

## Captain Freddie McCall

Airplanes were Freddie McCall's skin and bones.

From the moment he enlisted, McCall demonstrated a fearlessness that made him a superlative flyer. Enthralled with aviation, he learned quickly and came home from the First World War well-decorated – the fifth-ranking ace in Canada. He had shot down 37 planes.

After the war, stunt flying and barnstorming became McCall's bread and butter, and he and partner Wop May took passengers for rides; their aerial shows were a breathtaking part of Alberta fairs and exhibitions.

Planes were temperamental, rudimentary struts and trusses, webs of air rather than ships. Pilots were risk-takers, the astronauts of their time, and lucky to walk away from frequent crashes. There was no such thing as a smooth asphalt runway. Although flying those pioneer aircrafts was downright dangerous, McCall's aerial adventures, his charming demeanour and nerves of steel were a legend.

Air was his elixir. Fred McCall could flip and stall, roll and rock. No wonder his motto was, "Danger is Sweet."

### Home from the War

Freddie McCall received a hero's welcome when he returned home from the battlefields in Europe. As Canada's fifth-ranking air ace in the First World War, McCall enthralled Calgarians with presentations on life as a fighter pilot.



Squadron Leader Fred McCall, M.C. Distinguished Service Order, Distinguished Flying Cross, Calgary, Alberta  
Glenbow Archives NA-3511-26

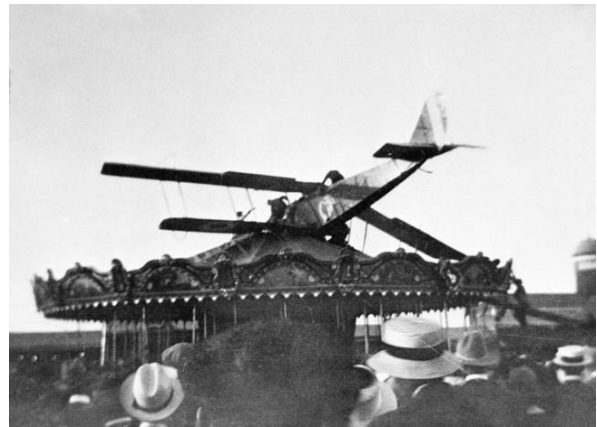
But talking about flight wasn't enough. McCall and fellow wartime pilots, such as Wilfred Reid "Wop" May, yearned to take the wing again. Albertans also wanted to see their war heroes flying airplanes.

McCall and May signed a contract to perform stunt flights for Western Canadian Fair Management. Soon fairs and exhibitions from Calgary to Winnipeg featured aerial shows by the two men piloting their Curtiss JN4-D "Jennies".

### **An Unexpected Attraction**

When McCall's open-cockpit Curtiss Jenny stalled above the busy grounds of the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede in 1919, his experience as a World War I flying ace took over.

Fair-goers watched in amazement while with the same calm that had seen him fly 100 missions and shoot down 37 enemy aircraft in the Great War, McCall landed the plane on top of the rotating midway merry-go-round.



Airplane stalled on top of merry-go-round at  
Calgary Exhibition and Stampede, Calgary, Alberta  
Glenbow Archives NA-1044-9

Miraculously, no one was hurt, although the centre maypole punctured the floor. The crowd, realizing they had witnessed a legendary moment and eager for a souvenir, rushed to the aircraft, and McCall even spotted some ladies using their shoes to whack at the plane's structure. Always quick to react, he shrouded the craft and charged twenty-five cents for the curious to come inside, take a look, and even carry away a small piece of the Jenny's fabric covering.

### **Putting a Bird Back in the Air**

Fred McCall (Captain Freddie McCall's son) believed Calgary needed to remember the Curtiss Jenny, so he built one.

He felt the historic plane must be seen in person, in order to best appreciate its beautiful design, the audacity of its construction, and the nerve of its pilots.

McCall knew planes. His father, Squadron Leader Freddie McCall, was a legendary First World War fighter pilot whose name appears alongside the Curtiss Jenny in Alberta aviation history.

But could a childhood spent with an aviation pioneer prepare him for this complex reconstruction?

Over two years and 8,400 hours later, Fred McCall and his construction crew – Herb Dreger and Ian Bennie – had finished the plane. Its engine, propeller, and wheels are original, the louvers on the engine covers, and other metal fittings were made from scratch; present-day fabric and paint covers the aircraft.

“It’s the plane that Dad flew,” McCall said. “I’m proud of it.”

Full Name: Frederick Robert Gordon McCall

Born: December 4, 1896 – Died: January 22, 1949

## Additional Resources

- **Canada’s Aviation Hall of Fame**  
<https://cahf.ca/fred-robert-gordon-mccall/>

## Our Collections

### Glenbow Museum

<https://www.glenbow.org>

### Glenbow Western Research Centre | Glenbow Library and Archives

<https://libguides.ucalgary.ca/glenbowlibraryandarchives>

### Glenbow Library and Archives | Digital Collection

<https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/asset-management/2R340826N9XM?WS=PackagePres&Flat=1>