

What on earth? Young farm boys preparing for war? Yikes. One week I was flying over Britian's coastline and the next I was in Canada preparing for WWII. It's 1943. I'm an Avro Anson aircraft. I lived for a couple years just south of Hartney. At the Commonwealth Air Training field.

That's a long way from Europe. When France fell to the German army in 1940, the British, Australian, New Zealand and Canadian authorities decided it'd be better to train fighter pilots far from war action, in a place with stable weather and fewer people. There were training fields outside Souris and Elgin as well.

I couldn't get too full of myself though. I'm no fighter plane. I can carry guns and bombs, for sure, but I was designed for surveillance, not battle. I was sent to Hartney because I'm reliable as a trainer plane. The fellas who climbed into my cockpit had never flown a plane. Speed and endurance were lower priorities. The real fighters in our training squad were the Harvards; also propeller driven, but much livelier in the air. Every new pilot looked to those powerhouses with fear and longing.

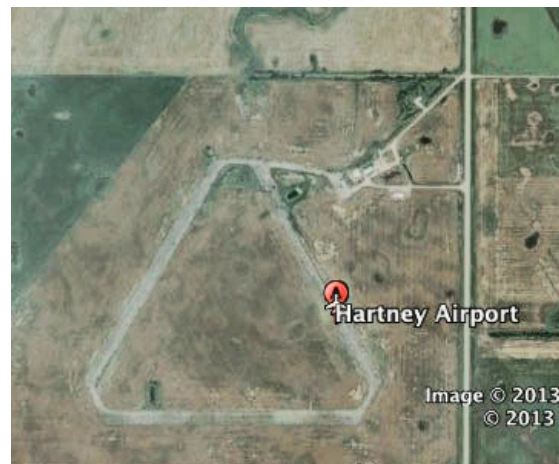


At the Hartney Airfield

I love prairie skies. Like being on a crystal clear lake. I could see every pebble and farm animal as we trained. Every house had a massive garden. We called them Victory Gardens. So much food was going to soldiers. Folks had to feed themselves. Essentials were rationed, like coffee, tea, sugar, butter and gasoline. But as beautiful as it was up there, it was also loud. There was no hiding. With takeoffs, steep turns

and firing at bunker targets, the sound of war was constant.

We planes wondered among ourselves, about the young men, some still boys who had experienced so little, how many would come home after the war. European skies were dominated by the famous German Messer. And German engineers were working on the first jet powered fighter. Scary place in those skies. We shuddered and focused on our task. "Planes can't choose. Humans can" we'd say. Our job was to offer pilots and crews every advantage. Skill and confidence in the sky.



The airstrip is still visible today, just south of Hartney.

New pilots and their trainers were a serious bunch. But after work, and after we had been tied down, fueled and polished bright, we'd hear roars of laughter from the barracks. There were 100 lads or so, along with a few wives who did the cooking. With new friends made, good food served and vigorous games of craps played, the future could be set aside, at least for a time. A good night's sleep gained.

Why do people go to war? They're convinced it's the best way to make the world a safer place. And maybe, sometimes, it is true.

David Neufeld adapted "Training for War" from a story in Vantage Points 5

See ya' later!