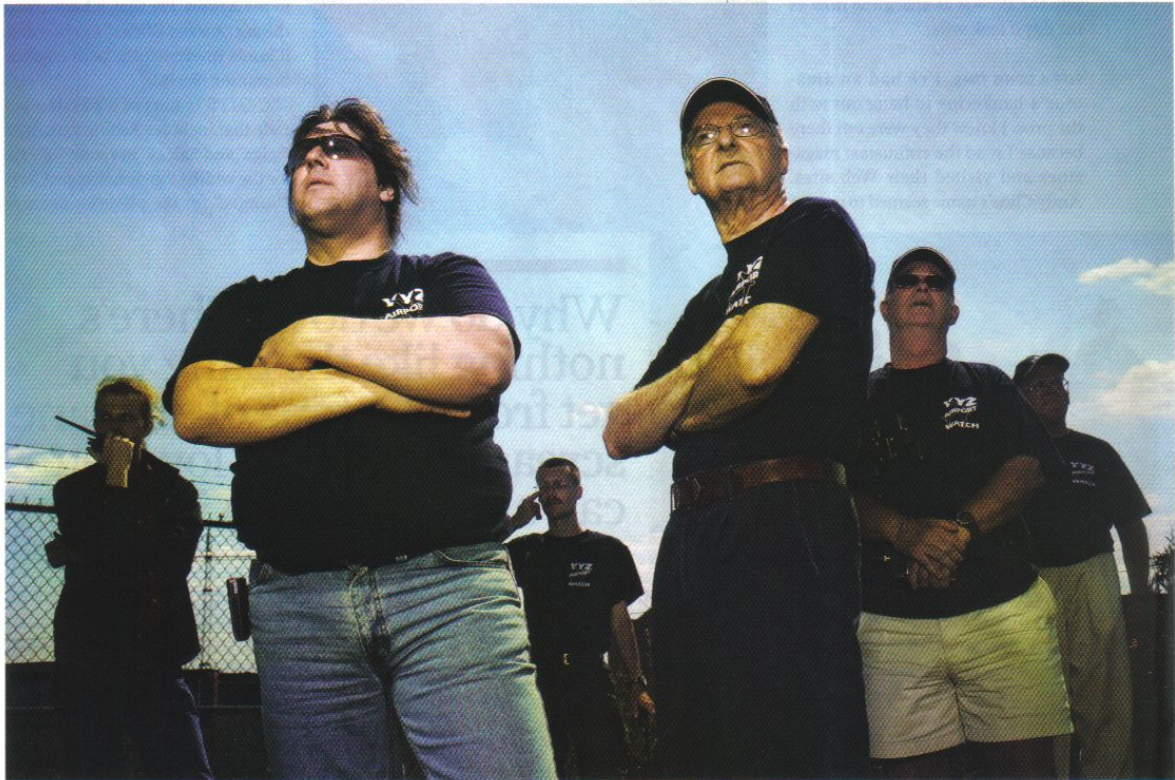


Before 9/11, planespotting was just a bizarre hobby. Now, for the 150 or so fanatics who monitor comings and goings at Pearson, it's about national security, too **By David Wilson**

Air Traffic Patrollers



BEFORE I GET INTO PIGS, lumps, sticks and lawn darts, I have to tell you about my own thing for airplanes. It began in 1966, the day Canadian Pacific Airlines offered my father a free ride on its inaugural DC-8 service from Toronto to Amsterdam. I was 12 and wonder-struck. No one in our family had ever flown anywhere. And now my father was going to Holland. On a jet. I half-expected he would come back with tales of how he took a turn at the controls as they flew over our house.

We lived in Barrie, in the days before metastasizing strip malls. Airplanes—those little specks trailing white thread across the sky—seemed distant and baffling. Then, a year after his Amsterdam junket, my father was transferred to Toronto, and all of a sudden airplanes were everywhere. I could not keep my eyes off the Viscounts, Vanguards, DC-8s, 707s and VC-10s criss-crossing the urban canopy. My new friends thought it odd that I was so fixated on the action up there, and I thought it odd that they weren't.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN CULLEN

Jet set: Pete Ivakitsch and Derek Horsey are hardcore spotters and founding members of Airport Watch, a combination of Air Cadets and Neighbourhood Watch

Forty years on, people still roll their eyes. When they were younger, my two kids would come with me to a lay-by on Silver Dart Drive, on the eastern edge of Pearson airport, where you could park and gawk at planes as they landed. I suspect they were lured there mostly by the hot dog guy who set up shop on nice days, because they haven't come plane-watching with me in years. Maybe my plane thing alarms them a little.

I loved it when my father took me up to the airport. He would park his Olds on the shoulder of Derry Road and together we'd watch the planes leap off Runway 33. A few years ago, before he took sick, he said

he'd like to do it again. The older he got, the more he valued kid stuff. On a cool afternoon one day in early spring, he, my brother and I drove to a place I know near Dixie Road, and the three of us had a grand time watching the Boeings and Airbuses and Bombardiers strut their stuff.

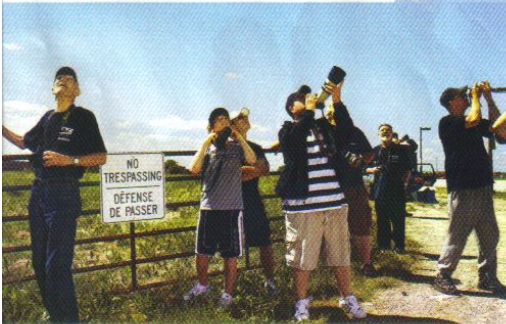
I notice as I get older that some things lose their lustre. But my airplane thing—the copy of *Jane's Aircraft Recognition Guide* in my bathroom, that compulsion to look up into the sky—is as sparkling now as the day it took wing.

FOR A LONG TIME, I've had an amateur's hankering to hang out with the pros. I knew they were out there because I read the enthusiast magazines and visited their Web sites. Andy Cline's name seemed to pop up



life at the Airbus plant in Toulouse, France, and first flew on March 17, 1999. A month later, it was delivered to L.A.-based International Lease Finance Corp., and subsequently leased to Air Transat of Montreal. On August 24, 2001, on a flight to Lisbon, it developed a fuel leak over the Atlantic and lost power in both engines. The 306 people who were on board lived to talk about it because the pilots were able to glide to an emergency landing on an island in the Azores. For that, it has earned the tag "Azores Glider." On this day, it lands uneventfully, both engines humming nicely.

C-GITS is part of a passing parade that includes Boeing 737s, 757s ("pigs" and "sticks" in spotter-speak, for the width of their fuselages), 747s ("lumps," for the plane's signature



Why do we do it? There's nothing like the bang you get from 150 tons of airplane screaming past so low you can almost scratch its belly

a lot, so one morning I went to see him.

Pay dirt. Cline runs a store on Carlingview Drive, south of Dixon Road, that's crammed with airplane books, models, videos, simulators, clothing—and airplane people. But the parking lot of Aviation World is as much of an attraction as the merchandise—not for the fact that it shares asphalt with a nudie joint next door called the Landing Strip, but for its location a stone's throw from two of Pearson's busiest runways. It's there Cline introduces me to his buddies Pete Ivakitsch and Steve Cos, and it's there I learn there's a big difference between people who think airplanes are cool—watchers, like me—and people who live and breathe them—spotters.

We watchers tend to plant ourselves directly under the path of onrushing airliners, like Mike Myers and Dana Carvey on the hood of their Pacer in *Wayne's World*. There's nothing like the bang you get from 150 tons of airplane screaming past so low you can almost scratch its belly. The Aviation World parking lot is north of Run-

ways 24L and 24R, and I can see that serious spotters prefer it there, a little off to the side, because they get their bang from studying the rear ends of airplanes.

Make that the string of letters tattooed on their rear ends. Registrations. "Regs," I learn, are to real-deal planespotting what pucks are to hockey—they give it game. Spotters track and collect registrations as philatelists quest after first-day issues or birdwatchers crimson-tufted sap-things. More is better. Rare is sexy. Steve Cos figures he has 14,500 of them in his logbook.

Like their trainspotting cousins, planespotting use registrations to open doors to tons of other information: when an airplane was manufactured, who first flew it, who has flown it since (you'd be surprised by how often planes are passed back and forth), and its accident history.

A blue and white Airbus A330 hurtles by. "There's C-GITS," Cos says, pronouncing the registration as if it were a single word: Seegits. It's a fabled example of the tale a registration can tell. C-GITS began

upper-deck bulge), skinny-looking MD-80s ("lawn darts") and new Brazilian-made Embraer 175s (known variously as "womblers" or "boomerangs," for the amount of time they allegedly spend in the hangar for repairs). I can name most of the planes that fly by, but I can also see that my vocabulary is chicken feed to serious spotters. I gesture toward a four-engined plane coming our way. "Airbus 340?" "Actually, that's a 340-300," replies Cos patiently. "You can tell by the smaller engines." A few minutes later, a nifty-looking business jet swooshes by. "Gulfstream?" "Gulfstream 3—and I think I need that one." Cos jots down the reg in a notebook he carries in his windbreaker pocket. Bizjets, it turns out, are one of his specialties. He's a big fan of the Toronto International Film Festival—not for the movies, but for the influx of the well-heeled in their flying playpens.

Cos, a spruce 45, works as an estimator at a body shop in Newmarket. Forty-two-year-old Ivakitsch wears his hair in a ponytail and dresses in soccer sweats. A former

Society

bar-band musician and Pearson baggage handler, now a drywall and painting contractor, he's not as keen to collect registrations as he is to eavesdrop on radio chatter between pilots and the ground. Evidently, he has a reputation. Two summers ago, after Air France Flight 358 skidded off 24L in a rainstorm, Nav Canada, the company that runs air traffic control at Pearson, demanded that he remove a recording of the pre-accident chatter from his Web site. In fact, he hadn't recorded it, but that's not to say he wasn't listening. His air traffic control scanner has only one setting: on.

On a miserable evening in April, he joined a few of the hardier regulars to watch Air Canada's new Boeing 777 touch Pearson soil for the first time. It was short and sweet, a planned touch and go; the wheels of the 349-passenger plane barely kissed the runway before the pilots revved the massive General Electric engines and hightailed it to Ottawa. Spotters know which customized 707s are carrying what rock stars, where the planes go after they drop them off and when they'll return to pick them up. And then there are the shadowy planes, such as the 707 registered to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that drops into Pearson now and then and is promptly hustled into a hangar. That's a puzzler, says Ivakitsch.

There might be as many as a couple of hundred serious spotters around Pearson. But it's hard to say, because they're typically a skittish bunch who go about their business quietly. Elsewhere, they've occasionally landed in the spotlight, in spite of themselves. The celebrated "Kalamata 14," for instance, a group of British and Dutch enthusiasts who took a spotting holiday to Greece a few years back and wound up in jail after the Greek military charged them with spying. Or the network of European and Asian spotters who bird-dogged some unusual aircraft movements and registrations in 2004 and helped blow the lid off the CIA's secret "air torture" flights.

Nothing so sinister comes our way as Cos, Ivakitsch and I watch dots in the eastern sky grow into winged behemoths hurtling toward the sweet spot down 24L. So what if I'm a duffer compared to these guys? The sun is shining, a warm breeze is blowing, and I have this giddy notion I've landed among kin.

IT'S ANOTHER SUNNY DAY two weeks later, and I'm in the far corner of a Coffee Time near the airport with Ivakitsch and three other Toronto-area spotters: Derek Horsey of Oakville (specialty: aircraft paging codes);

Trevor Ogle of Caledon (airplane photographer—40,000 and counting); and Michael Ody of Brampton (whose ambition is to spot every plane registered in Canada).

We're all middle-aged or better and trading stories about how we caught the airplane bug. The British-born Horsey describes riding his bicycle 30 miles each way to watch airplanes at the London Airport, now Heathrow, during the late 1940s. When Ogle was young, his uncle used to drop him off at Pearson's original Terminal One on his way to work, leave him there for the day, then pick him up on his way home. Ivakitsch would sit in the window of his house at Burnhamthorpe and East Mall and listen to radio chatter for hours on end. When other kids passed by on the street, he'd hide behind the drapes. "I didn't want them thinking, What kinda geek is this?"

Our hobby may have begun in innocence, but the day someone figured out you could use an airliner full of people as a weapon, it aged a bit. Even as 9/11 was unfolding, it was obvious planespotting would never be the same. "I thought, Am I even going to get near the airport again?" says Ivakitsch.

The parking lot of the big McDonnell Douglas plant on Airport Road used to offer splendid views of the action on Runway 23. After 9/11, it was fenced off and out of bounds. The lay-by on Silver Dart Drive is gone, too. James Bertram, who heads up security and safety for the Greater Toronto Airport Authority, says it was a traffic hazard—and those hot dog stands posed a threat, too. "The last thing I want is seagulls picking up someone's french fries and flying into the engine of an airplane," he says. He wouldn't be thrilled by a missile flying into an engine from there, either. "Obviously, since 9/11, there have been a number of changes in design," he says. And they are? "I'm not going to discuss that."

Spotters may laugh now about "Robocop guys in Suburbans," but they had some dark days after 9/11. "I didn't even bother to come up," says Horsey. "I thought, What's the use?" Those who did discovered that eyes once blind to minor trespassing sins were now wide open and hostile. As the noose tightened, spotters found themselves resorting more and more to guerrilla tactics: probe the airport perimeter, snap a few pictures, jot down a couple of registrations, then get the hell out. "The problem with this airport is there's absolutely nowhere to go legally," says Ody. "Wherever you go, someone's going to say, 'You're not supposed to be here.'"

Eventually, Cline, Ivakitsch and others heard about a watch program the RCMP

and local police had begun several years ago in Ottawa, using volunteer spotters to report suspicious activity around the fringes of Ottawa International Airport. Similar programs operate in the U.K. and Europe. The Toronto spotters thought they too should offer up their collective eyes, ears and expertise. So they put out word they were organizing.

Airport Watch, born at a gathering of enthusiasts held under the approach to Runway 23 three summers ago, is like Air Cadets, Neighbourhood Watch and a special-interest lobby rolled into one. Members wear Airport Watch jackets and ball caps, put Airport Watch banners on their dashboards, and carry an Airport Watch-issued photo ID card after they've passed an RCMP background check. By this spring, membership stood at 142.

The idea is that Airport Watch spotters go about their business, and help the Pearson security people go about theirs, by reporting anything out of the ordinary to the GTAA's security operations centre. That could include someone with a weapon or a flock of birds near a runway. "Those of us who have been around here for years know the place better than their own security people know it," says Ogle. "We know what looks normal and abnormal."

Abnormal would include gaping holes in the fence near the FedEx terminal on Bramalea Road. On a sunny afternoon last March, father-and-son spotting team Jaci and Darcy Stevens were snapping pictures of planes landing on Runway 23 when they noticed a hole big enough for a person to fit through in the perimeter fence. "I said to my son we'd better check for more," says Jaci. "So we walked along and found two more, about 10 to 15 metres apart." Charter members of Airport Watch, they rang the emergency number printed on their membership ID and 10 minutes later the authorities arrived. What the holes were all about remains a mystery, but it was the first major incident reported by Airport Watch in nearly three years of operation, and members couldn't help but see it as a win for the good guys.

So is Airport Watch about love of country or love of hobby? "It's both," says Ody. Pearson security is under no obligation to go easy on spotters who wear the Airport Watch colours. But the hope is that the authorities will cut them a little slack. "It's not about, 'If you see these guys wearing these jackets, leave them alone,'" says Ivakitsch. "It's about, 'If you see these guys with these jackets, come up and converse, don't come on like Rambo.'" Little gestures such as

cleaning up the trash on "FedEx Hill"—a rise of land on Bramalea Road that was popular with photographers—appear to have gradually won over the GTAA. "We certainly support them," says Bertram.

That's probably just as well. "We're not going to go away," says Ogle. "They have a choice of chasing us—and we'll be scurrying around and it'll be a pain for them and a pain for us—or working with us." Then he gestures out the window. "Taking off from [Runway] 6. Guess the wind must have died down." That's the cue for the gathering to break up and the spotting to begin. Horsey invites me to join him for a once-around of the airport.

HORSEY IS A RETIRED trucking industry executive who's been spotting for more than half a century. He took his first plane pictures with a box Brownie and still has some of the prints. He's a soft-spoken, kindly guy, and a bit of a demon behind the wheel of his well-preserved old Ford.

Our route is a long, counter-clockwise circuit starting near the Air Canada hangar at Airport Road and Orlando Drive, and ending at the GTAA administrative building on Convair Drive near the 401 and Renforth Drive. Along the way, he shows me spotting places I hadn't known about (the Country Style and Wendy's on the east side of Airport Road at the end of Runway 23), and how he plays mouse to the GTAA's cat on various parking lots and service roads on airport property. He shows me how you can drive right up to the new control tower almost smack in the middle of the airfield. We turn a corner and I catch sight of a plane I've lusted after for years: an enormous Ukrainian-built Antonov AN-124, unloading parts that will go into Bombardier jets. This is still fun, 9/11 or not.

We drive along Convair Drive past the place where Air France 358 burst into flames in 2005. I notice it isn't far from where I went plane-watching with my father for the last time, and it brings to mind another spring afternoon.

We were driving back to the city from my father's funeral, down Highway 400. It had been a long and jagged day, but the steady hum of the tires on the asphalt was soothing. Against the deepening indigo of early evening, I could see planes floating into Pearson, off in the distance. As we got closer to the city, I spied a 767 on final approach, its flaps extended, landing gear down and lights glowing. I thought to myself, If I time this right, he's going to fly right over top of us. My wife touched my arm. "Just drive," she said. **END**