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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Originator Of Air Mail Tells Of Historic Flight

By NEIL A. MATHESON

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This column was written before the death of Mrs. Matheson)

THE MAN who planned and originated the first official air mail flight in Canada stopped at my desk last Saturday. How is that for a lucky break to a man who writes an historic column like "Across The Island".

James Milner Stevenson is the man who persuaded C. R. Smallwood, then secretary-treasurer of the Provincial Exhibition, to back a Truro to Charlottetown air mail flight back in September 1919. It was the first official air mail flight in Canada.

At the time mail took two days to get from Halifax to Charlottetown, Mr. Stevenson recalled for me.

The hero of today's column was born in Fredericton but he lived in Charlottetown when he enlisted in the 8th Siege Battery, and went overseas in the First Great War where he later became a pilot with the RAF. Canada had no air force of its own in those days.

"My grandfather was Matthew Stevenson who had a tinsmith business down on lower Queen Street", the man told me. "My father, William Stevenson, also had a tinsmith establishment. It was on Great George Street", he added.

Mail Bore Official Stamps

"WE HAD made arrangements with the Postmaster in Truro to officially stamp the mail we carried, also the Postmaster in Charlottetown." I found the postmaster here was W.M Brehaut, the late husband of my friend Mary Brehaut, Grafton Street.

They had the mail stamped in Truro at one o'clock in the afternoon. "We rushed it out and hopped aboard the aircraft, flew to Charlottetown and had it stamped by the Postmaster here at two o'clock," Mr. Stevenson recalled for me.

That was exactly an hour but they made the flight in considerably less time. They would be in the air about 45 minutes in all, he told me.

"I understand that was the first official air mail in Canada," Mr. Stevenson told me. I wrote a column on this flight several years ago and I remember learning from some source – I believe it was a copy of a post office magazine – that was the first official air mail flight. My friend Mary Brehaut had confirmed that.

Making the historic flight – it was in September 24, 1919 – with Mr. Stevenson was Captain Laurie Stevens from Truro. They were shareholders in the DeVere Aviation Company in Truro and were trying to develop interest in flying mail and express so they could expand their fledgling business.

On the plane they carried about 60 letters which they had written to important people in Charlottetown and the province generally. One went to Mayor Wright, Mr. Stevens believes. He called the latter recipients here "V.I.P.s". Memory tells me that Jim Walker has a cover of a letter from that flight.

“We wanted to get those people interested, we wanted their co-operation in working up an air mail and express business” said the man who is now retired in the Green Mountains of Vermont with his wife and two daughters. He’s vacationing now at Cavendish.

Businessmen Were Dubious

BUT THE effort didn’t succeed, though Stevenson and Stevens gave it a gallant try. They spoke to Boards of Trade and other people in most of the Maritime centres. They included Moncton, Fredericton, Saint John, Halifax, Truro and Charlottetown among others.

The goal was the establishment of an air service to Prince Edward Island “because we were able through our experience in flying to foresee that air mail and air express, etc. was a coming development. We wanted the local people in the Maritime Provinces to be in on it”, Mr. Stevenson told me.

But nothing happened at the time, “we couldn’t influence them,” Mr. Stevenson recalled.

I asked him what reasons the businessmen of the day gave for refusing to explore the air carrier idea at that time.

In general the Maritime business leaders of the day were very dubious of the Stevens-Stevenson proposals. “They figured that possibly the extent of aviation had been reached at that time”, my visitor recalled. “They gave us that impression”, he added.

They possibly knew there would be some improvements but they never seemed to be able to foresee that express and freight could ever be carried by air, not to mention people. Stevenson and his colleague had also been talking freight transport possibilities. First of all, though, they were talking air mail flights.

The Maritimers were dubious that planes could maintain regular flights, they were dubious of what would happen in winter, for example.

Quotations Were Available

THE PAIR even had quotations for express rates, Mr. Stevenson told me, though he could not recall for me what the estimated carrier rates were.

We were questioned very closely on this and I remember that “R.E. Mutch was one man who did question us very closely, even down to the low fractions.”

Mr. Mutch whom many Charlottetown and other Island people will recall as a prominent Charlottetown businessman and promoter, usually could see ahead farther than most people, though it appears that he could not accept the air carrier idea at that time.

Remember there was no mention then of passenger flights, not even by the two young and eager promoters.

The plane used was a “Ford Jenny”, but I couldn’t learn much about it. Fifty years is a mighty long time, and the details of the Jenny had slipped Mr. Stevenson’s memory.

There were Bi-planes in those early days of aviation. The first airmail pair flew with open cockpits. They wore leather helmets and goggles.

Price For Flight Small

THE PRICE the two men got for the flight was “somewhere between \$200 and \$300, I’ve forgotten the exact figure,” he told me.

Stevenson went to Long Island, New York where he established a landscaping business, made a success of it and retired at the end of 1964 to build his retirement home in Vermont.

Reluctance to back air carrier ventures plagued Maritimers long after this 1919 venture. I haven’t the details but I’ve been told many times that Captain Carl Burke, a Charlottetown boy who built an air carrier empire at one time, had to go to Montreal to get the money he needed to develop his idea.

I had walked into the Guardian office at noon, to see if there was any important mail on my desk. That’s how I was lucky enough to meet James Milner Stevenson, the man who established an item of air mail history 50 years ago next year.

But the interesting story doesn’t stop here. In his younger days Stevenson was a reporter for the Charlottetown Guardian – J.R. Burnett was the managing editor.

In 1913 Stevenson took over the circulation. He had been working about a year as a reporter.

The day the First Great War broke out – it was in August 1914 – “Mr. Burnett came to me in his brusque Scotch way and said “whatever you do don’t be foolish and enlist.” Stevenson was with the 8th Siege Battery at the time.

The Guardian had a contest on at the time and “subscriptions were pouring in”, Mr. Stevenson told me.

The advice had been given to him in the evening, but “I came to work in uniform next day”, Mr. Stevenson observed.