

## Walrus spotted on the shores of Gander Lake

Walrus have been spotted in Gander both before and after the Second World War. But their tusks were a bit different from those of normal animals - theirs were .303 caliber machine gun bullets or 760 lbs of bombs.

We are obviously talking about military airplanes, in this case the amphibious Supermarine Walrus designed and made in the UK between the two world wars. This is what a wartime one would have looked like.



It normally had a crew of 3-4, was about 33 ½ feet long with a wingspan of close to 46 feet. It flew at 135 mph with a range of 600 miles. Built to be shot off a catapult, to make rough-water landings and to be hoisted back on deck, it was made as solid as a ship's anchor. It was also a shade more ugly than the sleek Spitfire fighter made by the same company.

The first amphibious aircraft to land in Gander was a Walrus. The station log has an entry dated 2 August, which states that the Walrus L2274 arrived at 1000 hours from Botwood, piloted by a Lt. Commander Cockburn and carrying Lt. Owen as passenger. It departed for Botwood at 1015 hours.

Another Walrus, the L2278, also landed Gander from Botwood at 1040 hours, 4 August 1939, also piloted by Cockburn. It carried two passengers, which look to be Commander Tidd and Lt. Owen. No departure time was noted.

There is another entry dated 5 August, which has Walrus L2278 arriving from Botwood at 1010 hours, piloted by Lt. Bailey and carrying two seamen as passengers. It departed for Botwood at 1105 hours. (Much thanks to Darrell Hillier for the log entries.)

These two airplanes had come to Newfoundland on the HMS Berwick, a County-class heavy cruiser. Built in 1924, the Berwick underwent extensive reconstruction in 1937-38 during which a hangar was provided with crane facilities for handling two aircraft, as shown below.



Below is a photo of the Walrus L2278 as it is being hoisted aboard the HMS Berwick. Given that the sign in the background says “National Biscuit Company”, this is fairly surely an American port.



On completion in late 1938, HMS Berwick was re-commissioned for service in the West Indies. In the latter part of the summer 1939, before the start of the Second World War, she made a goodwill tour of certain Atlantic ports including Montreal, New York and St. John's. The next photo shows her in St John's Harbour. It could be assumed that the goodwill tour also extended to the ship's aircraft.



The next Walrus went astray in Gander after the Second World War, an airplane known under two names, firstly as Z1781 and later as CF-GKA.

On 14 September 1940, a small British Royal Navy Air Section, HMS Seaborn, was formed at RCAF Station, Dartmouth, NS, to service Supermarine Walrus and Fairey Swordfish aircraft belonging to the Royal Navy ships visiting Halifax. While ashore at HMS Seaborn, these Walrus aircraft were used for search and rescue, as well as maritime reconnaissance patrols. In May 1945, at the end of WW II, the Royal Navy donated the three Walrus' then at HMS Seaborn to the Royal Canadian Navy.

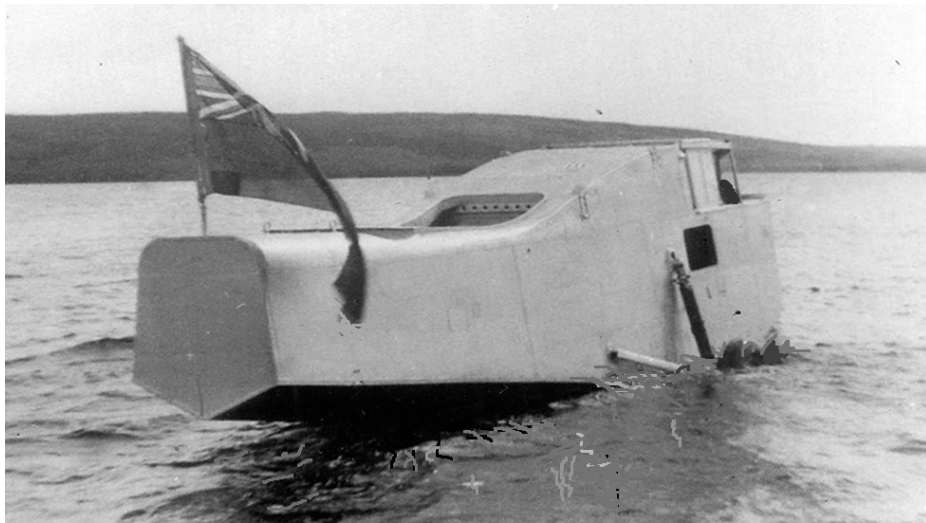
The Walrus Z1781 went back and forth between the RCN and the RCAF until finally it was struck off strength on the 6th of December, 1947 and declared a war asset. This Walrus was bought by Kenting Aviation in 1948 and subsequently registered as CF-GKA.

It was slated to do survey work in Newfoundland & Labrador when it went unserviceable due to engine failure. Being a non commercial model, Kenting Aviation concluded that repair would be pretty much unprofitable and, given the slew of other post-war airplanes cheaply available, they got rid of it. Too late they learned that the stores section at Dartmouth had plenty of brand new engines still in their packing crates.

There is nothing that looks more like a boat than a flying boat – so the idea came up to make it into a real one. Here is a photo from 1948 that shows the basic conversion – no wings or tail, the wheels still on for land mobility, and an inboard motor. This is the handiwork of the late Mr Sam Blandford, known as a superb mechanic who once worked for Ferry Command. It is possible, but not certain, that the well-known Ganderite, Edgar Baird, a former RAF FI/Lt, may have had a hand in this adventure.



The Walrus was actually put into service on a regular basis, as can be seen below where it is on the waters of Gander Lake.



Apparently, experience showed that quarters were cramped, the fumes from the motor sometimes unaccommodating and the whole shebang a bit too top-heavy for the sometimes rough water of Gander Lake. Somewhere along the way it simply fell into misuse and, like the other Walrus of that era, disappeared from view.