

Goderich's Sky Harbour welcomed almost 1,000 pilot trainees during WWII

By **David Yates** Originally published in the *Goderich Signal Star*, November 3, 2022

His Majesty's naval forces have played a vital role at some of the most critical moments Goderich's history. In June 1827, the Royal Navy founded the town when the HMS Bee delivered John Galt to the mouth of the Maitland River to meet Tiger Dunlop. During the 1866-68 Fenian threat, it was the gunship HMS Cherub and her crew who defended the port.

During the Second World War, air crews from the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm were trained at Goderich's Sky Harbour airport from August 1943 to July 1944. Since its opening in October 1940, Sky Harbour had been designated No. 12 Elementary Flight Training School. Thousands of pilot trainees from the Commonwealth's air forces received introductory flight training at the Goderich airfield. In August 1943, a fundamental change at Sky Harbour occurred when the *Signal Star* headline announced 'Navy Student Pilots Coming.' The Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm sent 50 student pilots to Sky Harbour for elementary flight instruction before undergoing training as carrier pilots.



Photo: Fleet Air Arm Flight No. 105 at Sky Harbour, 1944,
by J. Gordon Henderson from the Collections of the Huron County Museum & Historic Gaol.

The newspaper predicted that “the navy uniform, always popular in this lakeside town, will be more prevalent than heretofore on Goderich streets.” J. R. Douglas, Sky Harbour’s civilian manager, boasted that this was only the first group of Fleet Air Arm students. An anonymous Sky Harbour official simply stated that “we are going to have the bell bottoms with us” for a while. The *Signal Star* noted that ‘the blue-gray’ of the air force had “retired from the airdrome in favour of the navy blue and boys with the barrel chests.”

By October 1943, the *Signal Star* reported that with the arrival “of other contingents of student pilots of the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy, Sky Harbour is now one hundred per cent navy.” Sky Harbour was officially designated as the Fleet Air Arm Elementary School of the Commonwealth Training Plan. It was the Royal Navy’s only elementary flight school in Canada.



Fleet Air Arm student pilots were the elite of the naval service. They received their initial flight training on the Tiger Moth. It was a bi-plane with an open cockpit that looked more like a relic from the First World War. Yet, despite its ancient appearance, the Tiger Moth was an excellent trainer. In the proper hands, they were simple to operate, mechanically reliable and required minimal maintenance.

However, flight training could be hazardous.

On Nov. 13, 1943, a tragic accident claimed the life of Leading Aircraftman Samuel Billington. Inexperienced in Canadian weather, Billington, with only a few hours solo flight time, became “confused” in a heavy snow squall over Lake Huron. Attempting to fly by instruments, Billington was just a few hundred yards from Menesetung Park when he crashed his Tiger Moth into the lake. It took the RCAF crash boat and

Captain Bert MacDonald on the Annamac almost a day in “dirty weather and rough water” to retrieve Billington’s body still strapped inside his aircraft. Photo by J. Gordon Henderson from the Collections of the Huron County Museum & Historic Gaol



Photo by J. Gordon Henderson from the Collections of the Huron County Museum & Historic Gaol

Samuel Billington was given a full naval funeral procession beginning at Cranston's funeral home on Montreal Street. He is buried in the military section of the Maitland Cemetery. The *Signal-Star* reported Billington's age as 19. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission officially listed his age as 17.

In December 1943, two Tiger Moths collided 30 feet in the air. According to Manager J.R. Douglas, the accident occurred when one aircraft "in landing came down on the back of another plane which was taking off." "One of the most trustworthy of instructional staff" was hospitalized. The other three aviators were badly shaken.

Like the RAF/RCAF before them, the Fleet Air Arm men were welcomed into the life of the town. A Christmas dinner "fit for a king" was served at Sky Harbour for those not on leave. Lieutenant Jack Mott was invited to speak about his experiences in the Battle of the Falklands in 1939 aboard the HMS Exeter at the Goderich Lions Club. With "a delightful streak of humour," Lieutenant Mott "was heard with great interest and appreciation."

At the 1944 Knox Mariners' service, a "time honoured institution in this lake port town," a detachment of 30 fleet airmen were welcomed as the guests of honour. One of the great characters of Sky Harbour's Fleet Air Arm was Petty Officer Draycott Sidney Morgan, whom the *Signal Star* described as the "perfect exemplification of the story book Jolly Tar" with his bushy beard and waxed moustache. It was said that he will "long be remembered in Goderich by young and old for his good nature, his ready wit."

Yet, despite his cheery exterior, when asked about his combat experiences, he always became sidetracked with a couple of "merry ha ha's" and a witty story. It was learned that he had been in some of the war's fiercest naval actions including the hunt for the Bismarck and was "modest" about discussing it.

By March 1944, pilot training was no longer the priority it had been earlier in the war. The federal government announced that the Sky Harbour School was one of 28 Commonwealth Air Training schools to be closed. With mixed emotions, the *Signal Star* editorialized that the station's closing "may be a matter for regret; but as a sign of the progress of the war to a victorious conclusion it should be welcomed. We do not want the war to continue forever."

In June 1944, a Tiger Moth spiralled out of control and crash landed on Alex Johnston's Ashfield Township farm. A school teacher, Sadie West, witnessed the crash and called the Port Albert base for an ambulance and crash truck. Miraculously, the instructor, Pilot Officer J. C. Russell, was taken to hospital with only a concussion and fractured leg while the naval aviator escaped unharmed.

The last class of pilots graduated from Sky Harbour on July 14, 1944. They were the 107th class of flight students to graduate since the school's opening in October 1940. Fittingly for this lake port town, they were all men of the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm. "Soon the lads of the Fleet Air Arm in the uniform of the Royal Navy will have vanished from our streets" observed the *Signal Star* on July 16, 1944. The newspaper added that "the association with these youths has been a happy one. They have been a well-behaved, mannerly and friendly lot."

In all, nearly 1,000 navy pilots from flight classes No. 88 through No. 107 were trained in Goderich for the Fleet Air Arm. The fate of most is unknown. The *Signal Star's* editor spoke for the Port of Goderich as he bid the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm pilots farewell and wished them "Good Luck and Happy Days."