

Gander's First Postwar Airport Manager

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With the end of the Second World War, commercial airlines began scheduled transatlantic operations through Gander. The airfield had been under RCAF control since 1941, but at midnight on 31 March 1946, Newfoundland re-established control of all sectors of the field - American, Canadian, and RAF. Newfoundland now faced a burgeoning postwar market for transatlantic air travel that called for improved and expanded facilities. In September of that year, a terminal (former hangar) and hotel complex (former barracks) for in-transit guests of the operating airlines opened on the former RAF side of the field, cost-shared between three European and four American carriers, Trans-Canada Air Lines, and Newfoundland.

Concurrent with terminal and hotel construction and reconditioning, the Newfoundland government was actively seeking an airport manager. To date, and ever since October 1945, Newfoundlander Eric Winsor had been handling certain managerial duties, but under the occupational title "Business Manager." When Winsor first arrived, the RCAF still controlled the airfield, but with the military withdrawing progressively, explained the Honourable James S. Neill, Newfoundland Commissioner for Public Utilities, "someone had to look after things," so government hired Winsor and appointed Robert A. Bradley as chief engineer. Both men had experience working at Gander, Bradley as assistant engineer in the early days of construction, and Winsor as office manager with the Atlas Construction Company. While some of Winsor's duties paralleled that of an airport manager, he was hired mostly for his business acumen, as there were important administrative matters to address. More specifically, reported government, the financial arrangements surrounding the return of airport control to Newfoundland, management of staff, a possible housing scheme, and business relations with the operating airlines.

Newfoundland, it turns out, reached out to the British Air Ministry for a suitable candidate for airport manager. In July 1946, the ministry came back with two names, Wing Commander G.D. Middleton and Group Captain A.H. Owen. Both had expressed a willingness to accept the appointment for two years as proposed by the Newfoundland government. Owen was then commanding officer at RAF Station, Uxbridge, Middlesex, and Middleton second airport manager at London airport. After some deliberation between commissioner Neill and Newfoundland civil aviation director H.A.L. Pattison, they selected forty-two-year-old Wing Commander Middleton for the job.

Middleton's prep school years took him to England, France, and Switzerland. From 1919 to 1923, he served in the merchant service, and during 1924-25 qualified as a land and seaplane pilot in the RAF. He next served for several years in Malta as a seaplane pilot.

Following Malta, he became a flight commander at a flight training school in the UK and then relinquished his commission to accept an appointment as chief seaplane instructor with a private outfit. His duties included initiation courses for conversion of Imperial Airways pilots to flying boats. In 1939, he accepted a post as manager of Ipswich airport where he oversaw a flight training and observer school, the Aero Club, the local civil air guard, and a restaurant and workshops. With the outbreak of war, he returned to uniform as squadron commander of an advanced training squadron, and then chief ground instructor for an operational training unit. From 1942 until war's end, Middleton served with the Air Ministry in the Directorate of Operational Training. Early in 1946, following a successful selection board interview, he completed some initial training and was assigned to London airport. Several months later, he was bound for Gander as its first official postwar airport manager.