

# The de Havilland Otter A Northern Ontario Conservation Officer's Favourite Patrol Truck

By David G. Ferguson

In my former life (before retirement, that is), I was a Conservation Officer (CO) with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR). My first three years in that position were spent in Moosonee District, in Ontario's far north. I was the junior member of the entire force at that time, of two COs. While most of a CO's time in that district was spent on wildlife management projects, we also had some pretty hot waterfowl hunting and trout fishing that required a vigilant enforcement watch. Hunting and fishing *that* good usually draws its share of... well, I can't put it any more politely than to call them poachers.

At 215,000 square kilometres, Moosonee was a large district. In fact, it was larger than the entire area of Ontario lying south of the French and Mattawa Rivers. It encompassed Ontario's entire Arctic coast... the James and Hudson Bay Lowlands between the Quebec and Manitoba borders! That's almost 1,000 kilometres, if you follow the coastline. Whether it was an enforcement patrol, a wildlife population survey or transportation to some project on the ground, almost all field work we did required the use of aircraft. The ministry air fleet was to us what the truck fleet was to most other districts.

I frequently rode as observer on aerial polar bear and waterfowl surveys over the coast of Hudson and James Bays. As great a plane as they were for our work, I'd get airsick flying in the Turbo Beavers. The strong 'diesel exhaust' type of smell, combined with turbulent gut wrenching turns, was all it took for me, unless I was nibbling on Ritz crackers while we circled. Even then I'd get sick sometimes, but the crackers aren't as bad as... yah yah, too much information. I couldn't use Graval, because it would make me sleepy... and you can't watch for wildlife through snoozing eyelids. (And those ear patches hadn't been discovered up there yet.)

The big old de Havilland DHC-3 Otter was my absolute favourite yellow bird. From the ground, the distinctive sound of that big radial engine approaching was like none other... it could be nothing but an Otter. So slow in flight, the pilots often joked that you had to use a calendar as an air speed indicator, but those planes could swallow a one-ton truck's worth of gear, and still get off the water in a remarkably short distance. If you trimmed the elevator correctly, the plane pretty well flew itself. And I found that by wearing earplugs inside my intercom headset, that the bellowing drone of that big engine was much easier to take over long periods than the high-pitched whine of the turbine on the Turbo-Beaver.

While I didn't get to do take-offs and landings, the pilots would let me fly entire legs on some of our long distance flights. I enjoyed my flights with one particular pilot the most<sup>1</sup>. After I completed the navigational planning for the next leg of the trip, he would perform the take off, trimming the Otter controls for the climb, then he'd immediately get out of the left-hand seat and

---

<sup>1</sup> I won't give his name... I wouldn't want them to cut off his pension. Oh, and I had done some flight training, but never went for my licence.

let me control the plane from the proper position.<sup>2</sup> I would then get to finish the climb, trim out for level flight, adjust the throttle and fuel mixture and the propeller speed settings while putting (and keeping) the plane on the proper course. When the destination came into sight, I would do the circuit and commence the landing approach descent and related engine settings before giving up the cherished pilot's seat. What a rush!

The ministry planes were always clean and well maintained, and the pilots, although sometimes frustratingly fastidious about not flying in some weather conditions, were a really good group of guys (great hunting and fishing guides too). Several of our Otters, although they were generally similarly equipped, would exhibit slightly different flight characteristics. I recall the pilots preferring the takeoff lift of one particular plane, and we all groaned when we drew the one that could not make over 95 knots through the air... although in all other respects it flew perfectly well.

After I moved south to Elliot Lake, I got a few more Otter rides, but they began to show up with decreasing regularity as they were withdrawn from the ministry's service. It was a bit like seeing the last steam locomotives removed from regular service... you know that they are being replaced by more technologically advanced equipment, but it's sad to see them go all the same. I really got a nostalgic lump in my throat a few years ago, when I saw CF-ODU (one of my former rides) on display at the Canadian Bush Plane Heritage Museum in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

While their reincarnation as Turbo-Otters probably makes them stink like a T-Beaver, it's great to see that their useful lives are being given such a promising extension.

---

<sup>2</sup> On the MNR Otters I flew, there was only one control column, but it was hinged in the centre of the cockpit and could be pivoted to either side, however, there were no foot pedals on the right (passenger) seat, and the most continuously needed flight and engine instruments and gauges were directly in front of the pilot's seat.