had its share of idiosyncrasies, one of which Feitzelmayer relates was not having enough rudder control for crosswind landings. The free-floating controls were sloppy at low speeds and the aircraft tended to float on touchdown, making smooth landings a rarity. Gus blamed the rigid wing spar for making the aircraft respond so vigorously to turbulence, particularly when crossing its own wake while circling on patrol.

The Argus was fitted with a grinning Gus called “voice-activated controls” -- which means the pilot gave the power settings required to the flight engineer who actually maintained them within very close limits, especially at low altitude. The pilot rarely controlled the throttle except when using reverse power on landing or when maneuvering on the ground.

The navigator's duties began at briefing. He was responsible for flight planning information for the pilot. He calculated headings, arrival times, time in the patrol area, endurance, point of no return, etc., all based on the weather, and other relevant briefing details. The navigator prepared the track to fly, and the patrol area. He would also need to collect all navigation instruments, tables and publications. The navigator had little to do while the aircraft was on airways, but once the aircraft was away from land he must maintain accurate records of its position.

The aircraft was fitted with a simple computer that gave the latitude and longitude regardless of the aircraft's manoeuvres, but the navigator would update the computer with readings from three separate sextant sightings, LORAN (Long Range Navigation system) aids, radar or visual positioning.

The Tactical Navigator position was usually only operated in a patrol area where sonobuoys were used. The TacNav could determine the sonobuoys' pattern and launch them from his position.

The TacNav usually attempted to triangulate ranges from several sonobuoys in order to pinpoint a submarine. Several of these triangulation operations would enable the TacNav to predict the speed and direction of the contact and enable the crew to make an accurate attack. The pilot could use localizing maneuvers with MAD (Magnetic Anomaly Detector) equipment to locate a target. He can also drop smoke markers and weapons from his position.

After leaving the RCAF, Gus worked in Saskatchewan's Environment Ministry, specializing in the handling of water and wastewater. He was buried April 17, 2017.