

"A mechanic spun the propeller of the Martynside, the engine was revved up and the aircraft began to lumber over the grass . . ."

When the planes took off from St. John's - - 53 years ago

I have to obey the directive to talk about some of the matters that came within my own observation as Newfoundland entered the new age of aviation. This began with the revival of the *Daily Mail* prize of £10,000 for the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic. It was an event that put this then-remote and little-known island on the front pages of the world press and was also to excite the philatelic world and provide it with some of its greatest rarities.

Now all this was 53 years ago. I was still in high school and more interested in the start of the rugby-football season than in aeroplanes. I have discovered also with increasing age that what one believes to be reliable recollections are often no more than impressions. They embrace such things as enormous wooden crates containing flimsy aircraft unloaded at the docks in St. John's and drawn through the streets on four-wheeled carts by laboring horses; strangers in town with cloth caps above very English faces and singled out by their apparel of Norfolk jackets, knickerbockers, and golf stockings; the noisy pattering of aeroplane engines and eyes turned skywards as the Martynside, the Sopwith, and the large and clumsy Handley Page, flew on their test flights over the roof tops of the city; and the mild interest stirred by the four U.S. Navy seaplanes in distant Trepassey, preparing for their own conquest of the Atlantic by a series of short hops.

Two things I do recall very distinctly. One was the arrival of the American airship which was to be prepared for a leisurely journey of its own across the ocean. I doubt if I have ever seen a more spectacular sight than that of this blimp sailing gracefully through the Narrows with a bright May sun shining on its silver body. It was moored at Pleasantville on the north bank of Kitty Vitty Lake, and I went down one afternoon after school to have a look.

The valley of Kitty Vitty is a wind tunnel and a wild gale was blowing. The sausage-shaped blimp was struggling to be free and was being held in check by scores of American naval ratings by means of steel ropes. Of a sudden one rope snapped, the nose of the blimp came to the ground almost close enough for me to touch it, and then rose swiftly. The ropes were released and the airship drifted lazily over Kitty Vitty Gut until it disappeared from sight, never to be seen again.

I happened to be standing immediately behind Harry Hawker, the pilot of the Sopwith, who had earlier offered some advice to the American officer in charge and was given a curt brush-off. Through the many minutes when the blimp broke loose and sailed away, he was silent. But as it drifted towards the horizon he broke silence to mutter the terse commentary: "Well, I'll be damned." It seemed to epitomize the general feeling.

It was a few days later, on Sunday, May 18, that the news got about that this would be the day when the trans-Atlantic race would begin. Hawker's Sopwith was at Glendennings Farm, a few miles from St. John's, and Raynham and Morgan's Martynside was on the old cricket ground at Pleasantville. If you wanted to get anywhere in St. John's in those days, you walked. So I hurried down to Kitty Vitty to see what was going on.

Raynham had been advised that Hawker was about to leave and his tiny, heavily-laden plane was wheeled out to the bumpy bank of the pond which was his runway. As the airmen said their goodbyes and began to clamber into their aircraft, the Sopwith appeared overhead. Smoothly it flew out over the White Hills and its under-carriage—a planned operation to lighten the plane after take-off—could be seen dropping towards the sea.

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the aircraft began to lumber over the grass. Then it seemed to tilt and dig its nose into the ground. The Sopwith now had the field to itself.

I can still feel the tension of the next week when no news came and only optimists believed any would ever come. Then came the electrifying information that the Sopwith had come down at sea and its crew rescued by a small Danish ship which was without wireless.

For stamp collectors the great news followed. Four days after the forced landing on the sea, the wreckage of the Sopwith was discovered by an American ship and the most valuable mail bag the world had ever known was salvaged.

Oddly enough, although the *Daily Mail* prize had yet to be won, I cannot recall very much about the Vickers-Vimy converted bomber which was brought to St. John's on the Empire Day holiday by John Alcock and Arthur Whitten Brown. It was assembled at Pleasantville but the problem was to find a suitable field from which the heavily-laden, twin-engined aircraft could successfully take off. Charles Lester, the haulage contractor who had handled the crated plane, came to the rescue. He offered the use of a field on the higher levels of the city in which he kept his horses. Trees, boulders and a small stone wall had to be cleared away and this was done in a week.

From this improvised runway the Vickers-Vimy took off just before two o'clock on the afternoon of June 14. It was touch and go before the plane lifted at last into the air and I had my own last glimpse of it as it flew out through the sentinel cliffs that guard the harbour to come to land sixteen hours later in a bog in Clifden, Ireland. It is a sad and ironic commentary on this famous flight that Alcock died six months later when he crashed on a flight across the English Channel. Another eight years were to pass before the Atlantic was once more to be flown, this time by Lindbergh, whose aircraft

I also saw as he flew over St. John's and out to sea in the early evening of May 20, 1927.

Now between Alcock and Lindbergh there was some local activity in the sphere of aviation. There was no country in which an air service could confer greater benefits. Distances were great. Roads were few. Northern Newfoundland and Labrador were subject to a winter ice blockade. But a new day in mail communication seemed to be dawning when an Australian pilot, Sidney Cotton, came to St. John's in 1921 to initiate a diversity of commercial air services—including winter mails, spotting the northern seal herd, and topographical surveys.

I knew Cotton very well and since I was then a newspaper reporter, I became for two years a regular chronicler of his flights. In the end all the aircraft he brought to Newfoundland were victims of accidents and Cotton in the early 1920s, left the local scene. His attempt to establish an air mail service to Halifax had failed and from a philatelic standpoint the chief interest is to be found in the mails that he carried sporadically, and often with long delays, to various outposts. This tall, lanky and taciturn Australian was a charming fellow and I came to know him very well when I spent two weeks as his guest on a yachting trip. He was, among other things, the inventor of an electrically-heated flying suit which was known as the Sid-cot. Now as most Newfoundlanders should know, the great quest of the ships engaged in the annual seal hunt was the mythical main patch which was supposed to contain millions of seals. Cotton sold the idea of finding it by aerial survey but when the first ships reached the spot where he claimed to have found the main patch, there were no seals. A local balladeer with a comic sense of humour made this, the subject of a three-act play called Cotton's Patch. The climax came when it was discovered to be the patch on Cotton's trousers. It was the only time I ever saw the nonchalant Cotton discomfited.

The above is an excerpt from the speech given at the BNAPS annual banquet on September 9 in St. John's, Newfoundland. Albert Perlin, a resident of Newfoundland most of his life, was for many years the editor of the St. John's morning daily, THE NEWS. During his long career was a witness to many of the pioneer air flights, which he described in his talk. He also designed some Newfoundland stamps, and is mentioned in the Dalwick-Harmer book, NEWFOUNDLAND AIR MAILS. The second half of these excerpts will appear next month.