

In the Air

A U.S. Air Force crew with C-130 "Hercules" during a stopover in St. John's



St. John's International Airport Authority
Annual Report 2004.

Using Canadian Airspace, and Refuelling in Newfoundland

By Richard Sanders, coordinator, Coalition to Oppose the Arms Trade

U.S. aircraft transporting many thousands of troops and carrying weapons and military hardware to and from the Iraq war, have had free unrestricted use of Canadian airspace. And, U.S. soldiers and supplies bound for Iraq have been welcomed at Newfoundland's public airports.

Although this use of Canadian airspace and facilities has been mentioned very briefly in the Canadian media, it has largely escaped national public scrutiny. In March 2003, a very short *Ottawa Citizen* item noted:

"The war has brought millions of dollars' worth of new business into the international airports at St. John's, Gander, and Stephenville, in recent weeks, as the U.S. has used Newfoundland as a refuelling stop for military flights en route to the Middle East.... Newfoundland has been a re-supply station for the U.S. military for decades."¹

Three Canadian airports in particular have continued to service U.S. military flights enroute to and from the Iraq war throughout the entire invasion and occupation since 2003.

St. John's

In 2006, when the City of St. John's poured \$1 million into subsidising the airport to encourage military traffic, then-Mayor, Andy Wells, called it "military tourism" and said "It's great business b'y."² And, as an article in the *Toronto Star* said "He's got another term for it, too: 'big, big bucks.'"³

Other ways to describe this assistance might reasonably include "aid-

ing and abetting the business of war" or "complicity in crimes against humanity." These however aren't the terms you'll hear used by St. John's International Airport Authority (SJIAA). This not-for-profit business which has been privately managing the facility since 1998, prefers to describe the airport as a "destination of choice for servicing military aircraft."⁴ It also says the airport is "a technical stop for military aircraft" and calls it a "popular crew rest location for military aircraft personnel from around the world."⁵

The airport's value to the military cannot be underestimated:

"[T]he airport's strong history and connection with the military is still prevalent today. As the last stop in North America on the way overseas and the first stop after crossing the Atlantic, St. John's International Airport is strategically positioned for fuel stops and crew rests."⁶

The SJIAA says 1,465 "military aircraft...refuelled at the airport in 2009 - a 20 per cent increase over 2008."⁷ Between 80 and 90 percent of these military landings at St. John's are by the U.S. Air Force [USAF].^{8,9} The SJIAA also reports that in 2009 there had been a "25% increase in military aircraft landings since 2006."¹⁰

When reporting these figures, and stating that St. John's airport is "an increasingly popular destination for military aircraft," the SJIAA acknowledges the role of public funding from its "partner," the City of St. John's:

"the number of landings... would not have been possible without the partnership with the City of St. John's to develop the Airport's multi-purpose facility. Since the completion of this facility in 2006, larger and more

military aircraft are able to park and overnight in St. John's."¹¹

"In recognition of the value of this new facility in accommodating large military and cargo traffic" the municipal government "made a \$1 million contribution toward the construction" of "new infrastructure in 2006."¹²

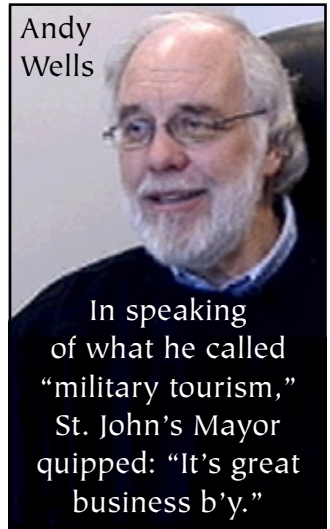
This infusion of tax dollars—the "Military Tourism Partnership"—was deemed a "strategic investment" to make the airport "more viable" for "military aircraft."¹³

Although all civilian aircraft must pay "landing fees," the airport's 2009 report states that the "Airport Authority does not receive landing fees from military aircraft."¹⁴

The not-for-profit "Airport Authority" justifies this generous public subsidisation of the military by saying these stopovers help local businesses. For example, in 2005, "more than 28,000 hotel room nights were sold to military personnel in St. John's."¹⁵

In 2007, the SJIAA explained that each year "more than 15,000 military personnel...spend time at our Airport and in our City" spending money on "accommodation, entertainment and transportation services."¹⁶ Although the same can also be said of the 1.2 million civilians using the airport annually,¹⁷ landing fees for civilian aircraft are not waived. The SJIAA does not explain this double standard.

Andy Wells



In speaking of what he called "military tourism," St. John's Mayor quipped: "It's great business b'y."



U.S. "Hercules" cargo/transport warplanes on the St. John's runway

The big ticket item for military warplanes landing in St. John's is fuel and the main supplier is Irving Aviation which provides "[s]pecialized handling for military aircraft through Canadian Air Reserve Forces."¹⁸

Another airport service is de-icing. The airport's new De-icing Facility allows "larger military aircraft that previously could not be accommodated. Such aircraft include C-17s and C-5s."¹⁹ These U.S.-built military cargo planes are among the world's biggest. Other large U.S. military planes used to supply the Iraq war have also landed in St. John's, including C-141 Starlifters²⁰ and C-130 Hercules.

C-130s are, in fact, "the most popular type of military aircraft landing in St. John's" and the airport's new De-icing Facility accommodates eight of them. This 45,000-sq-metre, municipally-funded facility effectively doubles the amount of parking space for large military aircraft.²¹ This, said the SJIAA, led to a "healthy increase in military aircraft traffic" in 2007.²²

But not everyone in St. John's is keen to spend their city taxes on increasing the airport's ability to facilitate U.S.-led wars in Iraq or elsewhere. Take James MacLean, for instance. He's a professor at the Memorial University of Newfoundland and a mem-

ber of St. John's Campaign against War. He says local politicians and businesspeople "appear to have no respect for human life when there is a dollar to be made." He also notes that

"In criminal law, it's an established principle that if you help someone commit a crime, you yourself are committing a crime. The same principle can be applied to war crimes and crimes against humanity.... The invasion of Iraq was illegal...and those who have helped make possible this illegal war certainly share in responsibility for the many tens of thousands of civilians American forces have massacred."²³

Newfoundland Airports have always Served the Military

St. John's

The St. John's International Airport began as a Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) base called Torbay in 1941. It was shared with the Britain's Royal Air Force and the U.S. Army Air Corps until 1946.¹ Torbay was then "transferred ...to the Canadian Department of Transport to operate as a civilian airport." However, thanks to the Cold War, the U.S. and RCAF continued to have a presence there until it was reopened as a Canadian Air Force Base (AFB) called "Station Torbay," between 1953 and 1964.²

In order to support its Air Force Base in St. John's, called Pepperrell AFB, the U.S. Air Force "constructed two 25,000-square-foot aircraft hangars as well as a 36,000-square-foot machine shop and administrative offices at the [Torbay] airfield."³

Gander

Like the St. John's airport, Gander has long been a major stopping point for transatlantic military flights. In fact, within a few years of its opening in 1938, RCAF Station Gander was "the main staging point for the movement of Allied aircraft to Europe during World War II." As "an ideal wartime refueling and maintenance depot for bombers flying overseas," it quickly became "the largest airport in the world." Gander continued to grow during the Cold War with the co-location there of various Canadian Forces and NORAD facilities.⁴

Stephenville

At one time, Stephenville was "the largest military airport of the United States Army Air Force outside of continental USA."⁵ Known as the Ernest Harmon Air Force Base, it was operated by the U.S. military between 1941 and 1966. There is also an abandoned U.S. Air Force radar facility located nearby.⁶

Although the massive, 11,000-foot runways at this American AFB provided refueling stops for transatlantic military flights, their main function was to service KC-97 Stratotankers. These large U.S. military aircraft were based at Stephenville to refuel the Strategic Air Command's nuclear bombers enroute to Cold War targets.⁷

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Gander

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq was a financial boon for Gander. On March 22, during the initial “shock and awe” bombing raids, while scores of innocent people were pulverised, the President and CEO of Gander’s International Airport happily reported that

“In recent weeks, as the U.S. has used Newfoundland as a refueling stop for military flights en route to the Middle East. ‘We’ve been getting roughly 2 or 3 U.S. flights a day, with probably 1000 troops coming through each day.’”²⁴

In 2004, Vey looked back positively on 2003, saying it “was a strong year as military tensions brought an extraordinary amount of international business” to Gander.²⁵ From a strictly business point of view, the 2003 invasion of Iraq was great for Gander. It saw 1350 warplanes arrive on its runways—a 50% increase over 2001 and 2002 levels, when only 900 military landings took place. In 2003, Gander’s “civilian” cargo flights surged from 300 to almost 500.²⁶ Many of these moved troops, weapons, ammo and supplies to Iraq for the U.S. military.

Dion Faulkner, manager for airport ground handling, says “Gander traditionally sees benefit from political unrest or tragedies.” The airport, he explains gets an “upswing in business” from things like “the conflict in Iraq.”²⁷

As the GIAA’s 2003 finance report noted, there was “an operational improvement of \$400,000” largely “attributable to increased revenue” from higher traffic volumes. “Global unrest and military conflict,” it said, “had a profound impact on traffic volumes for 2003” and “[m]ilitary movements grew by 21%” over 2002.²⁸

Further demonstrating that war is wonderful for airport business, the GIAA’s report on the first half of 2004 included the following “highlights”:

“Military traffic increased 36% over budgeted traffic.

Cargo movements are down slightly over 2003, largely due to a significant spike in movement last year attributed to charter freighters moving supplies for the Gulf War. However, cargo movements are up 72% over budgeted levels.

Total international movements are



**Gary Vey, CEO
Gander Airport**

2003 “was a strong year as military tensions brought an extraordinary amount of international business to YQX [i.e., Gander airport]”

down slightly over 2003 levels, again attributed to commercial carriers chartering military personnel last year, but up 37% over budgeted totals.”²⁹

In its annual report for 2004, however, the GIAA regretfully announced that “Military traffic was down almost 20% over 2003, as armed conflict overseas stabilized.” On the bright side though it went on to say that, “Nonetheless, military traffic was up over 2001–2002 levels.”³⁰

According to evidence presented at a Senate Committee by Bettina Ford who was a Councillor for the Gander “military community”:

“The significance of Gander International Airport supporting military flights cannot be overstated. That support includes the landings of some 1,100 military aircraft in 2004.”³¹

Although over the succeeding years, military-related traffic flow at Gander has seen some ups and downs, it continues to be a major source of revenue for local businesses. “Cargo movements are up 54% ... over 2006 and military aircraft patronage has shown a 13% growth.”³²

Under “Welcoming the World’s Armed Forces,” the GIAA website proudly says it “routinely welcomes a whole range of military aircraft from fighter jets to military charters and Hercs.” [i.e., C-130 “Hercules.”]³³

And, as its 2008 report explains “Patronage from military aircraft remains a cornerstone of both the airport and Central Newfoundland community. Including fuel sales, concessions, accommodations, handling ..., military aircraft at Gander generate \$25 million...annually.”³⁴

But, like St. John’s, Gander does not charge landing fees for military aircraft, “which account for about 50 per cent of the airport’s traffic.” This translates into a loss to the GIAA of “more than \$2 million a year.”³⁵

As GIAA chair, Donna Rideout, has explained, the airport authority “continues to absorb the cost of foreign state-owned and Canadian military aircraft landing at Gander, without compensation.”³⁶

Or, as then-Councillor Ford put it, Gander is “a civilian airport operated by a local authority of dedicated volunteer board members providing support to NATO aircraft.”³⁷

Although the Gander airport

authority treats the military as if it were a worthwhile charity, it has refused to pay its fair share of local taxes. By 2002, the GIAA owed Gander \$250,000 in back taxes. While the airport waged a six-year legal battle against paying its taxes, they racked up another \$2.5 million in unpaid taxes. In 2008, Newfoundland’s Supreme Court ruled that Gander airport did not need to pay local taxes. So, while the airport is happy to subsidise military flights by waiving landing fees for U.S. warplanes carrying troops and weapons to the Iraq war, it has refused to pay its dues to the local government.

And, citizens across Canada are also chipping in. In 2007, the federal government donated a “cash infusion” of \$5 million to the Gander Airport.³⁸

Although Gander airport treats the military like a charity by waiving landing fees for warplanes, it refused to pay local taxes. Meanwhile, federal taxpayers have donated millions to the airport

U.S. Air Force C-130s refuelling at the Stephenville airport



Stephenville

Relatively little data is publicly available on the Stephenville airport's role in servicing U.S. military aircraft travelling to and from Iraq. However, from what is known, this western-Newfoundland airport has been as involved in facilitating U.S. military air traffic to Iraq as St. John's and Gander.

An *Ottawa Citizen* article during the initial 2003 invasion, listed Stephenville as an airport used by the U.S. to refuel troop-carrying aircraft en route to the Iraq war.³⁹

In the summer of 2003, with the war raging in Iraq, this observation from Stephenville was posted online:

"I was camping recently at a park near the town of Stephenville....

Normally, there isn't so much air traffic that it would keep a camper awake, but the night I was...there, there seemed to be a plane flying overhead every few minutes. It was much more than the usual commercial traffic. Then I remembered that the U.S. military was using Stephenville as a refueling base for planes flying to the Persian Gulf."⁴⁰

Stephenville Airport Authority proudly describes itself as providing "refueling and ground handling services to corporate, military, general aviation and other customers."⁴¹

The airport says it serves as "a refueling stop to...military aircraft all year long" because it is "the official alternate to our sister airport: 'Gander International Airport.'"⁴²

The Stephenville airport says its customers include "large military cargo aircraft" such as U.S. Air Force Boeing C-17s, Globemaster IIIs and Lockheed C-5 Galaxies.⁴³ These planes are often used to move troops and material across the Atlantic to the Iraq warzone.

Like other Newfoundland airports, Stephenville has also hosted private planes carrying U.S. troops and equipment. Although publicly-available data on these flights is sparse, we do know that a Boeing 757 operated by Omni Air International, carrying

"101 American military personnel and 11 crewmembers," used the Stephenville airport in January 2008.⁴⁴ Omni is well known to peace activists monitoring Ireland's Shannon Airport as a contractor that has landed some 600 U.S. troops per day on the other side of the Atlantic.⁴⁵ We can only speculate how many times Omni, and other such military contractors, have used Stephenville, Gander and/or St. John's airports on their way to the war in Iraq.

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