

Early article on Ferry Command

(Robert G Pelley 2022-11-16)

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While the RAF believed it could not be done, Lord Beaverbrook (a Canadian, Max Aitken, heading the British Ministry of Aircraft Production) contacted his friends at Canadian Pacific to investigate what it would take to be able to fly land based airplanes across the Atlantic, even in the middle of the winter. On 13 July 1940, Canadian Pacific Airways, based in Dorval, decided to give all support possible to the ferry operations across the Atlantic with the creation of a dedicated operation, known as the Canadian Pacific Air Services Department.

About a year later, 10 May 1941, the ferry operations were taken over directly by the British Ministry of Aircraft Production itself through its ATFERO (Atlantic Ferrying Organization). The Canadian Pacific agreement was thereby terminated.

ATFERO was even shorter-lived, for this responsibility was now assumed as of 01 August 1941 by the Royal Air Force Ferry Command. The RAFFC was luckily commanded by an extremely capable officer, Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick William Bowhill. ATFERO personnel were incorporated as civilian or military personnel.

About a year later (September 1942), "Flying" magazine brought out a special issue on the RAF, including a section on Ferry Command. Presented by the commander of Ferry Command, it gives a good look, after one year of operation, at what Ferry Command hoped to do. Some of these photos are well known but it is nice to see them in a contemporary article.

There are a few points in this article of particular interest. A first point is that when one thinks of Ferry Command, it is the transfer of airplanes that comes to mind. But it was also a method of transferring pilots and crews, as 70% of ferry flights were flown by personnel who stayed in Europe as operational crews. It was also the primary means for transporting high-level officials. Perhaps as important, it carried both critical supplies and mail in pre-internet era.

This article includes an excellent summary of the provenance of pilots and crews and the high standards of training required before being allowed to fly the Atlantic.

The article also gives very interesting information on the command structure of Ferry Command and the range of responsibilities of the commander's chief staff officers. Not an easy task, given the mixed military and civilian resources and the number of agencies involved.

I would have thought though that Don Bennett's name would be more prominent, given his key early role setting up the operation, training crews, and leading the first expedition



These are Lockheed "Hudsons" waiting to be ferried to England. The airport is a ferry base in Newfoundland.

(Use your zoom as necessary)

FERRY COMMAND

Hundreds of sorely needed operational planes have been flown to Allied forces all over the world. Honors for this amazing work belong to the unsung, hard-working ferry pilot.

by *Frederick W. S. Hill*

AIR CHIEF MARSHAL SIR FREDERICK W. BOWHILL, G.R.E., K.C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Ferry Command, was one of the first two men to fly an aircraft off the deck of a warship, and also commanded one of Britain's first aircraft carriers, the *Empress*. Also served with the R.N.A.S. Born September 1, 1880, in India, he was educated at Blackheath and the Royal Navy school, H.M.S. Worcester. He was an officer in the Merchant Service from 1896 to 1912; he started flying in the latter year. He has commanded Ferry Command since 1941, having previously served (1937-41) as A.O.C.-in-C. Coastal Command.



THE medium and heavy bomber, and the long range boat, unlike all other war material produced in the United States and Canada does not require valuable shipping space to take it to the battle zones. So the war was only a few months old when negotiations began for the establishment of a Canada-Britain air mail service which could also lay the groundwork for a future bomber ferry to Great Britain.

Pioneering of the project was entrusted to Morris W. Wilson, president of the Royal Bank of Canada, who secured the help of Sir Edward Beattie, chairman of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Canadian Pacific Air Service. Under their guidance the planning and execution of the scheme were rapid and effective.

A group of experienced pilots was sent to Canada from

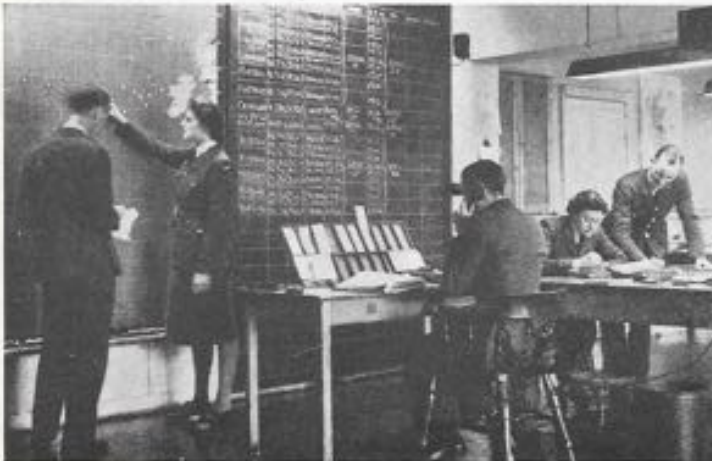
Britain to inaugurate the ferry. All were men well known on the world's civil air routes. Among them Capt. A. S. Wilcockson, Capt. Donald Ross, Capt. D. C. T. Bennett, D.S.O. and Capt. Humphrey Page.

From the first weeks there was a steady flow in of civilian pilots from the USA and Canada, as well as from the Allied nations and from other British dominions. They were reinforced by pilots with war experience from the RAF Coastal Command, of which I was then commander-in-chief. A transatlantic ferry pilot school was opened in Canada in November, 1940.

The first transatlantic delivery of American-built bombers to the RAF in Britain took place on Armistice Day, November 11, 1940, when seven Lockheed *Hudsons* took off from Newfoundland under Capt. D. C. T. Bennett. The flight was smoothly and successfully completed in less than 10 hours, and was quickly followed by the dispatch of the remainder of a consignment of 30 *Hudsons*, which had been flown to the Canadian border from Burbank, Calif.

These preliminary trials in regular Atlantic flight—now a routine everyday event—were organised from Montreal where St. Hubert was the main ferry base.

The early operations of the Atlantic ferry, showed that the maximum available output from the United States factories, whatever peak it



In the control room of a British ferry terminal WAAF help check on aircraft over the Atlantic.

might ultimately reach, could be readily absorbed in Canada and promptly and safely flown to Britain with the utmost economy in manpower and cost.

In March, 1941, the bomber ferry came under the control of the British Ministry of Aircraft Production and was given the title Atfero (Atlantic Ferry Organisation), with Morris W. Wilson at the head and Harold M. Long, a steel expert, as his chief executive.

Atfero survived for only a few months but this was due wholly to a momentous offer from Washington, D. C. This offer, it can now be told, was made in June, 1941, when the President of the United States informed the British Prime Minister that his government was prepared to help Britain's war effort further first by allowing the U. S. Army Air Corps [now Forces] Ferry Command, with service pilots, to ferry all aircraft destined for Britain from the west coast of America to Montreal or any other Canadian airport and, secondly, by releasing U. S. civilian pilots to British service to help fly the aircraft across the Atlantic.

The first part of this magnificent offer could produce only greater efficiency and speed in delivery; the second part was godsend to the RAF at the time. It meant the return to their squadrons for operational duties of a large number of RAF pilots who had been loaned to the Atlantic ferry.

A short time afterwards the British Air Ministry took over the Atlantic ferry and I was honoured to be appointed to command it.

On July 20, 1941, Atfero was wound up and the RAF Ferry Command was formed.



Limited radio conversations between the ferrying crew and RAF ground stations are permitted as they near their base.

I want to take this opportunity of paying tribute to the wonderful work which, I found, had been done, often in difficult circumstances, first by the Canadian Pacific Railroad and then by Atfero. Professional and business men, only a few of whose names I have mentioned, voluntarily and unsparingly gave their fulltime service to an unprecedented experiment in the newest phase of aviation without thought of any kind of reward and Canada has every reason to be proud of what they achieved.

The RAF Ferry Command moved its headquarters on October 4, 1941, to the new Montreal Airport at Dorval. The work of building this splendid airport—one of the best I have known, with uninterrupted approaches, modern layout and extensive facilities—had been practically completed in less than five months. Credit for this record performance belongs to the Canadian Department of Transport, represented on the spot by Comm. C. P. Edwards.

A transformation had been effected, too, in the forward base in Newfoundland, built on the site of an old forest camp alongside the railway, inaccessible by road, and with the widest runways of any aerodrome in the world. This airfield is under snow for more than six months in the year, but its runways are kept constantly clear by great rotary blowers which spray the snow into banks 16 to 20 feet high. Extensive reconstruction work had also been in progress at Bermuda, from which flying boats are dispatched, and other land and water bases have been laid out in areas which cannot yet be divulged.



At a British terminal the flying control officer checks on an incoming bomber. Control tower is much like those in U. S.

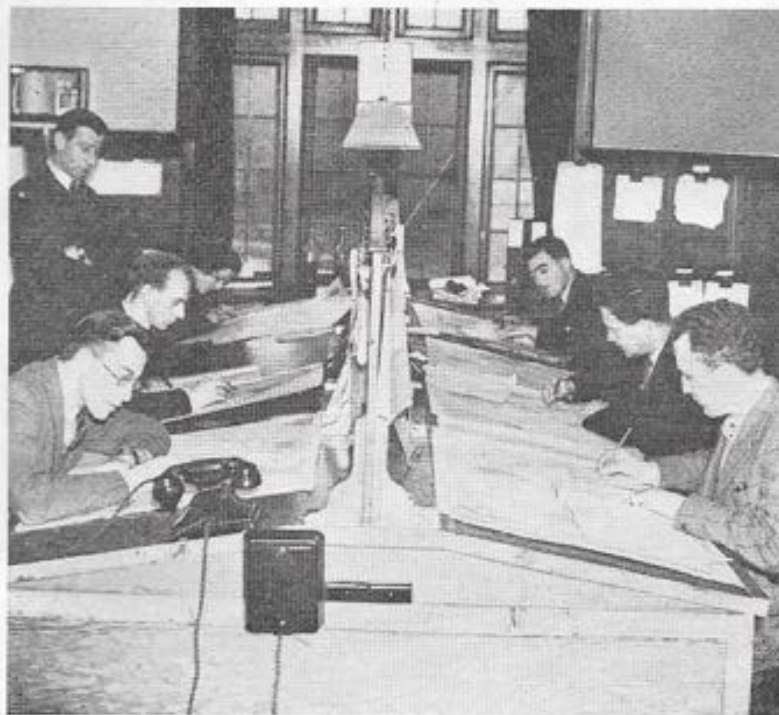
I am assisted at Ferry Command by a senior air staff officer and an air officer in charge of administration. But their respective duties are, of necessity, very different from those of their counterparts in other commands. For instance, my S.A.S.O., has under him:

All flying personnel	Signals
Operations	Engineering
Service flying training	Meteorology
Civilian flying training	Traffic

Part of his responsibilities in connection with operations is to maintain the closest liaison with the U. S. Army Air Forces Ferry Command to ensure that the flow of aircraft from the factories will be in phase with our deliveries across the Atlantic.

He must also be in constant touch with the U. S. Navy, and the aircraft manufacturers regarding the supply and movements of flying boats. And he is never out of contact with the Royal Canadian Air Force regarding the numbers and training of pilots, navigators and wireless operators who will be available to us for ferry duty.

The air crews, service and civilian, are his responsibility in



Meteorological forecasts for the Ferry Command are made at this RAF base in Britain. Forecasters are civilian experts.

addition, and always he has to make certain that there is a sufficiency of them to hand—but, to avoid waste, no more than a bare sufficiency.

The ideal proportions of Atlantic ferry crews which I set out to attain, as the Canadian operational training units have come into fuller working order, includes approximately 70 per cent newly trained pilots and crews. On reaching Britain these men go to squadrons and do not return. The remaining 30 per cent are civilians permanently employed on ferrying. The latter, incidentally, normally return to Canada by air.

The service training in my command is carried out in three departments: flying, wireless and navigation. Four distinct types of pupils arrive for training and checking:

1. *Products of the Commonwealth Air Training Plan in Canada.*

These pilots have approximately a total of 250 hours flying, of which 100 hours have been spent training on Service types of aircraft. They require very little further training.

2. *Experienced Service pilots who have been on duty in Canada and the U.S.A. and been posted back to Britain.*

3. *Qualified instructors from Service training schools in Canada and U.S.A. being posted to Britain.*

4. *United Nations Air Forces pilots (Poles, Czechs, Norwegians, etc.)*

Less than one per cent of all the pilots in these four categories fail to pass out.

A very high standard too is apparent in the wireless operator/air gunners—who share the intensive courses with civilian operators at our radio schools. To these schools also come personnel of the

U. S. Army Air Forces for special briefing in transatlantic procedure and flight.

Nearly all the navigators in the RAF Ferry Command are now service trainees who, like the pilots and wireless operator/air gunners do not return to us from Britain.

A training school has been established for civilian flying personnel for nearly two years. It was opened with the object of obtaining men with a minimum of 750 hours solo time holding a commercial licence and instrument rating and with some twin engine experience. About 75 per cent of these men are retained for ferrying work.

These civilian pilots come from all over the earth. Under the very severe tests which I apply to them if they are to be permanently engaged on Atlantic ferrying, only first-class men emerge successfully. Practically all of them would be regarded as too old for operational service in their national air forces, but they do great service by ferrying bombers to the younger men who will fly them in operations.

The Signals Branch of the Ferry Com-

mand has been organised on an immense scale and on the engineering side we have to supply men not only to Montreal but to places as far apart as San Francisco and Bermuda and into the Arctic zone.

The bogey of transatlantic flight has been laid by the meteorologist. The basic forecasts for the Atlantic flights are made at Dorval and primary forecast centres make a chain from Dorval to Bermuda, Newfoundland, Labrador, Greenland, Iceland and the west coast of Britain.

Bombers and flying boats crossing the Atlantic are well laden with urgently needed war material, Government mail and official passengers for all departments of the British Government and those of the U. S. and Canadian governments as well. A few months before the outbreak of this war leading experts in the U. S. and Britain were unanimously of opinion that it was impossible to found a winter airmail and passenger service over the North Atlantic. So it is worth recording, for the first time in history, a large volume of freight, diplomatic mail and passengers was ferried to Britain on regular schedules by bombers throughout last

winter—the worst winter, I am told, in 30 years.

From the questions most commonly put to me by laymen regarding transatlantic flights, it is clear that the main point of interest is still the speed at which the crossing can be made. I do not allow this consideration to enter the mind of anyone under my command. It is, in fact, an offence for any of my captains to attempt to “beat records” which might hazard new and valuable aircraft. Each captain is given a flight plan by which he proceeds to Britain on routes, zones and altitudes according to the weather information from both sides of the Atlantic. The most economical speeds are fixed for each zone of the crossing and the captains loyally adhere to their flight plans.

The record of each transatlantic flight is sent back to me. The great mass of information thus obtained by a war organisation is collated in a form which will be invaluable to Great Britain, Canada and the United States when plans come to be made for post-war commercial air services over the North Atlantic.

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