

# PX



## P O S I T I O N R E P O R T



### IN THIS ISSUE:

Botwood Museum  
Float Planes Galore  
In Defense of Boeing...  
*...and much more*

February 2021  
Volume XVIII  
Number 1



By: Lisa Hemeon  
 Tourism, Heritage and  
 Special Events

Located a mere 20 kms (12 miles) or 10 minutes off the Trans-Canada Highway, on Route 350 in central Newfoundland, is a beautiful gem of a town with history that is rich and varied, with stories not typical of rural Newfoundland or for most parts of Canada for that matter. With a population of just under 3000, we are a small town with a big story to tell.

Located at the head of what is Newfoundland's largest bay (Notre Dame), the Bay of Exploits leads you 35 miles up a sheltered estuary to the port of Botwood which owes its strengthened vitality to the quality and location of its deep-water port. Nowhere else on the island of Newfoundland can you leave the coast to dock so far inland in a sea-going vessel. The largest river on the island of Newfoundland, the Exploits River, ends where Botwood Harbour begins. Naturally deep, the sheltered harbour is relatively fog-free and ice-free for a large part of the year. These very qualities were what attracted Newfoundland's native Beothuk People to use Botwood's harbour as a vital part of the seasonal highway that carried them on their migration for birds' eggs along more than 30 islands leading down the estuary from Botwood. They also

sought the rich salmon stock from the mighty Exploits River along with the abundance of furs inhabiting our vast interior forest area. These were also the very things that attracted our first settlers. The introduction of our first settlers, competing for resources, would be the beginning of the end for the Beothuk People, and would eventually lead to their cultural extinction. We eventually became a logging and lumber town in the mid 1800's, then an international shipping port for newsprint in 1911 up until 2009 when the papermill shut its doors. Although we may be but a shadow of our former selves when it comes to industry, our beauty and physical attributes have not changed.

There was a time when all eyes were on our small town and we were considered the crossroads of the world for transatlantic flight. However, before the giant flying boats of Pan Am, Imperial

resist answering the ad which introduced him to Major Clayton-Kennedy, a Canadian who had obtained a contract for seal-spotting in Newfoundland, using two war-surplus de Havilland DH.9s. Cotton signed on and was soon joined by Captain Sidney Bennett, a former RFC pilot. However, because they considered the DH.9 unsuitable for prolonged over-water flight, they brought along two other aircraft on their 1920 sea voyage<sup>1</sup>—a Napier-powered Westland Limousine III and a Rolls-Royce-powered Martinsyde.<sup>2</sup>

When entrepreneur Clayton-Kennedy was found financially insolvent, Sidney Cotton covered his debt in exchange for his airplanes, and took control of the operation based at Botwood—his home for just three short years, but where his accomplishments were remarkable and his legacy still remains. He constructed facilities for his planes that would also



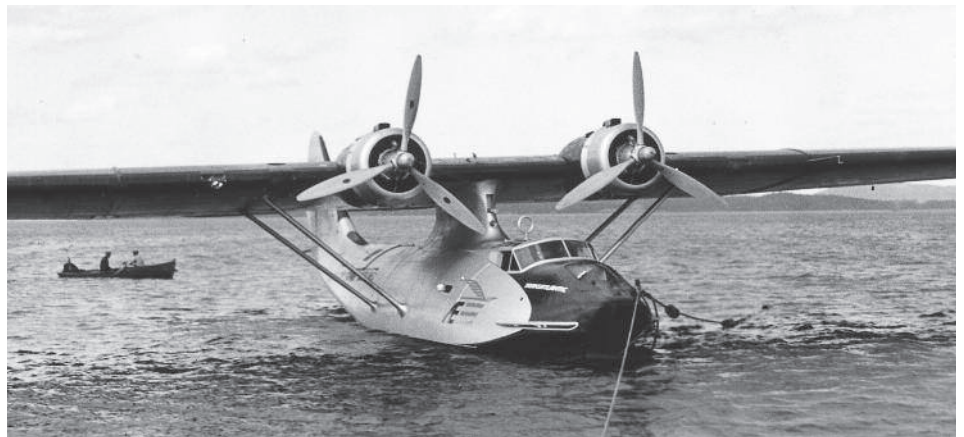
Airways, BOAC, and American Export Airlines used our harbour for a runway between 1936 and 1945, we had already made some aviation history firsts with a fiery Australian pilot by the name of Major Sidney Cotton. In 1916, Cotton joined the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) and was eventually posted to the Western Front as a bomber pilot. However, after a conflict with his seniors, he resigned his commission. After WWI in 1918, England had a large number of pilots looking for work and with very little work to be found. Cotton found an advertisement in an aviation magazine looking for pilots to fly the "unknown wilderness" of Canada—*Pilots wanted. Plenty of risk – good pay.* He couldn't

serve as headquarters for Cotton's Aerial Survey (Newfoundland) Company which contracted with the government of the day to deliver mail, provide passenger service, and to provide spotting services for sealing vessels. The planes were equipped with locally made skis for winter use on the Exploits River and Botwood harbour; in other seasons, the planes were equipped with pontoons. Cotton chose Botwood because it was sheltered and easily accessible, suitable for both summer and winter. The community of Botwood was the first in Newfoundland (and probably the world) to receive seal flippers via aircraft. Sidney Cotton's improvements to his planes for safe winter flying were enormous in their impact. He used a

cover to keep the engines warm; he used catalytic lamps under the engine's crankcase to prevent the engine oil from freezing; and he added alcohol to the radiator to prevent a similar situation. Carrying special winter survival gear on all winter flights, he was the first to deliver mail by plane to communities isolated by winter and the first to land a plane on ice near the sealing vessels, flying farther north than any airman before him. He was the first to use aerial photography to make maps and to do aerial surveys of lumber lands, as well as the first to use an airplane to search for and to find caribou herds. Despite his ingenuity and perseverance, Cotton's company could not find enough contracts to remain financially sound. The final airmail flight was made from Botwood in May of 1923, and Cotton left Botwood shortly after. Becoming an RAF Wing Commander during WWII (as well as a spy), Cotton was a close friend of Ian Fleming, and it is believed that many of James Bond's characteristics were based on Sidney Cotton. His stay in Botwood was short but Sidney Cotton was memorable.

The next aviator to grace our waters with a plane was non other than Charles Lindbergh in 1933, six years after his remarkable transatlantic solo flight. By this time, he was a technical advisor for Pan American Airways who were studying the possibility of flying mail and passengers over the Atlantic Ocean. Charles and his wife, Anne Morrow, were making a survey flight from New York, stopping in Newfoundland before flying onto Europe. They flew a two-seater Lockheed Sirius—a low-wing monoplane fitted with floats.<sup>3</sup> They stayed for three hours, Charles staying with the plane to ward-off any souvenir hunters while Anne went for a walk with some of the local women. It is believed this was the first time a woman was seen wearing pants in our small town. It was this very visit that set the stage for Botwood to become part of the transatlantic flying boat service.

In 1935 the United States and the British Government chose Botwood as a landing and refueling base for their



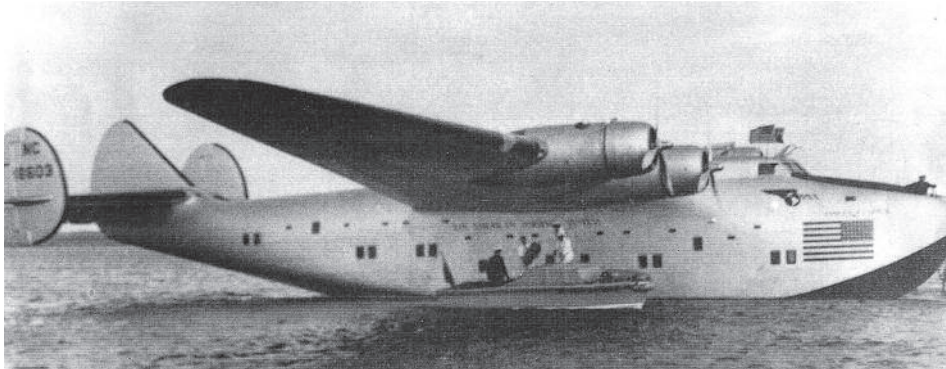
PBY (Canso)

transatlantic flying boats. On July 5, 1937 the first transatlantic experimental commercial flight—Pan American's *Clipper III*, a Sikorsky S-42 piloted by Captain Harold Gray—landed in Botwood harbour enroute from New York via Shediac, New Brunswick. It spent the night and left the next morning for Foynes (on the Shannon River) in Ireland. This same day, a reciprocal transatlantic flight—Imperial Airways' *Caledonia*, a Short Empire Class flying boat under the command of Captain A.S. Wilcockson—left Foynes for Botwood and landed here early in the morning of July 6, 1937. These flights marked the beginning of transatlantic commercial aviation; and in 1939, the first transatlantic passenger flights landed at Botwood for refuelling. Then came the luxurious *Yankee Clipper*, a Boeing B-314 flying boat—more like a flying hotel which only the rich and famous could afford. This plane was decked out to carry 74 passengers and 8 flight crewmembers. It had sleeping accommodations for 40 people with separate quarters for men and women; with a well-stocked bar, meals were prepared on board and served as in a five-star restaurant. While passengers slept, their clothes were ironed, their shoes were shone, and breakfast was prepared and served when they awoke. Needless to say, these are not available options on today's flights!

With onset of WWII, the town of Botwood was forever changed. Because the location was already established as an international refueling stop for the famous flying boats and had a superior

shipping port, it was chosen as a strategic location for the coastal defense and anti-submarine patrol squadrons. The 35 miles from the open Atlantic to the harbour gave Botwood the advantage of easy access for reconnaissance flights in search of German U-boats that were threatening the shipping traffic on our seaboard. Aircraft also helped escort various shipping vessels safely into our port or across the Atlantic. Land was taken over for the war effort, and built throughout the town of Botwood were barracks, hangars, firing ranges, cook houses, executive accommodations, administration buildings, a drill hall, four ammunition bunkers, and all the infrastructure required to sustain a military base. Our small town's population of around 1,000 people saw over 10,000 Canadian troops arrive via the Canadian Navy or by the trains. They came here for training and to prepare for war before being shipped overseas. During WWII Botwood flourished. We were a busy spot and work was plentiful.

During this time our harbour was full of the big flying boats, seaplanes, and military planes, including the PBY Catalina (aka Canso) that was so important to the defense of our coast. By 1943 the harbour was so busy with a variety of planes that the terminal here could no longer keep logs on arrivals and departures.<sup>4</sup> At our Ev Elliott Archives<sup>5</sup> located in our Flying Boat Museum, you can read the logs that had been kept until 1943. It was during these busy times of aviation that we saw some of the world's most famous



*American Clipper*

dignitaries and celebrities. Sometimes, due to bad weather, celebrities would have to wait here for the weather to improve. Botwood was a great place to get stuck and VIP accommodations were available for such occasions. Prominent among these visitors was Charlotte, the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg, and Right Honourable Winston Churchill (who requested lobster for all his meals). There was also a steady stream of stage and screen celebrities flying to Europe to entertain the American troops. Among those were Bob Hope, Frances Langford, Edgar Bergen (and Charlie McCarthy) who all entertained the troops while here. And the highest officials in Allied Command were here as well—Lt. Col. Mackenzie, Gen. Sir Allan Brooke, Sir Anthony Eden, Sir Charles Portal, Lord Mountbatten and so on.

Our harbour also unfortunately saw two plane crashes with fatalities. One of the most well-known is the story of the *Excalibur*, an American Export Airlines Vought-Sikorsky VS-44 flying boat, that crashed during take-off on Oct 2, 1942: of 37 passengers and crewmembers aboard, 26 survived and 11 perished—it is suggested incorrectly set landing flaps may have induced excessive porpoising. On November 6, 1943 a twin-engine Canso amphibian, #9834 of the 116 Navy Squadron, crashed while landing with eleven souls on board, five of whom survived—it seems a wingtip or outrigger float contacted the water prematurely.

After the war officially ended on November 11, 1945, the troops gradually left while the artillery stations

and military building on the airbase and surrounding areas were left to be sold, dismantled, or relocated. The flying boats were soon retired in favour of the land-based planes using Gander. Our time of being the focus of the aviation world was gone. The residents of our town felt the effect of the war and the flying boats in many ways: having been introduced to a better way of life, we were now left with the infrastructure of the base and flying boat accommodations. After also losing several of our residents to the war, we got back to the task of living our lives, but never would it be the same again.

Now 76 years later, our town remembers our history through many ways. We have two world-class museums that tell our rich aviation and local history. We have a PBY Catalina/Canso sitting on what once was the airbase. We still have our ammunition bunkers as well. The base now hosts a marina for recreational boaters, and the slipways that were built for the war are still being used today to launch our vessels. We are now looking toward the future and what that may bring. We are not resting on our past for this, knowing our gift of a natural harbour remains a great attraction for industrial development—it is one of the largest and deepest harbours on the island of Newfoundland. Approximately 3000 feet of berthing facilities makes our harbour capable of handling some of the largest ships in the world. The port has been and will probably be the reason for the town's existence in the future. So that is why we are seeking new users with new ideas helping to bring the influx our economy needs.

Our tourism, at this point, brings in anywhere from 10,000 to 30,000 visitors each summer season to see the museums, heritage park, and the local area. We have 14 world-class murals throughout our town that tell our history in the most visually stimulating way. (One is the largest in Atlantic Canada at 9,000 square feet.) Needless to say, the murals are also Covid-19 friendly and can be viewed 365 days a year regardless of the weather. We are truly the prettiest town you will ever visit and a story that is still being written. Considering our history, I would beg to guess that our future will be as unique and exciting as the past. Come see what we see!

NOTES:

1. Timeline: This story evolves eleven years after the first heavier-than-air flight in Canada (*Silver Dart*) and six months after the first-ever nonstop transatlantic flight by Alcock and Brown in their Vickers Vimy.
2. Sidney Cotton purchased his brand-new four-passenger Limousine III (one of only two ever produced) with insurance money from his crashed DH.14 from which he salvaged the Napier Lion engine. The Martinsyde (from original motorcycle manufacturers Martin & Handasyde) was another rare bird, probably the four-passenger version of their WWI fighter known as the Buzzard.
3. Built by request, Charles Lindbergh's float-equipped Sirius.8 was the first of 15 related units constructed by Lockheed as utility transports for the American military.
4. For night landings, floating kerosene lanterns were tied together and pulled out into the harbour to be lined up like a row of runway lights.
5. In 2014, the Botwood Heritage Society renamed its archives in honour of Everett Elliott, a former school teacher who had devoted 25 years to the organization as its first archivist. ✈️