

## A planeload of brass – Gander, 24 May 1942

(by Robert G Pelley 02 December 2016)

On 23 May 1942, an unarmed C-75 Stratoliner transport plane left Goose Bay and headed out over the ocean, en route to Prestwick. The C-75 was a modified unarmed Boeing 307 airliner, which was itself based on the B-17C bomber airframe. Compared with the B-17, the 307 had a larger diameter fuselage and a pressurized cabin. The US military had five of these, taken over from what became Trans World Airlines and flown by crews from that airline.



About 540 miles out, the plane ran into bad weather and had to divert to Gander. What had been forecast as fog was in fact heavy ice.

One of the passengers was General Hap Arnold, United States Army Air Force.



After arrival, he did a quick flight over the airport area. This is what he said: "Took trip over Gander: debris, junk, trash from old buildings everywhere, no one even tries to clean up. Officers Club a fine building." General Arnold probably didn't realize it was one of biggest ongoing construction jobs carried out at the time in North America, in what was five years before a forest, served only by the Newfy Bullet. It took some time before the dump on old Burner Road became operational.

However, Brigadier-General Henry W "Swede" Harms, commanding-general of Newfoundland Base Command, paid for what was seen as incompetence. He was reduced to Colonel on 30 Sept, sent to a minor base and never promoted again.

On 24 May, the C-75 took off from Gander at 05h44 P.M., headed for Prestwick 2,000 miles away. Good weather all the way across, one weather front hit but not bad, lasting only thirty minutes.

There were eleven officers traveling on this airplane, all with key roles during World War II, either as commanders, planners or doing liaison between Allied forces. Among them were the following:

Lieutenant General H. H. Arnold, USA  
Major General M. W. Clark, USA  
Major General D. D. Eisenhower, USA  
Air Marshal D. C. S. Evill, RAF  
Group Captain H. P. Fraser, RSAAF  
Rear Admiral J. H. Towers, USN  
Colonel H. S. Vandenberg, USA

General Arnold was the Commanding General of whole US Army Air Force. He was the person who brought the air force from a group of underfunded flyers with quite often obsolete, if not antique, airplanes in 1939 to the most powerful air force in the world in 1945. He was probably very well received when he got off the airplane on the American side in Gander!

General Mark Clark became the commander of American forces during Operation Avalanche - the invasion of Sicily and Italy in 1943 - and eventually became the area Allied Commander.

General Eisenhower became a five-star general in the United States Army during World War II and served as Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe. He was responsible for planning and supervising the invasion of North Africa in Operation Torch in 1942–43. It was Dwight D Eisenhower who lead the successful D-Day invasion of France and Germany in 1944–45. He also served as the 34th President of the United States from 1953 until 1961.

Air Marshall Evill became the second highest-ranking officer in the Royal Air Force in World War II.

Group Captain Fraser commanded notably the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment of the RAF and became an Air Marshal quite endowed with the ability for the planning of military operations.

Rear Admiral Towers became Commander, Air Force, US Pacific Fleet. He supervised the development, organization, training, and

supply of the Fleet's growing aviation capability, and helped develop the strategy that spelled the doom of the Japanese fleet and eventual American victory in the Pacific. He later became the Deputy Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet, including all air and naval forces.

Colonel Vandenberg became the commanding general of the Ninth Air Force, a tactical air force in England and in France, supporting the Army, from D-Day until the end of the war. After the war he became the head of the whole US Air Force.

Besides its machine gunners, an equivalent B-17 would normally have a flight crew of five: pilot, copilot, flight engineer, navigator and radioman. To be on the safe side, this plane had a much bigger operating crew: one pilot, one copilot, three second officers, a flight officer, a flight engineer, a senior radio operator and two navigators!

During Second World War, there were well over a 100 Gander-related airplane accidents or incidents that were worth mentioning. The area around Gander is replete with crash sites.

<http://bobsganderhistory.com/GDRcrashreps.pdf>

Imagine if this plane became another statistic, loosing power on take-off or getting hit by a sudden downdraft. What if someone on the maintenance crew in Gander was not quite alert and the airplane ran into mechanical trouble over the Atlantic? Even if the maintenance was well done (as would likely have been the case, given that the chief of the USAAF was on board), other things still could have gone wrong.

For example, weather forecasting in the 40s was an inexact science. While the Canadian/RAF Met office had been in place since mid-1937, it was only on 24 July 1941 that the first US weather officers arrived in "Gander Field", ill-equipped and with fairly limited experience with the North Atlantic. The C-75 crew had been briefed on weather at Goose Bay two days earlier but had to turn back 540 miles out. What if they hit the same icing conditions after the point of no return and had to try to continue on?

What chance would this unarmed plane have had if it had been intercepted by a long-range German maritime surveillance Focke-Wulf Condor out from the Norway coast?



In modern times, companies tend not to let their main executives fly on the same plane. However, this was wartime and transport was limited.

And no company today had the trained personnel the military had, ready and willing to replace a fallen comrade, even a commanding general.