

## Bennett Drive in the Town of Gander

(by Robert G Pelley and Ian Cambell,  
curator of the Don Bennett Archive at the Queensland Air Museum.  
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I have been asked on a number of occasions about Bennett Drive, especially as my father was a good friend of a fellow from Gander by the name of Bill Bennett since the early postwar days. People knowing anything about old Gander as it was constructed during the war, up to the late 1950s, will relate to the musings below.

I remember them as a 8 or 9 year old as they took down an H-style Quonset building on the far end of the road to Deadmans Pond. One wing was piled up with magazines like Popular Science, Life, Time and Outdoor Life, a window on a wondrous world outside Gander, an education that Hunt Memorial Academy could never beat.

I also remember being taken along when my mother and father, Mamie and Calvin Pelley, went to spend the evening at Mary and Bill Bennett's apartment in Building 16 (TCA) on the American Side, just where Chestnut Road met the east-west runway. The Bennett's had a great Hi-Fi set with 33-rpm records from the 1940s and very early 50s. They were my lullabies as I slept on the living room couch, a "music appreciation" lesson of a rare quality.

I can also remember them down at the dump across the road from the famous "burner", as they struggled to get the hydraulic lift off an-old truck that had been discarded there. Together they got 50\$ from either Marshall Motors or Hickman Motors in St John's.

This Bill Bennett became a businessman and a bush pilot. As a businessman, he had a garage and car dealership, but he really made his mark when he combined his flying skills and his business acumen. He had four hunting and fishing lodges, of which three were located in Labrador. The stories that could be told!

If Bill Bennett influenced other people as he unknowingly influenced me, he certainly merits a street name.

But alas, Bennett Drive was not named after him.

It was named after an Australian chap who did his own magic in Gander and other places that affected the future of Gander and did so long before Bill Bennett himself dreamt of flying. His made was Don Clifford Tyndall Bennett and who could be better at telling his story than a fellow Aussie. The following history is provided by Ian Campbell, none other than the curator of the Don Bennett Archive at the Queensland Air Museum.

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**Article by Ian Campbell**

*Carl Christie, the author of Ocean Bridge, the most comprehensive history of the Atlantic Ferry organisation, concluded: 'There is no doubt that Bennett was the single most important individual in launching the transatlantic ferry service.'*

*Christie was referring to Don Bennett or, as he would later become, Air Vice-Marshal D.C.T. Bennett DSO CB CBE FRAeS. For some who only know him as the Air Officer Commanding, Pathfinder Force, Bomber Command, it can come as a surprise that he was already famous for his many exploits before Arthur Harris appointed him to that role in the middle of 1942.*

*Don was a Queenslander, born in 1910, the youngest of four boys. All were exceptionally bright and family expectations were high for them all to have professional careers. In his early years, Don developed a love of mechanics, preferring to work on his father's car than do schoolwork. At end of school in 1927, he decided on a career in aviation, which was met with some initial resistance from his parents. They saw it as highly risky and, besides, family expectations was that he would become a doctor.*

*Any hopes of dissuading their youngest were dashed as Don witnessed first-hand a series of pioneer aviators arrive in Brisbane on record-breaking flights: Bert Hinkler in February 1928, Charles Kingsford Smith and Charles Ulm in June 1928, and then Amy Johnson in May 1930. He also got involved in restoring an aircraft, so his love of mechanics took to the skies.*

*He was accepted into the RAAF in 1930 where he got his wings. Due to the Depression, he accepted a posting with the RAF in England, first as a fighter boy and then piloting flying boats. He developed a reputation for navigation, which was still in its infancy, especially for long distance travel by air.*

*Finding the pace of change in the RAF too slow, he set out a path for entering civil aviation. First stop, in 1934, was the First Class Navigator's Licence. Not many aviators had it and the exams were very demanding. He passed, enabling him to enter the famous Centenary Air Race from Mildenhall in England to Melbourne in October 1934 as a navigator with Jimmy Woods, but the aircraft was underprepared and crashed in Aleppo in Syria.*

*In 1935, Don indulged his love of mechanics by getting the A, C and X Ground Engineer's Licences and then, for good measure, the W/T Air Operator's Licence. On leaving the RAF in August 1935, Don got married, had a honeymoon, wrote a textbook on navigation (the Complete Air Navigator), then became a pilot with Imperial Airways in 1936. He mostly flew flying boats – the S.8 Calcutta, S.17 Kent and the iconic S.23 Empire. In the Empire, he was the first to fly from Imperial's hub at Alexandria to England in a day, creating headlines.*

Where he became a household name was as the pilot of Mercury, the seaplane that was the top half of the Mayo Composite. In the course of 1938, he set many records, including the first non-stop commercial flight across the Atlantic from Foynes, Ireland, to Boucherville, Montreal. In October that year, he and his co-pilot, Ian Harvey, set the long-distance seaplane record flying Mercury non-stop from Dundee in Scotland to Orange River in South Africa, a flight lasting over 42 hours.

The arrival of the S.30 Empires (upgraded S.23s) meant Imperial Airways could finally realise its dream of establishing a passenger service across the Atlantic. Don was involved in testing and demonstrating S.30 in-flight refuelling, culminating in him piloting one of the first two S.30s across the Atlantic to Montreal and ultimately New York in August 1939.

Imperial Airways became BOAC in April 1940 and joined in the war effort. Don was called upon to fly an S.30 to France in June 1940, days before it fell to the Germans, on a high risk mission to rescue General Sikorski's Polish General Staff.

Shortly afterwards he was summonsed by Lord Beaverbrook, head of the Ministry of Aircraft Production. Beaverbrook had done a deal with a friend, Sir Edward Beatty, of Canadian Pacific Railways (CPR), to establish a system for ferrying American aircraft across the North Atlantic. The initial team comprised key members of Imperial Airways' Atlantic Division, who had done the pioneering work in the Empire flying boats.

By early August 1940, the kernel of what was to become the Atlantic Ferry Organisation (ATFERO), and later RAF Ferry Command, was up and running as CPR's Air Services Department. Don's role was Flying Superintendent. His job was to check out the American aircraft, prepare them for flying the Atlantic (working with Joe Gilmore, see article no 36 about him on this website), supervise the selection and training of the crews, and lead the first flight.

Conventional wisdom was that flying in the chosen aircraft (Hudsons in the first instance), with untried crews, through the renowned weather systems of the North Atlantic, approaching winter, was suicidal. But the aircraft were desperately needed for the war effort in Britain and Don felt that he could mitigate the risks sufficiently to make a go of it.

His engineering expertise was crucial in the selection and modification of the Hudson IIIs. Joe Gilmore had worked with Don during his Imperial days, so they combined to ensure the Hudsons, as they arrived from Lockheed's Burbank plant, were worked on and tested at St Hubert's airport, Montreal.

Recruiting civilian aircrew in North America was difficult and Don set high standards, as was his custom. Each Hudson would be flying without a dedicated navigator, which meant Don had to oversee a barely-adequate training program.

Having flown the North Atlantic on several occasions, Don was well aware of the vagaries of the weather. He worked very closely with Dr Patrick McTaggart-Cowan, the Chief Meteorological Officer, in formulating plans for the first flight. McTaggart-Cowan was based at Gander, along with Griffith 'Taffy' Powell, who was charged with preparing Gander to be

*the launch point for the new venture. Powell had also been a pilot at Imperial Airways. Now a squadron leader with the RCAF, he was on secondment.*

*The late delivery of the Hudson IIIs from the Lockheed plant meant the first flight was delayed until early November. No aircraft had ever attempted the North Atlantic at that time of the year.*

*The aircraft started arriving at Gander from 29 October. Don was the last to arrive from Montreal on 9 November, discovering the upper surfaces of the six Hudsons already there were covered with ice he estimated to be half an inch thick. They set about chipping it off, delaying take-off until the evening of the 10th.*

*Don's planning had been meticulous, including producing a detailed flight plan for each crew and tailored to their aircraft. The plan was for the aircraft to fly in a vee formation with Don in the lead but, realistically, a flight of 1900 miles over ocean, at night, in weather forecast to deteriorate, would likely see them on their own. Don would broadcast his position periodically until 20 degrees West when radio silence would be maintained by all so as not to attract the attention of the Germans.*

*The flight across the North Atlantic was a complete success, despite issues with both crews and Hudsons. Within weeks, the next two flights, also led by former Imperial pilots, were similarly one hundred per cent successful. Some had judged that the venture was worth pursuing if only half the aircraft arrived in Britain. After three flights, 21 Hudsons were in Britain and the Atlantic Ferry was underway.*

*Don left what became RAF Ferry Command in August 1941 to take up positions, including operational commands, back in the RAF. After his inaugural flight, the Ferry organisation would go on to deliver over 10,000 aircraft of 17 different types from North America to Britain during the war.*

*Why was Don considered to be the most important figure in the whole enterprise? It was because the prevailing mindset was that it could not, indeed should not, be done. Don's long aviation experience, qualifications and expertise in all areas (piloting, navigating, engineering, wireless, meteorological), his planning abilities, and a lead-from-the-front approach put that mindset to rest.*

*Don Bennett was a pioneer aviator. Almost by definition they were a breed who took risks in order to see aviation expand. That said, there was nothing cavalier about Don's approach to any adventure that saw the boundaries pushed back. He lived (probably literally) on the back of his ability to understand the risks and plan to overcome them, at least to the extent that was humanly possible. And like all pioneer aviators, he did gain a degree of personal satisfaction by proving the naysayers wrong.*

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**Selected photos below**



Donald CT Bennett



Lord Beaverbrook and Don Bennett



Mercury seaplane on the back of the Mai



AVM Bennett speaking to aircrew in England

