

Rare souvenir - US Air Corps
Newfoundland Airport

(By Robert G Pelley 2016/11/05)

I very recently acquired an absolutely splendid and rare souvenir of wartime Gander – though I'm not really sure what to call it!

It looks a bit like a throw-cover for a chesterfield but I suspect it had in fact a completely different function. The photos below give a good idea of its measurements. I have left it "as found" and deliberately have not had it ironed, as I wouldn't want to take a chance on ruining it.





The markings on this item seem rather innocuous but are in fact quite unusual, representing a time capsule of aviation, Gander and US military history:

U.S. AIR CORPS
US ARMY AIR BASE
NEWFOUNDLAND AIRPORT
NEWFOUNDLAND

Over the years, the air element of the US military has had different roles and names. In the First World War, planes were used mainly for reconnaissance of enemy lines and shooting down the enemy's scout planes, with a bit of bombing here and there. In between the two world wars, some thought that the Air Corps should be a separate service while others thought it should be subordinate to the Army in basically a support role to ground troops.

The inscription shows vividly that dichotomy, mentioning both the “Air Corps” and an “Army Air Base”. The Air Corps became part of the Army (in theory at least, as there was much resistance and infighting) on 20 June 41 and ceased to have an administrative structure as of 09 March 42. The official title became US Army Air Force. In this case, the Air Corps unit is shown almost as a lodger unit on a USAAF base. (The present day USAF, separate from the Army, was formed as a separate branch of the military on 18 September 1947.)

Also, Gander was called “Newfoundland Airport” only until mid-1942. Given the US designations and the name of the airfield, it therefore appears clearly to date from 1941-42. It could quite possibly have been commissioned sometime after the official opening of the United States Army Air Base headquarters on 9 May 1941.

I have seen one other (in reverse colours and presently owned by a person living in Alberta), so it could have been used as a chesterfield throw-cover - but most likely not. In 1941, American troops lived in very basic and sparse accommodations and throw-covers would have been the last of their worries, if they had chesterfields to put them on in the first place! In 1941, when the US was not yet officially at war and plans for Gander very unsettled, it would be unlikely to have been sold in their embryonic Post Exchange to be sent home as a gift, even if censorship was not yet in full swing.

From photos from other US military units, my guess is that It would have been used at the centre of a head table or at a press briefing, so that the unit identification would fold down vertically in front of the table. In that way, photos of event would automatic identify who was involved.

I might bring it out someday if I get visitors from the Rock!