

## An unsung Gander hero - Abner C Knee

Boston bomber BZ215

v3

(Robert G Pelley, 2018-02-20)  
<http://bobsganderhistory.com>

On Tuesday, 10 November 1942, at 08h00 local time, an aircraft lifted off from Gander, a ferry flight heading for Europe, via the northern route that brought it close to Greenland. It was an RCAF twin-engine Douglas A-20 "attack bomber", aircraft identification BZ-215. The Americans knew it as a "Havoc" and the Brits as a "Boston".

At 48 feet long, it was about ten feet shorter than a Beechcraft 1900-D used in cross-Newfoundland air services. It would have looked something like this:



The crew consisted of Pilot Officer David Goodlet (pilot, from Simcoe, Ontario), Pilot Officer Alfred Nash (navigator, from Winnipeg), and Flight Sergeant Arthur Weaver, (radio operator, from Toronto).

About 10h00, two hours or so out from Gander, the heavily overcast sky prevented Nash from "shooting the sun", and thereby figuring out his position. About the same time the radio went dead. And as trouble always comes in threes, the pilot noted shortly after that he was down to about thirty minutes of fuel.

As Greenland is covered with mountains, Goodlet kept his airplane at 15000 ft, hoping to get a break in the clouds. But soon his only choice was to let down through the soup. At 3600 ft, he came out of it and eased his plane, wheels up, onto a crevasse-riddled plateau between two mountain ranges, about fifteen miles from the coast.

The following is the entry in the RAF Transport daily log of 12 November 42:

"Boston BZ215 presumed missing on way to Reykjavik 10th November. heard transmitting SOS from Greenland coast. Catalina FP532 standing by to join in search when weather permits."

Bravery Officer:- F/O. Kleboe  
Weather:- Low ceiling and poor visibility early with driving rain,  
~~early~~ improving gradually to higher ceiling. Warm, but temperature falling  
Boston BZ 215, presumed lost on way to Reykjavik 10<sup>th</sup> November,  
heard transmitting S.O.S. ~~at 1000~~ from Greenland coast. Catalina FP 532  
standing by to join in search when weather permits

This is a 15 May 43 Maclean's Magazine representation of the site"



The only supplies they had were 24 biscuits and a gallon of water, which quickly froze. The men spent the first night huddled in the bomber, while the temperature dropped to under  $-30^{\circ}\text{F}$ . The next day, with only four hours of Northern daylight, they made their plans to head out for the coast.

High winds and zero visibility delayed the journey. During this time, Arthur Weaver monkeyed with the radio and briefly got it functioning again. Not having not much else to do, he spent his time tapping out Morse code messages before the batteries gave out or his fingers froze. After some time, he heard those particular radio sounds of someone working to make contact. An unidentified person, somewhere or other in Canada, had managed to pick up his signal and acknowledge his message.

On Sunday, Nov. 15, to make a very long story short, weather permitted them to start out, using make-shift snowshoes and pulling an inflated dinghy but it was so heavy and the snow so deep that they could hardly travel a mile a day. They set off a flare to signal an airplane about five miles off, with no luck.

Making progress toward the sea was almost unbelievably rough, with unexpected rain, but two days later, a plane dropped food, clothing and route instructions. On the next Sunday evening they saw a ship, but got no answer to a flare. The next day they reached the edge of the glacier and when darkness fell, they managed to set one of their parkas on fire. The same ship, about to leave the area, signaled back with flares. A rescue team soon reached the crew to bring them finally to the safety of the ship, the US Coast Guard cutter Northland.

In Gander on 11 November, a young fellow by the name of Abner Chafe Knee was working his shift as radio operator. All of a sudden his signal got cut into, coming from a weak unknown station. He could have dismissed it as an accident or bad radio etiquette - but something said that this was different. He cut his own operation and adjusted his set over some time to search out the signal. Nothing. He could have stopped there but figured no, one more try. He then got the signal that changed three men's lives. It wasn't clear and it wasn't strong - but it was readable....and with a position report. He acknowledged with the letters RR meaning that the message had been received and read, hoping that the person on the other end had managed to pick up his reply. He quickly passed his precious information to Gander's Royal Air Force Ferry Command authorities.



Abner Knee circa 1939-40

The RAF later presented Mr Knee a large silver mug with a beautiful crest and inscription on it, in recognition of his perseverance. Some years later he gave the mug to Gander's Aviation Museum of the North Atlantic for display and safekeeping. It is presently in storage at the Museum as the premises are being remodelled and a new section added. It will be taken out for display as soon as proper space becomes available.

The family was however able to find a photo of the presentation of the cup to Mr Knee by the officer commanding the Royal Air Force Transport Command in Gander, Group/Captain DF Anderson, after the successful rescue of the crew.



The inscription read as follows:

Presented to  
Wireless Operator Abner C Knee  
but for whose vigilance  
the crew of the Boston No BF 215  
might well have perished  
Gander November 11, 1942

It is interesting to note that the insert gives the airplane identification incorrectly as BF215, the correct id being BZ215. This is undoubtedly an error of transcription in those days of manual typewriters.



Another of his prized possessions was a thank-you letter from the crew who found out who he was the following year. A copy of this letter can be found at this address:

<http://my.kwic.com/~pagodavista/knee2.htm>

Abner Knee had been a radio operator at the well-known Cabot Tower, on Signal Hill, St. John's, the same place where, in 1901, Marconi received the first trans-Atlantic wireless message, the letter "S" in Morse Code, sent from Poldhu, Cornwall. He then went to Botwood with the arrival of the first trans-Atlantic flying boats, before going to Gander in its early stages of development.

Though he served for many years on the local school board, known as Abbie to his friends, he was a shy man. He designed and built his own small boats, tied his own salmon flies, loved to putter around with motors and cars, built toys, swing sets, and "gadgets" when his kids were little, and invented anything he thought would save him time and energy. He never saw the point of exercise!

He could care less about material things, as long as he had the basic conveniences, a beer or rum after work, good food with absolutely no vegetables! He'd say, "Anything green should be mowed!" So much for trying to be healthy....and yet he lived to be 93!

In Gander in the 1950s, the "old airport" based on the original military complex was torn down and a new modern town built. Many homes were built on a coop basis by groups of ten to twelve men. In those early days many groups choose easily available and good quality Lennox

furnaces. Luckily Abbie learned all about these units and became the furnace expert for his group.

Mr Knee was married to Olive and had three daughters: Jeanette, Marilyn and Barbara.

Abbie's best friend was a chap by the name of Jim Dempsey. Jim was also a highly respected, veteran radio specialist from the early days of Gander, the sort of person who paid attention to details. For example, during the war, his patient listening to radio traffic over the North Atlantic led him to locate the German battleship Bismarck that had up to then evaded Allied pursuit.

Birds of a feather do indeed stick together!

-----

Much thanks goes to his daughter Marilyn and to Darrell Hillier for the background info. The Maclean's article previous referred to and the book Ocean Bridge: The History of F Ferry Command by Carl Christie were also excellent sources.