
“Pilot Wanted. Plenty of risk. Good pay...”

Sidney Cotton in Newfoundland, 1920–23

Pre-dating his better-known exploits as a pioneer of clandestine aerial intelligence-gathering in the late 1930s and nefarious gun-running activities in Pakistan after the war, Sidney Cotton's three extremely challenging seasons' seal-spotting in Newfoundland in the early 1920s are all too often overlooked. **DIRK SEPTER** redresses the balance



NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA VIA AUTHOR

ABOVE Sidney Cotton (left) and his mechanic and copilot J.R. Stannard at Botwood, Newfoundland, in 1922. Cotton was taught to fly by Frederick Warren Merriam (whose memoirs, *First Through the Clouds and Echoes From Dawn Skies*, are published by Pen & Sword in association with TAH) with the RNAS at Chingford in 1916.

MAIN PICTURE Ski-equipped Westland Limousine III G-EARV of the Aerial Survey Co on its way from Botwood to the goldfields at Stag Bay, Labrador, in April 1923. Alighting on thin ice on the shore of the bay, Cotton and Stannard had to keep the six-seat machine moving to avoid breaking the ice and sinking. The company also used three examples of the smaller four-seat Limousine II.

PHILIP JARRETT COLLECTION

FREDERICK SIDNEY COTTON is still considered an aviation legend in his native Australia and something of a national hero in Pakistan for his involvement in a largely illegal airlift of arms to that country during its partition war with India (see *Gun Cotton* in TAH4). An aviation pioneer, innovator, businessman and diplomat, Cotton is also well known for his contribution to the evolution of colour film. His early aerial photography successes would lead to flying clandestine missions for MI6 and wartime intelligence-gathering for the RAF. Cotton even added two new items to the aviation dictionary: the “Sidcot” flying suit and “Cottonising” — the aerodynamic refining of the wing and fuselage surfaces of an aircraft to increase its speed.

Much less is known, however, about Cotton's early flying career in Newfoundland. It was here that he developed his interest in aerial photography and performed some of the first air mail flights in Newfoundland and between the self-governed British dominion and Canada. It was also in Newfoundland that Cotton initiated the use of aircraft for spotting seal herds during the annual spring seal hunt.

Unfortunately, mainly because of the harsh economics of the time, the Newfoundland government, whaling companies and local people did not share Cotton's faith in aviation. His attempts to establish the first Newfoundland—Canada air mail service did not take wing either. Cotton was ahead of his time in Newfoundland, but aviation would not begin to prosper there until after the territory became a province of Canada on April 1, 1949, by which time Cotton had long since departed its frozen climes.

Pilot wanted . . .

Following an aborted attempt by Cotton to undertake a trailblazing flight to South Africa in February 1920, which got as far as a beach in Italy, he found himself at something of a loose end. As he explained in the memoir he later published with Ralph Barker, *Aviator Extraordinary: The Sidney Cotton Story* (Chatto & Windus, 1969):

“While my [D.H.14A] was being repaired I met up with David Plaistowe, who had read about my crash in Italy and tracked me down. He was sitting in my flat reading a copy of *The Aeroplane* when something attracted his notice. ‘Listen to this,’ he said, ‘here’s a strange advert’. And he read out the following advertisement: PILOT WANTED — PLENTY OF RISK, GOOD PAY. I read it through several times, trying to imagine what sort of job might be on offer . . . it intrigued me. I wrote to the box number with details of my experience and asked what the proposition was, and I received a reply from a Major Clayton-