

Happy to see Gander Lake

(By Robert G Pelley 2017/04/28)

When people think of Gander as an alternate destination in case of bad weather or the mechanical failure of an airplane, the image that invariably comes to mind is that of “Gander Airport” as such. We can imagine in our mind’s eye, depending on the era, long and wide runways, huge maintenance hangars, converted hotels, good facilities, a modern terminal or perhaps even the “Big Dipper” Bar.

But Gander Lake itself also served as an alternate – for flying boats or seaplanes. The Royal Air Force Ferry Command had set up a Marine base there during the war and, during the pre-war planning, it was expected that the great Pan American and BOAC commercial flying boats could use it in a pinch.

Ensign Harley Wilbur, US Navy pilot, became qualified as a Patrol Boat Commander in September 1951. The patrol boat in this case was a “Patrol Boat Martin”, PBM-5 flying boat. It was quite a bit like the water bombers seen in Gander, though slightly larger and more powerful.

A year later, on 02 September 1952, now a Lieutenant junior grade, he saw himself leaving the warm breezes and creature comforts of Bermuda for the pleasures of autumn on the south coast of Newfoundland.

On his very first operational patrol, after 11 hours of flying, he discovered the variability of “Newfy weather” – the naval sea-drome of Argentia was completely socked in with dense fog.

His alternate was Gander Lake, about 250 kilometres roughly due north - and the weather was just fine.



After securing their airplane, Wibur and his crew were of course able to partake of Gander Airport's joys (apparently staying in the converted hotel complex on the former "American Side"). They returned to Argentia the next morning.

That Gander Lake adventure was the first and last time Lt Wilbur ever landed a PBM on fresh water.

The photos below show the difference between the visitors to Gander, a PBM and a PBV.

