

ERNEST EDMUND FRESSON OBE (1901-1905)

Captain Ernest Edmund (Ted) Fresson, OBE, has gone down in history as one of the great British pilots. Born on September 20th 1891, he was the eldest of four boys and two girls brought up in Surrey and Essex by his father Mitchel, a City of London stockbroker and his mother Marian, a talented pianist from the Robins family, famous as London auctioneers. He appears to have been the only son to attend Framlingham.



After early training as an engineer, he was sent to his firm's branch in China in 1911, but following his boyhood aspirations to become a pilot he signed on as a volunteer when the Great War began in 1914. He trained as a pilot for the Royal Flying Corps in Canada at the beginning of 1918.

When the war was over he returned to China, keeping his hand in at flying whilst working for his old firm again. He rebuilt or assembled some British aircraft for local dignitaries and then built and flew an aircraft of his own design for a Chinese warlord – to place it in production there. A revolution intervened and Ted returned to Britain in 1927 to begin several years of concentrated joy-riding and display flying, firstly with existing aviation companies, then with his own.

Each year saw him carrying thousands of air-minded passengers on five minute joy rides, at fields he chose all over Britain. During this time he took a great deal of liking to Scotland and saw an opportunity to start scheduled services in the Highlands. This started between Inverness, Wick and Kirkwall on May 8th 1933.

Ted formed his airline, Highland Airways Limited, with considerable help from Macrae & Dick, the motor engineers in Inverness, the Scotsman newspaper, Dr Alexander of Dr Grays Hospital in Elgin and other local traders. His regularity in flying in all weathers became a by-word, and so a year later, on May 29th 1934, his airline was given the first UK domestic Airmail contract by the Post Office. This was to fly mail at ordinary rates by air to Orkney and back. He later acquired airmail contract to Wick and Shetland.

In October 1933, Ted operated the first commercial charter out of Aberdeen, carrying three salesmen to Shetland. On May 7th 1934 he began Aberdeen's first scheduled service to Wick



and Kirkwall. After this, Highland Airways became the trail blazer for many new services throughout the Highlands and Islands, linking up with Inverness and Aberdeen with Shetland and Stornoway, as well as inaugurating the Orkney inter-island flights and services to Perth and Glasgow.

Ted Fresson as a pilot could land his aircraft in almost any field in Scotland and frequently did so. He knew the terrain so well that he became one of the principal advisors on airfield construction sites to the Air Ministry and the Admiralty before and after the start of World War II. The booming regional airport at Inverness is still on the site suggested by Ted to the Air Ministry as a wartime airfield and the Admiralty also consulted him prior to laying the first tarmac strip at Hatston, Orkney. The tarmac was actually Ted's suggestion. The

'runways' suggested by Fred at the old Stornoway golf club, so as to create least disturbance and inconvenience to the golfers, are now acknowledged as the first runways in Britain.

When his airline became part of Lord Cowdray's pre-war British Airways and was combined with the Renfrew-based Northern and Scottish Airways to form Scottish Airways (as it became), Ted Fresson played a vital part in running the airline throughout the war years. In 1947, however, all domestic air services were nationalised into the British European Airways Corporation and Ted Fresson left the corporation in March 1948, dismissed without compensation for the fine airline he had built up. That Ted Fresson and other early pioneers were so treated by the government of the day is still a shameful episode in the history of aviation in Britain.

The fact that almost all his network is still being flown today is a tribute to his foresight, flying enterprise and efforts to bring air travel to everybody living in these remote parts of the United Kingdom.

After a period overseas Ted Fresson returned to the Highlands continued to fly the occasional charter in the Northern skies using his own light aircraft. He died in Inverness on September 25th 1963.



In 1991 the Fresson Trust was set up with the following principal objectives :

1. To offer bursaries or similar contributions to residents of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland who wish to begin or pursue a career in aviation within the area as a pilot, engineer or air traffic controller.
2. To support the establishment of suitable local museums and archives to house memorabilia and aircraft (civil and military) with a Highlands and Islands connection.
3. To arrange and promote such events as commemorate the anniversaries of Captain Fresson's aviation activities throughout the area, and more recent aviation achievements, as a means of fund-raising and to keep their history alive.
4. To engage in fund-raising activities in a variety of ways, to provide the Trust bursaries, and assist in its other objectives.

The trust is still active to this day, with the involvement of his son and much of the above has been taken from their official site at <http://www.fressontrust.org.uk/index.htm> They have also been good enough to confirm that he did attend Framlingham College.

On 29 May 2003 the 70th anniversary of the first official internal British airmail service was commemorated at Kirkwall Airport in Orkney. Captain Fresson's son, Richard Fresson, was amongst those marking the anniversary. Members of the Fresson Trust recreated the journey from Inverness to Kirkwall with BenAir, the company that currently operates the mail flights to Orkney. The original pennant presented to Capt Fresson by Royal Air Mail on the occasion of the first flight was also flown to Orkney and put on display in the airport terminal by Kirkwall Museum.

Bob Macleod, managing director of Highlands and Islands Airports Limited (HIAL) and secretary of the Fresson Trust, said: "Captain Fresson was a visionary who led the way in connecting the islands with the mainland by establishing air links. His dedication and skilled flying paved the way for aviation as the main mode of transport to the remoter parts of Scotland. HIAL is extremely proud to be involved in the Fresson Trust and we actively support its continuing work in the field of aviation. Today commemorates one of the many aviation firsts achieved by Ted Fresson and we are delighted to be displaying some items associated with the first internal UK air mail service in the terminal at Kirkwall," he said.

John Morrison of Royal Mail said: "Seventy years on from Capt Fresson's first air mail flight, air services continue to play a vital role in mail delivery both to the islands and across the UK. His pioneering vision saw aviation develop to play the vital role it fulfils in the Highlands and Islands today."

Paul Wells of the Fresson Trust tells me that his son is trying to get his autobiography (in its full 'juicy' version!) published for 2007. He goes on to say that "if you have not read "Air Road To The Isles" then I recommend it

to you. As one who has spend years flying around the Isles as a pilot, I can honestly say it is a true and honest account of flying up here!"

I have just been advised that the re-publication of "Air Road to the Isles" will happen in May 2008 and copies can be obtained from kea publishing, 14 Flures Crescent, Erskine, Renfrewshire PA8 7DJ, Scotland
Telephone: 0141 812 3997 E-mail: kea@keapub.fsnet.co.uk www.keapublishing.com

His memoirs, which include his earlier years in China building aircraft and as a WWI pilot in the Royal Flying Corps, were first published over forty years ago. The original book has long been out of print. Well-worn second-hand copies of that volume can set you back as much as £100. However, this new edition has been compiled from Fresson's original manuscript and including material that was omitted from the original volume. It runs to 488 pages and includes 130 images and 6 maps. It's available in hardback ISBN 9780951895894.

