



Careers in Science: Captain Michael Jasper VandenBos, Snowbird Pilot (1969-1998)



««« By Stan Taylor

Stan Taylor is a retired elementary school teacher. He currently does science workshops for Scientists in School and is a member of the *Crucible* and *Elements* Editorial Committee (CEEC).



Curriculum Connection: Grade 6: "Flight" and anyone interested in flight, particularly the Snowbirds.

The following is an interview with Captain Michael Jasper VandenBos' parents, Jasper and Elizabeth.

Michael Jasper VandenBos was born on November 10, 1969 in Oshawa, Ontario. He attended R.A. Hutchinson Public School (Grades 1-6), Kathleen Rowe Memorial Public School (Grades 7 & 8) and Henry Street High School, all in Whitby.



When I asked his parents about Michael's childhood, they stated: "He was an easy-going, happy child. He loved his sister Nelly – who was almost 10 years older – and always wanted to go with her. Later in life, he asked her for advice on everything, especially girls. He could not understand how Nelly (an X-Ray Technician) could work in the same room every day. He was easily bored with such confinement and preferred camping and bike riding. As a young boy, Michael couldn't sit still. He was always looking for something to do. He always had trouble getting to sleep at night and because of that he had trouble getting up in the morning. He had a good heart. He was always saying, 'I love you Dad. I love you Mom.' We didn't grow up with that, but he did, without being asked."

What were his hobbies?

"Computers, first of all. He was one of the first kids to have a computer. He started on a Commodore 64. He also liked to play soccer and was crazy about his pets. He had rabbits and a dog named Kell Ley. In addition, the science of weather always fascinated him and he could talk about it for hours. He also played the occasional game of hockey: Not in Whitby so much, but rather in Saskatchewan with friends and colleagues. He did some wind sailing on asphalt, usually on the biggest parking lot he could find. He also did sailing in Lake Ontario. He eventually became an assistant instructor."



What universities/colleges did he attend?

“Michael went to Sault College for 2 years, starting in September 1988. After his first year an Air Force recruitment officer came to the school and he signed up. When he finished at Sault, he went to Chilliwack, BC for three months of officer training. He then took a French Course in Saint Jean, Quebec. He did some other courses including survival training. From there he went to Trenton to wait for his flying course to start in Moose Jaw. He went to Moose Jaw in 1992 and passed the flying course in '93. He was a flying instructor for four years and after that he joined the Snowbirds. He was also a maintenance test pilot. He would take his plane up, shut off the engine, practice gliding in case the engine would not start, and after a bit he would restart it.”



Michael making Corporal from Major Beaton.

Why did he choose the Air Force as a career?

From a CD taped on Father's Day, 1998 in Hamilton, ON, Michael stated: “My dad took me to an air show when I was five to see the Snowbirds at Trenton. All I could say was Wow!” Mr. VandenBos explains, “I always took him to airports and air shows since he was three. A recruiter came to his school from the Air Force. He didn't sign up right away, but asked us for our opinion. We said that it was a great way to get training and later on have a chance to fly with the big airlines. So he signed up.”

Was he involved in Air Cadets?

“Yes! In Oshawa at 151 Chadburn Squadron. He was in the Air Cadets for about five years. At first, he did not like the discipline, but he enjoyed being with the other boys, teachers and instructors. He got his Glider Licence while at the Air Cadets at age 16, and received his power licence a year later, both through scholarships.”

How long was he with the Snowbirds?

“Michael was involved with them for less than a year and a half – perhaps 14 months. The show season is from the end of April to the end of October. The rest of the time they practised. He was in his second year before his accident and his team flew over the Grey Cup (1998).”



Michael receiving a flying scholarship from Brig. General Rowbottom.

What is for you the most exciting part of Michael being a Snowbird?

“The smile on his face. He called quite often and said: ‘Mom, I would do it for nothing. The guys are great and it's so amazing every time you're up there. You leave your worries on the ground. It's a different world.’ He loved it. When he applied to become a Snowbird, he phoned one night and said: ‘Dad. I made it.’ It was very emotional. I was very proud of him.”

What did he like least about being a Snowbird?

“Nothing. He never complained about the rules and the discipline. He always had good things to say about the Air Force. He never said anything negative.”



Where should students start if they want to pursue a career like Michael's?

"Michael was a Beaver, Cub and Boy Scout. We think that is certainly one of the ways to make you ready for Air Cadets. When Michael graduated from Sault, it was mentioned that in order to increase your chances of getting a job, any job, is to have been a Scout and an Air, Sea, or Army Cadet."

Why did you take Michael to air shows?

"His fascination with flight. You can see hawks gliding and gliding, not moving a feather. It's amazing."

How did you hear about Michael's death?

Mrs. VandenBos: "I was cleaning dishes and Jasper was vacuuming, when the bell rang. Jasper opened the door and there was a Chaplain. He told us that our son had been in an accident and he passed away. He stayed with us until our Minister came over. We then had to tell Michael's sister, Nelly, before she heard it on the radio, but she was out with her children. Her husband told her when she got home."

I read on the Internet that the tip of Michael's plane hit another plane. Is that what you heard?

"I'd like to talk about that. Just before the accident there were six planes in the air in an arrow formation. Two of the planes made contact. Michael's plane lost his right tail horizontal stabilizer, subsequently he lost control of his airplane. On top of that, Michael's parachute did not fully open."

From a personal perspective, initially and even now, did you feel you had to avoid certain places, shows, books, music because of the memories they evoked in you?

Mrs. VandenBos: "I don't go to air shows any more. I did go when Michael was flying, but it made me nervous. Jasper still goes to air shows after the accident and talks to Michael's friends and colleagues. They always take time to talk to him. We both visit his grave on a regular basis. The first year Jasper went almost daily. We went to the crash site in Moose Jaw about two or three years later. It was a grain field. There weren't any trees there. It is about 40 km south of Moose Jaw. We are very thankful that we had Michael for 29 years. He was a handful, but he brought so much joy into our lives. We were proud when Michael became a Snowbird pilot but first of all he was a loving son, brother, brother-in-law, uncle and grandson. He kept us young with his energy."

I understand Snowbird pilots have nicknames. What was Michael's?

"When he was in the military, the drill sergeant asked him if he was Dutch. And when he said Yes, the sergeant said you are *Woodboot*."

Does the school named after your son have an annual assembly to honour his life and do you attend?

Mrs. VandenBos: "We go to the graduation every year and Jasper goes on November 11th and on the first day of school. The Snowbirds fly over the school and there are usually Snowbird pilots in attendance at the school. Sometimes the squadron leader speaks over the microphone from the air to the students. I usually go to the grave site during the flypast because it is more private."



Students at Capt. Michael VandenBos School wave their flags as the Snowbirds do a flyby.



Michael had #2 on his plane because that was his position in the formation. All snowbird planes have a number displayed on the rudder.

Michael had a passion for life and for flying. He set goals and attained them, no matter how hard he had to work. Michael loved flying so much. He had no fear.

Mrs. VandenBos states, "The Snowbirds have been very good to us. They always keep us up to date."

2 VandenBos squadron was a new squadron formed in September, 2003. The squadron was created by splitting the Whitby cadets from 151 Chadburn squadron in Oshawa. (Resource: Webmaster: 2VandenBos)

The Canadian Air and Space Museum at Downsview is fixing up an old tutor and when it is finished, they are putting Michael's name on it.

The following is from the School website: <http://vandenbos.ddsbschools.ca/>

"Every first day of school since 2001, the skies above Whitby have echoed with the roar of the jets of Canada's elite flying team, the Snowbirds. Excitement is in the air as the children, staff and many of our neighbours gather in the schoolyard around 11:00am as we anticipate the arrival of the familiar red and white airplanes. As the nine jets do their swoop over our school in tight formation, everyone jumps up and down waving enthusiastically at the pilots overhead. This annual "flyby" means as much to the members of the Snowbird team as it does to the students, staff, parents and neighbours of Captain Michael VandenBos Public School. Why are we so honoured each year? Why are we alone allowed to use the symbols of this special group with our students? The answer lies with our namesake, Captain Michael VandenBos. Michael VandenBos grew up in Whitby. He was a young man with a childhood dream to become a member of the Snowbirds. Tragically, he died in a routine training mission south of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan on December 10, 1998. The Durham District School Board decided to honour his memory by naming a new school after this remarkable young man. The Snowbirds pay homage to a member of their own each first day of school with the "flyby". The children of the school are encouraged to develop positive life skills in academics as well as extra-curricular activities by following Michael's example. The children can display the "VandenBos Spirit" by participating in reading programs, sports, Spirit Days and other activities at the school. Perhaps one day, one of our students will be a pilot zooming over the school on the first Tuesday after Labour Day with new little ones waving enthusiastically at the Canadian Snowbirds!" (Resource:

<http://vandenbos.ddsbschools.ca/about-our-school-mainmenu-163/captain-michael-vandenbos-public-school-main-menu-110>)



Author's note: I am indebted to Ms. Monique de Villers, Principal, Capt. Michael VandenBos School, Whitby, for information and for assisting me in contacting Michael's parents. I also thank Mr. and Mrs. VandenBos for permitting me to interview them and for all the subsequent emails. Finally, thank you to the Snowbirds for additional information. I consider it a privilege to have written about such a fine, young man.

I teach a workshop entitled: "Air and Flight: Investigations Into the Wild Blue Yonder" with Scientists in School. On the front of both the teacher booklet and the student booklet for this workshop is a side view of a CT-114 Tudor Jet, the aircraft used by the Canadian Forces 431 Air Demonstration Squadron – The Snowbirds.

