Back in '41

(by Robert G Pelley 2021-07-09)
bobsganderhistory.com

A lot has been written about the very early history of Gander. But it nice to see a short article written by an "outsider" with a professional eye who comes upon Gander for first time. It is even better when another professional takes the time to summarise it all.

This is case here, where a document from the Scientific American was condensed by the Reader's Digest. Copyright being valid for 50 years, here is a great story of Gander's beginnings.

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ARTICLES OF LASTING INTEREST

Let's Keep the Ball . . . By Wendell Willkie 1
Speed While You Read . . . American Magazine 9
My Most Unforgettable Character By Albert Payson Terhune 13
The Failure of Our National Defense Program
By Senator Harry F. Byrd 16
A Sabbatical Year for Marriage . . . Harper's 26
Japan Risks Destruction . . . American Mercury 29
Journey for Margaret . . . From the Book 34
The Reporter and the Arc Lights . . . "Newspaper Days" 39
She Happens on Ice . . . Liberty 41
Jump-Off for Britain . . . Scientific American 45
Campus in the Clouds . . . Progressive Education 49
Profit by My Experience . . . By J. C. Long, Fred Rodell 53
Let Fiorello Do It . . . Harper's 56
The Case for a Smaller Army . . . By Walter Lippmann 61
The Bombing Plane Has Made America Invasion-Proof
Army Ordnance 64
Help for Women Over Forty . . . Hygeia 67
Green-Grocer to the World . . . Time 69
Slyly the Veterans Grab for Five Billions More New Republic 73
Big White Medicine Man . . . Christian Century 76
Jumping Through Georgia . . . American Legion Magazine 81
The Last Thing Schubert Wrote . . By Alexander Woollcott 85
Roosevelt's Man Friday . . . Life 87
Chronicles of Americanization — V . . . Who 93
New Skin for Burns . . . Hygeia 97
Kansas City Has Its Chin Up . . National Municipal Review 100
Watch Out for Wooden Checks . . . Rotarian 103
This Age of Ingenuity . . . New Republic 107
Do Brains and Character Go Together? . School and Society 109
What the Soldiers Complain About . . . Life 112
Ubico — Boss of Guatemala . . Christian Science Monitor 115
Cripple Creek Wins a Bet . . . Forbes 119
Need We Fear Our Alien Population? . . American Mercury 123
How to Heat Your Home . . . Science News Letter 127
70 Percent Is Not Passing . . . Rotarian 130
Fiction Feature Penrod and His Friends By Booth Tarkington 135
20 Questions, 72 — Picturesque Speech and Patter, 92

NOVEMBER 1941

In a fogbound wilderness the world's biggest airport teems with dramatic tales of the transatlantic ferry

Jump-Off for Britain

Condensed from Scientific American

Edwin Muller

THERE'S a spot in the windy wastes of Newfoundland the name of which is known to very few, but it's one of the most important places in the world — and one of the most exciting.

Yesterday an uninhabited wilderness of spruce and swamp, it is today the world's biggest airport, and growing bigger with the labor of thousands of men working day and night. It swarms with aerial traffic. Scores of bombers arrive and take off for Britain every week. It's the great junction and forwarding point for transatlantic passengers and freight. And it is perhaps the most vital point in the outer defenses of this hemisphere.

For an hour before I arrived there, in a Lockheed-Hudson bomber, I had been sweating steadily in the palms of my hands. After sighting Newfoundland from high over the blue waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, we had run into a solid bank of fog.

By now we should be over the airport. The pilot, an air veteran from Texas, couldn't be sure because no radio beam is allowed. We made one or two tentative dips down through the gray soup. No land. Then we turned tail and ran north toward the ocean to get our bearings, coming out suddenly into the clear at a bay some 40 miles away. Back we went toward the airport, keeping just under the ceiling. It seemed as if we'd scrape our bottom on the tops of the trees. I kept rising in my seat, trying to lift the plane a little higher.

I was glad to see that airport.

Coming onto the field by air you are bewildered by its immensity. Runways are so wide that an ordinary plane could land or take off crosswise. When you strain your eyes across the expanse you see a mirage against the far horizon. It's a half day's brisk walk around the field, past countless hangars and shops and barracks.

Switch engines shift long strings of boxcars, and crews unload mounting piles of lumber and steel, crates and drums. Steam shovels scoop out great pits in the raw earth. Riveting machines hammer

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on every side. Now and then a blast goes off and you see a geyser of smoke and rock thrown high in the air. There is a constant overtone of airplane motors tuning up. Most thrilling of all is the breath-catching crescendo of a bomber as it starts down the runway on the long, lonely road to Britain.

That night I met some of the men who fly the big ships across. For several days bad weather had been reported from Q. M., the secret airport in the United Kingdom where the bombers land, and a score of fliers were waiting at the Newfoundland field, sitting around the rough board tables of East-Bound Inn.

These are not daredevil youngsters. There are plenty of gray hairs, and every pilot has had thousands of flying hours. They have come from transcontinental lines in the United States, from Imperial Airways in Britain, from Trans-Canada Air Lines. You hear tales of the early days of the Southampton-to-Singapore run, of being forced down in the desert and hiding in the dunes from tribesmen; of landing mountaineering parties on inaccessible Alaskan glaciers and keeping them supplied by parachute; of ferrying freight into Amazon jungles.

On this transatlantic job the pilots have settled down to routine. It takes nine to ten hours to cross, and when the weather is good they maintain a schedule as regular as those of ferryboats. Each pilot is given a flight plan, telling him his course, what height to reach at each point, what weather to expect.

The weather man is really the pilots' hero. They say there has never been anything like his work. He tells you: "In Zone 5 at 6 o'clock there will be ceiling at 2000 feet, top of cloud at 6000, moderate icing at 5000, tail wind of 40 miles per hour, veering shortly to north." You get there and that's exactly what it is.

Sometimes they fly at 15,000 feet or higher. It's 50 below zero up there but the heated planes are comfortable. Insidious, though, is the effect of altitude: you fail to recognize at first the dreamy, don't-care feeling, as the higher centers of the brain gradually cease functioning, and you may wait too long before attaching the oxygen tube.

One pilot, flying at 20,000 to avoid icing — the air is dry up there — had to detach his tube and go back to help a passenger. When he returned to his seat he couldn't readjust the tube. It's a simple operation, but the tube in his hand would approach the socket — and waver away. While this went on they were slipping down toward the dangerous icing level. Finally the navigator realized what was wrong and came to the rescue.

Pilots don't see much of the ocean. Most of the flight is above unbroken clouds, an Arctic landscape of white hills and valleys. On

its surface, far below, the tiny black shadow of the plane drives along.

Sometimes that glacial surface is torn apart. Then they may see a big convoy crawling along. One pilot saw the last plunge of a torpedoed merchantman, its stern rearing high. Men were struggling in the water, with no lifeboats, but there was nothing the pilot could do.

In the last hours they begin to slide down toward the land, a faint dark smudge on the horizon. There the pilot and his crew search the skies for intercepting Germans. Not so anxiously now, however, as when the bomber-ferry service first started. In all the hundreds of crossings, only one or two pilots have sighted a German.

The landing field at Q. M. is so ingeniously camouflaged that even the keenest-eyed German observer could hardly recognize it as an airdrome. It doesn't look like a spot where you could make even an emergency landing. There's no fuss about the arrival. Pilot and crew may get a few days' leave — London if they're lucky. Or within 12 hours they may be on their way back by ferry plane.

The pay is high: pilots get a minimum of $1000 a month, with a bonus for each trip above two trips a month. Some earn more than $25,000 in a year. Navigators and radio operators earn about two thirds as much as a pilot.

These fliers deny with short and profane words that they are engaged in a glamorous, adventurous job. It's routine flying, they assert, and rather dull at that. They mean it, but it isn't so. Two thousand miles of empty ocean is not a routine flying job — not yet. The worst hazard is the take-off, when the plane has its staggering load of gasoline.

One night at East-Bound Inn a pilot came in with the news that a returning ferry plane had cracked up on the take-off at Q. M. The 22 men in it had been killed. Every man present had good friends on that plane, some of those killed had sat at the same table two nights before. The talk stopped a few seconds, then resumed. The conversation was of other things.

Accidents never interrupt the flow of traffic east. I was in the control tower watching a line of Hudson bombers take off, one every five minutes. As the fifth got halfway up the runway, it swerved slightly, then there was a violent swing and it came around in a ground loop. The undercarriage collapsed, one wing sagged. It couldn't have been two seconds before it blazed up, a great bloom of orange flame. Three figures dived out through a door in the tail.

With sirens screaming, the fire trucks were on the field. While the flames were still burning, two tractors raced out and yanked the big plane off the runway. Ten

minutes later the next bomber had taken off and was on its way.

Here as nowhere else you can see how fast space and time are shrinking. You see the big transports come in, the Consolidated B-24's, as large as the ships of Columbus. They converge from points on the American continent, stop to refuel, wing on across the ocean, carrying many a passenger from Washington to London within 24 hours. At your breakfast in East-Bound Inn you can choose between the New York *Times* and the London *Times* of the day before. It's all as casual as travel between New York and Chicago.

This air center is also a shipping point for urgently needed plane parts, vitamin concentrates, precision instruments, laboratory materials. One plane carried 200 bullfrogs to aid in studying the effects of poison gas.

In this bleak, inhospitable land, snow falls through June and starts again in September, piling up 20-foot drifts along the runways. Always the wind blows, in gales and gusty squalls. Fog lies heavy.

The houses and shacks in the settlement are hammered together from rough timber. The unpaved streets are deep in sticky mud. There are scores of camouflaged pits where anti-aircraft guns thrust muzzles toward the sky. You can't walk far without being challenged by sentries.

The bulk of the population consists of laborers, superintendents and foremen, mechanics and engineers, troops who garrison the post, Newfoundland Rangers who police it. Feminine influence is lacking. It's a he-man place, without the amenities of life.

Yet there are few spots on earth where more big names are registered. In the short time I was there Lord Beaverbrook and Lord Halifax, a Roosevelt and a royal duke were seen about the East-Bound Inn. Harry Hopkins had been through a few days before.

When the war is over, airmen say, this will be the chief junction and forwarding point for transatlantic traffic. Bermuda and the Azores will be used, too, but this northern route is the shortest between the important centers of America and Europe. No matter how long a range planes may have, they will carry a bigger pay load across the Atlantic if they stop here to refuel, a third of the way over.

Then East-Bound Inn will be an affair of 1000 rooms, and will probably preserve as a show place the present room where the pilots gather. The mud will disappear, the raw earth will be landscaped. There'll be schoolteachers and bank clerks on their way to Europe for vacation trips, businessmen from Chicago or Prague, students from Tokyo, Harvard, Vienna. This will be the most cosmopolitan spot on earth, where all nationalities will meet and pass.