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Tofino Air Seaplanes

By Pat Awmack



To understand Tofino Air it's important to understand where it came from.

Scattered along the rugged west coast of Vancouver Island lie the traditional territories of several First Nations bands. Cut off from any large center, these communities are accessible only by water, making the movement of supplies a challenge. In

an effort to meet this challenge, John Walter founded Walter's Air Service in 1970, flying groceries and supplies from the town of Tofino to the nearby communities of Ahousaht and Hesquiaht.

The territory of the Ahousaht First Nation includes most of the Clayquot Sound Biosphere Reserve, an area renowned for its wildlife and old-

growth rainforest. With the translation of Ahousaht being "people living with their backs to the land and mountains, on a beach along the open sea," it's easy to understand how reliant this isolated community is on floatplanes. The same goes for the First Nation of Hesquiaht, the most northerly and remote of the First Nations in this area.

Walter's Air Service was only in

business for a couple of years before ceasing operations. It was later resurrected for a short stint as McCulley Air, by pilot Gary Richards and partners. Then, in May 1985, Gary and pilot Doug Banks resurrected it again, giving it the name Tofino Air. For the first three years, they used the Weigh West dock in Tofino, before moving to the base on 1st Street, where they are still located today.

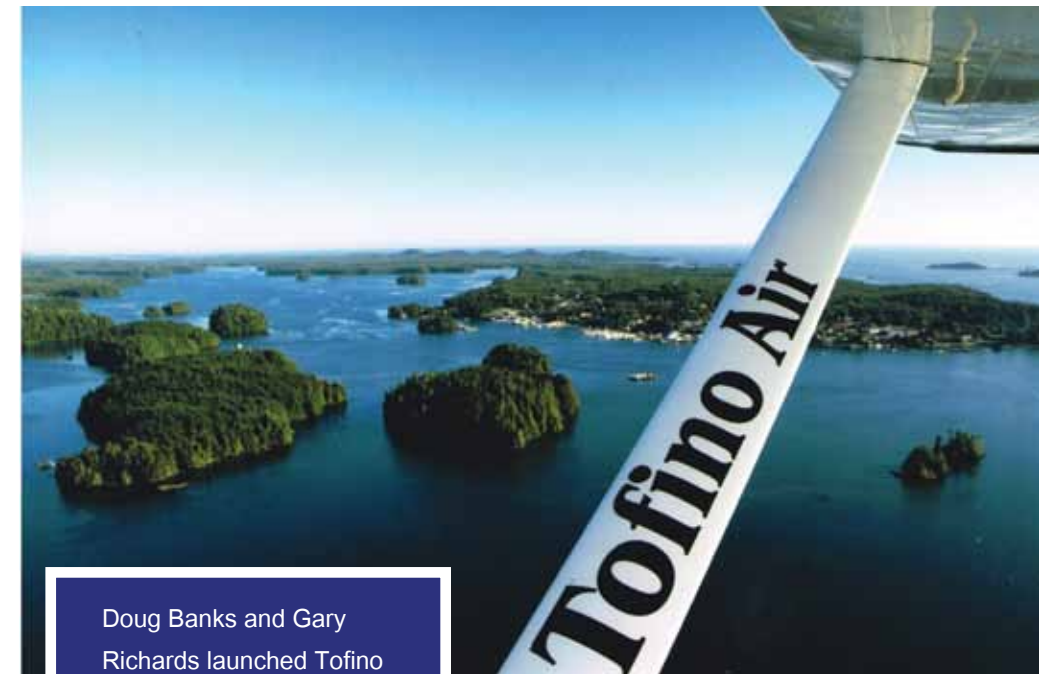
When it came time to sell the company to its current owner, Chris Danroth, Doug stayed on as a line pilot and mechanic for another 11 years.

Danroth, originally a logger, owned two logging camps – in Seymour Inlet and north of Bella Bella on the BC coast -- and a mobile timber-sales unit. Although not a pilot himself, he owned a private airplane which was used for moving his loggers in and out of the camps.. In 1992, four years before closing the camps, he founded an airline called Midcoast Air, with bases in Bella Bella, Port McNeill and Sechelt. Midcoast purchased Tofino Air in 2000. In January 2001, he also purchased Pacific Spirit Airlines, with its Silva Bay, Gabriola Island-to-Vancouver route. However, he has recently divested himself of that route, selling it to his former chief pilot and operations manager.

Although Tofino Air flew into the Vancouver Harbour Flight Centre for a few years, they've recently discontinued that run and streamlined their operation. According to Operations Manager Buffy Barrett, "There are a lot of companies flying into and out of Vancouver, and we decided we'd stick with what we do best and do those routes really well."

Today, with 15 employees, the company runs three floatplane bases: in downtown Nanaimo and Tofino – both on Vancouver Island - and Sechelt, on the mainland.

With a fleet of four de Havilland Beaver DHC-2 floatplanes, two Cessna 180s and a state-of-the-art de Havilland Turbine Single Otter,



Doug Banks and Gary Richards launched Tofino Air on the beautiful but remote west coast of Vancouver Island.





the airline offers four daily scheduled flights between Nanaimo and Sechelt, and scheduled flights between Tofino and Ahousaht, and Hot Springs Cove in the Hesquiaht nation. They hold the Canada Post contract to deliver the mail to Ahousaht and fly a doctor into Ahousaht daily and to Hesquiaht every two days.

Barrett says, “One of the great things about our airline is we’re small and we have a lot of commuters who go back and forth. We know everybody by their name, we know exactly what they need and we know when they need to go.”

The west coast of Vancouver Island offers miles of wild beaches with huge surf, hot springs, pristine glacial lakes, whale-watching and spectacular scenery. Charter flights out of the Tofino base present the opportunity to experience this vast, unspoiled wilderness.

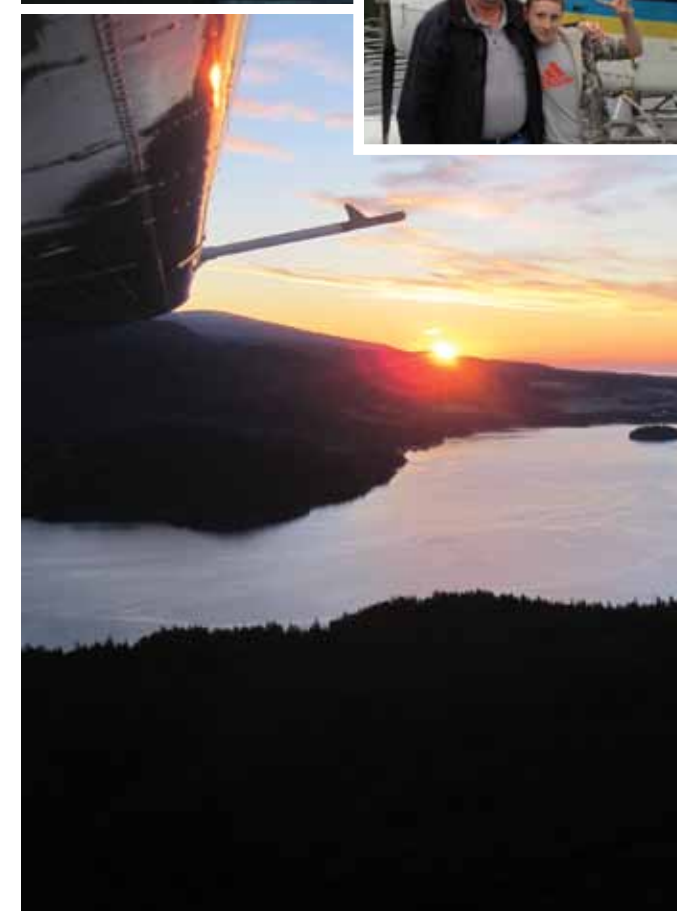
Can’t decide between whale-watching and taking a floatplane ride? Why not do both? One of the company’s most popular tours has it partnering with Jaime’s Whaling Station on a ‘Sea-to-Sky’ tour which offers whale-watching from a boat, a drop-off at Hot Springs Cove, where you’ll have time to enjoy the natural pools, and a flight back to Tofino later in the day. It’s truly the best of all worlds.

Or would you like to camp in an old-growth rainforest, surrounded by some of the most beautiful wilderness in the world? Book a flight to Hot Springs Cove and spend a few days enjoying nature. Or try your luck trout fishing or enjoying some hiking and canoeing by chartering a flight to majestic Strathcona Park. Barrett says, “We’ll basically take you anywhere you’d like to go. As long as the weather is good and we can stop for fuel, we’ll do it.”

While logging is no longer the booming industry it once was, other opportunities have evolved. Josh Ramsay, pilot and general manager, is constantly working to diversify business opportunities on the Nanaimo/Sech-



The breathtaking terrain of British Columbia offers plenty of opportunity for scenic flightseeing tours and charter flights for the adventurous. Left: Owner Chris Danroth and son are proud of their grassroots airline.





elt route. Scenic flightseeing up the Sechelt inlet – where, if you're lucky, you'll see mountain goats and bears – delivering groceries and passengers to coastal fishing resorts, and transporting workers to the Narrows Inlet Hydro Project on the Sunshine Coast are just a few such options.

Ramsay is also working at building relationships with hotels and bed-and-breakfasts in Nanaimo with the idea of building the flightseeing business in that area. Most people pass through Nanaimo on their way elsewhere but Ramsey would like to see it become a destination in its own right.

“One of the great things about our airline is that we're small and we're really grassroots,” says Barrett. “We know our customers, we know the doctors that we fly by name; to us it's all about customer service and getting to know the people that we fly. Because we're a small company we can do that. It's a lot of fun – we've got a great team.” ✈️

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