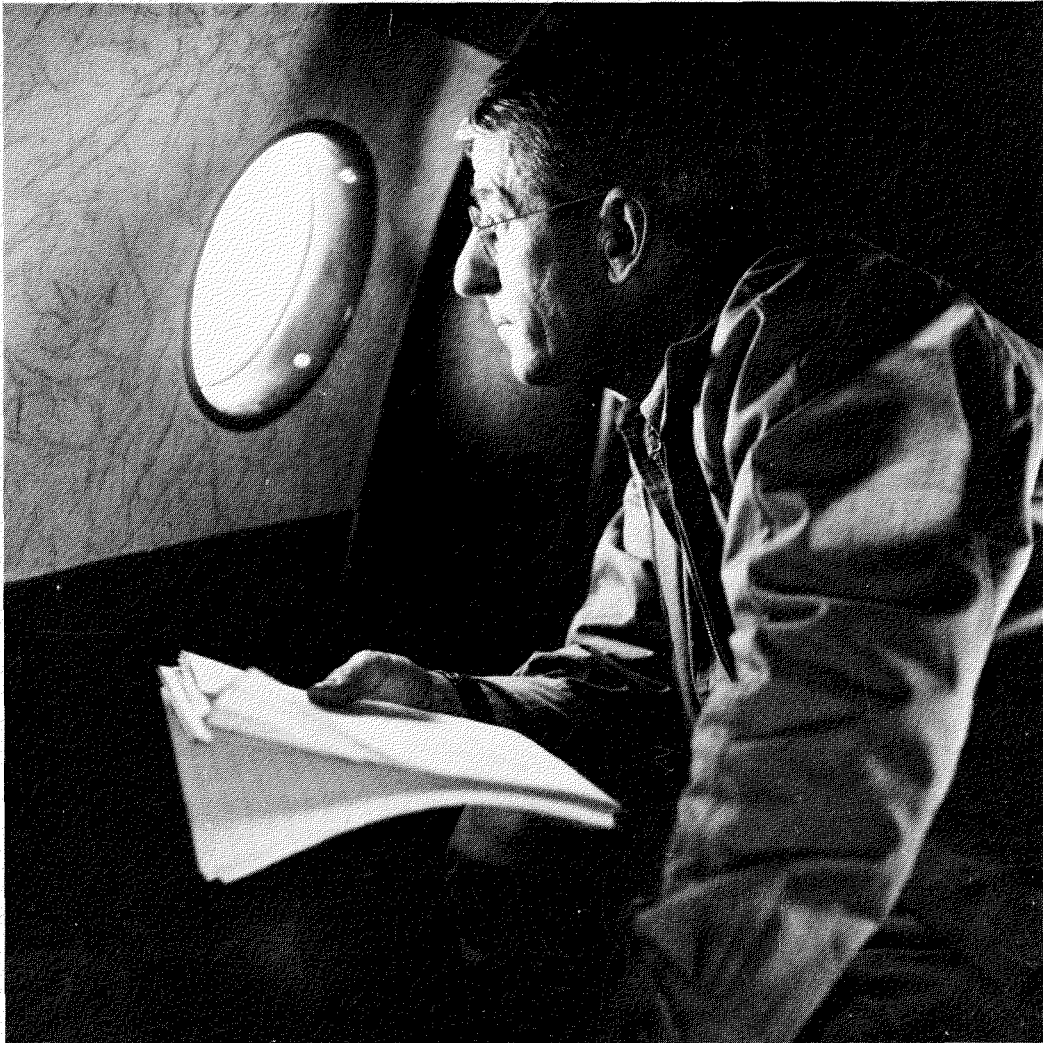


Guy Houghton Blanchet (1884-1966)



Guy Blanchet on the first reconnaissance flight from Norman Wells to Whitehorse, June 12, 1942. Photo by Richard S. Finnie.

Season after season, college students and others returning from part-time jobs with survey parties in northern Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba would tell how their leader, though older and half their size, would consistently outwalk, outpack, and outpaddle any of them. It was hard work for them just to tag along behind him, and he was a hard if amiable taskmaster. His name was Guy Blanchet, and he kept up his pace across the Canadian Arctic and subarctic and elsewhere for nearly a half century. As a surveyor, engineer, and explorer, he became a legend in his own time.

Blanchet, of remote French ancestry, was born in Ottawa on February 12, 1884. He attended local schools and McGill University, Montreal, where he received a B.Sc. in mining engineering in 1905. After two years of work among the coal

deposits of Crows Nest, British Columbia, he qualified as Dominion Land Surveyor, entitling him to put the letters D.L.S. after his name. That was comparable to a doctorate, requiring proficiency in astronomy, spherical trigonometry, and land laws, with strenuous examinations and extended apprenticeship in the field.

In 1910 he joined the Topographical Survey of Canada and laid out base lines in the northerly reaches of the prairie provinces, mostly Alberta, during the next few years. In those years he gained his reputation as a tough, tireless worker and traveller.

From 1921 to 1925 he carried out exploratory surveys in the Mackenzie and Keewatin districts of the Northwest Territories. His work was centered in the Great Slave Lake area

and northward, which he traversed by canoe and on foot, encompassing over 300 000 square km from Hay River on the west to the Dubawnt River on the east, the 60th parallel on the south to the Coppermine River on the north. Until then, the easterly shoreline of Great Slave Lake had appeared on maps much as Capt. George Back had placed it in the early 19th century. Blanchet's printed report described his journeys and summarized the history, geology, and typography of the country, plus sections on settlements, transportation, climate, vegetation, and wildlife.

Through an 18-month period in 1928-1929, Blanchet represented the federal government and led a mineral exploration expedition of Dominion Explorers, Ltd., a private company. This geological survey was set up to investigate huge areas along the western side of Hudson Bay between Churchill and Chesterfield Inlet, and inland to Great Slave Lake and northward as far as Coronation Gulf, with scattered bases. The expedition pioneered large-scale use of aircraft in northern Canada. However, geological work of the field parties became subordinate to the task of keeping airplanes in operable condition and finding lost people.

When an aerial inspection group headed by Col. C.D.H. MacAlpine, a Toronto promoter and president of the company, disappeared in the Arctic, Blanchet took charge of the search. After six weeks' effort, the search ended successfully as winter set in. The MacAlpine group had been forced down at Dease Point on the arctic coast and taken by Inuit with dog teams across the ice to the settlement of Cambridge Bay, Victoria Island. MacAlpine and his companions were soon picked up and flown south, little the worse for wear.

In 1930, after another season in the Mackenzie District, Blanchet retired from government service. He became an independent engineer and geologist, doing work in Labrador and the Northwest Territories. In the late 1930s, with his wife Eileen (after whom he had named a lake southeast of Fort Reliance) he moved permanently from Ottawa to Victoria and spent two years at the Astro Physical Observatory. Next, he was off to New Zealand and Fiji.

Following Canada's entry into World War II in 1939, Blanchet, although then 55, volunteered for active military service overseas. Claiming to be 45, he passed a physical examination and was accepted. He survived strenuous training exercises in Canada and got as far as England. There, however, he was hospitalized and his true age was disclosed. He was shipped home with a medical discharge.

In Victoria on June 1, 1942, he received a message from Edmonton: Would he join a small group making an aerial reconnaissance across the Mackenzie-Yukon divide to find a route for an emergency pipeline to carry crude oil from Norman Wells to Whitehorse?

He was in Edmonton within a couple of days. Thus began the field work for the Canol (Canadian oil) Project, designed by the U.S. Army to help fuel the new Alaska Highway and its airfields from an inland source relatively safe from Japanese attack.

The first direct flight from Norman Wells to Whitehorse was made on June 12, with one stop at Sheldon Lake, the ap-

proximate halfway point, west of the Mackenzie-Yukon divide. Blanchet observed the terrain with a practised eye and traced out what he believed would be a feasible route for a service road and pipeline. The most difficult parts would be among the little-known mountains east of the divide, which he wanted to examine on the ground himself. So, between late October and late November 1942, with Indians and dog teams from Fort Norman, he cut inland from a campsite along the Mackenzie River opposite Norman Wells and trudged about 450 km to Sheldon Lake. He did this when he was nearly 59 years old and despite a painful foot injury, adverse weather, and a dangerous shortage of food.

As chief of surveys for the project, he investigated other routes by air and on foot, but the original route was finally chosen. When detailed ground work replaced general reconnaissance, with more and more engineering and construction men in the field and personnel and red tape in the offices, Blanchet became impatient. A few months before the project wound up in the spring of 1944, he quietly withdrew. Subsequently, he did engineering work for the federal government in the Mackenzie District and around Vancouver Island and in the Yukon for private companies.

In 1951 he was called out of retirement to be chief surveyor of the right-of-way for the Trans-Mountain oil pipeline from Edmonton to Vancouver. Even then, in his late sixties, he could walk long distances and work long hours, to the wonderment of younger colleagues and helpers.

Besides official reports prepared during his career, Blanchet occasionally contributed to several Canadian periodicals. In his last years, referring to his diaries and notebooks, he set down reminiscences of his work and travel. Out of these came an entertaining and historically valuable book in 1960: *Search in the North*, chronicling the Dominion Explorers expedition. His story of the Canol adventure appeared posthumously in *North/Nord* magazine, but his autobiography as a whole remains unpublished.

He had no children. Eileen and his sister Helen were with him at home in Victoria when he died of a heart attack, August 17, 1966.

FURTHER READINGS

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Richard S. Finnie
28 Eucalyptus Road
Belvedere, California, U.S.A.
94920