

Talking flight

IN HIS FIRST-EVER VISIT TO THE ART SMITH AERO CENTRE, a 96-year-old SAIT alumnus meets this year's recipient of his Saddles and Service award

On the surface, it may seem like 19-year-old SAIT student Emily McConnell would have little in common with a Second World War veteran in his nineties. However, when veteran Winston Parker – a SAIT alumnus and donor for an annual SAIT student award – visited the Art Smith Aero Centre on Nov. 14, the two had plenty to discuss.

For one thing, McConnell is the 2014 recipient of the Saddles and Service award, the scholarship that Parker created. In addition, both Parker and McConnell are passionate about flying.

McConnell is an Aircraft Maintenance Engineers Technology student, but her love of flight began at an early age. She joined air cadets at age 13, and since then she's earned her glider pilot licence and flown smaller aircraft, including a dual flight in a vintage Boeing Stearman.

Parker graduated from SAIT's Agricultural Mechanics and Tractors program in 1939, and joined the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War. He flew bombing missions as a crew member and parachuted to safety in enemy Germany when his plane was shot down on his 13th mission.

As soon as McConnell and Parker get the chance to talk during his November tour of the Aero Centre – his first-ever visit – she begins asking him the questions she's been saving up for this moment.



Inspired by the vintage North American Harvard airplane housed in SAIT's Art Smith Aero Centre, alumnus Winston Parker and current student Emily McConnell talk about their shared passion for flight.

"Was it pretty cold up there when you were flying?" she asks him, as they stand in the Aero Centre hangar surrounded by aircraft. There's 20,000 square feet of aircraft space in the hangar, housing a Boeing 737, two Challengers, a small helicopter and a vintage training airplane that McConnell and her classmates use to practice their trade.

Parker describes his experience (yes, it was cold, he says, but you dressed for it), and McConnell soaks up all the information she can. As she works towards a career in aviation, McConnell hopes to join the military, and it's fascinating and thrilling for her, she says, to meet someone who's seen combat. Parker was even a prisoner of war for three years after his plane was shot down and he was captured.

"I've only flown a small aircraft," McConnell says to Parker. She's almost apologetic, as if it's something most people her age ought to be doing. But Parker reassures her.



(Left) Winston Parker tours the state-of-the-practice technology and equipment at the Aero Centre with Brian Moukperian, Dean of the School of Transportation and Lisa Weatherby, Aviation Academic Chair.

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“You’re young,” he says. “You have lots of time.”

During his visit, Parker also met with Brian Moukperian, Dean of SAIT’s School of Transportation and Lisa Weatherby (AXT ’00), Aviation Academic Chair.

Weatherby says Parker’s visit reinforces to students the fact that SAIT grads form a family out in the world. She says meeting someone like Parker shows students “they’re signing up for a lifetime.”

Parker truly embodies this lifelong commitment with his creation of the Saddles and Service award to benefit students like McConnell.

Named after Parker’s memoir, which was authored by writer and friend SAIT grad Elaine Taylor Thomas (JA ’74), the award supports aviation students because of Parker’s wartime experiences. Through book sales and contributions, a total of \$26,000 has been raised, providing \$680 each year to a third-semester Aircraft Maintenance Engineers Technology student in perpetuity. For McConnell, this award will help achieve her goal of graduating debt-free from post-secondary studies.

While much has changed since Parker’s days at SAIT, his words of wisdom to students still ring true. His number one piece of advice:

“WHATEVER YOU DO, DO YOUR BEST.”

HEATHER SETKA