

The first night flying in Gander

The first aircraft to land in Gander was a Havilland 83C Fox Moth with the registration VO-ADE. Piloted by Doug Fraser of St. John's and accompanied by flight engineer George Lace, it landed on 11 January 1938 on a very partially constructed airport.

It took almost two years before any night flying was attempted.

This night flying was done by another type of airplane, a Waco enclosed-cabin bi-plane.



Waco NC500 in front of the round-top Hangar 20

This plane made three flights after dark on 22 August 1939. Each flight lasted approximately twenty minutes. Squadron Leader Pattison and Mr. F.B. Jewett were taken up on the first flight and Messrs. Ratcliffe, Bailey and Fred Chafe went upon the second.



There were a few good reasons why it took so long to get to night landings in Gander. Firstly the initial asphalt was laid at the airport by COLAS, a Shell subsidiary, on June 4 1938, a full six months after the Fraser landing.

Secondly, there was in fact very little air traffic of any sort through Gander because Botwood was the focus for trans-Atlantic travel at that time. Eight month after Fraser's first flight, Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Wolf of Philadelphia landed on

Gander Lake in a Fairchild on 8 September 1938 and departed on the 12th, after spending a part of 11 September flying Gander authorities around the area to see the progression of work. In mid-May 1939, Carl Bachman in a Monocoupe 90A, registration SE-AGM, the first aircraft from outside Newfoundland, used Gander as a starting point for an unsuccessful flight to Sweden and two weeks later. two modified Harrows arrived to do in-flight refueling of flying boats to and from Botwood. The military did not fly into Gander until 10 February 1940, the airport itself becoming officially operational only in the previous October.

The other big reason for a delay between the first daylight landing and the night landing was the need for the installation of an airport lighting system. This story is told here:

<http://bobsganderhistory.com/we.html>

There is little known about the identification of the aircraft and why it was in Gander, except that it belonged to the Dupont Chemical Company or one of the family members. Back in the 1939, before computers, aircraft registration in the US was at times chaotic and in fact there were three quite different Waco airplanes with the registration number NC500,

One of these was model type "UKC", which had a very different fuselage. Another was a model "UOC", but only three of this model were made, which apparently all went to the New Zealand Air force. The last Waco with the NC500 registration is physically the same as the aircraft shown in the photos. It would appear then that this Waco is a "EQC" model, which had the constructor's number 4495.

No reason has been found for the trip to Newfoundland. However the Dupont family was quite well-known for its interest in aviation and with the Dupont Chemical money behind them, they were well able to indulge in their hobby or develop aviation-related businesses.

One member of the family was Henry Belin Dupont who seems to have particularly interested in supporting and participating in air races. He is seen below with Charles Lindberg.



Another Dupont interested in flying was Alice. She was an advanced instrument-rated pilot and seemed to have a penchant for South America. In 1932 she flew an open-cockpit plane up the Amazon River with her brother Richard. After World War II she pioneered single-engine airplane flights between New York and Buenos Aires with her husband, James Paul Mills. During the war, she served as a flight instructor for military pilots in Long Island, NY. Nothing points to her as having flown to Gander – and if she had, she would have been known more for that than for night landings.

Another Dupont aviation enthusiast was Alexis Felix. He left Princeton University without graduating, preferring to enter the Air Corps where he learned to fly in 1927-1928, reaching the rank of 1st lieutenant. He held commercial, instrument and instructor ratings and was quite often close to civilian aviation. During 1929 (with only a year of flying experience) he was test pilot for the Fokker Aircraft Corporation. With his brother Richard he founded All_American Airlines, which became Allegheny Airlines and eventually U.S. Air. He then went back to the family business until the early 1940s when he became vice president and director of All American Aviation, Inc. and Bellanca Aircraft Corporation, as well as a director of American Export Airlines, a frequent aircraft company seen in Gander after the war.

Given his interest for commercial aviation and his connection with companies which eventually flew through Gander, Alexis Felix Dupont, or someone working for him, would be good candidate as the first person to do night landings at the Crossroads of the World.

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The mystery has been solved!

It was Henry Belin Dupont who had with him a Mr JJFerrell. The photo below shows them at Gander's first railway station. Mr Dupont is on the right. RPelley 2017-06-09