



# Check Ride? What's That?

BUSH PILOTS OFTEN LEARNED BY DOING



Stan Nichols in his natural habitat.

The computer finally flashed a pass, and the last of eleven exams ended — all of them to fly a Wichita-built, tricycle-gear shopping cart. A few weeks later, a high-time bush pilot reminisced about days when airplane checkouts consisted of a hop or two around a lake. Whether accident rates have dropped in recent years he wasn't certain, but we agreed that affluent test producers saunter regularly to sun-soaked beaches or sail away on salt water cruises.

Born August 2, 1926, Stan Nichols saw his first airplane ten years later when a collection of fabric and wood slipped onto a patch of ice near his northeastern Ontario home town of Hearst. The shivering pilot ignored his pleas for a ride. Several years later, a flock of Fairchild Cornells settled into a nearby emergency field built for passing airliners.

"We all rushed out from school, but none of those guys would give us a ride," Nichols recalled. "So, 'someday,' I thought, 'I'll learn to fly.'"

Nichols placed his goal on hold to serve in the Royal Canadian Navy and, after the war, returned to Hearst to open a chain-saw business. In 1952, the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests established a seaplane base at Carey Lake, 17 miles west of the community. Nichols became ac-

quainted with a de Havilland Beaver pilot and, at the age of 26, found himself unofficially invited for his first airplane ride.

A career change brought Nichols to Malton, near Toronto, where he accepted employment with Orenda Engines, which manufactured powerplants for Canadair Sabres and Avro CF100 jets. Off-duty, he enrolled for flying lessons at Toronto Island's Central Airways and soloed Fleet Canuck CF-EOH on August 20, 1953. Slowly logging time on various airplanes, Nichols eventually acquired a commercial pilot licence in a Taylorcraft BC-12D.

"The Brampton Flying Club asked me to instruct, but I didn't have an instructor rating, so did a 12-hour course and began flying for a living in 1958," he said. "After a float endorsement, I happened to be at Orillia Air Services' North Bay base and met the owner, Harry Stirk."

Nichols must have impressed Stirk, who offered him a flying job for the approaching open water season. However, Stirk's North Bay pilot unexpectedly quit. Consequently, Nichols received a letter asking if he could come immediately. With little exposure to ski airplanes, Nichols agreed to fly the company's ski-equipped Cessna 172 and Champion 7EC from North Bay's Trout Lake. Ten days later, the base manager left him on his own.

Nichols stayed for 13 years and became hardened to slush, frozen skis, and cold engines. Some trips meant removing doors in sub-zero days to drop skydivers. Another assignment, involving closing an outpost camp, turned into an overnight stay in a log shack. Next morning, ice covered the lake, and Nichols worked until dusk flooding the surface by carrying gallon pails of water to thicken the ice enough to hold his Cessna 180. The aircraft staggered airborne without float damage.

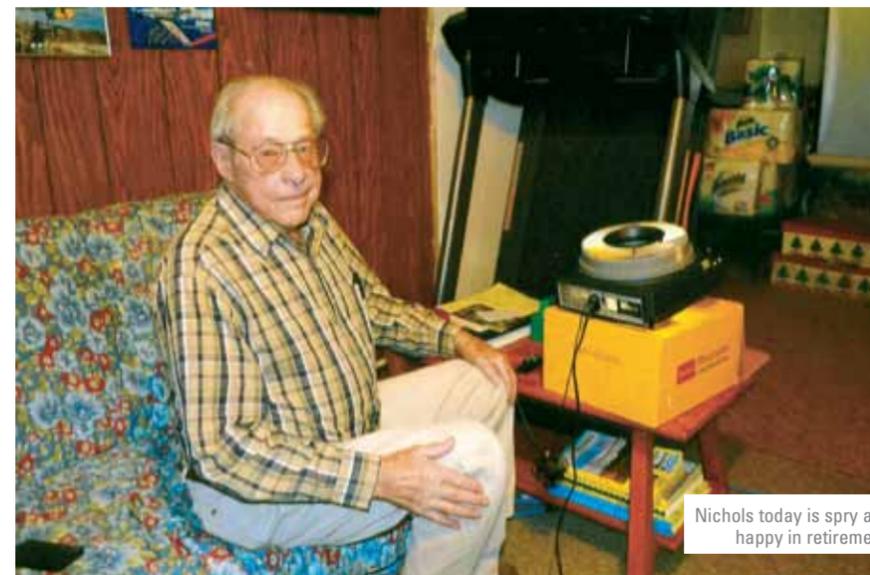
Nichols had few hours in anything larger than a 90-hp Fleet 80 Canuck. Nevertheless, Orillia Air Services expected him to shift into a gigantic 450-hp Stinson SR-10F. A massive airplane, CF-HVP's 41'11" wing span awed passengers and pilots wherever it went. A major step in bush flying, the SR-10F became Nichols's first radial engine type in an era when commercial operators expected employees to survive with little training. Time-consuming paperwork rarely entered the picture. In this case, the chief pilot flew two landings with Nichols and left him alone with the gigantic Stinson Reliant.

A short time later, Orillia Air Services assigned DHC-2 Beaver CF-RZL to the North Bay fleet. With lighter handling characteristics than the imposing SR-10F, a more thorough checkout should have been expected, but Nichols's employer believed in a simplified approach.

"My checkout this time was the boat ride to the aircraft floating at a buoy, and then it was, 'Goodbye; get to work,'" said Nichols.

When an ownership change occurred in 1975, managers ordered pilots to work summers only and survive winters on government handouts. Coincidentally, air strip construction reduced bush flying, so Nichols decided to switch to Albany River Air Service at Jellicoe, 24 nm miles west of Geraldton. The company flew Cessna 185s, Beavers, and Otters from the village's short Roland Lake and, in winter, reduced to three aircraft. For one season, Nichols flew a Noorduyn Norseman from a larger body of water closer to Geraldton.

PHOTOS STAN NICHOLS (2X)



Nichols today is spry and happy in retirement.

A solid, well-built freighter slightly faster than a Beaver or SR-10F, the less glamorous, go-anywhere Beaver was Nichols's ride of choice. Operations continued year-round; at least the nearest competitor agreed to limit activities to -40°C.

Some wilderness duties involved hauling external loads. Roped-on boats or canoes became routine, and, occasionally, 16' lumber lengths made up the cargo. Nichols once carried a steel fireplace that "held me down to a reasonable slow air speed but wanted to yaw."

Although whiteouts and glassy water occurred frequently, Nichols experienced only one mishap. At Geraldton's airport, his wheel-ski Beaver slipped out of control during a 35-mph, right-angled crosswind, smashed over a snow bank, and caved in the belly. In spite of dawn-to-dark loading and flying and unloading awkward items such as fuel drums and plywood sheets at remote sites, he maintained an excellent safety record. One contract demanded 250 hours in a Beaver and kept him from home for nearly three consecutive months.

He remembered an airborne fire in a Cessna 180. "I looked back, saw flames and smoke, pulled power back, and thunked down on a lake. Turns out, a Swede saw had shifted and shorted an uncovered battery. Getting out of that pothole was a problem, since I didn't have time to look over the rocks before the landing."

During the time Nichols spent in boreal bush country, which included 10,000 seaplane hours, few major airlines accepted

pilots who wore glasses. In his case, long autopilot flights and lack of contact with passengers held no appeal anyway. He never acquired an instrument rating but admits he "sometimes staggered around in the fog."

After eleven pilot log books and 18,000 hours, Nichols's last revenue flight occurred in a Cessna 180 on September 24, 1991, and he selected North Bay as a permanent home. Although reticent by nature, Nichols willingly shares his experiences with local pilots and stresses strongly that anyone interested in lifelong bush piloting seek flight schools specializing in skis and floats.

Newcomers require patience, he adds. Skills in today's bush piloting profession cannot be learned in a few hours aloft. Even perfecting the deceptively simple act of seaplane docking takes time, Nichols pointed out. Most importantly, novices must think for themselves and, when necessary, stand up to paying customers who demand landings on short lakes when safer ones may be a few minutes' walk away. Critical decisions are not made in air-conditioned offices far from airplane cockpits.

Nichols made time in his colourful career to get married in 1957. He and his wife Jean raised two children and eventually become great-grandparents of five. Sharp, even in hearing, although headsets rarely pressed his ears, he is satisfied to have missed the impractical exams foisted upon the current aviation industry. 🐦

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