

A plane-seat mystery

(by Robert G Pelley 2018-10-31)
<http://bobsganderhistory.com>

The Seaplane Museum in Botwood recently became the happy owner of a very original artefact, a wicker seat from an airplane. But the problem was to figure what plane it might have been from and what was its historical importance.



In the late 1930s, before Gander became available for overseas flights using land planes, the other choice was Botwood using flying boats.

Botwood became operational in early 1937. Air-radio was installed in January and meteorological operations opened up in June. Botwood was in a sense a test site and training school for later operations in Gander.

Three airline companies were involved, namely:

- Imperial Airways, a British company
- Pan American World Airways
- American Export Airlines (which eventually ended up a part of Pan Am in 1950).

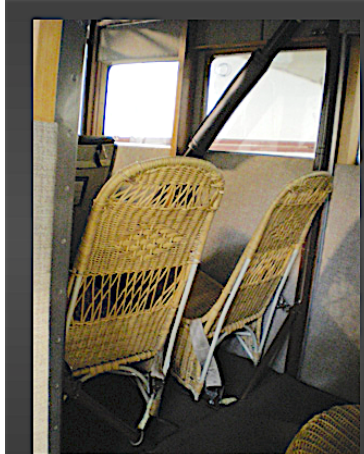
It was used for the first time 05 July 1937 for two commercial test flights. A Pan Am Clipper III, a Sikorsky S-42, left Botwood for Foynes, Ireland, while a Imperial Airways Short S.23 G-ADHM Caledonia did the trip the other way around.

During the war the RCAF flew anti-submarine patrols from there, using PBY Cansos. The Botwood museum mentioned three crashes in their area:

- a PBY,
- an American Export Sikorsky SV-44, called the Excalibur
- an unknown small aircraft, later identified as a Hurricane fighter out on patrol from Gander.

The first steps to solve the mystery were therefore to find photos showing the interior design of the military aircraft used in Botwood and those of the three civilian carriers, to see what type of crew or passenger seats were used. After considerable research, it became clear that this type of wicket seat was not used on any of these airplanes.

The next line of research was the opposite of the first. Instead of looking at airplanes to find the seat, it was the opposite case of looking for similar seats to find the type of airplane. The search was done only on airplanes from the 1930s and early 1940s but still took many hours. Finally a match was found.



The above seats are in a Fairchild 71, so the idea was now simplified to identifying if this type of aircraft was used in the Botwood area - and it certainly was!

A very critical part of flying over the dangerous Atlantic route from Gander or Botwood was being able to understand weather patterns. British and Newfoundland authorities therefore made an agreement to use an airplane under the control of Imperial Airways to collect weather information, with any flying time left over being made available as required for government purposes. In February 1936, a well-known Newfoundland pilot, Douglas Fraser, at that time a captain with Imperial Airways, brought down for them, from Montreal, a Fairchild 71C, registered as VO-AFG.

This aircraft was fitted with a "strut psychrometer" and flights were conducted at altitudes of up to three miles (16000 ft) - without external oxygen. The Met staff in Botwood then interpreted the information collected by the airplane. It would seem that on different occasions it flew from both Botwood and Norris Arm.

Darrell Hillier me informs that this Fairchild 71C, with Fraser at the controls, crashed in March 1940 on the Great Northern Peninsula. Fraser left from Norris Arm carrying Claude Fraser and a D.W. Gray

on a woods inspection tour. They landed at Roddickton and later left for the Bowater's Depot at North East Brook. While circuiting to land, the engine cut out over heavy timber. All survived but with quite a number of minor injuries. The wreck was brought to the Bowater's Depot and covered in a tarp until a decision was made on its disposal.

When the Nfld government's internal air service was shut down in June 41, a Fox Moth, hangar buildings, various supplies, spares, parts, and the wreck of Fairchild VO-AFG remained either at Norris Arm or Quidi Vidi Lake, near St.John's. Under wartime conditions, crashed aircraft were cannibalised, with the wreck left in situ. In this case, it is possible that only usable parts were brought back or because of the Imperial Airways connection, it may have been preferred to load everything and let the airline pick at the pieces at a later time.

The government report does not specify if the wreck went to Norris Arm or St.John's. However, the seat was donated by George Skinner and his sister from St. John's. Their father, Levi Skinner, had worked in Botwood during the war and had even been involved in the rescue effort for the crash of the Excalibur.

My best guess is that the wreck was sent to St.John's, where Levi Skinner's knowledge of Botwood led him to have a look at it. I would presume he would have known of it as having historical value and made sure it didn't get scrapped forever - luckily for the Botwood Museum and all those interested in Newfoundland and aviation history.

One might ask about the connection of Capt Fraser and Gander. He was notably the first person to land there on 11 January 1938, in another airplane, a Fox Moth, VO-ADE. Fraser Road and Fraser Mall in Gander are named after him.

Two notes. First, thanks to Darrell for providing info from Nfld archives. Second, the story of Capt Douglas Fraser can be seen here:

<http://bobsganderhistory.com/fraser.html>