

M and M in Gander - A bomber crash that could have gone really badly

(by Robert G Pelley 15-09-2017)
<http://bobsganderhistory.com>

The last website entry, by Darrell Hillier, gave the story of the first crash in wartime Gander. This one describes the last wartime crash.

You have most likely already heard the expression: “They were very lucky in their bad luck!” It generally refers to when something good came out of a bad situation or at the least where things could have gone terribly wrong but happily didn’t. This is what happened in Gander in early 1945. There were many wartime crashes of aircraft arriving or departing Gander – this one, but for the grace of God, could have been the worst.

The RCAF Daily diary of 20 February 1945 is reproduced below, with minor adjustments to make more readable:

“In the early hours of this morning B.24 no 44-50427, an American aircraft crashed after takeoff on runway 36 (...). It appeared to list badly to one side and did not rise properly, so that it crashed through the power lines and through two small buildings, levelling them to the ground. One was the Gander Hobby Shop, unoccupied at the time, and other unoccupied building. It also took the roof and two walls off a third building in which there were occupants, before landing some hundred yards from the barrack block occupied by the Women’s Division. Only one of the crew was injured, though after viewing the wrecked aircraft this appears a miracle. The entire domestic area was without telephone communication for some hours.”

This is the actual entry is shown here:

In the early hours of this morning B.24 50427, an American a/c crashed after takeoff on runway 36 (See Appendix "A") It appeared to list badly to one side and did not rise properly so that it crashed through the power lines and through two small buildings levelling them to the ground. One was the Gander Hobby Shop, unoccupied at the time and the other an unoccupied building. It also took the roof and two walls off a third building in which there were occupants, before landing some hundred yards from the barrack block occupied by the Women's Division. Only one of the crew was injured though after viewing the wrecked aircraft this appears a miracle. The entire domestic area was without telephone communication for some hours.

The report produced by the United States Army Air Force gave the crash time as 0550Z, meaning in civilian terms Greenwich Mean Time or the time in Greenwich near London. Being wintertime, the difference between GMT and Nfld time was 3 ½ hours, making departure roughly 02h20 local.

This airplane had been manufactured just two months before, on Christmas Eve 1944, and had only 24 hours 55 minutes flying time on it. Its home base was the 1379 AAF Unit, Dow Field, Bangor, Maine and was enroute to a final base (possibly in Europe) via Lagens in the Azores. At take-off it had a full load of fuel, namely 2780 gallons, good for a bit over 14 hours. Its gross weight was 61744 lbs, close to the maximum allowable of 62000. Weather at take-off was clear, ceiling unlimited, visibility eight miles, temperature 12° F, dew-point 12°F with a west wind of eight MPH.

The pilot was a 28 year old Army Corps 2nd Lieutenant Donald K MacCallum. Over and above his almost 400 hours as second pilot or student, he also had 272 hours as aircraft commander, including 161 on a B-24. There were nine other crewmembers.

The American crash report gave the following version of the facts:

This aircraft was briefed and cleared normally, as one of a group of aircraft being dispatched to Lagens, enroute to their final destination. Aircraft received taxi instructions and proceeded to take-off position for final run-up. Crew reports that run up was normal and no malfunctions were found. Take-off was started and aircraft was seen to leave the ground at approximately the same position as previous aircraft had done. After leaving the ground, the aircraft did not climb but maintained almost level flight until nearly out of sight, at which time a flash was observed. Crash alarm was immediately sounded even though there was not any further indication of a

crash. Control tower also observed the flash but did not realize that aircraft had actually crashed until after checking with American operations. Ambulances and crash trucks were immediately sent to the scene.

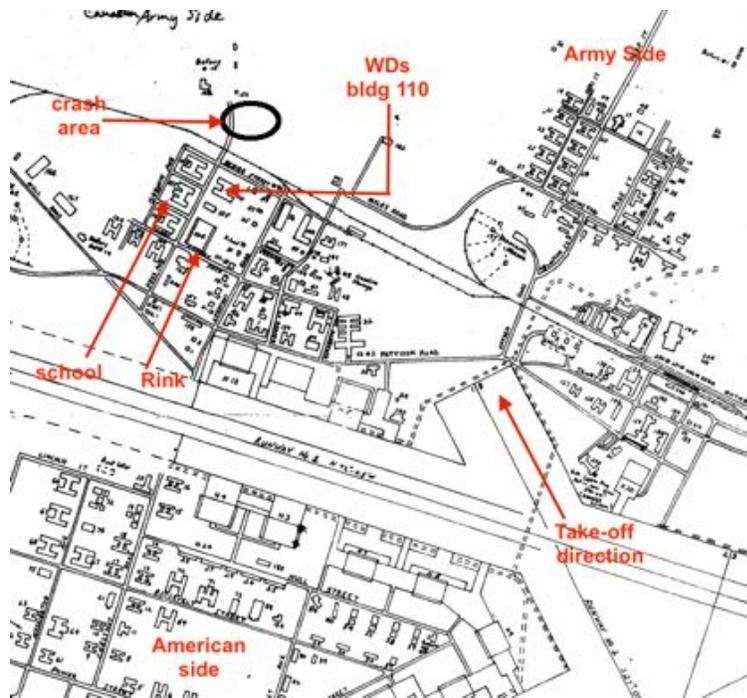
Following the take-off, the aircraft continued in flight, with the left wing slightly lower than the right, and made a very slow turn, totalling about 10 degrees, to the left of the take-off line, to the point where wreckage came to rest. In the process, numerous power and communication lines were torn down, tops were broken from two (2) telephone or power poles, and three (3) other poles were knocked down. Just beyond this point, the aircraft hit, and completely demolished two small frame barracks and damaged two others. Two people (who were not injured) were sleeping in one of the damaged barracks but the others were unoccupied. The aircraft began to come apart when the first pole was hit and parts were well-scattered along its track, until it came to rest in a deep ditch about 50 yards beyond the barracks it had knocked down.

Crewmembers ditched the aircraft as rapidly as possible, after it came to rest, and they went to a nearby barracks. While phoning, the ambulance and crash trucks arrived. The #1 engine, in its passage through a barracks, had picked up some lumber and part of a stove, and a small fire started which was extinguished by crewmembers before the crash crew arrived.

The pilot, co-pilot and engineer reports attached all speak of severe vibration. Nothing has been found to indicate a possible source of this vibration. Crewmembers, at the time, thought it to be runway roughness. Manifold pressures and RPMs remained normal throughout flight but crew felt that airspeed was slow in building up. Pilot stated that pitot heat was on at all times. One propeller governor is being sent to Presque Isle for bench test and disassembly due to inadequate facilities at this station. A separate report will be made of this test. The Accident Board doubts the possibility of malfunction of this governor since any decrease in RPM, which could cause the severe vibration mentioned, would immediately cause a noticeable increase in manifold pressure. This change in manifold pressure was not observed by the crew.

Frost on the aircraft is not believed to be a factor since frosting was very light. Other aircraft did not report any trouble from this source, either before or after this crash. Examination of the engines, particularly the critical cylinders #7 and #9, revealed no indication of detonation. Condition of the propellers indicates that all engines were developing power at the time of the crash.

For people who are familiar with the old Hunt Memorial Academy and the old skating rink on Foss Avenue, this crash was a short distance past the end of Foss, just north of the railway tracks.



(USAAF photo)



What is left of Carrier Hobby Shop after being struck
by B.24. No 450427

(RCAF photo)



Damage to barrack (USAAF photo)

Pre-take-off checks by the crew appeared normal except for a slight loss of supercharger oil, not considered major. There was slight frosting of the wings that was swept clean by the crew. The engines were warmed and prop de-icers used. Gas tanks were topped up for departure but the navigator found his sextant seemed to be out by about 50 miles. The engines were shut down and when the navigator came back, were restarted, including diluting the oil “in the normal manner for three minutes running the props through and also feathering mechanism.”

The official crash report did not single out the cause the crash because, except for the vibration which had an unknown source, the take-off was made as per procedures. All operable controls, so far as could be determined, were in normal operating positions for take-off. Among the contributing factors to this crash mentioned by the Accident Board were the following:

- ° Failure to use landing lights for takeoff, as briefed, and as advised by tower when giving take-off clearance. If lights had been used, as directed, pilot could have seen obstructions in time to pull up and go over them.
- ° Over-dilution of engines and propellers. After starting engines the last time, pilot did not operate propellers and feathering systems to fill them with fresh undiluted oil. Time interval between original starting of engines and dilution of them (.....) did not require or warrant another dilution. Poor understanding of dilution, and poor technique in handling it, are indicated.
- ° Good judgment would have been to cut throttles and locate the source of the reported severe vibration before proceeding to take-off.
- ° Pilot and co-pilot both reported that they had been trained to go on instruments as soon as aircraft was airborne. As a result, neither pilot was looking outside and, of course, obstructions could not be seen. Regardless of training, it is poor judgment to make a night take-off, without lights, on a strange field and runway, and make no attempt to see and avoid obstructions, which may exist.
- ° Aircraft used about 5000 feet of a 6000-foot runway for take-off. Following take-off, pilot apparently held aircraft level and made no attempt to gain altitude. First contact with pole was made at a point approximately 2000 feet from, and about 50 feet higher than, the actual point of take-off.

Among the specific recommendations were the following:

- ° Crews should thoroughly understand that briefing and control tower instructions should be followed, at all times, for their own protection.

- ° More time should be devoted the proper dilution, and subsequent operation, of their engines

- ° Pilots should understand that it is highly dangerous to place complete dependence on instruments the instant the wheels leave the ground, particularly on strange fields, unless the co-pilot is looking outside the aircraft for obstructions. Until definitely clear of all obstructions, crews should be trained to have one man watching constantly.

There were also several comments of a general nature concerning Gander and concerning American operations as such.

- ° Lack of adequate approach, runway and obstruction lighting at this station.

- ° Ground discipline of tactical crews passing through this station is poor, by comparison with crews who have recently passed through this station. This is proven by the careless handling of their aircraft in the air and on the ground, by the mechanical condition and cleanliness of the aircraft, and by their lack of knowledge and interest in looking after their aircraft while on the ground here. It is, also, evidenced by the condition of their uniforms, their response to orders and suggestions, and to some extent, by their personal habits. This is a general criticism and is not directed at this particular crew

- ° Many tactical crews, at this station, start their take-offs with lights on, after receiving Control Tower instructions to use them, but turn them off as soon as they are rolling. On strange fields, with unknown obstructions, this is definitely poor judgment.

In February 1945, it was felt by many that the war in Europe was pretty much over and it is quite possible that they thought there was less a reason for strict discipline and precision.

In any case, the photo below shows the result as far as both the airplane and the United States Army Air Force was concerned:



So: a **Miracle** that nobody was killed and a **Mystery** of why it happened in the first place.

In early 1945, this time Gander managed to get away with it.