

# Wartime Gander Lake

(by Robert G Pelley, 2020-11-16)  
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## Introduction

Some of Gander's older residents may remember it. But anyone who has gone down to the lake past the "Silent Witness" knows where it was.

The "Silent Witness" is a monument to the 248 soldiers of the 3rd Battalion, 502 Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division who died when their aircraft crashed slightly after takeoff. It is between the highway and the lake, slightly east of Gander. The road to, and past it, is rough, requiring careful driving. But it wasn't always that way. During World War II and for many years after, it was one of Gander's most travelled routes, in wartime for work and in peacetime for pleasure.

When trans-Atlantic travel started in the late 1930s, flying boats through Botwood was the first choice. By 1940 it became clear that flying boats were now the second choice, compared to land-based planes in Gander. Botwood was closed to civilian air travel and an alternate base for flying boats was developed at Gleneagles, near the west end of Gander Lake. However, soon became clear that there would be little chance of civilian flying boats using it.

In a pinch, a flying boat could of course land anywhere on the lake. But Gander Lake had three problems:

- ° there were no facilities to service an occasional civilian flying boat
- ° many military flying boats were soon expected to come off the assembly lines, many of which were not amphibian
- ° Gander Lake, being so long, yet so close to an expected massive ferry operation, would require crash boat facilities.

## The Marine Base

The notes of a 20 January 1941 meeting in Montreal of the Canado-American Permanent Joint Board for Defense said the following in that regard;

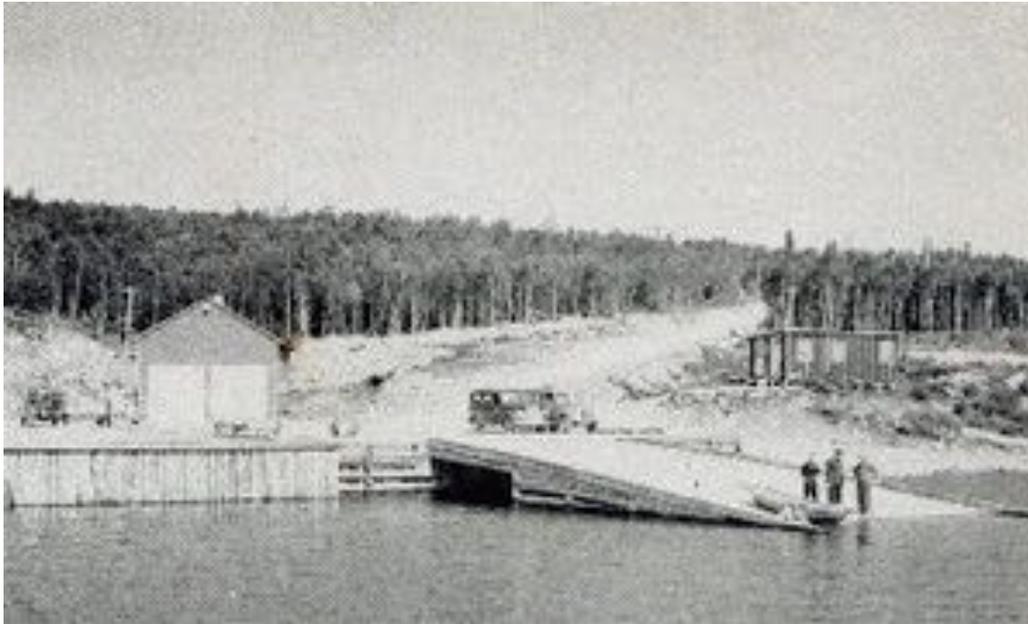
Owing to weather conditions and conditions of the ground at Botwood, the engineers could not definitely locate a site, but the district inspector is arranging for more preliminary investigation, but final report cannot be made until conditions permit observations in the spring. Gander Lake should be considered as an alternative to Botwood as information received indicates that a suitable shore for slipways can be found on the north shore of Gander Lake reasonably close to the airport. Officers on the site have been requested to submit a report on a suitable site, including road connections to the Newfoundland Airport. Some facilities should be erected at Botwood to meet the emergency when boats might occasionally not get over the land to Gander. There is a good chain of lakes between Botwood and Gander.

At that time, the beginning ferry operations through Gander were in the hands of civilians, the Canadian Pacific Air Service, created through the efforts of Lord Beaverbrook, head of the British Ministry of Aircraft Production. This unit was made up notably of personnel from Imperial Airways.

One of its pilots, Capt Ian Ross, directed CPAS operations and administration in Gander. He immediately set in motion and supervised the construction of a marine base, as soon as spring weather permitted, on the shore of the lake, at the bottom of the now "Silent Witness" road.

This marine base could be visualised as having three main areas:

- ° a "slipway" for launching and retrieving boats and seaplanes
- ° a "bent finger" wharf about perhaps 150 feet long
- ° a maintenance/ storage area



The "Slipway"  
The Silent Witness memorial is about 6-800 feet up the road.



Bare shot of the wharf,  
Very early morning, foggy day. c.1952



Another shot of the wharf, early 1950s  
Note the stairways leading down to water level  
(Cliff Powel and brother)



The maintenance/ storage area showing a mobile crane brought in from the airport as required.

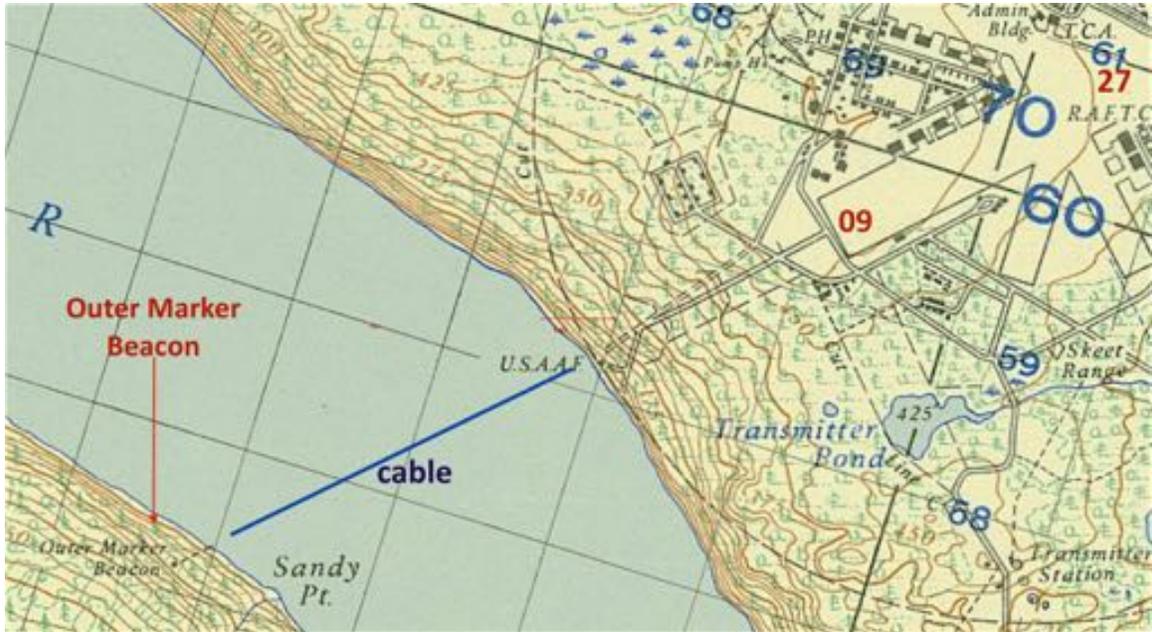
This marine base was used for civilian purposes after the war, but by the 1970s was pretty much unusable as an operating base.

By then the former Royal Air Force marine base was not in good condition. The wharves were practically gone and the refueling raft once used by Shell Oil to refuel the PBN flying boats going to Russia had long since disappeared. Finally authorities decided it was too dangerous and had no choice but to completely demolish and remove it.

### **First motor launch**

Aircraft using any airport needs to be able to line with the runway some ways out on its approach path. The main runway in early Gander was roughly NE-SW, at first called runway 3 and later more properly 09-27. This means that the system to guide an airplane would have to start across the other side of Gander Lake, uninhabited and without facilities, except for a scattered logging or hunting camp.

This of course meant laying cable across Gander Lake, properly aligned with the runway, as shown below.



Sketch 1- showing early Gander's main runway 09-27, the outer marker beacon across the lake and the placement of the cable.

To get the cable across the lake required, besides ingenuity and hard work, two substantial boats, one a cable-layer and the other to offer assistance as required. This was done in 1937, in preparation for hopefully soon to come land planes.



An astute reader could very well say that there is something wrong here. There is a large motor launch plying the waters near Gander Airport in 1937 - but the marine base was built four years later!

In fact, the British authorities responsible for the flying boat travel had motor launches both in Botwood and Gleneagles. The Gleneagles craft would have been available on short notice anywhere on the lake.

A note dated 6 November 1937 states that this motor launch was under orders by "Airport Officials". Equally, it apparently would have been used to quickly transport meteorological and radio personnel from Gander to Gleneagles if the arrival of a flying boat was anticipated.

As mentioned previously, ferry operations were run by the CPR Air Service. This boat was handed over to them in early 1941.

There was also a smaller boat that was sent to Gander from Botwood that sank during a storm on the lake in April of the same year. It was recovered and repaired but no other information on it was found.

However, here is a photo of the "Glenagles" motor launch in the summer of 1945 at the marine base previously mentioned.



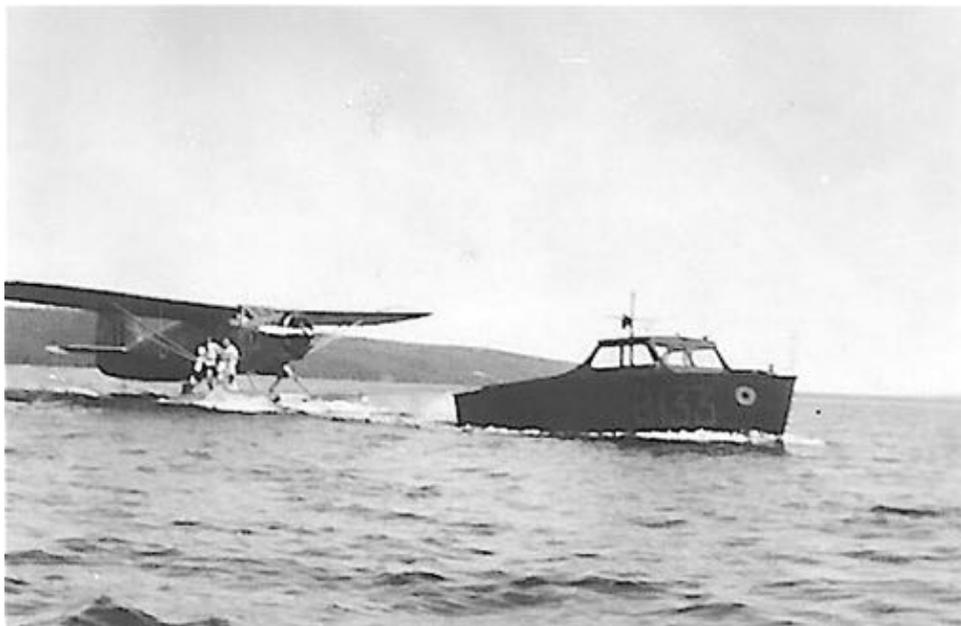
## **RCAF crash boat**

It may seem strange to think of sailors in the RCAF. But the RCAF did have sea-planes and flying boats. The pilots and crews of the airplanes were quite excellent but hadn't yet learned how to walk on water. The RCAF therefore had supporting marine squadrons to which the sailors were attached.

On Gander Lake, there were ten sailors full-time, detached from the Marine Squadron in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. In the summer of 1945, a Flight-Sargeant Wentzell was in charge of the crew.

The main job was to service the RCAF Norseman generally tied up just off the marine base. This meant notably bringing out the crews and supplies, especially if the plane was going on a mercy or search and rescue mission. A most difficult job was when they had to bring a patient on a stretcher from the plane to a waiting ambulance.

They were also available in the event of an accident or emergency. This photo shows the RCAF boat, number B133, out next to the Norseman. It is not clear what they are actually doing, as there appears to be three chaps chatting on the pontoon, but nobody in the boat.



This is another shot of the boat:



This crash boat was built in 1936 by the Grew Boats, at the time located at Jackson's Point on Lake Simcoe, Ontario. It was 19 feet long with a 60 hp motor.

It would appear that this boat was left with the Civil Administration when the RCAF pulled out of Gander after the war, and quite logically so, since after the war, the military had loads of surplus equipment it had to get rid of. In any case, it was kept in a boat house (which will describe in the next section) until the 1980s, when it was sold by auction. The buyer redid the boat and put it up for it for sale in 2013:



## The American crash boats

The Americans put boats on Gander Lake surprising late in the war. It may have been a precaution, as they knew that as soon as the war was over, there would be a massive influx of combat-used airplanes coming in to land over the lake.

The USAAF had in fact two crash boats on Gander Lake. The smallest and perhaps earliest was the J-169, known as a "utility" or "general purpose" craft. It was 22 feet long, built by Chris-Craft in Algonac, Michigan. Only one photo of J-169 was found and is shown below, along with a photo showing a similar model.



The "real" crash boat was the much larger P-162:



P-162 was a 42 foot crash boat also built by Chris-Craft in Algonac, Michigan. A modified Owens Boat Builder's civilian design, it was part of a contract for 30 boats built between November 1942 and February 1943.

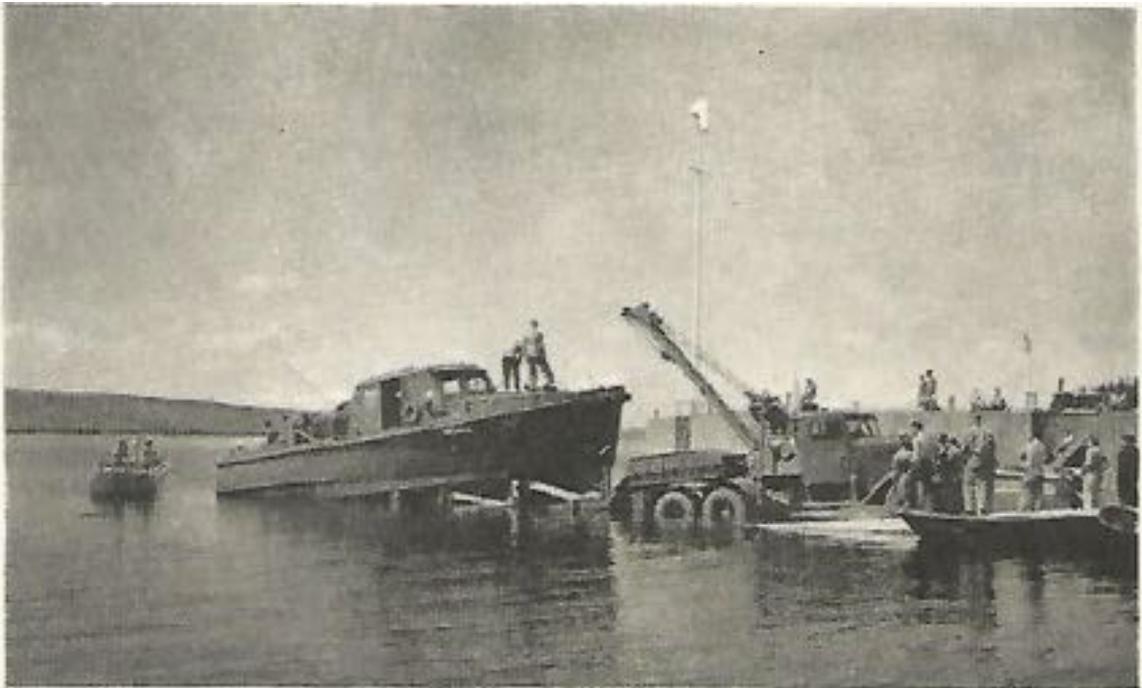
It had a 12-foot beam and two 500 hp engines. It launched from the marine base in the summer of 1944 as these photos show.



Arrival at the marine base



Setting up on the slipway



Launching as planned.

To protect the boat from the elements and have it ready to scramble immediately, the USAAF then built a boat house with crew quarters, just where the cross-lake cable went across the lake in 1937. The boat house was therefore conveniently located south of the "American Side" of the airport, via Washington Avenue (known to many as Burner Road).



The next shot shows the 1-162 preparing for departure



At the end of the summer 1945, when the USAAF closed down its wartime operations in Gander, this boat was sent to the Harmon Air Field in Stephenville. No specific mention was made of J-169 but presumably it left at the same time.

This boat house did not end its career at that time. The roof served and the piers on either side made good diving boards for reckless Gander kids. The boat house was used to store different boats post-war, including the former RCAF B-133.



Post-war boathouse bathers.

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### **Main References:**

- ° Carlos Ruth's US Crash Boats Website,
- ° A number of notes supplied by Darrell Hillier,
- ° USAAF "Propagander" magazine, fall 1944 and summer 1945
- ° RCAF "Gander" magazine, summer 1945