

1953/4 CANADA and the U.S.A

The R.A.F. sent me to Canada in 1953 for navigator training. This is what I remember. Though I can recall most of my fellow cadets, I cannot remember who I was with on various trips described - hence the anonymous 'we' throughout!

We travelled to Canada at the end of March 1953. Queen Mary died on the 23rd, so a period of National Mourning had been declared - which meant the wearing of black armbands when in uniform. Our journey began at London Airport - not the Heathrow of today, but the huts near the Bath Road. We embarked on a BOAC Stratocruiser heading for Montreal. Those were the last years of civilised air travel - leisurely and comfortable! Stratocruisers were James Bond's favourite -



BOAC Stratocruiser to U.S.A. and Canada

"dinner in peace, sleep for seven hours in a comfortable bunk, and get up in time to wander down to the lower deck and have that ridiculous BOAC 'country house' breakfast while the dawn came up and flooded the cabin with the first bright gold of the Western hemisphere".

Stratocruisers didn't have the range for non-stop journeys against the westerlies so they had refuelling stops. Our first stop was Shannon, where I sent a postcard home which referred to 'flying in luxury'. We stopped there overnight because of adverse weather (so we didn't experience the bunk and the breakfast), then continued to Gander and finally on to Montreal where we took a train to London Ontario and the RCAF station.

Incoming groups were always taken on a "Welcome to Canada" trip soon after arrival. Always Niagara Falls - until it was our turn. They thought it would be nice to do something different. And so we were taken to the Steel Works at Hamilton and the Bell Homestead! Disappointing! The next weekend was free, and I used it to visit a College friend who was at Ann Arbor in Michigan - my first visit to the U.S.A.

Then the two-day rail journey to Winnipeg to join Course 5304 at No. 2 Air Navigation School. There were about 30 of us (R.A.F.) together with a few Canadians, a couple of French and a Dane. The course trained us in the traditional navigational methods which are now virtually forgotten! For astro-navigation we were issued with bubble-sextants, Air Almanac and Sight Log Book. We had about 40 hours of training flights each month, flying in noisy Beech 18 (C45) Expeditors.

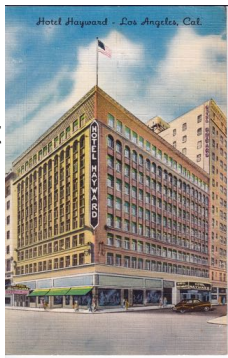


Our base was 'Stevenson Field', now 'Richardson International Airport'. We were about 5 miles from the centre of Winnipeg, north of Portage Avenue, which was the start of the westward-heading Trans-Canada-Highway. Ancient, decrepit, rattling streetcars, scrapped in 1955, took us to the city centre passing the Hudson's Bay Company and the Eaton's Department Store. We would get off at Portage and Main, "the crossroads of Canada", where the icy north wind was funneled from the railroad station, down Main Street. Longer weekend adventures started there - bus south to Fargo, North Dakota, and into Minnesota; or east to Kenora and Lake of the Woods, Ontario.



Our mid-course break came at the beginning of October and the course dispersed, most people determined to see as much of the U.S.A. as possible, spending as little as possible! I (and another) headed for Minneapolis and went to the U.S.A.F. base to hitch a ride 'somewhere interesting'. 'Somewhere' turned out to be Butte Montana because there was a DC3 just leaving, carrying bandmen. This was set up for paratroops with a bench down the middle of the aircraft and a large opening where the door should be! It was nightfall when we got to Butte, and we decided to take an overnight Greyhound bus south. No doubt it was a scenic route via Idaho Falls - but it was too dark to see.

We spent long enough in Salt Lake City to see the Mormon Temple and Tabernacle, but California was now our 'promised land', 600 miles away, and we found a fruit-truck with a friendly driver heading that way through the seemingly endless succession of deserts punctuated by mountain ranges. We stopped briefly in Reno and then went on to Sacramento. I think we must then have taken the Greyhound bus to Los Angeles, perhaps overnight again.



Time to pause and see the sights. We had several nights at the centrally located Hotel Hayward (rooms from \$3.50), now a historic landmark - 1906, early high-rise built from reinforced concrete. We soon headed for Hollywood and found the United Services Organisation reception lounge. "Yes of course you can visit the movie studios; just wait there". And after a few minutes a chauffeur arrived and ushered us out to the gleaming Cadillac. His boss had about six Cadillacs - this was the 1952 one, and the oldest was his first Cadillac, kept for sentimental reasons. So off we went in style to MGM in Culver City. They were filming Gene Kelly in his "Invitation to the Dance".



More to see and do in Hollywood. As well as walkabout near Graumann's Chinese Theatre (showing "The Robe" at the time), we went to the Art Deco Radio City and sat in the audience for a Jack Benny radio show - with Rochester van Jones, his black 'valet'! And there was an open-air concert in one of the parks with the Ray Anthony Orchestra, one of the 'big bands' which followed on from Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey. And we found ourselves in a small group with Rhonda Fleming.



Gene Kelly



Rhonda Fleming

Just enough time to visit the Los Angeles Pueblo, and to see the Pacific before we realised that we were over 2000 miles from Winnipeg and had to get moving again! We hitched one long stretch through Wyoming, Nebraska and Iowa in a smart new Ford Mercury. Despite my telling the owner that I hadn't driven in the States or on the left side of the road, he handed over the driving to me after a while and went to sleep!

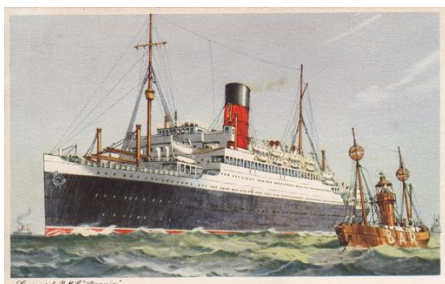
Back in Winnipeg our course continued until the end of the year. One incident occurred when we returned from a night flight and one aircraft was missing. Search missions were being organised at dawn when the crew reported in. Engines had failed, and the pilot had successfully ditched on a shallow lake in the middle of nowhere.

We became qualified navigators on 8th January 1954. Our 'passing out parade' took place with some ceremony in a hangar in the midst of a snow storm. An R.C.A.F. band was due to play the National Anthem but was lost in the snow and after a bit of delay a record was played!

We left Winnipeg within a day or so heading home by train - 2000 miles to Halifax, Nova Scotia. On the first day skirting Lake Superior through Port Arthur (now called Thunder Bay) it was exceptionally cold. We had a few free days between trains when we got to Montreal - enough time for a trip to New York City getting there immediately after the big snowstorm of 11th/12th January 1954 - a 10 inch fall. Then back to catch our train to Halifax and embark on the Ascania - seven luxurious days to Liverpool, arriving on 26th January, over a fortnight after leaving Winnipeg.



Port Arthur



My new posting was to R.A.F. Kenley in South London. So different!