

# “A Winter’s Tale” – Gander Style

(With apologies to William Shakespeare)

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American personnel found themselves working under extreme weather conditions during their first winter at Gander, 1941-1942. Snow reached the second storey windows of many buildings, which the men struggled to keep connected by deep, shovelled paths. The officers’ club and single-storey barracks were almost completely covered. Snowshoes were standard issue. Air traffic dwindled, and with little to do and few recreational facilities, gambling became a major distraction “and reached reckless proportions,” wrote the base historian. Snowstorms made mail delivery slow and unpredictable. Morale plummeted. A depressing circumstance for anyone accustomed to warmer climes. It helped to have a sense of humour.

First Lieutenant James B. Van Dyck was a signal officer at Gander’s US Army base when he was assigned to oversee guard duty one stormy day in January 1942. His sharp sense of humour was put on display in an Officer of the Day report, addressed to the commanding officer, no less. His duty began in the afternoon in the “midst of a raging blizzard,” or what the weather office called a “snow shower,” he added sardonically. Van Dyck first reported to the guardroom and for safety’s sake, suggested that the men travel in pairs to reach their posts and report in as often as possible. He then had all the relief guards for posts 7 to 13 wait in hangars 1 and 2.

Van Dyck soon set out with reliefs for posts 11 to 13, but lost his way in the whiteouts. He could find neither the guards, gasoline dumps, nor airport, and “fell down so many times,” he said, that “I finally decided that was probably the best way to travel.” He eventually located the posts and “thought that the relieved guards were going to kiss us.” The guard on post 13 was “hiding in the trees,” he remarked. “Talked to him but have yet to see him.” By now, Van Dyck had given up his snowshoes, experiencing for the first time the “condition of sitting down and standing up” simultaneously. After a visit to hangar 1, still without snowshoes, “and after falling down for the seventh time,” Van Dyck wondered “whether it was worthwhile getting up any more. Still think I made a mistake,” he added in response.

Van Dyck spent the next couple of hours travelling between the hangars and guardhouse and distributing thermos bottles of coffee. Posts 5 and 6 were at the railway station where the waiting room was jammed with Newfoundlanders. Every time one of them stretched, “he punched three others in the nose and started a fight.” Around 0130 AM, while snowshoeing to check up on posts 3, 4, and 14, “I tripped over a large black object. Dug down a little and found it was a 1½-ton truck. Crawled, slipped and finally fell to post 14,”

the location of a B-17 Flying Fortress, but there was no sign of the guard. "Heard him though," said Van Dyck, so he "tapped out a message" in Morse code on the B-17 fuselage and "wiggled back to [the] guard house. On the way, and off the record, he joked, Van Dyck passed a Newfoundlander. "I remarked that it was a rough storm. He asked, "What storm?" Shot him dead with one shot, in spite of reports to [the] contrary."

At 0300 AM, transportation called to say that the plough was stuck. "Couldn't find it in my heart to blame it," said Van Dyck. Three hours later, he called hangars 1 and 2 and sent all the relief guards not on duty to breakfast. However, the reliefs preferred to sleep and declined, "with no reflection on the mess sergeant." At 0930 AM, Van Dyck discontinued guard duty on post 14 at the B-17, as the approach to the aircraft was too dangerous. Besides, he added, "you couldn't tell where the plane stopped and the runway began and vice versa." At 1130 AM, Van Dyck ordered all those on duty in hangars 1 and 2 to proceed to the mess and then report to the guardhouse. His tour ended thereafter, he wrote, with the so-called "snow showers unabated."

Van Dyck concluded his report with several recommendations, some genuine, some not. Among the latter:

1. That St. Bernards with casks of Ovaltine be procured.
2. That snow gloves as well as snowshoes be procured. This will greatly aid crawling.
3. That for the protection of the base, the general wellbeing and comfort of all base personnel, and to ensure a smooth working and eventless guard tour, timidly requests that my name be stricken from the guard roster.

A funny man, that 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant James B. Van Dyck.



The American side at Gander, February 1942.  
(Perhaps Van Dyck wasn't exaggerating after all...)