

Runway snow compaction

Gander is well located on the "Great Circle" route between North America and Europe. But being on the edge of the North Atlantic, it also gets a whole lot of snow. Snow removal was obviously a priority, but a very costly operation. So thought was given in 1939 to the idea of landing on the snow rather than removing it. For a safe landing, however, the snow had to be highly compacted.

To test this Idea, you need three things :

- obviously snow
- heavy-duty compaction equipment
- an airplane that would not be required for normal operations

Ideally, the plane used in such a test should be roughly about the size and weight of the largest aircraft expected to use the runways. And it would be best to use an airplane that no one would cry over if it got a few dents and dings along the way!

By the winter of 1940 all test conditions were met. Compacting equipment was already available and there was a fair amount of snow. Two Harrow bombers had been converted for in-flight refueling but with the end of commercial civilian flying-boat traffic, they now were basically taking up ramp space. Might as well put them to good use!

The following photos show the equipment and the type of plane. (Much thanks to Darrell Hillier on this article.)





Talking about dents and dings, as an example, these photos show a tail-wheel mishap which occurred 19 March 1940 to Harrow G-AFRH, as confirmed in the operations log.



The tail wheel broke through a weak spot in compacted area. The crew given as Johnson and Le Chemenant (spelling being verified because hard to read).