

From War to Peace: Gander's Postwar Transition

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In April 1941, the Newfoundland Commission of Government relinquished control of Gander airfield to the RCAF, agreeing to lease to the Canadian Government the lands occupied by hangars, works and buildings constructed at Canada's expense, for a period of fifty years. Interestingly, the Canadians were unable to take full and immediate control at the date of signing on 17 April, so the existing civilian organization continued to provide certain services. As per the agreement, the date of transfer remained a matter for future discussion. Ultimately, and retroactively, the Canadians set 17 April as the date, and further agreed to make any financial adjustments to the Newfoundland government for services rendered by its civilian staff to 30 June. The RCAF assumed payments of staff beginning 1 July.

The transfer agreement likewise held that Canada return control to Newfoundland on the termination of hostilities, with the understanding that Gander would be operated as a civil airport as originally intended. The postwar transfer did not happen immediately however, and eventually required some negotiations between the two governments (and the United Kingdom), and some help from the RCAF during the transitional period.

Several months before the 1941 transfer, the U.S. War Department, anxious to establish an air garrison in Newfoundland, put forward the idea of a lease of land adjacent the airport, and an alternative of having Canada provide the facilities on an informal basis. The Canadian government, then in discussions with Newfoundland to assume control and not wishing "to have any permanent U.S. establishment at or near the airport," stated national defence minister C.G. Power, rejected the lease proposal. They preferred instead the alternative, and further agreed to incur the cost of erecting additional buildings for the Americans. This made for a unique arrangement, with U.S. forces

occupying Gander essentially as guests of the Canadians. The United Kingdom, on the other hand, was less restricted in its operations at Gander as the 1941 agreement allowed the Atlantic Ferry Organization of the British Ministry of Aircraft Production (later reorganized as RAF Ferry Command) to provide itself with “such buildings and other facilities as the Newfoundland and Canadian Governments may agree to be reasonably required.”

At war’s end in 1945, the U.S. phased out its Gander operations, reducing personnel strength and sending equipment and surplus supplies to Fort Pepperrell and Harmon Field in Stephenville. This gradual process saw infrastructure in the American sector returned to Canada on a piecemeal basis.

In November 1945, the St. John’s *Daily News* reported that, “statements [were] heard that the Newfoundland government had taken over Gander airport.” This was incorrect, explained the Honourable James S. Neil, Newfoundland Commissioner for Public Utilities, as the matter was “still in a state of flux,” and depended on the international situation regarding aviation. With the military withdrawing from Gander, explained Neil, “someone had to look after things,” so Newfoundland appointed Eric Winsor as business manager and R.A. Bradley as chief engineer, while Squadron Leader H.A.L. Pattison continued as Director of Civil Aviation. These appointments may have stimulated rumours that Newfoundland had taken control of the airport.

Gander’s wartime occupation “had produced a very complicated setup owing to the combined presence” of the RCAF, RAF Ferry Command, and U.S. forces, added commissioner Neil. Indeed, a caveat in the 1941 agreement threatened to further complicate matters for Newfoundland as the signatory governments had agreed to consult beforehand on Canada’s continued postwar use of the airfield. This concerned Pattison because if Canada insisted on leasing all the areas entitled them under the agreement there would be insufficient space for civil air operations. Such matters would shortly be addressed at a conference in St. John’s on the disposition of Canadian defence installations in Newfoundland.

From 29 January to 6 February 1946, conference delegates from Newfoundland, Canada and the United Kingdom, gathered to discuss a myriad of issues, among them Gander airfield and the RAF area at Gander. The conference concluded with Canada agreeing to re-

transfer control of the airport to Newfoundland on 31 March 1946. To maintain continuous operation of the airfield, RCAF personnel would be withdrawn progressively from that date to 31 May. Canada also agreed to forego its right to the fifty-year lease and to sell to Newfoundland its buildings, hangars, works, and certain equipment and supplies for the bargain sum of one million dollars. The hangars and buildings were of no “particular use to Canada,” admitted the Canadian delegation, which also recognized that any insistence on a long-term lease “would certainly create a good deal of antagonism in Newfoundland, whose people strongly resent the idea of granting” such leases to other countries. The British delegation announced at the conference that their government would transfer its hangars and buildings “without consideration.” This decision, claimed the Canadian delegation, also influenced the low price set by the Canadian Government. However, as historian Peter Neary points out, the United Kingdom subsequently sold its buildings and assets to Newfoundland for \$200,000.

By agreement then, Canada returned Gander to Newfoundland on 31 March 1946. RCAF Station Gander “has at last come to an end,” recorded the last entry in the station’s daily diary. The padres held their last services in the station chapel and the final Ensign lowering took place in the presence of Group Captain F.J. Ewart, station commanding officer, and a flight of airmen. As agreed, a small contingent of RCAF personnel stayed until 31 May to assist with the transition. At Gander control tower, for example, several RCAF flying officers stayed behind. The tower logs for May records the arrival of civilian controllers, working alongside their RCAF counterparts. During June, the tower became fully civilianized and in the capable hands of Robert Raymond, Robert Banfield, Rex Tilley, Maxwell Butler, Herbert Chafe, Clement Elms, and others who would shortly follow.

Gander again rested in Newfoundland’s hands. Whether or not it could afford to maintain it was another matter. In any event, Gander quickly found itself at the fore of civil aviation as commercial airlines began routing traffic across the Atlantic in the immediate postwar months. With planeloads of air travellers arriving weekly, what the airport needed sooner than later was proper aircrew and passenger accommodations and an airline terminal, but that’s another story...