

"Mosla" and "Benzin" - Russian PBN flying boats in Gander

People familiar with local history know that during the 2nd World War, Gander was home to many outsiders. The Royal Air Force Ferry Command and later Transport Command had a large staff situated basically around hangers 21 and 22. The "mainlanders" of the RCAF became the landlords. The Yanks had so many people in Gander and elsewhere in Newfoundland that one author even penned a book about the friendly American invasion.

But nobody talks about the Russians - who also used Gander for ferry flights to Europe. There is a good reason for this - while the British and Americans used land-based airplanes, the Russians used almost exclusively non-amphibious flying boats. This means that while American and British B-17s, B-24s, B-25s, Hudsons, Hurricanes and the like were a common sight on the runways of Gander, one generally had to make a special trip down to Gander Lake to see the Russians.

Many are familiar with the PBY flying boat (called Cansos or Catalinas depending on which country made it). These were often later used as water bombers. The Russian planes were a particular model of that airplane.

The American "Consolidated Aircraft Company" designed and built the PBY series with manufacturing rights given to several other companies. By 1940, the most recent version was the PBY-5. While Consolidated employees worked on it, the Naval Aircraft Factory in Philadelphia was already working on major improvements. However, introducing these changes would have interrupted the Consolidated production lines. Therefore the Naval Aircraft Factory itself built a new version. This factory had a military identifier "N", so the new plane became the PBN-1 Nomad. The new aircraft had several differences from the basic PBY in that it had a revised hull, revised wing tip floats, a unique nose turret, a longer, pointed nose, longer fuselage and taller tail.

The first Nomad came off the NAF assembly line in February 1943. Of the 156 PBN produced, 139 went to the U.S.S.R. under Lend-Lease program (Project Zebra in this case). Some of the PBN improvements were later incorporated into a new PBV-6 Catalina and a total of 148 Catalinas and Nomads were flown to the Soviet Union. Some went via Alaska or Africa but 46 were delivered to Murmansk. This means via Gander and Iceland.



In March 1944, Russian flight crews and supporting staff arrived in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, for training and ferrying of 25 PBNs to the Soviet Union. Three months were spent in flight training, learning the use of the bombsights, radio navigation, guns, translation of maintenance manuals, etc. The combat crew of a flying boat consisted of two pilots, one bombardier-navigator, one radio operator, one flight engineer and two gunners. On average, plane commanders received 45-50 hours of flight instruction, while flight commanders (seven officers) received from 80 to 120 hours.

Located at Gander and Reykjavik were representatives of the Soviet naval missions in the U.S. and England, as well as British government officials to organize receipt of the airplanes and preparation for the next leg of the route.

Between May 25 and June 11, 1944, the first 25 aircrews flew out on their planes. They covered the first portion of the flight, Elizabeth City to Gander Lake in 10-12 hours, the second leg, Gander to Reykjavik, in 13-16 hours, and the third leg, Reykjavik to Murmansk, in 14-19 hours. The total time for the flights ran

from 37 to 47 hours.

The first flight of four planes took off at the end of May 1944 for Gander. Since the Soviet crews were not familiar with English and RAF procedures, they were aided by three personnel from the RAF Transport Command - pilot, navigator, and flight engineer - who had flown the Atlantic several times.

The last group of five PBNs took off from Elizabeth City in late July 1944, with PBY-6s following later. The PBYs were amphibians (had wheels) so they didn't need to use Gander Lake.

On Gander Lake, these PBNs were anchored about 500 feet off shore where the RAF had its now long disappeared dock facility. Shell Oil Company serviced them from a barge. My father, Calvin J Pelley, has told me about working on this barge and hearing the Russian crews ask about "maslo" (Масло), "benzin" (Бензин) and something else we have not been able to identify which apparently sounded like "sodukpier". The first two words mean oil and gas - and any ideas on the last one would be appreciated.

Below is a photo of a PBN-1 Nomad that I have had for some time but has no identification of source or place. If it is not Gander Lake, it would certainly have to be a clone!



The Shell barge, known to many by the name "Leapin' Lena", measured perhaps about 12 feet by 20 feet and had four fuel tanks, each about 8 feet long and about 2 ½ feet wide. They were connected to a pump powered by a small gasoline motor. The fuel used both by the PBNs and the PBYs was known as "100/130 av gas".

The crew required to refuel a PBN was three men. There was one on each wing, while a third acted as the lead and stayed on the barge to make sure that proper procedures were used and that safety measures were maintained. (Though like many fisherman in the outports, many of the men refueling these aircraft didn't know how to swim!) The time to get the barge underway and to complete the refuelling was about an hour and a half.

Generally the operation went smoothly and the aircraft did only an over-night. However the weather could be extremely difficult over the northern Atlantic, which could cause delays of 3-4 days.

The Shell crews had been told that given that it was an American-made plane, sold to the Soviets under Lend-Lease, flown by Russian crew who were subordinate to an RAF pilot, operating through an RCAF controlled facility – not to mention the language problem – even a minor incident could become an international affair.

My father doesn't remember any particular incident except that one PBN lost an oil cover. The RAF accompanying pilot had something made up and decided to continue on, a tough decision for a long flight over the cold Atlantic Ocean.

The Shell crews knew quite well where these airplanes were headed and how they were going to get there. They were always extra careful.