

American Overseas Airlines in Gander

(by Robert G Pelley 2021-05-01)
bobsganderhistory.com

As far as aviation history is concerned, American Overseas Airlines was not a bright star among the major airlines such as Air France, Pan American or Lufthansa. It did however, because its short life during a critical time in aviation, exemplify the constant turmoil and jockeying for position during the beginnings of North Atlantic commercial flying.

The roots of AOA went back to Export Steamship Corporation which started in 1919 and in the 1920s added American to its name. In 1931 they ordered four liners known as the "Four Aces" (Excalibur, Excambion, Exeter and Exochorda).

In 1937, the corporation started a subsidiary called "American Export Airlines". Of course there was no Gander Airport at that time, so the focus was flying boats. Transatlantic surveys were made with a PBY-4 flying boat, resulting in the purchase of three Vought-Sikorsky VS-44 flying boats, called the "Flying Aces" in honour of the earlier steamships.

In the same year AEA applied to the US Civil Aeronautics Board for routes to Europe. Despite protests by Pan American, President gave them a 7-year permission to fly New York-Lisbon and later New York-Foynes (Ireland). These flying boat services ended in 1944 when AEA start working with the US Air Transport Command, flying C-54 Skymasters (DC-4) to North Africa.

AEA was quickly building up its theoretical and practical experience of flying over the Atlantic. At the end of the war in 1945, it was awarded transatlantic routes to Europe and ties were cut with the shipping company.

Parallel to this activity, another company was trying to break the Pan American virtual strangle hold on US-Europe commercial flying. American Airlines, a continental US carrier, acquired AEA on 05 July 1945 and operated a flying boat route La Guardia-Botwood-Shannon.

TRANSATLANTIC AIR SERVICE
1945 Summer Schedule
U. S. A.—Newfoundland—Eire—England and connections beyond
Service operated with The Famous Four-Engine "Flying Aces"

MILES	GREENWICH TIME	LOCAL TIME	*3 ROUND TRIPS WEEKLY	LOCAL TIME	GREENWICH TIME	MILES
0000	1200	8:00 A. M.	Dep. NEW YORK, N. Y., LaGuardia Field (Marine Terminal)	2:45 P. M.	1845	3502
1111	1915	4:45 P. M.	Arr. } BOTWOOD, NEWFOUNDLAND	9:00 A. M.	1130	2391
	2100	6:30 P. M.	Dep. }	7:15 A. M.	0945	
3112	0830	9:30 A. M.	Arr. FOYNES, EIRE (Shannon Airport)	8:00 P. M.	1900	0390
3502	Direct Connection by British Overseas Airways. Flight Time 2½ hours.		FOYNES, EIRE LONDON, ENGLAND (Airways House)	Direct Connection by British Overseas Airways. Flight Time 2½ hours.		0390 0000

CONNECTIONS TO CONTINENTAL EUROPE, SCANDINAVIAN COUNTRIES AND MEDITERRANEAN AREA UPON APPLICATION

The American Export name therefore became "American Overseas Airlines" and converted to six C-54s (DC-4). AOA started its flights on 24 October 1946, with the DC-4 flagship "New England" on the route NY-London, via Boston, Gander and Shannon.





These unpressurised DC-4s were replaced quickly by Constellations (June 1946). They were later largely replaced by Boeing Stratocruisers.



By 1948 AOA was flying through Gander to Keflavik, Prestwick, Amsterdam, Berlin, Frankfurt, and the four Scandinavian capitals (Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm and Helsinki)

FOR INFORMATION — RESERVATIONS CALL

TRANSATLANTIC OFFICES

CITY	RESERVATIONS TELEPHONE	TICKET OFFICES
Amsterdam, Holland	..... 34760	Leidseplein 29, Hirsch Bldg.
Berlin, Germany	Berlin..... 66-8214	Tempelhof Airdrome
Copenhagen, Denmark	Palae..... 5982	Dagmarhus, Vestre Boulevard 12...
Dublin, Ireland	..... 79011	35 Westmoreland Street.
Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany	Frankfurt..... 33291	Hotel Carlton
Gander, Newfoundl'd.	..... 319	Newfoundland Airport Terminal ...
Glasgow, Scotland	Prestwick..... 78496	Prestwick Airport
Helsinki, Finland	..... 61491	North Esplanade No. 2
London, England	REgent..... 8414	180 Regent Street, W. 1
Oslo, Norway	..... 416542	Stortingsgaten 12
Paris, France	Opera..... 9660	10 rue Auber
Reykjavik, Iceland	..... 1644	Hafnarstraeti 19
Shannon, Ireland	Shannon..... 29	Shannon Airport
Stockholm, Sweden	..... 233585	Jakobstorg 1

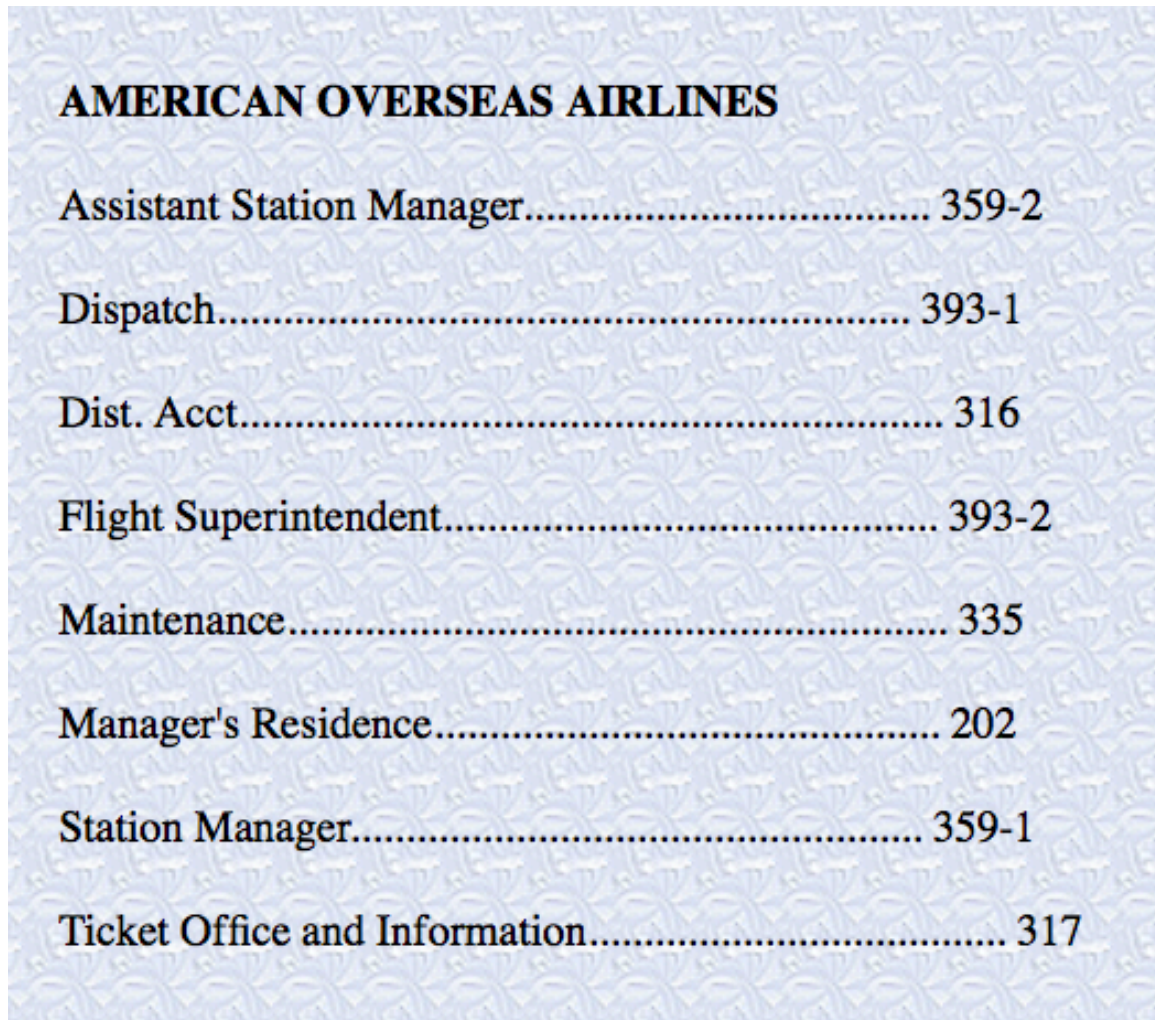
Offices and phone numbers 1948
(Gander # 219)

The battle for the transatlantic flights was certainly not over and Juan Trippe, the head of Pan American, was not the sort of chap to give up easily. Pan Am tried to acquire AOA after five years of transatlantic flying but did not get approval from the Civil Aeronautics Board. However, President Truman overturned the decision and AOA was merged with Pan Am on September 1950. American Overseas Airlines existed therefore for only five years.

There were no AEA or AOA accidents in Gander as such. However, on 03 October 1942, the AEA flying boat Excaliber crashed on take-off in Botwood when it stalled because of the landing flaps being inadvertently opened. Five of eleven crew and six of twenty-six passengers died.

An AOA DC-4 crashed elsewhere when Gander was fogged in. On 03 October 1946, four years to the day after the Botwood crash, an AOA DC-4 en route from Stephenville to Shannon crashed slightly over seven miles off the end of the runway. The cause was not determined, other than "the action of the pilot in maintaining the direction of take-off toward higher terrain over which inadequate clearance could be gained." There were no survivors among eight crew and 31 passengers.

Given that AOA as such did not have a long life, there is little information on its offices and personnel in Gander. The following list from the 1949 phone does however give a general idea of its set up.



AMERICAN OVERSEAS AIRLINES

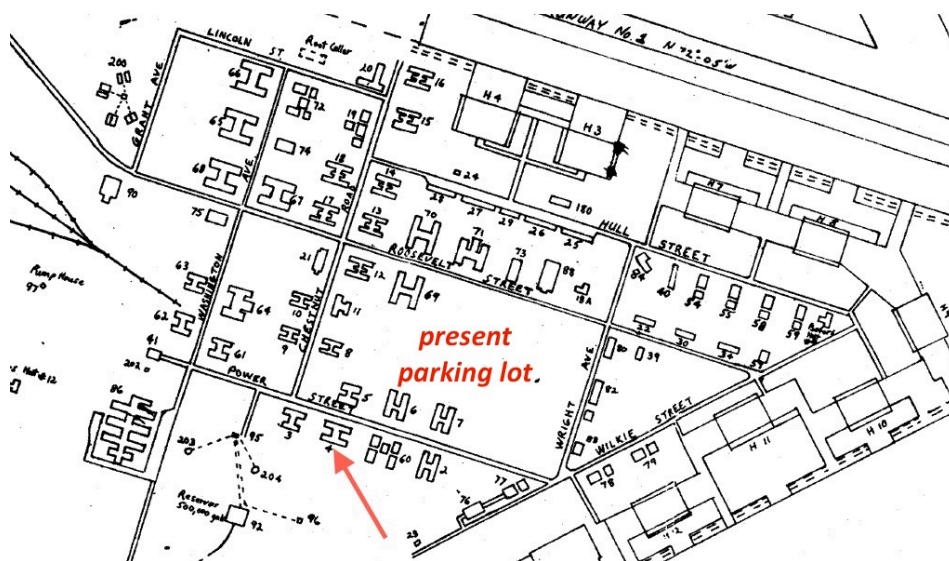
Assistant Station Manager.....	359-2
Dispatch.....	393-1
Dist. Acct.....	316
Flight Superintendent.....	393-2
Maintenance.....	335
Manager's Residence.....	202
Station Manager.....	359-1
Ticket Office and Information.....	317

The photo below is one of the rare photos seen of AOA in Gander. "AOA" as such is not shown on the stairs probably as quite often their transatlantic traffic was referred to in documents as "American Airlines Transatlantic Service."

The person on the right is Mr Ray Carter: info on the other person would be appreciated if available.



In the earliest part of post-war Gander, AEA employees and families lived in building 4 on Power Street, which today would be close to and across the street from the exit of the present terminal parking.



Unfortunately this building burned to the ground in April 1946, with the loss of one life.



The occupants were temporarily sent to other buildings. However the post-war period saw a lot of movement of personnel, notably with transfer of airlines' maintenance staff to Allied Aviation and the introduction by Pan Am of Ground Control Approach. In as far as possible, by the early 1950s, all Pan Am related personnel were accommodated in buildings 17 and 18 Chestnut Road on the "American side", near what is now the present terminal.

The history of AOA was a mirror of the great changes not only in Gander, but of the airline industry itself.

Main references:

- building photos from the collection of the late Hazel Fausak, via the Museum of the North Atlantic
- Wikipedia
- Pure History website (purehistory.org)
- Ulrig Timetable images (<http://www.timetableimages.com/index.htm>)
- Gander pamphlet early 50s by the Atlantic Guardian
- personal collection of photos and files