

On the Precipice of Change: Gander in May 1940

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When war broke out in September 1939, the Newfoundland Airport (soon renamed Gander) was defenceless but operational with a rudimentary but modern airport infrastructure. The airport was still undefended seven months later when in May 1940, Raymond Manning, Newfoundland government secretary for Public Utilities, toured the airfield and prepared a lengthy report for his superiors. The arrival of military forces would shortly transform what Manning witnessed that spring.

The first aerial defence unit arrived the following month in the form of a detachment of Douglas Digby patrol bombers from the RCAF's No. 10 (Bomber Reconnaissance) Squadron. Canadian ground defence forces also took up duties, while more antisubmarine and fighter squadrons were shortly to follow. The Canadian Pacific Railway Air Service Department, later reorganized as Ferry Command, began transatlantic aircraft delivery operations late in 1940, and showed no let-up until war's end. Then the Americans arrived in 1941, flying neutrality patrols until they too entered the war and Gander became a strategic outpost for their own overseas aircraft delivery operations. With all this multinational activity, the airport grew exponentially to include multiple hangars, hospitals, messing, recreational, and administrative facilities, and barracks to accommodate thousands of permanent and transient personnel, all in separate areas of the field and identified colloquially as the RAF side, American side, Army side, and Canadian side.

So what did Manning see and do back in May 1940, before the arrival of allied forces changed the landscape of Gander airport? Manning spent five days at Gander, meeting with staff and motoring all over the roads and runways. Gander's then most prominent structures was the

Administration Building, complete with control tower, and a large, solitary hangar. Manning described the Administration Building as “poorly constructed and ... exposed to every wind that blows.” It housed 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. The conversation centred on initiatives to prevent accidents, as “our workmen are not now insured,” revealed Manning, “and that the airport is carrying its own risk.” Manning also discussed the matter with the man in charge, Aerodrome Control Officer H.A.L. Pattison, and determined that the biggest risks for accident was at the machine shop, carpentry shop, and from the operation of motor vehicles. Both Knapp and his assistant agreed to make periodic visits to workshops to ensure that staff was observing all precautionary measures. Likewise, newly appointed works superintendent, E.S. Spencer, agreed to visit worksites around the airport to “see that workmen are not exposed to unnecessary risks.”

Spencer, continued Manning, was presently engaged in studying the airport area and boundary lines of the various properties, and had instructions to allow no encroachment on privately owned lands and no building construction without a government permit. Manning then broached the idea of a land settlement near the airport and its advantages as a supplier of milk, eggs, vegetables, meats, and casual labourers. The increased population, he theorized, “would justify the building of schools, churches, a theatre and club rooms and would create a settlement of no small importance.” Spencer, however, cautioned him that the airport population was likely not to exceed fifty families, easily supplied by three farmers. Furthermore, rough drawings left by the airport’s original chief engineer suggested that the area lacked good agricultural land, so Manning deferred the matter until a “competent agriculturist” could carry out a thorough survey.

Manning next reported on the runways and roads, noting that the former was in excellent condition except for a few small cracks, some caused by winter ploughing. The roads to the transmitter and receiver buildings were graded and in good condition, and the buildings themselves in good condition but required painting. The road to Gander Lake, on the other hand, had partially washed out with no plans

to repair it, said Pattison, "as there would be little occasion to use it in this year." Manning likewise identified the hangar, dwellings, store, and fire hall as being in good condition. The old camp area had about twenty unused and vermin-infested buildings still standing. Manning suggested that any material inside be destroyed and the buildings demolished as time permits.

A discussion on airport defence led Manning to suggest that the justice department provide the airport with 6,000 rounds of ammunition and approve the building of two gun pits, one at the Administration Building and another at the Transmitter Building. Spencer had meantime prepared cost estimates to build an ammunition store. A rifle range at the old quarry south of runway No. 3 was also under consideration.

Accounting matters represent a significant portion of Manning's report. Manning spoke of three accountants, W.P. Meehan and C.S. James at the Administration Building, and Albert Trask at the construction site. Two men were on the payroll at the general store, Charles Meehan, storekeeper, and Maurice Power, butcher, baker, and shop assistant. After conversing with accountant Meehan, Manning prepared a series of accounting annexures that included, among other things, monthly financial and works reports, provision store salaries, messing costs, arrears of rent, board, and meals by former staff, and disputed rental rates by Dr. McTaggart-Cowan, the airport's chief meteorologist. Manning's report indicated that some householders had fallen behind on their coal payments. A new arrangement saw each householder called in and obliged to arrange a monthly payment schedule to cover their debts before provided further supplies.

Law enforcement at the airport consisted of one member of the Newfoundland Ranger Force. The ranger, it appears, had few duties to perform and harboured doubts that his services were necessary. Consequently, he proposed to Manning that the ranger should be a liaison between the airport and government, "and that he should get more recognition both in a business and social way." Manning felt that Gander needed a representative of the law, but nonetheless questioned whether government was justified in keeping a ranger there "at considerable expense when there is so little for him to do." The resident ranger, who had been with the force since its inception in the mid-1930s, welcomed "the opportunity of working in a wider field," but

asked that government not take immediate action, “as if moved now he might lose face.”

The first overseas aircraft delivery flights were still months away, but the pre-planning had begun. The manager of Imperial Oil, D.S.L. Patterson, had already revealed to Manning that a large number of planes purchased by the Allies would be flown across the Atlantic via the Newfoundland Airport, and Patterson was instructed to study the refuelling problem. Airport manager Pattison endeavoured unsuccessfully to get more information on these proposed flights, he told Manning. Pattison, presently preparing for a business trip to the U.K., added the subject to his agenda to discuss with Air Ministry officials once overseas.

Manning concluded by re-addressing accounting matters, which presumably was the primary impetus for his visit, and concluded that there was “no slackness in the accounting at the airport.” If anything, the accountants were overworked and understaffed. They were working day and night, he added, handling personal accounts, billing, machinery and construction store claims, and managing the business of the Administration Building, “a fairly large and important hotel.” There had been complaints too, of excessive drinking at the bar, but Manning concluded that such reports were exaggerated. The ranger thought the bar “an evil influence,” but could refer only to two incidents therein. Manning considered it inadvisable to close the bar, “as such an action would cause the greatest dissatisfaction.” Newfoundlander Tom McGrath, then airport operations officer, had made a positive impression, with suggestions put forward that government send him to a large, well-organized airport for training so that he might one day be placed in charge at Gander. The airport’s most pressing need, however, was for married quarters, and Manning’s final recommendation was that government give priority to the erection of such quarters.

With that, Manning ended his report. Defence concerns were shortly addressed by the arrival of Canadian forces. Other matters became less of a concern or redundant when the following year Newfoundland transferred operational control of Gander to the RCAF.