

Botwood Seaplane Base

By Darrell Hillier

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Botwood's aeronautical origins can be traced to the early 1920s when Australian aviator, Major F. Sidney Cotton and his Newfoundland associate, Captain Victor Sydney Bennett, used the site as a base for airmail and seal spotting services. As Cotton related to biographer Ralph Barker, Botwood "was sheltered and easy of access, suitable for both summer and winter." Although Cotton's operation lasted only two years, Botwood soon developed a reputation among aviators as a practical refueling point. Among its early visitors were Charles and Anne Lindbergh, who arrived in 1933 as part of a successful west-to-east transatlantic flight.

Botwood's development as a principle seaplane terminal originated from a 1935 agreement between Canada, the United Kingdom, the Irish Free State, and Newfoundland (then a British Dominion). This agreement, which also precipitated construction of Gander airport, called for cooperation in establishing a regular transatlantic mail and passenger service using multi-engine flying boats. In August 1935, Major Ivor McClure and Maurice Banks, officials with the British Department of Civil Aviation, had visited Newfoundland and prepared a report on potential sites. McClure and Banks recommended Botwood as it was considered relatively fog free, and boasted a

large sheltered harbour and favourable ice conditions – important considerations when operating flying boats. Moreover, Botwood was conveniently situated on the great circle route, the shortest geographic air route from eastern North America to Europe.

In 1937, flying boats of Pan-American Airlines and the British carrier Imperial Airways completed a series of experimental overseas flights via Botwood. The success of this experiment confirmed the feasibility of transoceanic aviation and by the end of 1939, scheduled mail and passenger flights were regularly spanning the Atlantic.

During the Second World War (1939–1945), there was no scheduled transatlantic passenger service as such. Instead, airlines such as Pan-American, British Overseas Airways Corporation (formerly Imperial Airways), and American Export Airlines, operated through Botwood under government contract, carrying mail, diplomatic passengers, and senior military personnel. Botwood was also the site of meteorological and communication services; established by Canada in 1936–37, they were transferred to Gander in the winter of 1938–39.

The declaration of war in September 1939 would initiate further change and increased responsibility for Botwood. Canada had by now “publicly proclaimed interest in the defence of Newfoundland.” Consequently, on 15 September 1939, Newfoundland Governor Sir Humphrey Walwyn suggested to the Dominions Secretary in London that they invite the Canadian government “to take over for the duration of the war...Botwood Seaplane Base for the RCAF.” London flatly refused, explaining that in light of Newfoundland’s destined role in transatlantic aviation, relinquishing control of its airports was inadvisable as they “are such an important factor in our bargaining position vis-a-vis Pan-American and [the] United States.” They did not object, however, to the RCAF making use of facilities if Canada so requested.

Protection of aerial facilities at Botwood and Gander became of increasing concern to the Newfoundland government during the summer of 1940. With Governor Walwyn raising alarms over the “defenceless conditions of this country,” Britain allowed Canada to establish a military force for ground protection. Canada acted quickly. Before the end of June, an army detachment of some nine hundred troops of Canada’s Black Watch had arrived at Botwood (via the S.S. *Antonia*) and established battalions at both air bases. Botwood received additional defensive support with the construction in 1941 of coastal batteries at nearby Phillip’s Head and Wiseman’s Cove. Coast Artillery Batteries of the Royal Canadian Artillery manned the sites’ 4.7 and 10-inch guns throughout the war. (An agreement in April 1941 did eventually see the transfer of Newfoundland’s air bases, Gander and Botwood, to Canada for the duration of the war.)

In July 1941, a detachment of Canso aircraft of 116 (Bomber Reconnaissance) Squadron, RCAF, commenced antisubmarine operations at Botwood. Each year, aircraft would arrive in early summer once the ice in the bay had thawed, and depart in November before winter freeze-up. The squadron was permanently withdrawn in June 1944.

Wartime Botwood had its share of visiting dignitaries; on at least two occasions Prime Minister Winston Churchill arrived by flying boat. A visit in May 1943, described in the

RCAF station diary, stated that Churchill delighted everyone by signing their dollar bills and making "a short but eloquent speech to all the assembled guests." Other Botwood visitors included Vice Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, General Sir Allen Brooks, Lord Beaverbrook, Australia's Prime Minister Curtin, New Zealand's General Freyberg, and actors/entertainers Lieutenant Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Gracie Fields, Edgar Bergen and "Charlie McCarthy," Edward G. Robinson, Francis Langford, Tony Romano, Jack Pepper, and Bob Hope.

With the onset winter and the hazards it created on the North Atlantic route, commercial services at Botwood ceased temporarily each fall. The extent of aerial activity is evidenced in an RCAF recapitulation report for October 1944, indicating a season total 924 arrivals. By war's end in 1945, air force deactivation at Botwood was complete and the station occupied primarily by maintenance and security personnel. Later that year, commercial operations were discontinued and land-plane services established through Gander.