

Alaskan aircraft in Gander, Newfoundland - how to get things wrong!

Sometime ago I got a postcard that made me curious. It is a sepia type, which generally would make it 1940s. It was made by the well-known "Photogelatine Engraving Company" in Toronto. The caption on this postcard says "Alaskan aircraft in Gander, Newfoundland".



However, the background, the ladder and the type of fuel truck did not seem to correspond to activities in Gander. From an online research based on the national aircraft code ZS-BWX, this airplane was identified as anything but Alaskan. In fact, it is of South African registration. It belonged to Mercury Air Services and as far as can be seen, was used only on runs from South Africa to Europe, in particular to Paris.

From Gander to Johannesburg, South Africa, the distance is 11580 kms and from Gander to Juneau, Alaska, it is 5083 kms, so the caption on the postcard is off "only" 16700 kms or so. Goes to show that when doing historical research, nothing should be taken for granted.

To complete the story of ZS-BWX, on 20 November 1948, this DC-3 was diverted from Paris-Le Bourget Airport to Orly Airport. On approach to Orly, the aircraft struck electric cables and crashed, damaged beyond repair, luckily with no fatalities.

So why would someone confuse a plane from Alaska with a plane from South Africa?

There might be a possible reason – during the 1948 airlift when the Soviets blocked access to Berlin, the “real” Alaska Airlines flew charter flights, bringing mainly food for the beleaguered citizens of the city. To get to Europe, their DC-3s did in fact go through Gander.



A careful look at the original photo and the photo above will show that these DC-3s have a slightly similar name. The South African plane is a “Skyliner” while this Alaskan Airlines plane is a “Starliner”. Given the activity in Europe in 1948 of two airplanes of a similar type with similar sounding name, it might be possible - in those days before Internet research – that someone unfamiliar with aviation industry simply confused the identity of the two airplanes.