

Gander's Dogs of War

By Darrell Hillier

2021-11-17

<http://crossroadsoftheworld.ca/>

Military forces utilized dogs in various ways during the Second World War. Perhaps the most common function of “man’s best friend” was in sentry or guard duty and as sled dogs, primarily for search and rescue or to transport equipment and wounded soldiers.

So how did Gander utilize our canine friends during wartime?

Search and rescue at Gander throughout much of the war was often a cooperative affair using available Canadian, British, and American resources in both manpower and aircraft. However, early in 1944, American forces began efforts to establish a permanent ground search and rescue unit, with a nucleus of about one hundred enlisted men, ten non-commissioned officers, and one officer in charge. The enlisted men trained for these secondary duties in small groups, one week at a time, learning special rescue instructions and carrying out overnight marches and bivouacs in mid-winter. In the event of a downed aircraft, the Americans Gander-based UC-64 Norseman, Beechcraft AT-11 Kansan, or Piper L-4 Grasshopper, ski- or float-equipped depending on the circumstances, would land the rescue party as close as possible. The ground party would then proceed overland on foot, maintaining radio contact with the drop aircraft, which guided them to their target. Sled dogs provided the most practical means of wintertime transportation in the Newfoundland wilderness, but the unit would have to wait almost a year after its formation to be so equipped.

The idea of using war dogs at Gander on defence duties (ie., guard or sentry duty) came under review by American forces when US Army dog trainer Lieutenant Benno Stein arrived on tour in September 1944. Dog training was somewhat of a Stein family tradition. Ironically, as Stein went about his dog business with the US Army, his nephew was doing likewise for the German equivalent, the Wehrmacht. In any event, Stein’s assessment at Gander showed that the nearest settlement was some twenty miles away with no proper connecting roads from the airfield to this or any other settlement. Moreover, the wooded and boggy terrain made it difficult for an enemy raiding party to approach the field overland from the outside. Access to the field was limited to plane or railway, both carefully controlled, he assured. Ultimately, Stein’s review was specific to defence considerations, not search and rescue, and his observations led him to recommend against sending canines to Gander for base protection. Nevertheless, Gander would shortly have its war dogs.

In December 1944, the US contingent at Gander welcomed two full teams of huskies, eighteen dogs in all, in charge of sled driver Staff Sergeant David W. Armstrong. An experienced dogman, Armstrong arrived at Gander with several commendations, including one for his work delivering radio equipment for the US Army Signal Corp to remote parts of Newfoundland under severe weather conditions. At Gander, he found that the earlier created ground search and rescue unit now amounted to four men with other jobs, headquartered in nothing more than a storage closet. It was his job to get the unit back in working order. For living arrangements for himself and second dogman, Corporal Lawrence Morrie, Armstrong secured a vacant building northwest of the airfield at the wireless radio receiving site. At the same site, Captain Jackson Zook, US base engineering officer, had kennels built for each husky. Zook's main complaint during visits was that the dogs were never inside the structures, but always on top!



A sled dog perched atop its kennel at Gander's wireless radio receiving site, January 1945. Maxwell AFB Historical Research Agency.

During January 1945, Armstrong took the teams out daily on training runs, "to ensure peak conditioning for any exploits which the exigencies of February might call upon them to perform," wrote Gander's US base unit historian. Then, in the midst of January's training, Armstrong received word by cable that he, Morrie, and their dogs would be sent overseas. Their impending departure was linked to the German Ardennes offensive that began in December 1944, later known as the Battle of the Bulge. The plan, devised by Lieutenant Colonel Norman Vaughan, Arctic search and rescue specialist, and approved by Washington, called for the use of sled dogs to evacuate the wounded.

Armstrong and Morrie "were quite hopped up" at the prospects of going overseas and working with Lieutenant Colonel Vaughan, Captain Willie Knutson, and "other famous men in dog sledge circles," says the unit historian. On 1 February 1945, as per their orders, Armstrong and Morrie, along with their eighteen dogs, sporting such names as Byrd, Perry, Windy, Saucey, Silver, and Whitey, boarded a C-47 transport for Harmon Field, the US air base at Stephenville in western Newfoundland. At Harmon, the dogs, freight sleds, and toboggans were loaded aboard four-engine C-54 transports and flown to Orly Field in Paris, France. To their dismay, Armstrong and Morrie received last minute orders to return to Gander. Only their dogs went overseas.

Armstrong and Morrie were now dog men without dogs, having only empty kennels to watch over. Their conundrum, and a recent spate of poor weather, gave cause for a lighter moment when the post historian quipped about “the rescue dogs going to the front, and the weather front going to the dogs.” The seriousness of this canine absence became evident when an American B-24 Liberator carrying a crew of ten, disappeared near the field in mid-February. With no dog teams to utilize, Armstrong and Morrie searched on snowshoes and with two M7 halftrack snow tractors, their front axles affixed with skis. Still, the absence of dog teams complicated ground search efforts. The situation required immediate attention. Two dog teams were flown in, one from Presque Isle, Maine, and the other the remaining team at Harmon Field, which had sent three teams overseas under Colonel Vaughan’s plan. The search continued, but without success.



Gander’s two original sled dog teams, January 1945. Staff Sergeant David Armstrong on the far right. Corporal Lawrence Morrie second from left on the sled. North Atlantic Aviation Museum.

Then, in mid-March, word came that a trapper had located the missing B-24 northeast of the airfield. The loaner sled dogs were back in action, along with an eleven-man ground party and M7 tractor pulling an M19 trailer. For the remainder of March, Armstrong, Morrie, and their dogs assisted with the recovery of the deceased crew, helping return their remains to Gander for burial. About this time too, the original two dog teams, having completed their work in Europe, returned to Gander and reunited with their dog men. Fortunately, there were no further serious accidents at the airfield that winter requiring the use of sled dogs.

By September 1945, with the war in Europe and the Pacific ended, the US began winding down operations at Gander, reducing personnel strength and sending equipment, vehicles, and surplus supplies to Harmon Field and Fort Pepperrell near St. John's. Included in this relocation effort was Gander's search and rescue unit. In November, says Armstrong, "we were ordered to close down our operation" and then cleared to take the dogs and equipment and join the search and rescue unit at Harmon Field. Thus ended Gander's wartime sled dog search and rescue operation.

Note: David Armstrong retired as administrator of the Montana Veterans Affairs Division in December of 1982 and co-founded the Montana 500 Sled Dog Race. He passed away on 6 April 2021 at age 100. His obituary is posted at:

<https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/helenair/name/david-armstrong-obituary?id=6755659>



David Armstrong. Photo posted at:
<https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/helenair/name/david-armstrong-obituary?id=6755659>