British Overseas Airways Corporation in Newfoundland (Botwood and Gander)

(by Robert G Pelley, bobsganderhistory.com, 27 March 2026)

British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) came into the world on 24 November 1939 as the amalgamation of Imperial Airways and British Airways Ltd. Its first operations commenced on 01 April 1940. It ceased operations on 31 March 1974, when it merged with British European Airlines, Cambrian Airways and Northeast Airlines to form British Airways, a curious return to the past.

Though a few experimenters like Hawker and Lindberg had flown the Atlantic and the Italian Balbo landed in Clarenville on 26 July 1933, with a fleet of 24 flying boats, there was no commercial airline traffic. However, both in Britain and in the US, hopes were high to open a trans-Atlantic service in that era. Both a flying-boat and land service were considered eventually possible but since no land-based airplanes were immediately available, the priority went first to flying-boats.

An air conference was held in Ottawa in December 1935, with delegates from Canada, the UK, the Irish Free State. and Newfoundland, with the main object of discussing refuelling sites on the western side of the ocean. In late 1935, after appropriate surveying, Botwood was chosen as the site for a flying boat base. A plateau near where the railway line was close to Gander Lake was selected as a land-plane base.

By spring of 1937, both Botwood and Gander were taking form. At Newfoundland Airport (Gander), clearing of vegetation was underway for the construction of the runways and necessary buildings were being commenced for future civilian operation.

The first contact of BOAC with Newfoundland, through its founding partner, Imperial Airways, was not with Gander but Botwood, on an inland bay near the mouth of the Exploits River. Facilities were built around the existent civilian buildings with structures such as refuelling

facilities and buoys added as required. Air-to-ground communications facilities were installed, along with professional communications, meteorological and technical staff.

But to use Botwood it was urgent to obtain proper meteorological information to guide both incoming and outgoing aircraft. For this reason, Imperial Airways bought a Fairchild 71 floatplane for inflight collection of weather information for the three Met officers and six observers in Botwood via daily meteorological ascents. This aircraft, piloted generally by Douglas Fraser of Imperial, was hangered n Norris Arm, eight miles away, and flew to Botwood every day for instructions and return of information. Flights went often to 16000 feet without oxygen. Temperatures, cloud levels and similar info were recorded. The plane was equipped with a ''strut psychrometer'' which measured relative humidity, with visual readings noted by the pilot.

On 05 July 1927, flying boat test flights across the North Atlantic began. A Pan Am *Clipper III*, a Sikorsky S-42, from New York (Port Washington), via Shediac, NB, landed at Botwood and headed next day for Foynes in Ireland. On the same day, a Short Empire C-Class flying boat, the *Caledonia*, left Foynes for Botwood.

The success of these two flights and those which followed in 1937 led to the start of a promising commercial venture. However, the eventuality of a second World War and an increasing likelihood of land-based aircraft put a stop to commercial passenger and mail service via flying-boat through Botwood. It soon became apparent that a modern system of airport operations would soon be required in Gander. When the flying season finished in Botwood in 1938, the control, radio and meteorological personnel therefore moved over to Gander. This involved about 50 people.

Some radio equipment was maintained in Botwood on an as-required basis as Pan American, American Export and BOAC used Botwood quite often for high-ranking military, political personnel and Hollywood personalities aiding in the war effort. For these flights, radio staff from Gander went to Botwood, using a small bus set up to roll on the railway tracks.

Photo by the late Hugh Lacey, provided by son Keith,
showing the driver, Sgt Hammond

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Winston Churchill, flying on a BOAC-operated Boeing 314 flying-boat, went through Botwood four times, staying in the VIP residence, the ''Little White House on the Hill'' in January 1942, Churchill made his first flight to Botwood on the *Berwick,* painted in olive drab camouflage with large Union Flags under her cockpit windows.

The following is a story by the late Rollie Masse, a code operator with the RAF Ferry Command in Gander:

"During that period, in August, I was also sent to Botwood on loan to Pan American and the British Overseas Airways Corporation in support of Boeing Clipper flying boats. These planes begin their flight from Ireland, a neutral country, ferrying businessmen or high-ranking officers traveling to Canada or USA. It was easy to detect them as they simply took off their officer's cap and tunic and put on a sweater or sports jacket to make believe they were civilians. The first stop over was Botwood for fuel and then on to New York. "

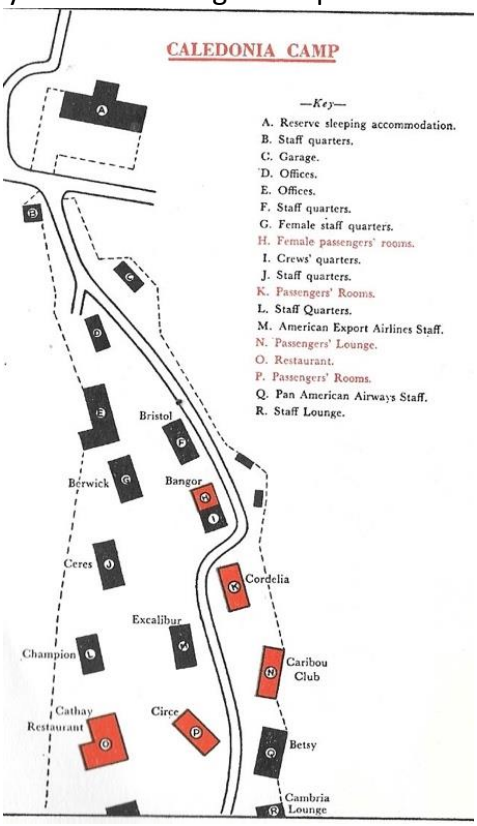
"This was quite a change from the busy life in Gander. In Botwood you only had to be in service when one of these planes took to the air, which gave you one or two days off occasionally. Compared to Gander, the receiving station was just a small wooden construction inside an RCAF base compound. This receiving station was however connected to Gander via teletype machine, and all coded messages coming from the clippers were typed directly to Gander."

"One day I found out the probable reason why I had been selected to go to Botwood. With my 35-40 words per minute in code, I was able to work quickly and securely at a very fast speed. On one day in particular, as a Clipper was en route, I remember commenting to RAF liaison officer that this was the first time radio traffic with a Clipper was so heavy, but he did not comment.

Finally the Clipper docked and passengers began to descend and one man started to walk towards the RCAF building. As I came out of the radio shack, this man is lighting a long cigar. He looks at us and gives us the V sign with his right hand while puffing on his cigar, yah it was Churchill. The RAF officer friend saluted him he returned it.

I don't remember but I think I did salute too!

BOAC accommodations in Botwood in 1943 were given the name ''Caledonia Camp'', after the first Imperial flight. The following shows its lay-out as of that general period.



The following is a photo of the area in the early 1940s. The lines marked out on the ground are in military style, where tidiness and discipline were king. As the military saying went ''If it doesn't move, paint it; if it does move, salute it!''

Though the Newfoundland Airport in Gander had been made ready to receive any future land-based flights, and commercial operations had been basically transferred to Gander, it was not the end for continued and frequent BOAC-operated flights across the Atlantic

By the middle of 1941, the ferrying of bombers to Britain was slowly moving into high gear. However, the return of ferry pilots to Canada by boat to collect more aircraft had been taking up to a month and a half, with the possible loss of precious pilots through U-boat attack. There was a dire need to get them back early.

The British Ministry of Aircraft Production operated a 'Return Ferry Service'' itself using Liberator bombers for about six months. But in 1941, BOAC was tasked with operating this ''RFS'' from Prestwick to Montreal, all with a stop in Gander. They were provided with additional RAF Consolidated Liberators with a very basic passenger conversion – which meant basically floorboards and jump seats along the sides of the aircraft. There was no pressurization, no

alternate airport closer than Gander, and no aid to navigation other than a sextant for shooting stars. Rudimentary radio navigation began only in 1943.

On 04 May 1941, BOAC captain James Youell piloted the first westbound flight for the RFS. His BOAC Liberator AM260, carry seven passengers, was the first from England to land at Gander.

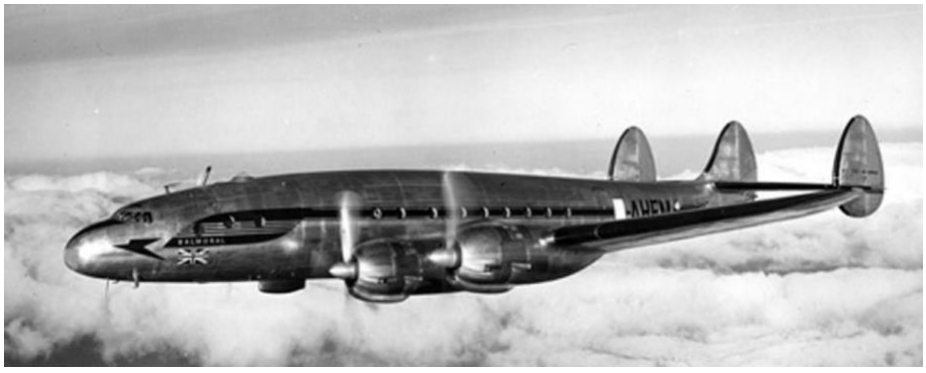
The first eastbound Liberator flight departed Gander on 22 April. This Liberator, AM912 flown by Capt. Messenger, carried passengers Brig. Worthington, Maj. Morres, Capt. Loomis and A.H.R. Smith, landing at Prestwick the following day.

The RFS was finally withdrawn in November 1946 after 2,392 crossings of the North Atlantic, having carried some 22,500 passengers, 3.5m pounds of mail and urgent war supplies.

These flights were not simple milk runs. A very early one, captained by Don Bennett, was retarded by damage to his plane by German bombers. Another plane, BOAC Liberator AL 591 met a worse fate. It left Prestwick on 08 February 1943, enroute Gander. It hit a very bad head wind which caused excessive fuel consumption, the gas gauges froze and there was a snowstorm in Gander. It was ordered to divert to Sydney but had insufficient fuel, in fact just enough for one approach in Gander, where there was a confusion about runway lighting. The pilot made one unsuccessful attempt to land and crashed north of Gander while trying a desperate turn for another approach. The final death toll was 19 out of 21.

It goes without saying that this gave BOAC crews tremendous experience, not only in actual flying over the Atlantic, but also in terms of aspects such as maintenance, scheduling, and passenger movements that stood in good stead for the coming post-war commercial flying.

BOAC operated its first commercial flights from London to New York, with stops in Shannon and Gander, in July 1946. Since 1941, the advanced pressurized Lockheed Constellation L049 had been under development, and in 1946 BOAC was permitted to purchase an initial fleet of six for the prestigious North Atlantic route, in fact reconditioned former USAAF C-69s. Though there were no equivalent British types available, the British government insisted on procuring British aircraft. At the same time, Howard Hughes, the ‘’inventor’’ of the Constellation, preferred to supply American companies in priority.



But BOAC got around the problem with an ingenious solution. It had been training pilots for a new Irish airline company which had bought five new Constellations. However, the company never made it off the ground, literally and figuratively. BOAC was then able to purchase them, though at a higher cost than from the factory. It was considered wise not to wait a year longer to get newer ones.

In the meantime, Boeing had developed the Stratocruiser, a derivative of the B-29 Superfortress which had been used in the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In 1955 it was found that additional aircraft were needed for the transatlantic services, so six Boeing Stratocruisers were bought from United Airlines and one from Pan American World Airways. However, major modifications were necessary to bring the aircraft up to BOAC specifications. The first Stratocruiser registered to BOAC was the G-AKGH, named *Caledonia,* which was the same name as first Imperial flying boat to Botwood.

This was a superlative passenger plane, designed for those with very deep pockets. A double-decker, it had luxurious seating, an in-flight lounge with bar and even private sleeping accommodations.

In 1950, BOAC introduced a dedicated “Monarch” First Class service to New York, initially with this Stratocruiser aircraft**.**

Breakfast in bed/Monarch sleeper service
Source BOAC/British Airways

In 1956, a Mr Gerry Catling spent five months with BOAC in Gander. This is a part of what he said:

> *The Stratocruisers all had bunk beds for passengers to don night attire and stretch out in comfort and were particularly popular with young female aspiring film starlets heading to Broadway or on their way to Hollywood to try to further their careers. We always pushed the engineering steps up and opened the forward door first, taking the flight plan on board, and then opened the passenger door at the rear. The freezing gale then swept through the passenger cabin blowing all the bed curtains horizontal and causing the scantily dressed starlets to leap from their beds desperately trying to find some warm clothing to put on and providing some much-needed light entertainment for the night shift.*

The Stratocruiser ultimately faced challenges with operating costs which led to limited production and eventual retirement from commercial service. It also had a major mechanical problem, namely that of ''runaway propellers''. The B-29 had a particular engine with solid props and mechanical speed control. On the Stratocruiser, there a was different engine, hollow props (for weight and therefore cost reasons) and an electronic prop control. This did not always work well together. In a number of cases, propellers went out of control, turning at impossible speeds, to the point of tearing the engine off the wing-root, causing crashes.

Mr Catling also mentioned a particularly memorable early morning experience:

> *Another incident I remember which I thought for a few minutes would abruptly terminate my BOAC career occurred at about 0400 in a small bleak room, illuminated by a single bare light bulb, where at a small wooden table, sitting on a hard chair, muffled in a greatcoat and scarf, I was struggling to finish the loadsheet and get the aircraft away without a delay that I would have to explain.*
>
> *A voice behind my back said: "Can I speak to you for a little while".*

Without looking round, I said in a fury: "For God's sake bugger off until I have finished this load sheet and got rid of the aircraft, then I'll talk to you." "That will be too late," he said, and I turned and to my horror recognised Sir Miles Thomas, then Chairman of BOAC. I apologised and he laughed and we had an amiable chat for about 15 minutes until he re-boarded the flight. It gave me great pleasure on sending the departure signal to add "delay due Chairman"

BOAC was now ready for the jet age, as were other airlines, such as its arch-rival Pan American. The first scheduled transatlantic passenger service with jet-powered aircraft began on 04 October 1958, when two BOAC Comet 4 airliners, G-APDC and G-APDB, left nearly simultaneously from London Heathrow Airport to Idlewild Airport New York, and vice versa.

With solid tailwind, G-APDB flew the eastbound flight took just 6 hours, 12 minutes, averaging 565 miles per hour (909 kilometers per hour). The east-to-west airliner, G-APDC, departed Heathrow at 8:45 a.m., London time, with Sir Gerard d'Erlanger, chairman of BOAC, and 31 passengers aboard. The westbound flight took 10 hours, 20 minutes, including the 1-hour, 10-minute fuel stop in Gander.

The following was a photo taken by the Canadian Department of Transport on 04 October 1958 and not meant for general circulation shows G-APBD on the tarmac in Gander.

The Comet 4 G-APDC (which was scrapped in April 1975) beat Pan American 707 NC711PA by four days.

The Comets were fast and comfortable but especially the early ones had a problem of metal fatigue, notably near the corner of certain square windows. In 1959, BOAC began shifting its

Comets from transatlantic routes, replacing them basically with British Bristol Britannia and VC10 or American DC-7 and 707.

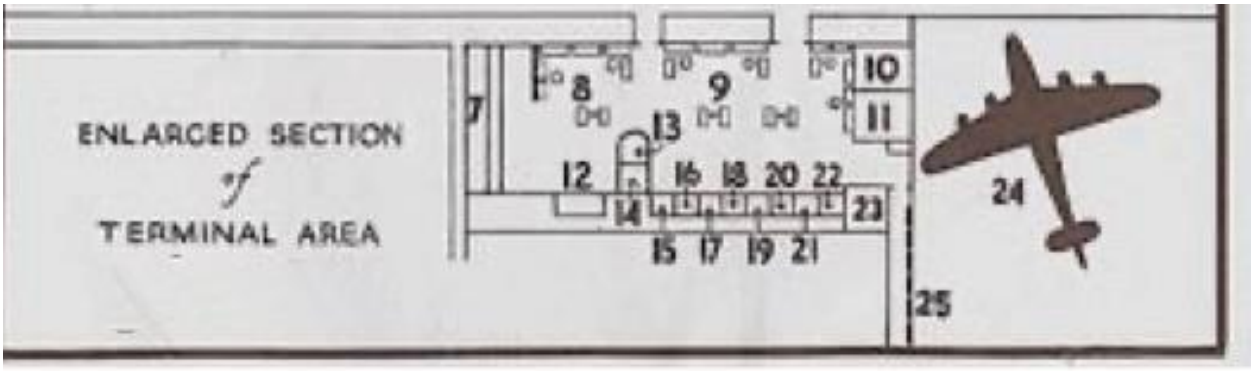
Bristol Britania arriving in England after flight from Gander
(Wiki common)

On 19 June 1959, Queen Elizabeth ll opened the new Gander terminal. Before that date (and for some operations a while after), commercial aviation operations were run out the former RAF Ferry Command hangars. There were two large hangars, each capable of taking three large airplanes at a time. Initially BOAC did its own stop-over maintenance but given that their aircraft were fairly new, major repairs were seldom required.

But at a certain point, people wondered if there was any difference between a Wright R-3350 Duplex-Cyclone engine on a TWA Constellation and a BOAC Constellation?

In New York, at both Idlewild (Kennedy) and LaGuardia airports, a company by the name of the Allied Maintenance Corporation was already offering ramp services. Allied had become interested in doing the same in Gander and tasked a Mr Les Gettel, a former technical sergeant in the USAAF, to do the job. The airline companies in Gander being the same as those in New York, inter-company discussions were simplified, so when Mr Gettel arrived in July 1949, all went smoothly. From that point on, BOAC ramp operations (such as baggage, meals, general and specialised maintenance) was handled by Allied.

Loading tables and ticket offices remained however under direct BOAC control. In the old, pre-1960 terminal there was a row of ticket offices on the left-hand side after the passenger entrance. BOAC is shown below in position 20.

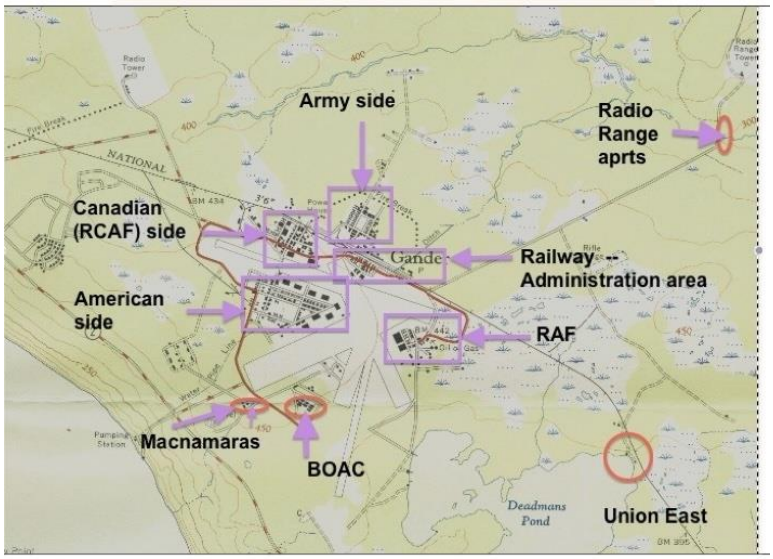


Below a 1950s postcard depicting the terminal lounge area, showing the airline ticket offices. BOAC was close to the entrance from the ramp in the distance.

In Gander at the end of World War 2, except for a few key personnel, there was no civilian accommodation. The closest ''town'' was Benton to the east and Glenwood to the west, both roughly a dozen miles or so by infrequent train, the ''Newfie Bullet''. Therefore, when the Canadian, American and British forces pulled out, their headquarters, barracks, stores, even artillery gun emplacements and other facilities were taken over for civilian use. The civilian aviation authority took over all that was aviation related, while the other buildings were farmed out basically to business groups, aviation or otherwise, who had employees required for the maintenance of airport operations and their families. The airport was still thought of as being organized into the same sections as during the war: The ''Army side'' (Canadian Army), the ''Canadian'' side (RCAF), the 'American'' side (USAAF), the ''RAF'' side (Ferry Command) and the ''administration'' area (main administration building, railway station, etc). The airline companies

were in general offered housing accommodation on the American side. However, pretty soon, Gander was staring to run out of available space.

By the luck of the draw, BOAC was given a small area a bit separate from the main ''sides'' of the airport. They were set up in the former headquarters area of the anti-aircraft artillery. The following map shows the sides and the location of BOAC. (bottom center)



Though the BOAC site seemed a bit out of the way, back in those days, going out for a ''short walk'' could easily be quite a long distance. Walking out seven or eight miles to a pond to go swimming or fishing was quite normal. The kids living in Union East on the map above walked to school on the Canadian side, even in the winter, by following the railway track. As well, there was a good bus service.

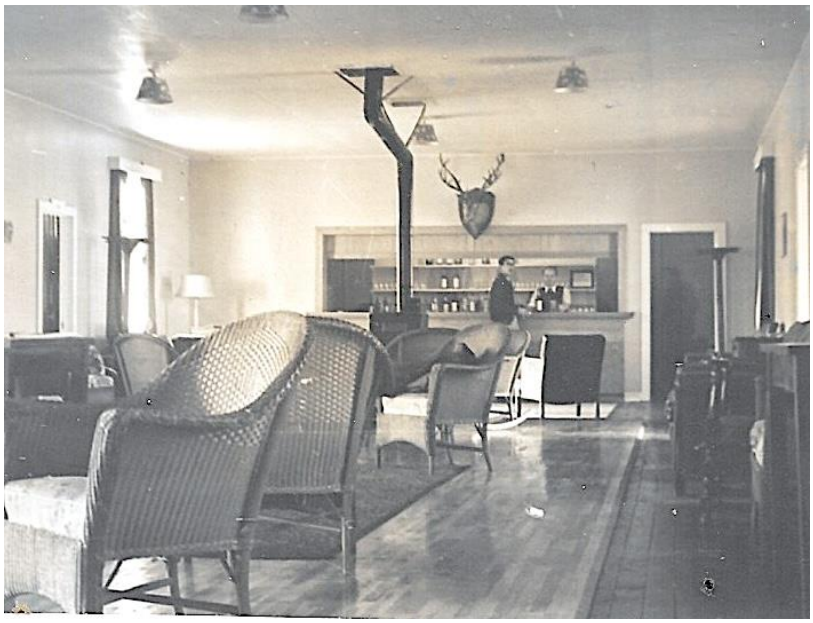
BOAC station bus –
Members of the Millar family

But this relative isolation had its good side, as the BOAC folks were able to develop their own little community. A large amount of the info given below is extracted and condensed as required from what appears to be a BOAC Newsletter, probably of September 1946.

It was written by a ''roving reporter'', Eve Brewster, who explains that: *''With nothing to start with but seven disused Army huts and some fittings and furniture salvaged from Botwood, the S.S. (Station superintendent, Denis Bustard) has created a camp of which the Corporation can be proud. It has the appearance of a miniature bungalow village, each hut painted green, with red doors and window frames, and small porches over each of the doors. Without doubt, it is the most complete and comfortable unit on the whole of this vast airport, which is in itself a miniature town.''* (In fact, the ''green paint'' was roofing shingles.)

At the Caledonia Camp there were married quarters, which consisted of a small three or four-room apartment. There were two lots of single quarters, one occupied by the men and the other by the six Corporation girls. Each girl had her own room, with a communal room at the end of the bungalow, with a large stove and some easy chairs. A special area was set aside for drying and ironing. The whole was attractively furnished.

The largest bungalow of all stood in the center of the colony and was known as the Caribou Club. Here there was a bar, a dance floor, expertly laid by the members themselves, a ping-pong table, a gramophone, and very comfortable chairs. Just in case anyone should forget the name of the Club, above the bar there was the head of an enormous caribou. It sometimes had a cigarette hanging out of its mouth, giving it a slightly rakish appearance.



Caribou Club looking towards bar

Caribou Club, looking to the rear
(Notes by Staphanie Millar, wife of Sandy Millar, on the back of the photo mention the dance floor to the rear, a ping-pong table at the far end, a dart board on the left wall and the gramophone on the right. Also available Monopoly and Chinese checkers.)

Says the roving reporter: ''*The Caribou sports and social club have been loaned $1,000 (£250) for improving their amenities. Graham Noble is the President and the Club plans to build from scratch a full-size ice-hockey pitch. All work is voluntary, and Graham borrows, when he can, a bulldozer. The rink is just behind the Caribou Club, and the committee plans to run a loud-speaker from the Mess on to the rink, so that visitors can skate to music when ice-hockey is not being played.*''

The station staff are now running their own air club with a Piper Cub which can be rented for $10 (£2,10s) an hour.

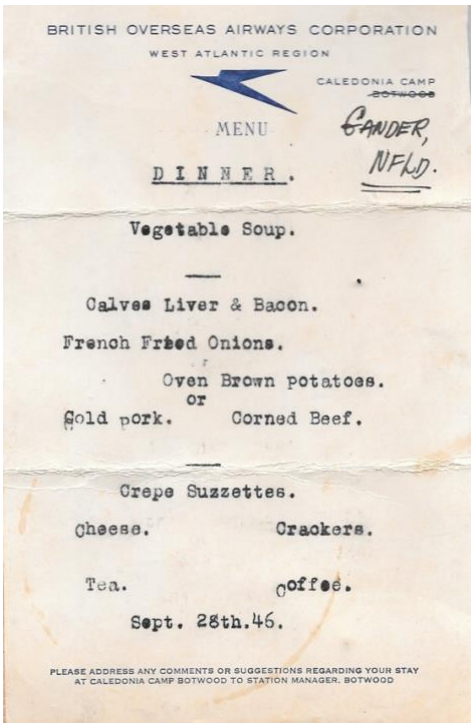
But a BOAC station was not just a bunch of houses and equipment. It required people working together to get aircraft safely of the ground with happy passengers. Some persons are worth mentioning.

Out of a staff of 60 with family using Caledonia Camp, six girls were stationed there in 1946. Three were Canadian and Newfoundlanders. Three were secretaries, two helped with traffic and Newfoundland-born Loretta Mackenzie was in the Operations Room. The local girls were able to go home quite frequently, the Canadian girls twice a year.

One important personage was George Meloche who could be described as chef cook and ''Chef for Important Occasions''. Formerly à Chief Petty Officer in the Navy, he was chef to an Admiral in Ottawa before becoming a B.O.A.C. steward. The Admiral was fussy about his food, and, as a result, George could serve up the most delicious dishes in Gander, if not, as some claimed, all of Newfoundland.

Dining room, Cathay bldg.
Eric ? in white, George Meloche in black

This is the menu for dinner 28 September 1946. To be noted that Botwood has been scratched out and replaced by Gander, a sign of a rapid transfer.



BRITISH OVERSEAS AIRWAYS CORPORATION

WEST ATLANTIC REGION

CALEDONIA CAMP ~~BOTWOOD~~ GANDER, NFLD.

MENU

DINNER.

Vegetable Soup.

Calves Liver & Bacon.

French Fried Onions.

Oven Brown potatoes.

or

Cold pork. Corned Beef.

Crepe Suzzettes.

Cheese. Crackers.

Tea. Coffee.

Sept. 28th.46.

PLEASE ADDRESS ANY COMMENTS OR SUGGESTIONS REGARDING YOUR STAY AT CALEDONIA CAMP BOTWOOD TO STATION MANAGER, BOTWOOD

Another person important for the morale of Caledonia Camp was Johnny King behind the bar at the Caribou Club, and in charge of catering. He spent a lot of his time, almost a vocation, trying to get fresh fruit and vegetables flown up from Canada. In 1946, Johnny had been with the Corporation for 15 years. As an aside, Catering even maintained a list of babysitters!

Another interesting member of the local staff was Newfoundland-born Graham Noble, a pretty good fisherman. In the summer of 1946, he caught 120 salmon in two months, and they weighed anything up to 16 lbs. (By the way, for what it is worth today, he always used a Silver Doctor!). Graham was a traffic assistant and when he wasn't assisting traffic or fishing, he went hunting. He was one of the few members on the station who had a game license.

The latest list of known persons who lived in Caledonia Camp over the years is given here :

http://bobsganderhistory.com/gene7.pdf

By the early 1960s, commercial aviation airlines started leaving Gander. Both the newer piston engine planes and the jets could now cross the Atlantic without stopping to refuel. Though BOAC ceased to exist as a separate entity in 1974, by 1960, the Gander stop was only used as an alternative to a Glasgow or Shannon stop for the Bristol Britannia service to Montreal and Toronto.

But that was not the end of the BOAC story in Gander. A Concorde used the airport in 1974 to test Transatlantic flight capabilities. Passengers were selected from the town population to fly to England and France on test flights, and experience supersonic flight. In September 1975,

Concorde G-BOAC made two return trips to Gander in one day, becoming the first aircraft to make four transatlantic crossings in a single day.

All in all, it was quite a story. From the Fairchild 71 meteorological flights to help keep safe the crews and passengers on the Imperial/BOAC flying boats, to the purchase of reconditioned wartime Constellations and remodeled bombers, through turboprops and jets, the story of BOAC in Newfoundland was a microcosm of modern aviation across the Atlantic.

And even more lucky, with their own little Caledonia Camp, were those who lived it intimately from the inside!

Special thanks

to Michal Millar (Crowe), daughter of Sandy and Stephanie Millar, who spent her childhood in Caledonia Camp. She kept much of her mother's scrapbooking from the early days of Caledonia, making possible a large amount of this historical record.

Thanks also to Michal and Darrell Hillier for revising the text.
It helped me get around the problem of thinking in French and writing in English!