

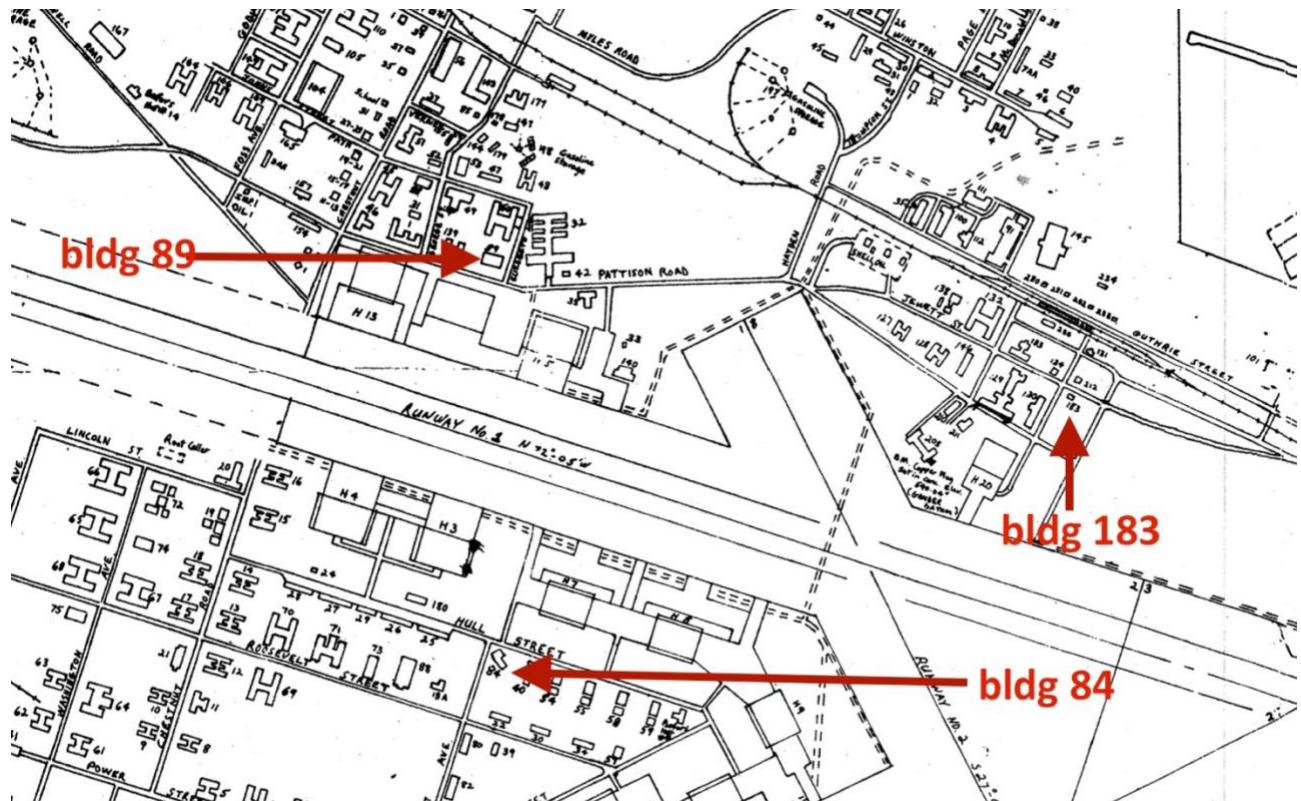


Fire protection In Old Gander



By Robert G Pelley. 24 October 2024
Bobsganderhistory.com

In the pre-town “Old Gander”, there were three fire halls. One was close to the Administration Building / railway-station area, namely building 183. Near the Canadian side Banting Memorial Hospital was the main fire hall, in building 84. On the “American side, their fire hall was in building 89.



Curiously, it does not appear that there was a fire hall dedicated to the RAF Ferry Command operation. One can presume that trucks from bldg183 could just zip across the runway as needed.

The first fire truck was a Merriweather, described more completely in an article by Darrell Hillier. In a nutshell, it arrived at the Newfoundland Airport in late 1938 and was turned over to the RCAF in April 1941. The next year it was lost in a fire.



Merriweather fire truck during 1938 winter testing
near the power house and Hanger 20

The fellow near the back of the truck is checking pressure, while the gentleman in a long coat is Fred Smeaton, snr, superintendent of Works service.

It is interesting to note that the first mention found of fire fighters of Gander comes in a proposal for the defence of the Airport, contained in Sir William Horwood's despatch No. 109 , where the Committee noted that "two stages were envisaged: Pending the formation of the Defence Force, the immediate training by the Aerodrome Control Officer of members of the airport staff, both as machine-gunners and fire-fighters.

"On the formation of the Defence Force, the allocation of 30 men from the force to provide continuous guards at the Airport in time of emergency.

"The Committee felt, on consideration, that the scale of attack to which the Airport would be likely to be subjected was so slight that the first stage should prove adequate to meet defence requirements, and accordingly that it should prove unnecessary to proceed to the second stage. They therefore recommended that the measures to be taken for the defence of the Airport should be limited for the present to the provision of two anti-aircraft Lewis Guns with ammunition, and the training of the necessary personnel from the staff of the Airport to man them."

Luckily, there were no aircraft attacks on Gander, so there was no need to compare the fire fighters' ability to aim a first hose to that of aiming a machine gun!

The first fire hall was building 183, a two-story building which later became Jenkin's Drugstore. It was well suited as a drug store as it was near the railway station, the Administration building and Goodyear's restaurant and on the main road to the RAF area which became the terminal.



Bldg 183 first fire hall / first drugstore
We can see someone exiting Goodyear's canteen on the left.

The main fire hall, on the Canadian side, was conveniently located next to the hospital and the police station (bldg 35), so the coordination of emergency services would have been relatively easy. The fire hall phone number was 222. Here is a global photo.



Fire hall bldg 84, circa 1942

After the war, building 84 became a taxi stand and the Airport Service Station, run by Harry Newhook.



No photo yet has been found of bldg 89, the American side fire hall. According to the late Frank Tibbo, "The Canadian and American crash crews worked independently and had a reciprocal agreement to help each other when called upon." He spoke with Mr Walter Tucker who worked in June 1944 in the American fire hall. He said "they would respond If things got out of control." He continued, "Well, things sure got out of control that day, and we responded immediately - we were just across the runway".

Mr Tucker was no doubt remembering what happened about 10 o'clock on a quiet Sunday morning as folks prepared to go off to church – and all hell broke loose. A light fell to the floor of Hangar 6, the bulb broke and ignited the oily hangar floor.- Within a very short time depth charges on the Liberator submarine patrol bombers started to explode and machine guns started to cook off. Everyone was ordered to get out and take cover. The eager services of Mr Tucker and friends, quickly on the spot, were no longer needed.

The following are various photos of Old Gander's fire trucks and crews.



RCAF fire fighters, circa 1944



RCAF fire hall, 1942

The truck on the right still exists (see below)



RCAF, bldg. 84, 1945

One of these old fire trucks has survived. The second from the right, a 1939 International was brought to Gander in 1941.



The Gander Fire Dept says “ The truck continued in service until 1968, when it was turned over to the newly formed Gander Volunteer Fire Brigade. It remained in service for several years and was then left in a supply compound for many years. With the support of the municipality, fire fighters began to restore the vehicle in the late 1980s”.

So Gander is still well prepared if a B-17 Flying Fortress ever gets lost in the fog, runs out of gas and does a controlled crash on a runway. The old International fire truck with the others trailing behind will be on the spot to spray her down!

Sources of information

° Darrell Hillier -

<https://crossroadsoftheworld.ca/pdf/Merryweather.pdf>

° Paul Bridle, DOCUMENTS ON RELATIONS BETWEEN CANADA AND NEWFOUNDLAND
VOLUME 1 **1935-1949**

° Photos from the late Fred Smeaton, jnr.

° Photos from different issues the the RCAF “Gander” magazine

° Website Town of Gander