

By Accident or Design? A Case of Suspected Sabotage at Gander

By Darrell Hillier
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On the afternoon of 4 November 1944, Ferry Command B-25 Mitchell KJ680 arrived at Gander from Dorval, captained by Pilot Officer Acheson. By day's end, Gander would dispatch eleven Mitchells overseas via the airfield at Narsarsuaq in southern Greenland, code-named Bluie West One (BW-1). Nine of that number landed safely at BW-1 while one returned to Gander due to inclement weather and another because of radio trouble. Mitchell KJ680, on the other hand, never got off the ground. A terse entry in the Senior Flying Control Officer's office diary stated simply, "Case of suspected sabotage in KJ680. CO [commanding officer] dealing with it."

Documents at Newfoundland and Labrador's provincial archives shed further light on the matter. On 16 December 1944, RCMP Assistant Commissioner V.A.M. Kemp, Director, Criminal Investigation, notified the chief of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary (RNC) that their Canadian counterparts had been requested (presumably by Ferry Command headquarters in Dorval) to investigate the suspected sabotage to Mitchell KJ680. "Information received," added Kemp, "indicates that the gas line of this plane was tampered with and this could not have been committed except at Gander where refuelling was taking place prior to the aircraft being flown overseas." Investigators were presently at Dorval but expected to continue their inquiries at Gander. Ultimately, Kemp's was more a courtesy letter, intending to explain his officers' anticipated presence at Gander, while welcoming the cooperation of Newfoundland authorities.

On the morning of 22 December, RCMP constables MacDonald and Marel arrived at Gander from Dorval aboard a Ferry Command aircraft and shortly called on RNC Constable Charles Whitten. The RCMP investigators revealed to Whitten that "there was a small piece of cork discovered in the gas line of one of the tanks," and asked that he have

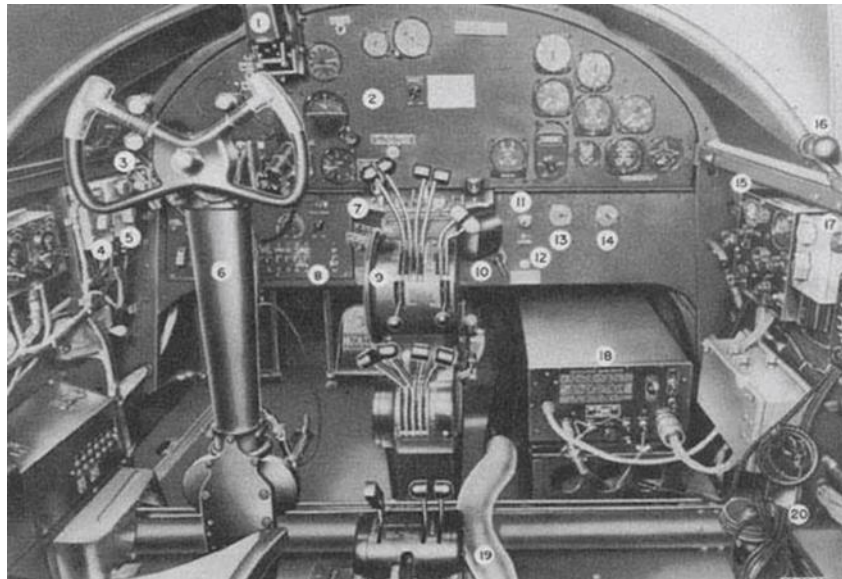
the Shell Oil Company summon the men who refueled the aircraft that day. Whitten contacted Shell manager Ron Hayden and soon two presumably nervous and bewildered young men, Leonard Miller of Trouty, Trinity Bay, and Pearcey Bartlett of Goose Cove near Trinity, arrived at the Gander police detachment. The RCMP questioned the pair inside the magistrate's office in the presence of Whitten and RAF security officer Flight Lieutenant Godson, and concluded that Miller and Bartlett knew nothing about the cork. Indeed, they could remember little about the aircraft in question, having refuelled ten or twelve planes that day. Both RCMP constables left Gander the following morning and what became of their investigation is presently unclear.

However, in conversation with Godson, Whitten discovered that some doubt existed over whether the crew had even used the fuel tank in question coming from Dorval. The pilot said they did and the co-pilot said they did not. Had they not used it, then the cork could have been there before they arrived at Gander. Re-examination of the aircraft by the RCMP was in any event impossible. Gander's ground maintenance section had long since carried out any necessary repairs and KJ680 dispatched overseas two weeks after it had initially landed and five weeks before RCMP investigators arrived.

Postwar, stories of the suspected sabotage circulated around Gander. In an interview published in the *Gander Beacon* in 1977, former Shell employee Cecil Edison told how the Ferry Command "had been losing a lot of B-25's in mid-flight and no one seemed to know why. After the plane had flown for a while, the fuel in the wing tanks would be all used and the captain would then switch to the bomb bay or cabin tanks for the last leg home. This usually occurred in mid-ocean."

Contemporary research into Ferry Command fatal accidents, especially the work of Carl Christie, suggests that the total number of mid-flight B-25 Mitchell losses during overseas ferrying operations was not abnormally high in comparison to other aircraft types. From the start of ferrying operations to the date of the cork incident, roughly eight Mitchells were lost on the North Atlantic route. By war's end, Ferry Command had lost a similar number of Mosquitos and a slightly lesser number of Venturas and Bostons along the same route. Hudson losses ranked among the highest, however, delivery numbers of this aircraft type were also among the highest. Total losses as a percentage of type delivered might bring matters into sharper view.

In any event, on “this particular day,” Edison continued, “Edsel Langdon and Pearce Bartlett had to leave the cabin because the fumes were coming back from the fuel pipe instead of going out the vent pipe and found that a cork plug had been inserted into it. The plane showed no signs of trouble until the auxiliary tanks were switched on then this cork plug would cause a vapor lock and the plane would go down before the crew had time to find out what was wrong.” This story is roughly consistent with what former Gander resident Robert Pelley (<http://bobsganderhistory.com/>) and others recall hearing over the years.



Cockpit of B-25 Mitchell

However, as the RCMP investigation revealed, Bartlett knew nothing of the cork and therefore was unlikely to have been with Langdon during its discovery. Edison also claimed that authorities found the culprit at Dorval responsible for plugging the fuel lines of KJ680 and other aircraft, but this is unconfirmed and likely attributable to common wartime rumour. Facts become scarcer during wartime due to military secrecy and security, so rumour acts as a substitute. Furthermore, just as rumours of sabotage were present at Gander, so too did they circulate elsewhere, yet according to Ferry Command historian Carl Christie, no direct evidence has surfaced to substantiate them.

The B-25 Mitchell was a twin-engine, medium bomber (also modified as a gunship) manufactured by North American Aviation. It carried a crew of six, a three thousand pound bomb load, and depending on the variant, twelve to eighteen .50 caliber machine guns and a 75 mm cannon. Nearly 10,000 were produced and operated during World War Two by the air forces of Canada, Great Britain, Australian, the United States, China, the Soviet Union, France, and the Netherlands. The Mitchell gained notoriety in April 1942 when sixteen of the type took off from the carrier USS *Hornet*, and led by Lieutenant Colonel Jimmy Doolittle, successfully bombed Tokyo and four other Japanese cities. The "J" variant investigated at Gander by the RCMP was one of 316 received by the RAF and known in that service as the Mitchell III. The "J" variant was the last factory series production of the B-25. Mitchell KJ680 survived the war and was struck off the RAF inventory in June 1947.



North American B-25 Mitchell

The writer would appreciate any further information from readers.