

First Gander civilians in an airplane accident

(by Robert G Pelley, 2015-06-06)
<http://bobsganderhistory.com>

The RAF 35 Squadron went through Gander in the summer of 1946. Many in Gander are unaware that this visit ended with the unfortunate death of four civilians. So I decided to see what information was available about this accident which marked the history of Gander for a long time.

Happily someone else had had the same thought some years before. A very well known Gander historian, Frank Tibbo, did an excellent article on the subject in October 2004 for the Gander Beacon. This was based primarily on reports from people who had in some way been involved in the incident at the time. A link to his very informative article is given here:

http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~cannf/ct_news_lancasterbomb.htm

Back in 2004 when Mr. Tibbo did his article, access to Internet resources was rather sketchy. So the following text hopes to put both the visit and the accident in a larger context and to add a few more details.

The visit of the RAF 35 Sqdn was part of a Goodwill Tour to the US. This had been organized apparently via discussions in February 1946 between General Ira Eaker who commanded the US 8th Air Force and Air Marshall Sir Norman Bottomley of the RAF Bomber Command. Group Captain Richard Collard was given charge of the operation which would involve sixteen Lancasters of 35 Squadron, plus an Avro York (Lancaster modified for cargo).

One half of the squadron left England (RAF Graveley) on

8 July with the other half leaving on 9 July, following the route England – Azores – Gander. When the Lancasters arrived in Gander from the Azores, and got sorted out, they went, as one crew member reportedly said, "to an enormous breakfast at 3.30am. First unrationed food since 1939, and we all made pigs of ourselves". After a stop of several days in Gander, the squadron flew on to Mitchell Field, New York, and subsequently toured as far as California. This part of the trip was basically without incident.

During the return trip, the Lancasters departed Mitchell Field, NY, on the 22 August for Gander. On the 23rd, one half of the squadron, 'A' Flight, departed Gander routinely for Lagens Field in the Azores.

In the evening of 25th of August, it was the turn of 'B' Flight to take off from Gander for the trip to Lagens. Lancaster TW870, piloted by F/L Pete Stockwell, had to return to Gander after twenty minutes primarily due to problems with his compass. He may also have had a problem with his landing lights, which might otherwise have helped warn of his arrival. He was cleared to land but mistook two directional green lights which marked the end of the runway for glide path indicators. As a result, the aircraft bounced on the raised road which was parallel to and twenty yards from the edge of the runway.

There were some civilians standing in that general area waiting for a light signal indicating when it would be safe to use the road along the end of the runway. The aircraft's starboard wheel hit some of them, killing three men and one woman and injuring a fourth man.

This was reported in the Toronto Star on 26 August as follows:

4 KILLED AT GANDER AIRPORT WHEN STRUCK BY LANCASTER

St. John's, Nfld., Aug. 26 — Four persons were killed and another seriously injured at Gander airport last night when struck by an airplane as it was preparing for an emergency landing.

The plane was believed to be one of the British Lancaster "good will" squadron, which is returning to Britain.

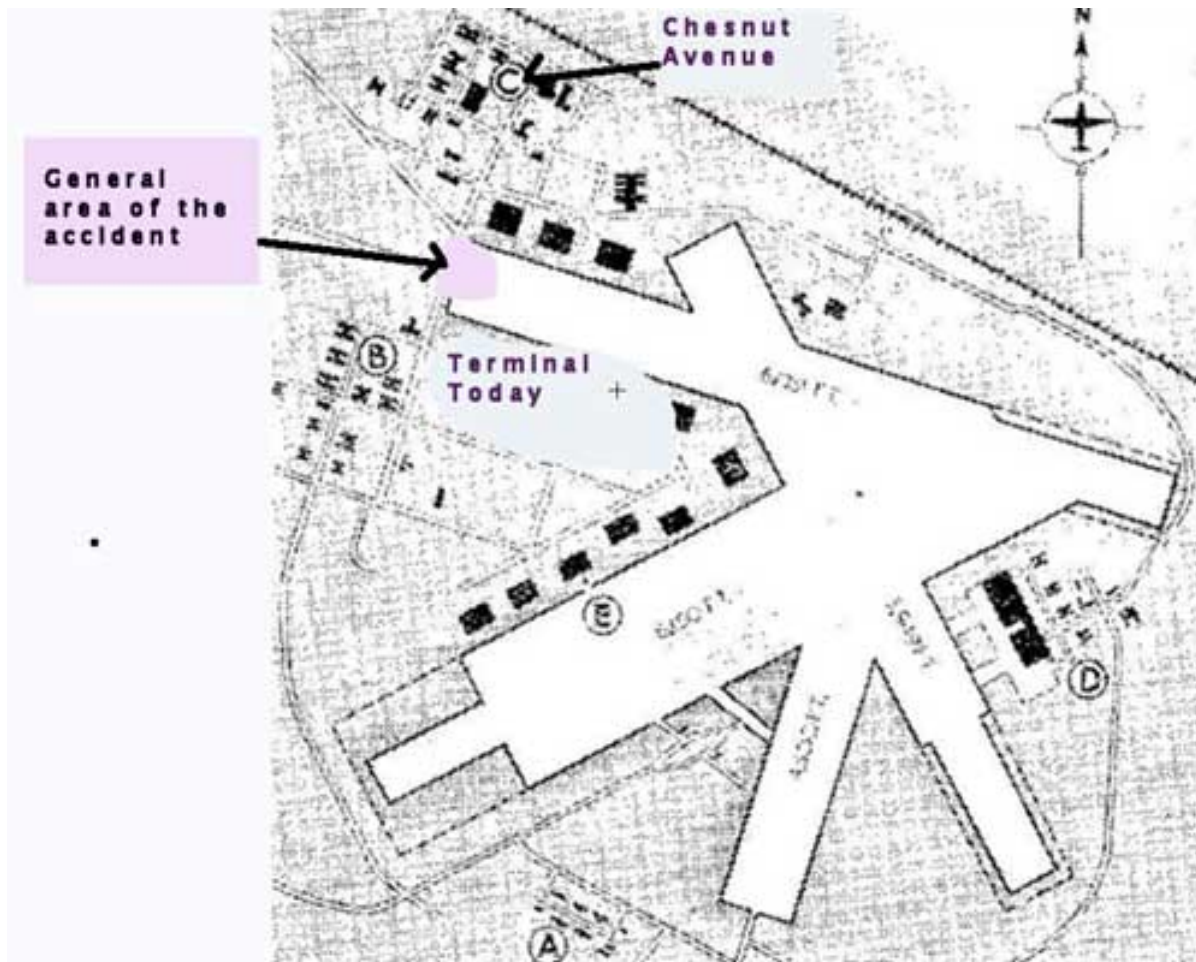
The plane had taken off but was forced to return to the airport because of compass trouble and swooped low across a road on which the victims were standing.

The dead are: Raymond Parsons, Stanley Rideout and Cyril Brazil of St. John's, and Miss Isola Clarke of Carbonear. The injured man is W. McDonald of St. Mary's. All were employees of the airport.

The aircraft was held and an inquiry has been instituted.

Given that an aircraft wheel is not all that large and given certain reports, it may be possible that some were in fact hit by a whirling prop. Apparently the official evaluation mentions the prop but it is possible that the public version was sanitized, so to speak.

On the map below from that era, I have indicated approximately where the accident happened. As a guide, the location of the present terminal is indicated. Another way to physically find the area of the accident is go to the corner of the road to the present terminal and the radar station. From that point, look north across the runway and that should be it.



The aircraft involved in the incident is generally known as serial number TW870 and spent quite some time as a

derelict in Gander. In RAF parlance it was aircraft TL-R. Below is a photo of this actual airplane on 29 April 1946.



On investigation, The pilot F/L Stockwell was exonerated of all blame. It is hard to see but below is a photo of F/L Stockwell doing an engine run-up on 6 June 1946 in the days before the start of the Goodwill Tour.



Funny thing about life – if on that day of 6 June the pilot had found that one of his engines was running a bit rough, he might have been given another airplane, this one with a better compass...and life in Gander would have continued on, in its own happy way.

As a follow up on the afterlife of TW870:

It remained virtually derelict - and often vandalised- in Hanger 8 in Gander until October 1950, when it was sold for scrap to Hercules Sales of Toronto, then to Freight Lift Inc. The aircraft was repaired just sufficiently to be flown from Gander to Dorval via Summerside. In Dorval it was converted to a fuel tanker. This included including the fitting of a nose cone that had once been part of a Trans Canada Airlines Lancaster X passenger aircraft – this nose cone had even been previously used as a chicken coup!

After transfer in 1952 to World Wide Aviation (owned by a Ferry Command legend, Don MacVicar), it was registered as CF-GBA and moved to Seven Islands, Quebec. There it was used primarily to resupply outposts of the Iron Ore Company of Canada. On one of these flights, on 28 July, 1953. the pilot, Capt A R Iba, lost control while landing in a crosswind on the gravel airstrip at Menihek, NL, about 100 kms north-west of the Smallwood Reservoir. The Lancaster hit a rockpile, caught fire and was a total loss. The manifest showed an overloaded aircraft of 2,150 gallons of diesel, 300 gallons of petrol and 800 gallons of Avgas. Happily both crew members were unhurt.



The above photo shows the Lancaster TW870 / TL-R / CF-GBA as it burns on the edge of the landing strip in Menihek. It was taken an unknown person, quite likely a bush pilot. Any identification of the photographer and other pertinent info would of course be appreciated.

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