

Gander Airport, 1935-45

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Development of Gander airport, initially called Newfoundland Airport (hereafter referred to as Gander for consistency) came about at the 1935 Ottawa Conference following discussions on transatlantic aviation between the United Kingdom, Canada, Newfoundland, and the Irish Free State. The attending nation governments ultimately agreed to cooperate in a development program involving survey, experimental flights, and ultimately the establishment of a regular transatlantic air service. It happened that surveys for a suitable flying boat base and land aerodrome in Newfoundland had begun several months before the Ottawa conference. "The primary need was for a seaplane base," pointed out historian Peter Neary, "since for the moment flying boats offered the only practical means of introducing a scheduled transatlantic service." Following the survey work, Ivor McClure and Maurice Banks, visiting British officials from the Department of Civil Aviation, recommended the seaport town of Botwood as a principal seaplane terminal.

The progenitors of the Ottawa Conference agreement also proposed to experiment with long-range land-based aircraft, still under development, and for this, McClure and Banks recommended a heavily wooded plateau on the north shore of Gander Lake. The site, conveniently located adjacent the railway, also boasted relatively good, fog-free weather, but most importantly, lay on the great circle route, the shortest geographic air route from eastern North America to Europe. Construction of the airfield, a joint undertaking by Newfoundland and Great Britain, began in 1936. Two years later, pioneer Newfoundland aviator Douglas Fraser made the first landing, piloting ski-equipped Fox Moth VO-ADE.

When war broke out in Europe in 1939, the airfield boasted four hard-surfaced runways, one large hangar, a control tower, quarters for married officials, a staff house with fifty single bedrooms, thousands of gallons of gasoline, and complete wireless telegraphy, direction finding, and meteorological equipment. The airport landing register shows that the primary activity that year was upper air meteorological observation and data collection. Each day, weather permitting, pilots Douglas Fraser, Clifford Kent, and Donald McGregor, took aloft the Newfoundland government's Fox

Moth (VO-ADE) or Fairchild 71C (VO-AFG), measuring atmospheric properties with a meteorograph and strut psychrometer. These observations, reported the *Evening Telegram* at the time, “gave the only information available on the structure of the ‘fronts’ moving out over the Atlantic, [and] the associated icing conditions and cloud systems.”

By the end of 1939, the airfield had yet to receive an aircraft on the transatlantic service as the land-planes were not ready and their construction now halted due to the war. Nor had the airfield received many visitors, save Swedish-American Charles Bachman, piloting the first aircraft to arrive from abroad, and a couple of curious American vacationers. The twenty-five year old Bachman, delivering a Monocoupe 90A to his native Sweden, refueled and made history as the first aircraft to depart Gander on a transatlantic flight. He was never heard from again. The only other aerial activity that year saw two British Handley Page Harrow tanker aircraft arrive in May to conduct mid-air refueling trials in conjunction with Imperial Airways’ transatlantic flying boat service at Botwood.

With the outbreak of war, Gander’s future as a hub for transatlantic aviation remained uncertain. Dr. Patrick McTaggart-Cowan, head of Gander’s meteorological section, “received instructions from Ottawa to close down the meteorological section, because it wouldn’t be used.” Likewise, he claims, Ottawa sent instructions to mine the runways, lest they fall into German hands, putting enemy aircraft within striking distance of the Maritimes and shipping through the Strait of Belle Isle and Cabot Strait. As it then stood, Gander was less an asset than a liability, but by mid-1940 that thinking had changed. Recognizing the implications of enemy control of the airfield, railway, and Botwood seaplane base, and with Britain focussed on its own survival and Newfoundland Governor Sir Humphrey Walwyn raising alarms over “the defenceless condition of this country,” Britain allowed Canada to send a detachment of Digby patrol bombers to Gander for general reconnaissance and local air defence. More RCAF antisubmarine squadrons followed as the war progressed, while Hurricane fighter squadrons rendered aerial support and guarded the coastline. Significantly, foretold one RCAF officer in a secret communique to the Canadian Department of National Defence in May 1940, the airfield “may be of paramount importance to the allied war effort as the main aerodrome on this side of the Atlantic from which to dispatch” aircraft for delivery by air to England. This indeed came to fruition, with the first experimental ferry flights dispatched from Gander in November and December of that year under the auspices of the Canadian Pacific Railway Air Service Department (later reorganized as RAF Ferry

Command). It was dangerous work, but by war's end, Ferry Command had safely delivered more than ten thousand aircraft via Gander, Goose Bay, and the South Atlantic route.

As early as 1940, a then neutral United States had made known its desire to establish an air garrison in Newfoundland "for urgently needed training of a composite group of U.S. Army aircraft." The Americans put forth their preferred idea of a lease of land adjacent Gander airport, and an alternative of having Canada provide the facilities on an informal basis. The Canadian government, then in discussions with Newfoundland to have the RCAF assume control of the airfield (which they did in April 1941), and not wishing "to have any permanent U.S. establishment at or near the airport," rejected the lease proposal. Instead, the Canadians agreed to provide the facilities on an informal basis for operational training, and further agreed to incur the cost of erecting additional buildings. President Roosevelt approved the arrangement and in May 1941, the 21st Reconnaissance Squadron arrived. The squadron, its intelligence officer none other than Captain Elliot Roosevelt, son of the president, represented the first U.S. air unit deployed to Newfoundland.

When the U.S. entered the war seven months later, aerial activity intensified. Added strength began to arrive and facilities in the American sector of the field were expanded to accommodate overseas ferrying operations. The first major overseas movement of combat aircraft through Gander, code name Bolero, got underway in late summer 1942 with the buildup in the United Kingdom of the American Eighth Air Force. As the staging point for the northeast ferry route, explained General Harold L. George, Commanding General, Air Transport Command, the unit tasked with aircraft ferrying, Gander's mission was to clear all ferried aircraft, which entailed briefing of flight crews, communications, weather forecasting, and aircraft servicing and maintenance. By war's end, U.S. operations had dispatched some 5,000 heavy bombers through Gander.

Postwar, Gander's location on the New York to London air route continued to make it a vital refueling and maintenance terminal for east- and westbound traffic. By 1950, with upward of one thousand passengers passing through daily and eight international airlines using its facilities, Gander was affectionately coined the "Crossroads of the World."