

The Star Weekly talks of Gander

(by Robert G Pelley, 22 Nov 2024
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The Star Weekly was a weekend supplement to the Toronto Star, in a city that many in those days considered to be the financial and cultural center of Canada. But even though Gander was just an improbable place of a few thousand souls in the middle of that unknown island called Newfoundland, it still merited attention on occasion.

The objective of the present website posting is to present a selection of articles from The Star Weekly which show what might have interested a Toronto Star reader about Gander.

This first article, of 13 July 1957, gives a small window unto those times, not only on Gander but perhaps as well on the Canada that Newfoundland joined in 1949. The cover photo is that of the then Canadian Prime Minister John Diefenbaker.



It happens that Mr Diefenbaker was not considered by many to be a friend of Newfoundland - and certainly not by Joey Smallwood. Difficulties arose especially from the two conflicting views about "Term 29" relative to financial compensation after the union of 1949. As well, some may point to the fact that in a federal election Mr Diefenbaker swept Canada – except for Newfoundland. He resented Mr Smallwood's highly public campaign to secure a better outcome

to Term 29. He may as well have felt less inclined to honour promises made by federal Liberals before him.

Aviation aficionados will also remember Mr Diefenbaker as the fellow who cancelled the production of Avro Arrow, a Mach-2 capable fighter, considered by many as the best fighter in the world at the time.

Mr Diefenbaker made a visit to Gander during the run-up to the June 1962 federal election. One of the places he stopped was Gander Academy in the new town, as part of his effort to present his Canadian Charter of Rights. (As president of the school's student council, I had the singular honour of accepting the copy he presented.)

In the mid 1950s, Gander was transitioning from the old military buildings to a new townsite several miles to the west. There was also considerable gossip in the mid-50s that the terminal in Hangar 22 would be replaced by a brand new terminal building, hoping to be a showplace for people coming to Canada. The story became official, as given in an article in the St. John's Daily News of 18 November 1955. It reads:

“A contract for a new terminal building at the transport department's Gander airport in Newfoundland has been awarded at a cost of \$2,750,000. The tender was awarded to Kenney Construction Company of Yarmouth, N.S.”



As shown in the following pages from the Star Weekly, although there were hints of airlines leaving Gander and modern aircraft starting to overfly the island, rather than stop for fuel, it was a hopeful, pleasant period.

They All Come to Gander

Clearing house for the world's notables, Canada's aerial gateway is being transformed into the nation's 'showcase'

J. E. BELLIVEAU

“YOU may have Queen Juliana's bed or Zsa Zsa Gabor's," murmured the suave clerk in the Jupiter hotel.

This is the sort of welcome that makes life interesting in Gander. At one time or another most of the world's notables stop here. Lying in a vast forest clearing, this Canadian international airport has become the aerial crossroads of the world. Since Newfoundland became a province of Canada it is also the aerial gateway to our nation, the Atlantic entrance. Currently it is undergoing a transformation that its importance and activity have long demanded.

Gander is one of the few places in the new world you might properly call "fabulous;" it is not only a trans-Atlantic stopping place but a wilderness city. It is a new and growing community with overtones of suburbia marking the town that has risen suddenly, surprisingly, and is not yet complete. It is the only place on this continent, one of the few in the world, that is

pitiable hour so that when you walk through the long waiting-room past the ticket counters, the news-stand and the snack bar you may meet Eartha Kitt or Nehru of India, Nixon of Washington or an Indonesian delegate to the United Nations.

Such people you might also see at London airport or New York's Idlewild, but only fleetingly as they hurry through customs. At Gander they saunter about or sit in the bar, lounge or restaurant for an hour. If you have a mind to start a conversation with them this is the place to do it. They are relaxed and convivial; an autograph hunter stationed in this airport for a few weeks could reap a happy harvest. Signs about the airport are in several languages, and from waiting passengers rises a Babel of tongues.

Outside, as they wait, there is a bustle of activity as planes taxi past the tower and the range station which has brought them halfway across the ocean. Fuel trucks and jeeps dart about, men clamber up ladders to wings with

Things moved fast from then on and land planes became the practical and faster way to fly over the ocean; permanent wireless was established at Gander which came to life as an operational station on Nov. 30, 1938. World War II made Gander a lifeline between North America and Britain, and the Atlantic Ferry organization came into being in 1940 for deliveries of bombers from this side across the ocean. Another year and the RCAF arrived; the RAF sent a unit and the United States also established a well-manned station.

Newfoundland resumed control of the international airport with war's end, and Pan-American, Trans-World and American Overseas Airlines established regular Atlantic passenger services. The rapid growth from then on is a living legend. During 1955 about 11,000 aircraft carrying 452,000 passengers flew in and out of Gander.

The introduction of passenger jets that can span the Atlantic in five or six hours would seem likely to jeopardize the prosperity of such

As can be surmised from the previous text, security at the airport was not as it is today. In the postwar 1940s and 50s, 'security' meant being careful around aircraft and equipment, especially on the tarmac where a whirling prop would be unforgiving.

The next article makes a great story linking Toronto and Gander.



The description reads as follows: "After a record flight. Trans-Atlantic aviatrix Sheila Scott cuddles gift stuffed seals from Gander after landing in Toronto Saturday in a light plane (...)". On this particular trip Ms Scott, OBE and a winner of innumerable trophies, was on the first leg of her 1967 record-breaking solo circumvention of the world." In the late 1960's and early 1970's, Sheila Scott broke a total of 104 records for speed, endurance and long distance flying. Without a Gander Airport to land in, some of these flights would not have happened or may have been even less safe.

The next photo is a real surprise. At first glance, it really looks like people sitting in deck chairs on the roof of Gander's early terminal building, Hangar 22, awaiting some important visitors. Though seeing people on the roof of Hangar 22 would be unusual, it could be the case, as it refers to a royal visit.



The photo description explains the scene: Flags waved smartly in the breeze as the royal couple landed at the airfield. Plane arrived five minutes ahead of schedule; after re-fuelling at Gander; Nfld.

It is a fact that Queen Elizabeth went through Gander in 1953 as mentioned in the photo information. But there lies the first element of doubt. After a gruelling 16-hour flight, the luxurious *Canopus*, a Boeing 377 Stratocruiser, operated by British Overseas Airways Corporation, made a refuelling stop in Gander. However it was in 3 o'clock in the morning. But

Newfoundlanders would have had better sense than wait in daylight hours - in shirt sleeves - until the wee hours in the morning on a barren hangar roof in November! A closer look shows tropical plants and, even more incongruous, a boat sailing on the "tarmac".

The reporter obviously confused Gander with some other place, perhaps a slightly warmer paradise, such as Bermuda.

The last photo in the sampling is from very early Gander. The title gives the official focus for the scene: "Refueller for Trans-Canada planes off to Newfoundland".

The complete description says: " Refueller for Trans-Canada planes off to Newfoundland. This bull-necked; heavy-hoofed air monster is a Handley-Page refuelling machine. Shown here still on land at Montreal; a few moments later it took off for a long flight to Newfoundland. There it will be used for refuelling airplanes of Trans-Canada Airlines; which now link Canada's coasts. This is the newest development in the system which is rapidly bringing Canada's aerial service into line with that of other countries

Right off the bat, they got it wrong.

The carriage of passengers by TCA in the Maritimes (NB, NS and PEI) started on Feb 15, 1940, and the first aircraft was the Lockheed 14 Super Electra (of which TCA had sixteen). but TCA service between Gander, Moncton, Sydney and St. Johns was inaugurated on 01 May 1942. In other words, the Star Weekly photo was three years earlier and obviously had nothing to do with TCA.

The airplane in the photo is a Handley Page Harrow, a converted bomber. In February/March 1939, three bombers were given British Civil Registrations as G-AFRL, G-AFRG and G-AFRH. They were equipped with the extra internal fuel tanks of 1000 Imperial gallons, impressive for the time. The first one stayed in Ireland and the two others were shipped as deck cargo to Montreal on the steamer SS Bedford which was part of the Canadian Pacific Shipping Line. They were then uncrated and reassembled in Longueuil, the Fairchilds Aircraft base, and were then flown to "Newfoundland Airport". Spare parts were also sent to Gander, so the aircraft and team were fairly self-sufficient, though for a part of the time, a railway boxcar was used as accommodations. They were sent Gander, known then as Newfoundland Airport to refuel not TVA but rather Imperial Airways.

After considerable testing, the first real success came on August 5, 1939, when a weekly mail service was inaugurated. Even the pPrime Minister of Ireland, M Éamon de Valera, was present for the departure. Two Imperial Airways Short S-30 flying boats flew on the Southampton-Foynes-Botwood-Montreal-New York route, refuelling in the air twice, once over Ireland and once over Newfoundland. The first refueling took place shortly after takeoff. On their return flights, the flying boats were refuelled by G-AFRG and G-AFRH, after take-off from Botwood. It took generally less than 15 minutes, depending on weather conditions, to transfer the fuel between the two aircraft flying on average at about 125 mph.

When the war started, these two planes stayed Gander to test compacted snow as a possible landing service.

A lesson to all from these Star Weekly articles – today we speak knowing about “fake news”, conspiracy theories, misinformation and the like. Older sources were generally made in good faith, but the constraints of time and technology means that errors are inevitable. Constant crosschecking is therefore the only way to go.