

## Old Gander Airport in the movies

Have you ever seen or heard of the film from the early Fifties called "No Highway in the Sky" which "starred" the old terminal?

No Highway in the Sky was a 1951 British air disaster film (aka: No Highway) directed by Henry Koster and starring James Stewart and Marlene Dietrich.

The 20th Century Fox film was based on the novel No Highway by Nevil Shute, and was one of the first films that involved a potential aircraft crash.



The official film publicity tells the story of Theodore Honey (James Stewart), an eccentric with the British Royal Aircraft Establishment. He is a widower with a precocious young daughter, Elspeth (Janette Scott),

Honey is sent from Farnborough, England, to investigate the crash of a "Reindeer" airliner in Labrador, which he figures occurred because of a structural failure in the tail, caused by sudden metal fatigue. To test his theory in his laboratory, an airframe is continuously shaken in eight-hour daily cycles.

It isn't until Honey is already aboard a Reindeer that he realizes he himself is flying on one such aircraft and that it may be close to the number of hours his theory projects for the fatal failure. Despite the fact that his theory is not yet proven, Honey decides to warn the passengers and crew, including actress Monica Teasdale (Marlene Dietrich).

After the Reindeer lands at Gander Airport, an inspection clears it to continue on. He takes drastic action to stop the flight by raising the undercarriage while the aircraft is still on the ground. The ensuing dispute includes demands that he be declared insane to discredit his theory.

Teasdale and flight attendant Marjorie Corder (Glynis Johns) both take a liking for Honey and his daughter Elspeth, who is lonely and isolated from her schoolmates. Teasdale speaks on his behalf to his superiors, while Corder, seeing that he is disorganized but decent, decides to marry him.

During a hearing in which his sanity is questioned, Honey resigns but continues trying to prove that his mathematics are sound. In the laboratory, the time he predicted for failure passes without failure. However, the Reindeer he disabled in Gander is repaired, but after landing from a test flight the tail falls off. Shortly afterwards, the same thing happens to the

test frame in the lab, and Honey discovers that he failed to include temperature as a factor in his calculations.

I managed to buy a "movie still" numbered 51 of 340 showing the interior used to model the airplane cockpit. It almost seems to be forward section of a World War II bomber, so many of which went through Gander some years before.



The action in Gander lasts about 15 minutes or so, and while it is at night, it is easy to see the sign saying Gander Airport near the old passenger entrance. The scenes inside the old terminal are not actually Gander but the style is close enough to fool someone who was not a regular visitor.

The technical side and the plot are reasonable except for a few very small errors. For example the sounds, the cockpit area and the flight engineer's controls are made to look like a piston engine airplane of that era. However the engine nacelles seem to be that of a turboprop.

On the plot side, at Gander Airport the pilot refuses to allow Honey to continue on to Montreal. But since Honey was on his way to Labrador to investigate the previous Reindeer crash, he would not have been going on to Montreal in the first place.

Campbell Pritchett, formerly of Gander, says that his father played a part in it as well as Clayton Lock, both of whom at the time worked for Imperial Oil. They drove the fuelling truck up to the aircraft, and set up the fuelling process during the filming. It was a 5 second part. He remembers "going to the Globe theater with dad to see the movie, and you could clearly see the tanker truck, but you couldn't pick out the Imperial Oil employees faces, just them moving around the ladders and hoses".

The movie can be seen at this address. So go to the Big Dipper, get yourself something drink, settle in and have a look!

[http://www.metacafe.com/watch/7743905/no\\_highway\\_in\\_the\\_sky\\_1951/](http://www.metacafe.com/watch/7743905/no_highway_in_the_sky_1951/)

It should be noted that in reality, James Stewart probably knew more about real airplanes than any one involved in the

making of the movie. During WWII, he led his B-24s bombers to places like Berlin. His official tally of mission credits while assigned to the 445th and 453rd Bomb Groups totaled 20 sorties. Stewart was one of the few Americans to rise from private to colonel in four years.

On July 23, 1959, Stewart was promoted to Brigadier General and remained current as a pilot of huge aircraft such as the Convair B-36 Peacemaker, Boeing B-47 Stratojet and B-52 Stratofortress. He probably would have known if the tail was really going to fall off!