

The first non-professionals pilots in Gander - the amazing Wolfs

(by Robert G Pelley, 2015/10(03)
<http://bobsganderhistory.com>

Three facts are common knowledge to anyone interested in Gander's early aviation history. Firstly, it is well known that Capt Douglas Fraser was the first person to land in the daytime, on 11 January 1938. It is also a fact that a Dupont Chemical Waco NC500 plane made three flights after dark on 22 August 1939. They also know that on 30 November 1939, a Mr. Carl Bachman, landed in Gander while delivering a Monocoupe 90A, registration SE-AGM, from Bangor, Maine, to Sweden, though he was lost at sea reportedly near Greenland.

But who knows about Alfred and Constance Wolf, who arrived in the fall of same year as the Fraser flight?

In a letter dated 13 Sept 1938 to R. Manning, the Newfoundland Secretary for Public Works, F.C. Jewett, Gander's Chief Engineer, speaks about the first civilian aerial visitors to Gander. Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Wolf of Philadelphia landed on Gander Lake on 8 September and departed on the 12th.

They made contact with airport authorities and on 11 Sept they flew various staff members around airport area in order to see the progress of work from the air.

They have probably been overlooked, as were the Russian PBN flying boats during the Second World War, because they used Gander Lake rather the runways, which were under construction at the time.

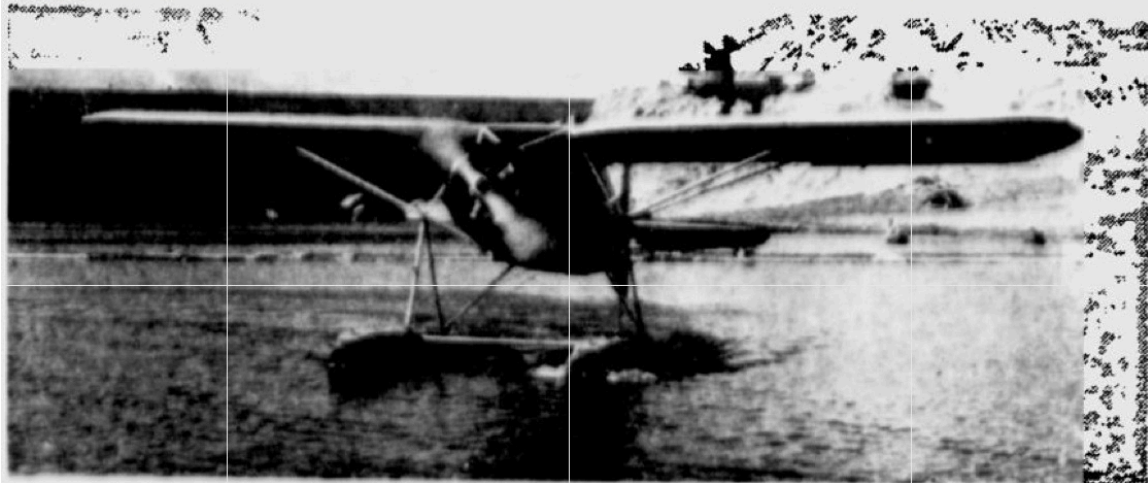
But if you ever had to pick two people to be the first civilian non-professional pilots to fly in Gander's airspace, these would have been the folks you would have wanted to choose, the amazing Wolfs.

The information available does not say why they were in Gander. It would appear however that it was very simply for the adventure, for which they so well known. The Princeton Alumni Weekly of 24 November 1938 has the following entry:

“Connie and I recently flew our Fairchild on floats on a wintery circuit to the Newfoundland Airport (the new international airport now being built by the British Air Ministry) and returned via the Straits of Belle Isle and the Labrador Coast”

An article in the Spokane Daily Chronicle of 07 January 1941 shows another Wolf “first”, that of a landing on River-Lake near the Grand Coulee dam. The photo below is that of their Fairchild model 24, which is very likely the plane used to land on Gander Lake, or, if not, a very close model.

Seaplane Lands on River-Lake Near Grand Coulee Dam



The “Alfred L and Constance Wolf Aviation Fund” was established in 1986 "to support scientific research and educational programs in matters relating to the use of aircraft as a means of transportation". The biography below, augmented by other sources, is based partially on the info on the Wolf Aviation Fund website.

A lawyer who was first inspired by the heroics of Charles Lindbergh, Alfred attended the University of Pennsylvania at age 15 and graduated from both Princeton (1923) and Oxford (1925). He became interested in aviation and learned to fly, obtaining his license in 1929. Recognizing that as the new field of aviation grew, there would be a need for changes in aviation laws and regulations, he began to specialize in this area of the law at his firm in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His avocation truly became his vocation as he helped shape the path of US aviation law.

Mr. Wolf, along with four contemporaries, founded the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association in 1939 to assure representation for this segment of the flying community. This established a proper place for General Aviation to co-exist with the airlines and the military as America's airspace became more crowded and complex.

Mr. Wolf had a distinguished career in the United States Air Force, retiring with the rank of Brigadier General in 1964. A facet of his life that will most certainly vibrate with those interested in Gander history is that his most notable accomplishment was overseeing the ferrying of more than 6,000 new combat aircraft into the Pacific Theater during World War II. During his 56 years as a pilot (1929-85), Wolf flew more than 110 types of aircraft. He soloed his first jet-powered aircraft at the age of 51, an act never before accomplished by any US reserve officer.



Alfred L. ("Abby") Wolf, general counsel and secretary of the AOPA

Great lives often reflect great partnerships, and in the case of Alfred Wolf his wife of 54 years, Constance "Connie" Wolf, provided the ultimate complement to this adventurous and accomplished individual.



"Connie in 1965

Born in Canada in 1905, Connie attended the University of Toronto and was a theatrical agent until her marriage in 1931. She also caught the bug and learned to fly (her husband taught her during their honeymoon). At one point much later in her life, she was one of only five women in the entire world to possess a valid airman's certificate longer than fifty years.

But Connie Wolf's true aviation passion was balloons - and gas filled balloons in particular.

She and Alfred took their first balloon ride together in 1951 over Zurich, Switzerland. The thrill of that ride inspired a life-long passion for Connie, while an unusually subdued Alfred found himself "huddling in the bottom of this miserable laundry basket." In 1962, Connie was the first woman to cross the Alps in a balloon.

While Connie went on to perform various and well-publicized balloon flights, Alfred returned to pilot all manner of powered aircraft, never setting foot in a balloon again.

Connie would have only the best, so her balloons were filled with hydrogen and not helium. Today, there are very few

balloonists in the world who are certified to use hydrogen as the lifting gas.

She had one balloon named La Coquette, which her friend Mike Todd used to film "Around the World in Eighty Days". This balloon was seven stories high, and in 1956 she flew it over London and Paris to promote the movie.



In one epic flight on 24 Oct 1954, the balloon envelope ruptured at an altitude recorded at over 1300 meters. Amazingly, the envelope inverted in the net and formed a parachute. All on board survived, Connie with only minor injuries.

On 26 July 2015, she was posthumously inducted into the US Ballooning Hall of Fame.

Living at their farm homestead - aptly named "Wingover" in respect for their nearby home base, Wings Field in Ambler,

Pennsylvania - the Wolfs directed their aviation, business, travel, and charitable activities. Connie having been a theatrical agent in New York prior to her marriage, this gave her access to many of the stars of the era. Many such luminaries of stage and screen attended the Wolf's famous "fly-in" parties at Wings Field. Come one, come all. But you had to come by air. Sometimes 150 planes arrived. Connie loved parties. Common folks, and the rich and famous. Howard Hughes, Elizabeth Taylor, Ginger Rogers, the list goes on and on. Once, at his birthday party, her husband opened his eyes to see the girl wrapped in ribbons pop out of the box. The girl was Marlene Dietrich. Such was life at Wingover.

Connie died at 89 in 1994, eight years after her husband.

Bigger than life – but unknown in Gander, they would two excellent another candidates for street name!

(Much thanks to Darrell Hillier for providing the initial impetus for this article.)