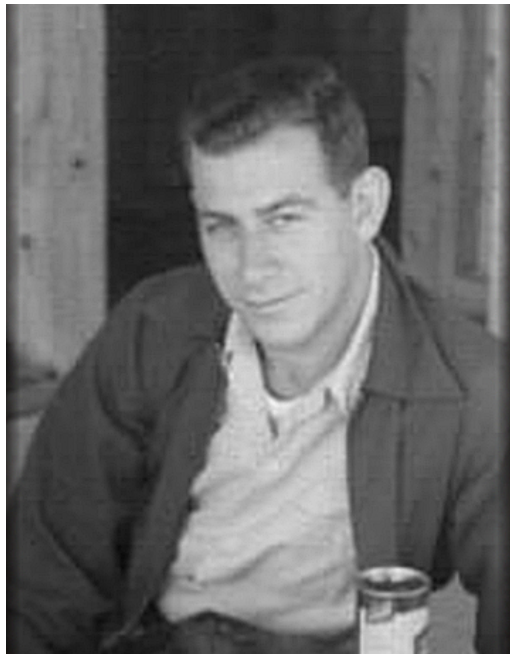


Another Gander hero from controlling airplanes to controlling lunar modules

(by Robert G Pelley 2018/04/28)
<http://bobsganderhistory.com>

Old Gander has been the temporary or permanent home of a great number of interesting characters. There have been for example politicians of note, actors, national church leaders, Yukon gold miners and heads of internationally known businesses.

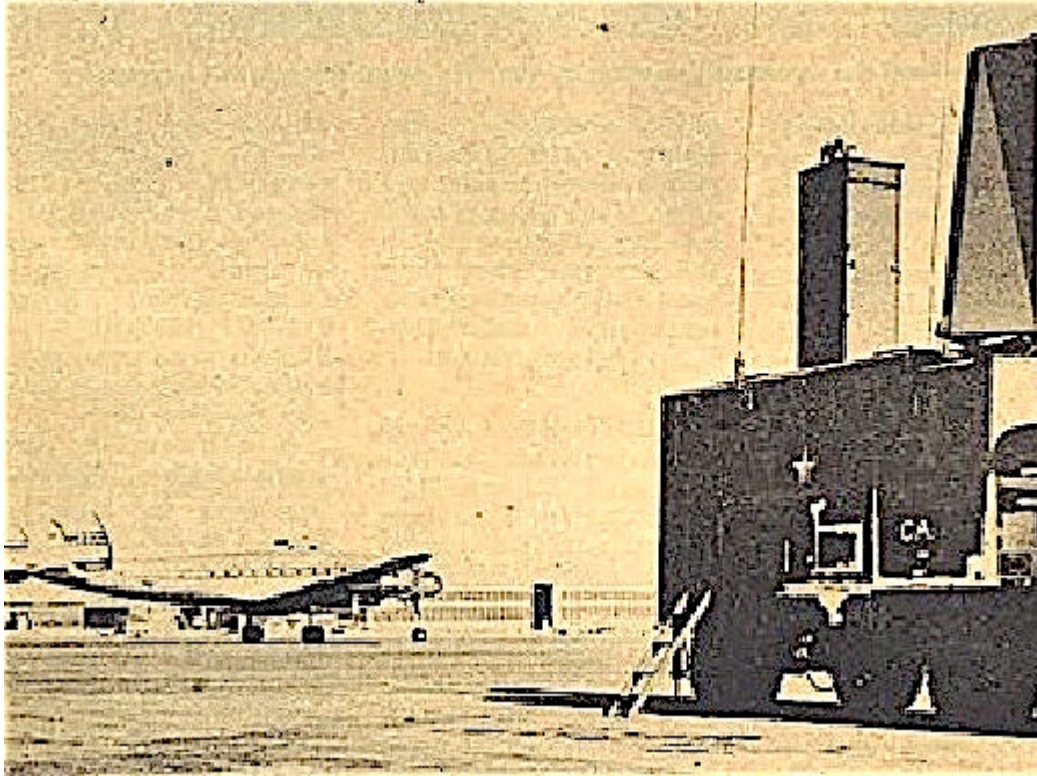
But the person described herein, Edward I Fendell, had a trajectory rather out of the ordinary. Though he ended up in a world of strange objects hurtling through space, he was not at all interested as a young man in aviation. He graduated in merchandising in 1951 from a junior college in Worcester, Maine, which was about as far as one could get from his future career,



Ed in his early 20s

The Korean war had just began and wanting to do his duty without being shot at all day long, he started in Air Traffic Control and ended up in this new fangled thing called "Ground Controlled Approach", where radar was used to talk down airplanes blinded by bad weather. After he got out of the Air Force, he was contacted by Pan American Airways and found himself in Gander, as a GCA controller on a contract with ten other people.

The photo below shows a typical summer's day in Gander with the GCA set-up in the foreground and a TWA Constellation just arriving. GCA used "Blue Jay" as its radio call-sign.



This is how Ed described his arrival and subsequent days in Gander:

Prior to coming to Gander, I was working for National Airlines at Idlewild Airport (now Kennedy). I wasn't making much money and I was renting a room with the bathroom down the hall, in Jamaica, Long Island. One day I received a Western Union telegram from the Vice President of Operations of PAA asking me if I was interested in a GCA job at Gander, and to give him a call. I called and his secretary immediately put him on the line, and he asked me to drive over and meet with him. I do not know how they found out about me. Probably through the US Air Force. He explained the job and situation and made me an offer and two weeks later I landed in Gander. I knew nothing about Newfoundland, except where it was north of Connecticut where I was from.

I arrived in Gander on a Pan American Airways cargo flight on April 4, 1956. It was snowing fairly hard and I later found out that we were brought in by GCA, by one of my future friends. I was met by Joe Greene, my new boss. We went into the terminal and had coffee. He had made a reservation for me at the hotel place over on the American side. He left me the jeep, and after getting situated. I drove back to the terminal to eat dinner. The waitress gave me a menu and the order pad. I asked what the order pad was for and she said for me to write my order down. I had been all over the world and the waitress or waiter always did that. I knew then I was in a different place! I later became a fan of fried bologna, chips and gravy.

I was hired to be Jim Hillis' replacement as he was leaving to work for PAA in New York. The guys that I went to work with were terrific. They had all been there about 10 years and they really helped me out to get acclimated. The GCA equipment we used, I had used in my early days in the Air Force, so it was right up my alley. We worked mostly with experienced Air Line pilots. PAA had a contract with 10 different Airlines and they shared all of our salaries and expenses. All military aircraft that utilized our services was free. Anyone else who used our services was charged 250 dollars an approach.

After living in the hotel for a while, I moved into an apartment with two other new guys who came on about 6 months after me, George Breen and Charlie Nielson. Later SAS purchased a new home and two of their dispatchers, Frank Alexander, and Bill Gray invited me to move in with them. We partied and drank a lot. Airport club, Eagles, Canadian Legion. The parties at the house were crazy. You could come home at 0800 AM in the morning, after working the midnight shift, and find a party going on at our house, with none of us who lived there present. All the booze was flown in from St. Johns. One of my really good friends was Dr. Paton who was a legend at Gander, and still is.

I found the weather to be incredible. We had multiple operating sites, one for each runway. In those days all the area between the runways was still covered with asphalt from World War II, where they parked all the aircraft that were waiting to be ferried over to England. When it snowed hard and the wind would shift, we would have to move our truck, diesel power unit and radar unit to the new active runway. This was always exciting at night, as the snow always seemed to be coming down sideways, making it extremely to hard to find your way. Sometimes when

we were out there under those conditions, and if no aircraft scheduled to land, they would turn off the lights on the hangar/terminal and we would get lost. That was an incredible experience.

We worked with no minimums on weather for landing. Our reputation was known all over the world airline industry. Pilots would follow our instructions right to the ground without the ability to see the runway. I had worked GCA all over the world in the Air Force and this operation was just great.

One of our guys brought in an Air France Lockheed Constellation in a blinding snowstorm, which bounced off the runway and bellied in off the side. The pilot was later asked, why when you didn't see the runway, that you did not go around. His answer was, when Blue Jay tells me I am over the end of the runway I cut the engines!

Prior to coming to Gander I had played a great deal of baseball. I got involved in Gander, and kind of took over. We rebuilt the ball field, had a small league and formed an All Star Team, and played one year in the all-Newfoundland playoffs. We lost out in the finals to Grand Falls. Every year they hired a professional coach from the US, who worked there all summer long with their teams.

The people in Gander were incredible. Everyone loved everyone and we were treated almost like Gods. People knew that we helped keep the place going, by bringing in aircraft in all kinds of weather and conditions.

One of the funny things that happened occurred on Christmas day my second year in Gander. The GCA families always had a rotating dinner for each holiday. That year the single guys in their apartment were tasked with the main course, the turkey. During the winter the snow would pile up against the lower part of the old barracks building that had been turned into apartments. Cats lived under the buildings protected by the packed snow to stay warm. We had cooked the turkey and taken it out of the stove and left it on the kitchen table, so it would be ready when we returned from the prior courses to have turkey course of the meal. By mistake when we left, we inadvertently left the door slightly open. When we returned there were two cats on top of the kitchen table eating the turkey. They had eaten so much they

were swollen double in size. No turkey for Christmas that year. When I think back to Gander naturally I remember live lobsters at 20 cents a pound and the great fishing, but what I think of most was the wonderful people and their friendship. They also were so proud of their province and everything they had, even when was minor. The only time I have ever seen people like that was when I was assigned to the Carnarvon tracking station in Western Australia, out in the outback. The people were just like the Newfoundlanders - except the climate was warm!

Canadian DOT opted for another system called Instrument Landing System (ILS) near the end of 1958 and Pan Am GCA personnel left in January 1959. I believe it was the 10th. We drove out in 4 cars to Port aux Basques. We spent the night and took the ferry. When I left Gander I made a vow that I would never live again where the white stuff came out of the sky.

Note from RG Pelley: I was very happy to be able to give Ed some additional information about the cats. There were no native cats in Gander at the time because it had been created out of virgin forest. The "GCA cats" were probably descendants of the ones brought by Air Transport Officer of 164 Squadron of the RCAF in 1944 to keep down the rodent population. They had to be flown in from Moncton, New Brunswick. So just to clarify, the supper was most obviously eaten by Canadian cats. Newfy cats would never have been so impolite to our American visitors!!

Not liking snow, Ed found himself in the south of the US, initially in Cape Canaveral, Florida, and eventually worked for the NASA. One might wonder how a chap with a junior degree in merchandising might fit in with all those scientists, engineers and specialists. The answer to that is double. Firstly, Ed was known to have an "Einsteinian" IQ. Secondly, he had something that very few of the other personnel had, namely hands-on experience in air-ground communications. As well, his first job at Cape Canaveral was on a PAA contract where he worked in "rocket range" operations. They coordinated the radars, the optical cameras, the tracking sources, the support, the ships, the range instrumentation, everything that supported the launch. Then they recovered nose cones, by tracking them and then directing the ships and the planes to pick them up.

His new job with NASA was known as Capsule commander, which meant knowing everything about space capsules to support their crews from the ground. And when he started, he knew practically nothing. The excerpt below from his oral history gives a good idea of the learning process.

<http://bobsganderhistory.com/NASAschematics.pdf>

Ed's story with the NASA covered a long and varied period.



Ed Fendell today

Suffice it to say to say that he was in the first row seats as capsule commander or later as chief of communications during three major programs:

° **The Gemini program**

Gemini followed the Mercury project, as NASA's second manned space-flight program between 1961 and 1966 based on a two-astronaut crew. Ten Gemini crews flew low earth orbit (LEO) missions during 1965 and 1966. Gemini's objective was the development of techniques to support the later Apollo program which aimed at landing astronauts on the Moon. It perfected working outside the spacecraft with "extra-vehicular activity" and it pioneered the orbital manoeuvres that would be necessary to achieve rendezvous and docking in space.

° **The Apollo program**

Apollo was the third American manned space flight program, which accomplished the landing the first humans on the Moon from 1969 to 1972. Apollo was dedicated to President John F. Kennedy's national goal of "landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth" by the end of the 1960s. This goal was accomplished on the Apollo 11 mission when astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed their Lunar Module (LM) on July 20, 1969, and walked on the lunar surface, while Michael Collins remained in a lunar orbit in the Command/Service Module (CSM),

Five subsequent Apollo missions also landed astronauts on the Moon,

the last in December 1972, with total a of twelve men walkiing on the Moon.

The 1967 Apollo 1 cabin fire killed the entire crew during a prelaunch test. The Apollo 13, in transit to the Moon, was prevented from landing by an oxygen tank explosion, which destroyed the Service Module's capability to provide electrical power. The crew returned to Earth safely by using the Lunar Module as a "lifeboat".

° **Skylab**

This was the United States' space station that orbited the Earth from 1973 to 1979, when it fell back to Earth amid huge worldwide media attention. Launched and operated by NASA, Skylab included a workshop, a solar observatory, and other systems necessary for crew survival and scientific experiments.

For those interested in the inner details of the above programs, Ed's "oral history" can be seen here:

https://www.jsc.nasa.gov/history/oral_histories/FendellEI/FendellEI_10-19-00.htm

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We live in a complex interconnected world where, as the saying goes, the movement of the wings of a butterfly can generate a storm. Now imagine if Ed Fendell ended up liking snow and had decided to stay in Gander and become a trapper or some such. Space exploration might have been set back for years!