

Hospitals in old Gander

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(Robert G Pelley 2018-06-05)
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Other than the present James G Paton hospital out on Trans-Canada Highway, there were five other hospitals in Gander, all on the old airport site.

The first medical facility, of the late 30 - very early 40 era, could hardly be counted as a hospital. It was just a set of two tarpaper shacks and was basically a medication inspection room and dispensary. A Doctor Noel Steward Knapp, a 1924 graduate of Queens University in Toronto, came in regularly on speeder from Lewisporte, for which he was paid 200\$ a month.



First doctor's quarters and office

In May 1940, Raymond Manning, Newfoundland government secretary for Public Utilities, toured the airfield and described the Administration Building as housing the 'airport hospital, located on the ground floor near the west entrance and consisting of two rooms, one a surgery and the other a consulting room'. While there, Manning spoke with resident physician Doctor Noel Knapp and his "first aid man" named Munn. It would appear therefore that this first Gander hospital moved in early 1940 to the Administration Building.

In very early 1940, Atlas Construction arrived in Gander to build the facilities required for a modern military aerodrome. A first priority was a small hospital primarily to take care of Atlas workers and had four beds, though no proper operating room. A Dr Conran was responsible. Its location was apparently in the general area between the tracks and the Administration Building, near the railway station in case a civilian patient needed to be sent out to a larger hospital, in Grand Falls or St. John's, via the "Newfy Bullet" train.

The Royal Canadian Air Force made its first reconnaissance of wartime Gander in February 1940 and moved in elements of "North Atlantic Squadron" (10 Bomber Reconnaissance) in mid-June. Hospital facilities were therefore required for the RCAF. Construction was started very soon after on a third hospital, with a standard ward of eight beds, a dental laboratory and clinic, a small kitchen and a pharmacy. There were also two isolation wards, as both measles and venereal disease were not unknown.

The fourth hospital was the 125-bed RCAF facility, which everyone thought of as the "Gander Hospital" until the Paton opened in 1964. Better known as the Sir Frederick Banting Memorial Hospital, it was opened by the Duke of Kent on 12 September 1941.

The photograph below gives a good idea of general construction of the "real" Gander hospital in the early 1950s. It was hand-coloured by the late Fred Smeaton.

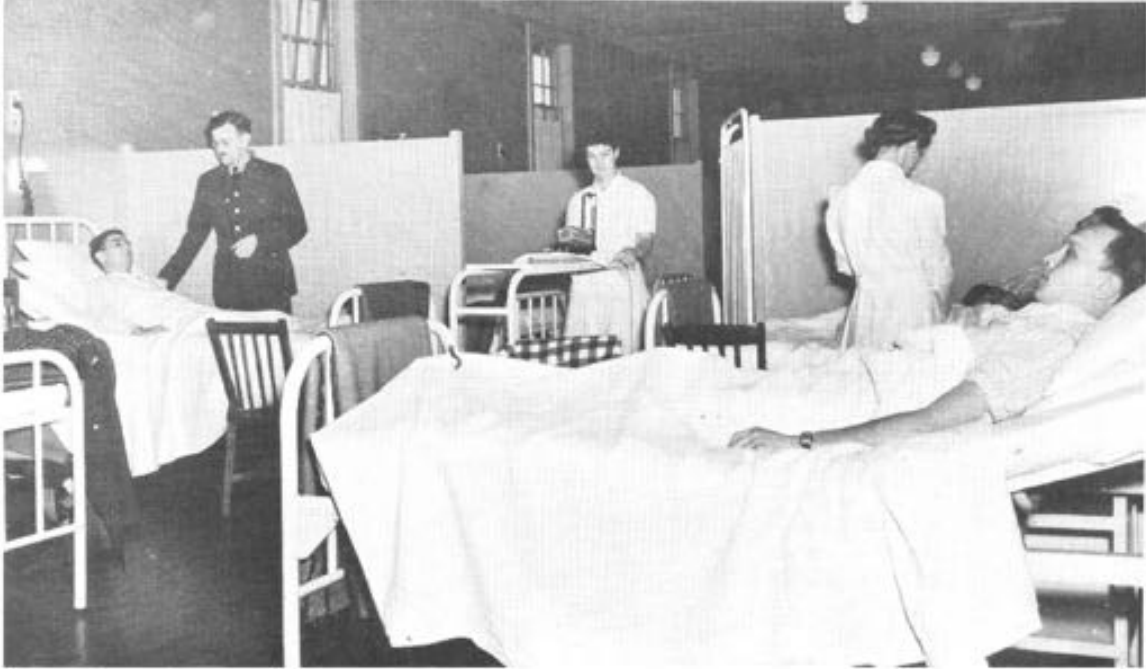


● Gander's Sir Frederick Banting Memorial Hospital, named in honor of the famous co-discoverer of insulin who was killed in a plane crash near Gander in 1941, has sixty-five beds, is modernly equipped, and handled 1800 patients in 1949. Shown here are Drs. J. Crowle (left) and J. G. Peters, who took charge in April, 1946. Patient is Peter Readell, an aircraft mechanic. Hospital is operated by the Provincial Department of Health.



Photo Atlantic Guardian 1950

The next to photos show aspects of the hospital as a military operation (post-op ward and lab).



Because there were no medical facilities on the RAF side, for a monthly sum of fifty cents per person, Ferry Command personnel, their wives and children, received free treatment at the RCAF (Banting) hospital. This scheme came into effect on 1 Feb 43. However by July of 44, costs were exceeding the memberships paid in, so the monthly sum per person was raised to one dollar effective 1 Aug 1944,. The maximum rate of \$2 for family memberships remained in place. Benefits were also increased.

By now American military forces were starting to arrive in Gander. On 09 March 1941, the first American weather personnel of 8th Weather Squadron arrived and the American United States Army Air Force area was officially established 09 May 1941: The quarters for the Americans were entirely furnished by the Canadian government and in early 1941, the Canadian Air Ministry drew up plans for a 150-bed hospital for them, a fifth in Gander.

There were administrative hang-ups, so it took til December 1942 before it went into service as the "310th Station Hospital". Until it was opened, one ward of the RCAF Banting hospital was assigned to US medical staff to treat American patients. They able were allowed to use the hospital's laboratory and X-ray facilities.



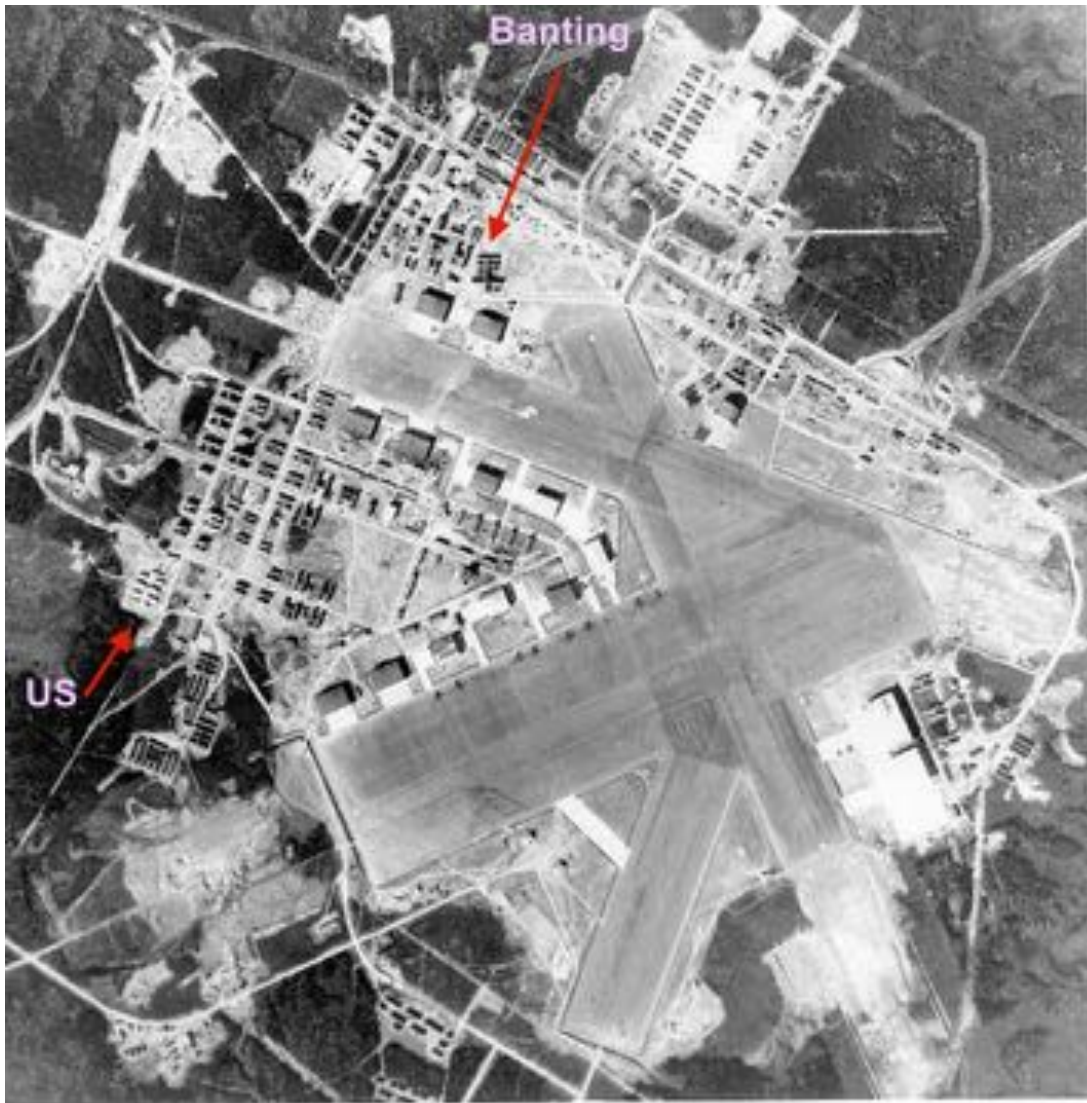
US hospital seen from the west



Aerial view US hospital



Position of the two hospitals on a map of today



Two main hospitals in Old Gander

During the war, the hospital was used both as a regular station hospital and as a convalescent centre for the wounded soldiers flown from Europe for rest and recovery, for as long as required before returning to the United States.

By July of 1944, the hospital was officially disbanded. It did however continue as a convalescent and rehab centre for returning military.



C-54 med evac cargo in Gander

Evacuation from Newfoundland was uncertain due to the unpredictable weather. For this reason, a medical officer of better than average surgical skill was assigned to this American unit.



Operating room in the US Gander hospital

The following information is from the magazine Propagander of summer 1945 published by the USAAF base authorities



The AAF Dispensary here is rather unlike any other medical installation with which U. S. Army personnel are familiar. It is of a Canadian cantonment type of hospital construction and is patterned to withstand the rigors of severe northern Weather - heavy snows and high winds.

Built to accommodate 150 patients, it is a large, well equipped medical installation which readily adapts itself to the handling of smaller numbers of patients, yet within an hour's time could be expanded to handle the number of patients designated as capacity.

Although at present it has the official title of an AAF Dispensary, this installation is authorized to carry on all the professional activities of a station hospital and such service is rendered to the military and civilian personnel at Gander.

The Convalescent Training Service has been in operation in AAF Hospitals for the past two years, but at Gander it is something new. The purpose of the program is to recondition hospitalized soldiers physically and mentally by a planned and organized rehabilitation program. In this manner, time spent in convalescence is actually not wasted, nor does the patient feel that he is squandering days and weeks in regaining his strength.

Many opportunities and devices for this reconditioning are made available to the patient in order to make it appealing and interesting to every type of patient. The Convalescent Training Service here started in the basement of the Hospital with a hand full of tools and a strong inclination to develop a useful program.

With the co-operation of the various departments on the field, great strides have been made. A convalescent Hobby Shop has been set up in one half of a wing at the north end of the hospital. A Hospital Theatre and a Library have been set up in Ward IV. Physical reconditioning is held in the Wards every morning from 9 until 9:30, and all patients

except the acutely ill participate. The convalescent Hobby Shop is open each afternoon, from 2 until 4 and all material and tools are furnished. A typical day for the convalescing patient in the hospital is filled with diversions and interests directing his mind from worry and boredom.

Awakened in time to wash and shave before breakfast, he goes to the mess for his meal. After returning to the ward he rests a short while before making his bed and policing the immediate area. At 9 exercises strenuous enough to suit the individual patient are given. After resting from this, the patient is made ready for the doctor to see on his ward rounds. Sometime later in the morning the ambulatory cases go to the Hospital Theater to see a variety of training films of universal interest to military personnel. The remainder of the morning the patients have access to the well stocked Library and Day Room facilities at the Hospital. After lunch there is a movie of the GI series, newsreel, or short subject type at the Hospital Theatre that he can attend if he so desires.

At 2 the Convalescent Hobby Shop opens and the NCOIC familiarizes the newcomer with the many dozens of hobbies he can start and lends a hand to those already working on projects who have come to a sturnbling block and need assistance. At Gander we are very fortunate in having Cpl. Gerald R. Smurphat connected with the Convalescent Training Service, since he brings a wide knowledge of radio, carpentry, metal work, and artcrart acquired in civilian life to assist in carrying out the program.

In the evening the American Red Cross presents a recent full length movie for all the patients, either in the Ward to accommodate those unable to leave their bed, or in the Hospital Theatre.

The day for the convalescent has been a full one - with but little time to concentrate on his illness plus great strides toward returning to the status of a useful soldier.



After the departure of US forces, this hospital was used for number of civilian purposes including by airport authorities for storage. It was used also by local business enterprises.

In one case, around 1953-54, a company, probably Eatons, used it as a showroom for a new gizmo called "TV". The signal came in from Grand Falls 60 miles away and the screen generally showed more snow than a blizzard in the Newfoundland Gaff Topsails. People around Gander were already familiar with strange voices coming out of snowstorms and were pretty certain they didn't need to bring a storm *into* the house. They probably didn't make a lot of sales as everyone could see it didn't work and most likely never would.

In later years, the American hospital was incorporated into the Pinetree radar complex. It was subsequently used as a Canadian Forces Base (CFB) administration building with an attached dining hall, all ranks mess and transit barracks.

The James Paton Memorial Hospital has replaced all these other hospitals. It has a history different from that of a hospital in the pioneering and military period of Gander. But those pioneers and military folk would have loved to be able to call on its services. Many more lives might have saved.

