

## **Don't forget the civilian pilots – Canadian Pacific involvement in Gander**

(by Robert G Pelley 15 May 2015)  
<http://bobsganderhistory.com/>

In 1940, Britain faced critical aircraft shortages. American factories could supply many of the needed airplanes, but normal delivery – by boat – was slow and dangerous. RAF officers were curiously opposed to the most obvious solution – flying them across. This, they decided, would be impractical, especially in winter.

We often hear mention of Ferry Command flying aircraft across the Atlantic - but it is not necessarily a well known fact that it was ordinary civilians and NOT the military who got the show on the road. It basically involved three parties.

The first actor was the British Ministry of Aircraft Production, headed in 1940 by Lord Beaverbrook (in fact a Canadian newspaper man and financier, Max Aiken). The recently retired general manager of Imperial Airways, Woods Humphery, assured Beaverbrook that he could do the job, if he could have some of his "old Atlantic team" and as long as some existing organization looked after the administration. This was settled with a call to Sir Edward Beatty, president of the Canadian Pacific Railway and, apparently, an old friend of both Beaverbrook and Woods Humphery.

The second driving force was the Air Department of the Canadian Pacific Railway, which was assembling the elements of what would later become Canadian Pacific Airlines. The Atlantic Ferry Operation (ATFERO) consisted of ground crews, supplies and administrative support provided by the Canadian Pacific Railway, while management and aircrews were the responsibility of the British Air Ministry. Neither the RAF nor the Royal Canadian Air Force could spare any aircrew, so civilian volunteers would have to be recruited.

By August the pilots leading the operation had set up shop CPR's Windsor Street Railway Station in Montreal. A proper transatlantic ferry pilot school was opened with Canadian Pacific support near Montreal in November 1940. As well, one source says that Hangers 21 and 22 on the RAF side in Gander, constructed by the Belmont Construction Company, were financed largely by CPR.

The third group was of course the civilian aircraft crews and those who led them. A group of experienced British pilots was sent to Canada to inaugurate the service. All were men well known on the aviation world. Among them were Capt A S Wilcockson, Capt Donald Ross, and Capt Humphrey Page, lead by Donald C.T Bennett. From the first weeks there was a steady flow in of civilian pilots from the USA and Canada, as well as from Allied nations and from other British dominions.

American airmen learned about the operation from a clandestine organization lead by Clayton Knight, an American aviation artist and First World War flyer. Along with Homer Smith, a Canadian-born businessman, he established offices in major U.S. cities to cultivate contacts in the aviation community. The objective was to identify instrument-rated pilots with more than 300 flying hours and to help get them hired on.

By the end of November 1940, 380 American pilots were sent to Canada. The sixty-two who survived the careful initial scrutiny and testing of Bennett and Wilcockson then trained at St. Hubert, southeast of Montreal, on the Lockheed Hudson, chosen to make the first experimental delivery flights.

Four months of intense effort were crowned on 10th November 1940. That evening the first seven Hudsons took off from the snowbound airfield at Gander. Ten and a half hours later and 2,100 miles farther east all seven put down safely in Ireland.

Bennett led the initial group himself. His co-pilot came from the US and his two radio operators from Britain and Canada. The other six Hudsons each carried a crew of three, a pilot, a copilot, and a radio operator. All the pilots and co-pilots were either British or American. Six of the radio operators were Canadian. The last group had all been working as ground radio operators with DOT and had answered a call for volunteers. Few had ever flown and none had made a long-distance flight. In the end, many spent the entire war ferrying aircraft around the world. Like their crewmates at the start of the ferry service, all were civilians. At least 75 of these civilians lost their lives doing this job.

The attached magazine article is indicative of the times and the CPR role.

**ANSWERING THE NEED FOR... Trained Air Men!**

**I**n a war demanding overwhelming air supremacy, the need is for men better trained than any the enemy can send into the sky.

The United Nations have an answer to that need in the immense British Commonwealth Air Training Plan centered in Canada.

To this great undertaking Canadian Pacific Air Lines is making a direct and constant contribution. The company operates, on a non-profit basis, six Air Observer Schools and a steady stream of British Commonwealth airmen is advancing daily through these navigation schools to emerge full-fledged flyers.

Another major war task of the company is the management and operation of five Aircraft and Engine Overhaul Plants under contract to the Department of Munitions and Supply for the servicing and repair of Royal Canadian Air Force equipment.

Back in 1940 the Canadian Pacific made another vital contribution to the United Nations war air effort by pioneering the Atlantic ferry bomber service, now the R.A.F. Ferry Command.

Thus does Canadian Pacific Air Lines serve the war needs of today. Tomorrow, when victory is won, the system will be ready to meet the transportation needs of a new, air-minded generation.

**Repair Plants Keep 'em flying, too!**

**Canadian Pacific AIR LINES**  
The Wings of the World's Greatest Travel System

**BACK THE ATTACK — BUY VICTORY BONDS**

The general contribution of CPR to the wartime effort is underlined above. The 2nd to last paragraph refers more specifically to its role in ferry and training operations.

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This is from an unidentified Canadian magazine from 1943. From the page size and style, I think it could most likely be "Mcleans". Any other info would be appreciated.