

Rare envelope from "Newfoundland Airport"

I recently managed to acquire a very unusual envelope sent from Gander to the "mainland" or to what was in those days the foreign country of Canada.

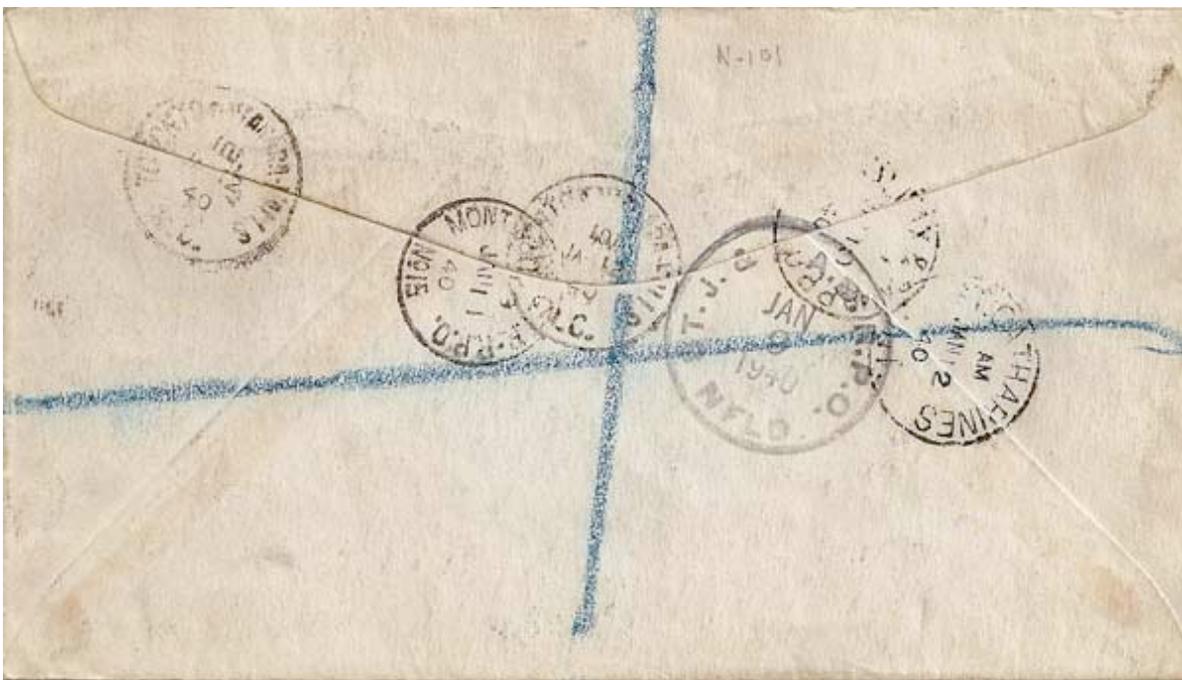


The first reason it is unusual is because it is postmarked not Gander nor Canadian Army Post Office 2 or 4, which usually treated mail from Gander. This envelope has an extremely rare postmark, that of "Newfoundland Airport". This nomenclature existed basically about a year or so, and was as they say in the outposts, squished in between Hattie's Camp of 1939 and Gander Airport of 1941. This makes this envelope very difficult to find.

Another reason why it is unusual is that it is registered. This was not a common practice and this letter has a fairly low number. The main reason for so few registered letters was primarily the cost. Regular mail was 5-6 cents in 1940 while this registered letter cost 15 cents. Wages in those days for workers ran from 27 – 50 cents an hour, so a registered letter could well take a ½ hour's worth of pay. No wonder it was used mainly for official business.

As well this letter was not censored. It is dated 08 January 1940, while censorship started with the arrival of the 1st Battalion of the Black Watch in Newfoundland in June 1940.

From the back of the envelope we can see the route used to get to destination. It is hard to read but appears to be: - 09 Jan: St.John's (St.J & ABRPO) - 10 Jan: unreadable but seems to be the same as previous - 11 Jan: Montreal - 12 Jan: unreadable - 12 Jan: Toronto - 12 Jan: St Catherine's. In other words, a letter from Gander to St Catherine's took only four days – which is not much longer than today, some 75+ years later!



But the most interesting aspect of this letter is the signature on the front of " RA Bradley". Mr Bradley was the chief engineer in Gander and responsible for overseeing all engineering aspects of the construction of wartime Gander and for some time after.

Given the importance of building, in a wartime setting, the largest airport in the world, Mr Bradley was very highly respected. However, some people living in Gander before the Trans-Canada Highway was built associated his name with what they figured was very bad engineering. On the old road from Gander to Glenwood, there was a place some called "Bradley's mistake" or "Bradley's blunder", where they believed that Mr Bradley did a bad job with a very badly built road.

So to protect Mr Bradley's reputation, here is the story. During the war, the military authorized building a road to Glenwood with the intention of connecting Gander Airport via other connecting routes, to Lewisporte which was the closest port and to Botwood where BOAC seaplanes often landed, bring passengers even of the likes of Winston Churchill. Near the war's end and Canada in debt, authorities in Ottawa decided it was longer necessary to continue building expensive roads in what was for them a foreign country. Work on the road to Glenwood, of excellent quality, was halted near Joe Batts Pond, about 6 miles east of Glenwood.

In 1946, British authorities in whose hands rested the responsibility for the administration in Newfoundland decided that road should be completed. They therefore gave Mr Bradley the giddy amount of \$6000 to complete the work.

At \$1000 a mile, there was not much leeway, so Mr Bradley consulted a map and figured out where the terrain was the most solid and where there would be fairly easy access to rock to fill in the soft spots. There was only thing to do – have someone hop on a Caterpillar tractor (believed to be a D6) and have go at it, following the prescribed route. The tractor driver would then widen to road on his way back and fill in the rough spots along the way. The tractor driver's name was Ron Kelly and a fine job he did.

So while some considered this to be a sub-standard bit of construction work, between the two of them, Mr Kelly and Mr Bradley came up with a miracle.

Another fine example of Ganderite ingenuity. If only today's governments could be so cost-effective!

(Thanks to my father, Calvin J Pelley, for his excellent recollection of that period.)