

# Bombers Across

(Adapted by RG Pelley 2016/08/09)

It is well known to those who have even a smidgeon of knowledge about Gander's history that modern trans-Atlantic air traffic started with the daring flight of seven small Hudson bombers in the late hours of 10 November 1940. Less is commonly known about the training required, the qualities necessary and what it was like to fly into Gander – and then head off eastward again.

Capt Edgar J Wynn wrote the story below. This article was originally published in the February 1942, issue of *Flying and Popular Aviation* magazine, vol 30, no 2, pp 14-17, 96, 98. (Some parts of the article not essential to a good understanding of activities related to Gander have been removed.)

## **Flight over the Atlantic, daring feat of yesterday, becomes routine as hundreds of military landplanes make the 2,200-mile hop to aid RAF.**

After serving in the RCAF for more than a year Captain Wynn, an American pilot, resigned his commission a few months ago (NDLR late 1941). Previous to that time he was in charge of training every American who joined "The Canadian Atlantic Ferry Command (sic)". Following his tour of duty, he made several trips across as a pilot of US-built Britain-bound bombers. One of these journeys he describes in detail in this article.

Every day we read in the newspapers of the exploits of some fighter or bomber pilot over Germany or England. We thrill to the picture of some young sergeant-pilot being presented with the DFC.

But another equally important — and dangerous — job is being performed every day, a job that is less spectacular than that of the

fighter pilot and about which the general public knows little or nothing. That job is ferrying American-made bombers across the North Atlantic to Great Britain.

Not long ago a flight across the Atlantic called for a parade, a shower of ticker tape and the key to the city. For more than a year now, a small band of pilots has been winging its way back and forth over 2,200 miles of ocean, through all kinds of weather, depending upon their own skill and initiative. They are flying landplanes never intended to fly across entire oceans. But they are getting them there without a hitch.

These men are unknown to the public. Who are they? Why are they doing this job? What are their thoughts on those long sleepless nights, high above mid ocean? Do they fly alone or with a crew? For the first time, war censorship has been lifted to allow these and many other questions to be answered. The pilots and crews themselves are pledged to secrecy.

Heading the Royal Air Force Ferry Command (the present title of the organization) is a veteran Royal Air Force pilot, Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Bowhill. A veteran of thousands of hours of service flying, including command of a coastal patrol unit in the present war, he has the respect of every man in the organization.

The men performing this job seven days a week, through all kinds of weather, come from all parts of the world. Among them are some of the world's best pilots. There is the winner of the famed London-to-Australia race, an Englishman; a famous Canadian Arctic flyer, an American of round-the-world fame, a Dutch airline pilot and another from Egypt. Here and there among them one sees the dusty blue uniform of the Royal Air Force, with a DFC a common sight. All are tops in their profession. Besides being expert pilots, they must have a good working knowledge of navigation, meteorology, airplanes, engines, radio and the thousand little details which mean the difference between getting an expensive, much-needed bomber to the fighting forces in the United Kingdom — or oblivion in the trackless waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

The first requisite for a pilot applying for the job is that he be an instrument pilot with multi-engined experience. The majority of our flying personnel are Americans, This, of course, is due to the fact that Canadian and English pilots are, for the most part, already in the air forces of their own countries. So most ferrying pilots come from the ranks of the airlines, or are former Army or Navy pilots with experience on large multi-engined equipment. Flying the Atlantic is no job for a novice.

When the new pilot's credentials have been thoroughly investigated and he has emerged successfully from an interview with the superintendent of flight training, he is ready to start his preliminary training. His first week is spent in the classroom studying navigation. (...) He must learn to think in knots, nautical miles, in degrees of latitude and longitude. Later, if he makes the grade as a captain and completes a few trips overseas, he might come back to be initiated into the mysteries of celestial navigation and the use of the sextant.

Here he finds that, when we speak of radio navigation, we do not mean beam flying. If he has been an airline pilot in the US he will miss that beam. On the way to Newfoundland there are numerous beams with which to check, but from there on it is done by radio direction-finding. Bearings are taken from the ship and by ground stations. The pilot must know how to take those bearings quickly and accurately, and how to make use of them after he has them.

There are many groans from the American pilot who, after flying for years on "compass headings," finds suddenly that there is no such thing. Instead, he must learn to navigate by the British system and the terminology is quite different. The reason is that he will be carrying a navigator who is a member of either the Royal Canadian Air Force, the Royal Air Force, the Royal Australian Air Force or Royal New Zealand Air Force — all of whom use the British system.

(...) Under the tutelage of experienced engineers, the pilot goes to school for a week to study the airplanes he will be expected to fly. Here he must draw the complete fuel and oil systems of the Lockheed *Hudson*. He also must chart the hydraulic system and the workings of the automatic pilot, the flaps, landing gear, etc. He is taken out into the hangars where he has opportunity to put his hands

on the gadgets he has been sketching. Every Hudson to be ferried across carries an extra gasoline tank in the cabin and another in the bomb bay, in addition to the four regular tanks in the wings. The two special tanks carry the necessary extra fuel for the long flight and are taken out when the ship reaches its destination. So, in the hangar he is shown how to use fuel from the tanks so as to keep the ship balanced. He learns how to use the oxygen equipment, the Aldis signaling lamp, Very pistols, emergency escape hatches, and how to operate the automatic pilot. He is shown how to properly operate and make use of every bit of equipment in the aircraft.

At the end of the week a report is made, showing instruction given and whether or not the pilot is ready for flight training. (...)

Some time also is spent in the Link Trainer. Then, at the end of the week, he is taken up for a final check. (...) Upon his skill and accuracy in computing, and in his flying generally, depends whether he is made a captain, first officer or washed out.

The new captain is issued complete flying clothing, including fur-lined suit, boots, gloves and helmet. He gets a sextant, a complete set of celestial navigation tables, maps covering all of eastern Canada and Newfoundland, Ireland, Scotland and England; besides Mercator plotting charts for the trip from Montreal to Newfoundland and across to the United Kingdom. He is given a chronometer, navigation and engine logs, flight plan forms, dividers, computer — even pencils and erasers.

His name now goes on the flight list to await his turn for a ship. He is assigned a radio operator and navigator. Most of the radio operators are Canadian civilians; there are a few English operators. Navigators are sergeants or pilot officers on their way overseas to an operational unit.

Let me take you with me on my first trip, which I made several months ago (NDLR likely late autumn 1941). (...)

Most captains have a conference with their crews before departure. It is good for morale and, as commander of an aircraft, I personally want to know something about my crew. I am sure they want to know

what their skipper is like on a flight of this nature. After all, the lives of each depend upon the others. We drank a toast — a "coke"; alcohol is forbidden 24 hours before a flight — and prepared for a night's rest.

The next morning we were at the airport, along with the crews of six other ships also going to Newfoundland. (...) With the navigator's help we quickly checked our equipment: Mae Wests, thermos bottles, flashlights, signal flares, compass deviation card, loop correction card, spare radio tubes — everything seemed in order.

(..) Now to the radio room for a last-minute check on the chronometer. Ocean navigating is done in minutes and seconds and the time must be correct to the second, for celestial navigation. Finally up to the meteorology department where each captain was handed a report of the weather to Newfoundland. Here the navigator and I made out a flight plan together. We decided to fly at 9,000 feet.

We took off on schedule. Twenty minutes later we leveled off at 9,000 feet and settled down to a 4 hour flight to Newfoundland, almost 1,000 miles away. The flight was without incident; we were on instruments most of the way, flying by radio bearings. Newfoundland was a complete surprise. After flying for the last hour over barren rocks and woods dotted with swamps and lakes, we suddenly came upon the largest airport I have ever seen. The runways are wide enough for a whole flight of bombers to take off at once. It was one huge paved surface in the midst of a wild, almost inaccessible country of forest and lakes.

We taxied up to the end of a line of 16 other *Hudsons* which had been held up by weather. We were met by a Newfoundland Ranger, who presented each of us with a yellow card which carried our name and which allowed us to enter the airport area. Here was evidence of the careful planning and organization behind this ferry service. A soldier guard was stationed along the line of ships (we now have a soldier assigned to each ship).

The crew chief asked if there was anything about the ship I wanted to report. His men were already removing the engine cowling for their routine check.

We were directed to the meteorology department where several captains, most of whom had been there a couple of days, were making out flight plans preparing to go across that day. I decided to stay overnight because the weather didn't look too good and, as this was my first trip, I was taking it easy. Sometimes we go right on after gassing up, if the weather permits.

I was taken over to the Eastbound Inn and shown to a neat little room. Amazed at the smooth-running order of things out in this wilderness, I decided to have a look around. There were two wooden "hotels" for the pilots and crews, a game room with ping pong tables, darts, card tables and a dining room where delicious meals are served. Over in the administration building were the business offices, weather offices, flying control tower, radio room and post office.

Along one edge of a runway was a long line of bombers of the RCAF coastal patrol. Using my pass, I walked across to the other side of the field where I found a little "town" of barracks and officers' quarters. Walking along the muddy street, I passed enlisted men and officers in the uniforms of the RCAF, RAF, US Army and even one or two US Navy officers. The uniforms were wrinkled and mud-spattered. These men were up here doing a job, not on parade.

That night I slept well after a hot shower. Up at 8 AM, I found the ship gassed, oiled, cleaned and a report of a complete mechanical check made. I found that there were to be 17 ships leaving that day. At a predetermined time, all captains and navigators reported to the meteorology office. Here we had a conference with the chief weather man, whom I believe to be one of the best in the world. We were shown a complete picture of the weather across the Atlantic, the position of fronts, icing levels, winds aloft and so on. Each captain was given a secret report consisting of the weather for each of the 10 zones across. From this we determined that 10,000 feet was the best altitude for favoring winds and lack of ice. We made up our flight plans together, checking each others' calculations.

I estimated my time across as 10 hrs 21 mins. I will never forget that figure, because I landed on the other side exactly 10 hrs 19 mins. after takeoff. Partly luck, of course; but imagine being just two minutes early on a transoceanic flight!

The radio operator had loaded the food and coffee into the ship and obtained the necessary secret codes. Each ship has its own call letter. I reported to the duty control officer, where I left a copy of my flight plan. Here he showed me a secret map on which were marked all barrage balloons, defended areas and other vital points and gave me my secret orders, which contained the signals to be used in case of challenge by a boat or British aircraft on the other side.

I ran the engines up carefully, being sure to "bleed" the automatic pilot twice before carefully testing it. I couldn't forget the experience of one of our pilots who had "George," which is what we call the automatic pilot, go crazy on him at 11,000 feet two hours out over the ocean. It threw the ship into a spin from which he managed to recover at about 1,500 feet. He returned to Newfoundland where he smoked about a package of cigarettes before he could manage to tell someone what happened .

At last everything was ready. I shut off the engines to be "topped up." This means the gas man fills your tanks to the last drop they will hold, just before takeoff.

Contrary to popular belief, we do not fly in formation. Each ship goes entirely on its own. We were the third ship off. I held it down to 115 mph before lifting her off. Thirty minutes later, I leveled off at 10,000

(Some many hours later) we sighted land off to our right. (...)It was Ireland.

By dint of some fast, accurate map reading we identified the exact spot over which we were flying. There was a momentary urge to set down in the first clear space. But I was paid to deliver this airplane to a given airport, not just to get it across the ocean. I decided not to ask for any radio bearings. I knew where I was and there were 16 other ships coming over that might really need that assistance. That is a code we stick by: never clutter up the air with useless radio because you might prevent some man, who really needs it, from getting through.

By now the ceiling had dropped to about 400 feet and I was really worried as I followed the coastline, flying half on instruments and half

contact. Suddenly the radio operator pointed out what looked like a ship ahead of us. We were flying at 200 feet. As we came closer, we could see it was a submarine. From its conning tower was coming a volley of sharp flashes. We were being challenged.

I shouted for the navigator to grab the Vickers pistol and fire it out the window. We had it already loaded with the color of the day. I slammed the landing gear down as an added sign of friendliness. After all, the Germans had been known to fly airplanes with RAF markings and I had no desire to be shot down at this stage. But the signals ceased and we were safely past. A few more minutes of ticklish low flying, with the operator and navigator keeping a lookout for other planes or barrage balloons, and we landed safely on an airport of our destination. Upon taxiing up to the line, I was told that mine was the day's first ship to arrive.

Our luggage was loaded into a taxi and we were whisked away to report to Customs and present our passports. Our secret papers and reports were taken from us and burned before our eyes. I made out a brief report on my crew, the behavior of the engines and airplane and, after a conference with the meteorologist on the weather I had encountered en route, we were assigned a room for some much-needed rest.

In a few days we started back nonstop to Montreal — this time as passengers in the bomb-bay of a huge four-engined Consolidated *Liberator*. We averaged two trips a month. We were well paid — and we earned every cent of it. [Reliable sources state that pay of captains of the RAF ferry commands starts at \$1,000 per month, goes up to \$1,300, plus expenses; navigators \$900.- Ed]

We prided ourselves on doing a job well and are content in the knowledge that we were doing our part in a good cause.