

# Buffalo Airways Curtiss C-46 Commando



## Indispensable freighter planes to supply remote communities in the Northwest Territories

*Text and photos by Pierre Gillard*

*Translation by Kenneth I. Swartz*

It's a winter Saturday in early 2020. This morning at Yellowknife Airport in the Northwest Territories, the temperature is  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$ , the sky is overcast, and it is snowing just a few flakes. Around 8:30 am, the Buffalo Airways Curtiss C-46 Commando C-GTPO arrived from Hay River. As soon as the plane's cargo doors were opened, two powerful forklifts took turns unloading the pallets that made up its load. These are placed close to several small delivery trucks. Employees immediately sort

the goods from the aircraft and load them into the appropriate truck according to their destination. The operation is very efficient!



*William Levacher, former ENA student and first officer on C-46 prepares the aircraft for the next flight.*

While the unloading is taking place, William Levacher, the first officer on the next flight, is busy removing the blankets and heaters placed on the engines to keep them warm. He also takes care of the refueling while the C-46 is being loaded for its delivery flight down the Mackenzie Valley. For this flight, the forklifts pick up pallets that have been prepared in advance at the Buffalo Air Express warehouse located just across the street. In the cockpit, the captain, Anthony-John "A.J." Decoste, is



going through the preflight checklist.

At Buffalo Airways, pilots do not wear white shirts with shiny ties and shoes. Admittedly, they are pilots, but they also take care of flight-related tasks such as fueling, loading and unloading the aircraft as well as securing the cargo. The clothing they wear is similar to other northern workers, rather than the tailored uniform of big city pilot!



These resupply flights to remote communities are absolutely vital. For the majority of these, only an aircraft can transport the food and other material necessary for their survival. This is a vital link that Buffalo Airways, over the years, has reliably established with its robust cargo planes from another era. Indeed, it is impossible to land without damage more modern aircraft such as Dash 8 or ATR on short gravel runways established near remote communities. Buffalo Airways' Curtiss C-46 Commando, Douglas DC-3 and Lockheed Electra are the most suitable aircraft for this type of operation today.



***On Saturday morning, Buffalo Airways Curtiss C-46 Commando C-GTPO arrives at Yellowknife Airport from Hay River with a load of cargo and is then prepared for its next cargo flight to three remote communities in the Mackenzie Valley in what is known as the “Valley Run”.***

Once the C-46 is loaded and the pallets secured, A.J. starts the aircraft engines. This Commando came out of the factory in 1944. Planes

of this age, or even older in flight, exist in several collections or are operated by private owners. In general, they are pampered, cared for, taken care of and fly very little. Our C-46 C-GP-TO, has not stopped working since the end of World War II! It is one of four aircraft of this type still in commercial service in the world (two at Buffalo Airways and two at Everts Air Fuel in Alaska) and currently flies almost every day. Unbelievable, right?

Buffalo Airways flight 521 takes off from Yellowknife at 9:28 a.m. with a load of 12,000 pounds of food and other goods destined for remote communities. The climb is made west at 500 feet per minute to reach a cruising altitude of 6,500 feet and an air speed of 140 to 145 knots. This is not extraordinary performance but let us not forget that we're in a 76-year old flying truck!

If the weather was cloudy in Yellowknife, the arrival at Norman Wells (CYVQ) takes place under a clear sunny day. The aircraft lands on runway 28 at 12:08 pm and performs a back-track on the runway to park behind a Canadian North Boeing 737-36Q which about to depart. A large forklift and a truck await the C-46 on the edge of the apron. As soon



***Above: About 12,000 pounds (5.5 tonnes) of equipment and supplies are loaded onto the C-46 for the day's delivery tour. Above: The C-46 crew at Buffalo Airways is made up of a captain and a first officer, A.J. Decoste and William Levacher, respectively, for today's flights.***

as the cargo door is opened, the forklift goes into action. Inside the aircraft, A.J., using a pallet truck, moves the cargo progressively towards the cargo door where the

pallets are taken out one by one by forklift and deposited on the truck. About 4,000 to 5,000 pounds of goods are offloaded at this stop.



*Above: As you get closer to Norman Wells, the view of the Mackenzie Valley becomes spectacular. Above: First step of the Valley Run at Norman Wells.*

Meanwhile, William is in charge of fueling. To oversee the process, he accesses the wing tanks by exiting through the two emergency exits. Once on a wing, he takes the pistol from the fuel truck and fills the tanks and checks the amount of fuel using a calibrated dip stick.

Once the remaining payload is rearranged to meet weight and balance requirements on the C-46, the doors are closed and without delay, A.J. starts the both huge Pratt & Whitney R-2800-51M1 engines

developing 2,000 horses each. At 12:42 pm, the plane takes off from Norman Wells. The view of the river and the Mackenzie Valley is absolutely magnificent, and in the distance you can see the snow-capped mountains of the Mackenzie Mountains that form the Continental Divide.

The climb still takes place at 500 feet per minute, but this time the cruise altitude is 4,500 feet, which is an ideal altitude to admire the Arctic landscape which goes from rugged terrain to huge snowy forests in a flatter environment. At 145 knots, the imposing C-46 is now moving northwest from Norman Wells.



*Above: Pallets destined for the Norman Wells communities are transferred by forklift to a truck. Center: In order to complete the Valley Run, the fuel tanks must be refilled at Norman Wells; that's the role of the first officer. Opposite: A.J. Decoste organizes the movement of pallets on board the aircraft during the stopover at Norman Wells.*



# C-GTPO-registered Curtiss C-46F Commando



*The Buffalo Airways Curtiss C-46F Commando C-GTPO at Colville Lake Tommy Kochon.*

Along with C-FAVO, Curtiss C-46F Commando C-GTPO is one of two aircraft operating in the Buffalo Airways fleet. Both are ordinarily operated from Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories, but they sometimes flying in other provinces of Canada when they receive cargo contracts.

C-46 serial number 22556, C-GTPO left Curtiss-Wright factory in 1944 and joined the U.S.A.A.F. in August 1945 with the military serial 44-78733. In 1950, it was declared surplus and sold in the civil sector where it was acquired by the famous Flying Tiger Line which registered it N1258N. In 1957, it was leased to Wien Air Alaska and on July 7, 1964 it was bought by Wings Inc., then in June 1969 by F.A. Conner, in September 1970 by Shamrock Airlines and in

1976 by Trans Continental Airlines. In May 1985, it was re-registered N519AC in the name of Atkins Aviation Inc. before being sold in Canada the following year.

On April 15, 1986, it was registered C-GTPO by Northland Air Manitoba Ltd of Winnipeg

then, on August 25, 1993, it officially passed into the hands of Buffalo Airways. From October 7, 2004 to November 17, 2010, it was registered in the name of FNT First Nations Transportation Inc. of Gimli, Manitoba. And then eventually returned to the Buffalo Airways fleet.



*The avionics of the C-46 C-GTPO are made up of both traditional instruments and recent equipment.*



***Approach to Fort Good Hope. When you see this frozen gravel runway just under 4,500 feet long, it is easy to understand that not all types of aircraft can land at this location.***

After a half hour flight, the Commando arrives at Fort Good Hope Airfield (CYGH). It is a relatively short, icy, snow-covered runway. The landing takes place at 12:18 p.m. and goes perfectly. However, the C-46 needs all the piloting skills of A.J. and William to make a U-turn on the runway and taxi to the parking area. Indeed, the wheels of the aircraft tend to slip on the ice during the maneuver and you definitely don't want to slide off the runway and get stuck in a ditch!



***Pallets destined for Fort Good Hope are unloaded using a bulldozer with forks. They are then placed on a trailer hitched to a large pick-up.***



***Above: C-GTPO in front of the small terminal at Fort Good Hope. Above: little by little with each stopover, the cargo on-board decreased to a single pallet destined for Colville Lake. Below: approach to Colville Lake.***

Once the C-46 is parked and the engines stopped, the same unloading operation as at Norman Wells takes place here, but this time, it is a bulldozer equipped with forks which transfer the pallets onto a long flatbed trailer attached to a pickup truck. Approximately 4,000 pounds of cargo are unloaded, and the remaining pallets are again distributed in the fuselage to keep the aircraft balanced. These are secured to the floor by large

straps to avoid any undesirable movement during the flight.

Once the operation is complete, it is time to start the engines and take off without delay. At 1:40 p.m., the wheels of the C-46 leave the ground and the aircraft heads north-east this time at a cruising altitude of 3,500 feet. Since navigation takes place beyond 70 ° north latitude, the GPS is programmed to give heading information in true degrees rather than magnetic degrees.

A good 25 minutes later, Colville Lake Tommy Kochon (CYVL) airfield is in sight. Here the approach is a little more delicate because the runway has a bulge in the middle and, above all, there is a little cross wind today which could cause the aircraft to slide laterally outside

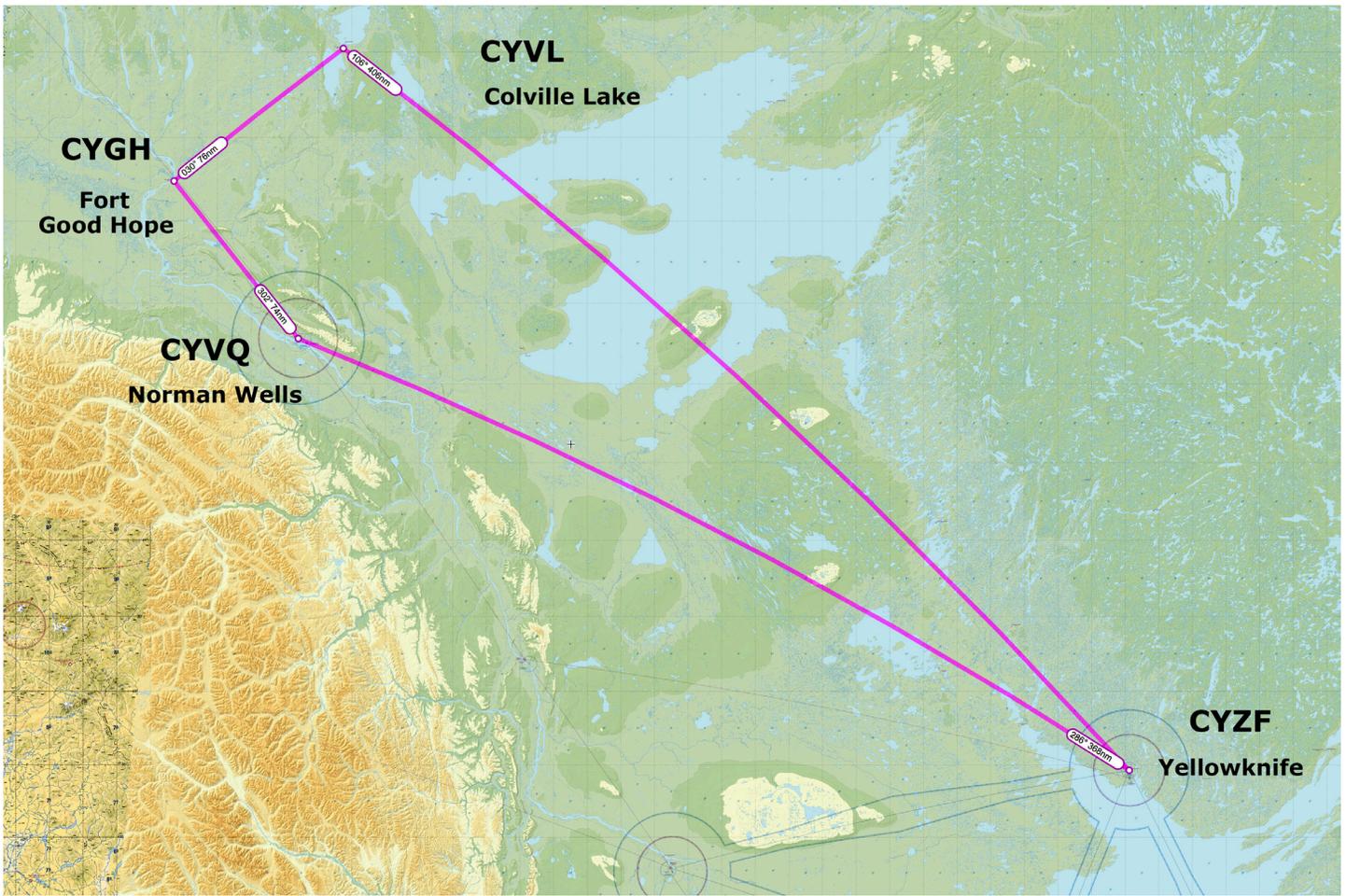


# The Northwest Territories, beautiful, but inhospitable



All of the flights on the delivery tour discussed in this article were made in the Northwest Territories. Covering an area of 1,346,106 km<sup>2</sup>, it has a population of approximately 42,000, nearly half of whom live in the capital, Yellowknife. Most of the Territories are almost deserted except for a few indigenous communities and natural resource sites. Here are some views showing both the majestic and inhospitable side of the regions overflown on the "Valley Run".





*Above: The Mackenzie Valley delivery tour of March 21, 2020 recreated on SkyVector. Bottom left: C-46 in front of Colville Lake Tommy Kochon terminal.*



the runway. But, once again, the dexterity and expertise of the two pilots makes everything go smoothly and the aircraft touches down at 2:09 p.m.

Having arrived a little early, there is no one to welcome the crew. The place is really deserted, literally in the middle of nowhere! After a few minutes, however, a small truck from a local cooperative arrives and backs up to the aircraft. The remaining pallets are unpacked and the boxes of goods, mainly food, are transferred by hand in a good spirit.

This time, there are only a few empty pallets, the pallet truck and a few boxes left in the hold that need to be shipped to Yellowknife. The return flight will therefore take place almost empty. Takeoff takes place at 2:42 p.m. and the selected cruise altitude is 9,500 feet with a route to the southeast. Colville Lake is over 400 nautical miles from Yellowknife, but fortunately there is a tailwind which means the aircraft can make the journey in two hours and fourteen minutes.

The weather deteriorates somewhat en route, but ultimately the C-46 returns home without incident. Once on the ground, the ground handling crew take charge of the plane while William installs the large insulating blankets and electric heaters on the engines to keep them warm. With these steps, the C-46 C-GTPO - a tireless beast of burden - is ready for a new mission!

*The author would like to thank Joe McBryan, Anthony-John Decoste, William Levacher, and Buffalo staff for organizing these beautiful flights on the Curtiss C-46.*

**Top and center: At Colville Lake, unloading is done by hand directly in a small truck. Opposite: En route to Yellowknife ... There are only 386 nautical miles left to go!**





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