Bomber Ferry

Only crack pilots can fly bombers to Britain — the North Atlantic is no place for a novice

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THE GERMAN raiders had been busy over the British coast. Out of the clouds and the smoke of a burning city another black shape appeared and the anti-aircraft guns opened up again. Pinpoints of colored light dropped from the shape and thebattery fire ceased.

A weary A.A. officer had his glasses to his eyes. “It’s a ferry bomber from Canada. Pass, friend.” That bomber was a pioneer of the Atlantic run. Now they come in a steady stream—twin-engined Lockheed Hudsons and the new, big, four-engined Consolidated B-24, called the Liberator, with armor-plated cockpits, a range of 3,000 miles and a speed of more than 300 miles an hour.

The Royal Air Force Ferry Command which delivers these aircraft to Britain is an odd mixture of the services and civilians. Its commander in chief is Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Bowhill, with incredibly sweeping eyebrows and a heroic row of ribbons, who learned to fly with the Navy. Senior Operations Officer, until he left recently to take over a new job with the C.P.R. airlines—was the famous forty - three - year - old Canadian pilot “Punch” Dickins, who won the D.F.C. in the last war, mapped great areas of the Canadian north from Edmonton to Aklavik, flew prospectors and !fur traders over it and got the O.B.E. for his work. ¡And the Controller of Operations, now Senior Air Staff Officer, is Group Captain G. J. Powell of the R.C.A.F. who flew the Cambria over in 1937 and pioneered the Cape to Cairo route for Imperial Airways.

Headquarters of the command is at Dorval, near Montreal, where there is a field as big as a prairie and besides the usual offices, a wireless school, an inn, a skating rink and a cafeteria. The cafeteria is like something out of Hollywood. Here are to be seen airmen in the various uniforms of the Empire, the United States and most of their allies; pilots in leather jackets and sheepskin boots; “Waffs” (W.A.A.F.) of the cipher department; people in ski clothes from the field and the hangars, policemen and ordinary citizens.

“When the first flights were made in November, 1940,” remembers “Punch” Dickins, “no one knew whether an Atlantic bomber ferry was practical or not. But ships were scarce and shipping was slow and risky and meant dismantling the aircraft. Fifty experimental flights were made before it was decided to go ahead. We didn’t have enough navigators then—we sent the first group of seven planes off with only one completely-trained navigator to lead them. He lost track of most of them in a short time but they all turned up on the other side.”

The ferry command has several hundred pilots now—the exact number is a military secret. Most of these are civilian pilots and about seventy-five per cent of the civilians are Americans. One reason for this is that a great number of experienced Canadian pilots are in the R.A.F. or the R.C.A.F. Whether American or Canadian they were usually co-pilots with the airlines, flying instructors or bush pilots. There are some famous names among them : Clyde Pangborn and Hugh Herndon of round-the world fame, Duke Schiller of the Canadian north, W. C. Chitty “astro” expert, Louis Bisson, E. G. Carlisle, Charlie Lorber, Lome V. Messenger and Marvin Griggs, chief test pilot. Average age of the group is about thirty and they all have one thing in common—experience.

The North Atlantic with its fierce gales and icing conditions is no place for a novice. A candidate for the ferry service must have a minimum of 750 hours in the air, a transport license or its equivalent, and instrument rating. The command takes in about eight pilots a week and washes out a third of them. They have thousands of applications on hand, a good many of them from crackpots.

When a pilot comes to the Ferry Command, no matter how good he is he goes back to school. For the first week he studies navigation, mostly dead reckoning; the second week, navigation and instruction

in the use of oxygen equipment, automatic pilot, de-icers, emergency landing procedure. The third week he tries an examination and the fourth week—if he's still with the Ferry Command —he gets to fly a bomber. He will be given ten to twenty-five hours flight instruction, the idea being not only to make him familiar with the controls but to teach him the exact technique required of him for transatlantic delivery. Dorval is one of the few places which give instruction on four-engined aircraft, and it is probably the most exacting school in the world.

Captain W. C. Siple, young and tough-minded, who is in charge of civilian instruction, has been across five times himself. He used to have an air transport and school at Larder Lake. "When one of our boys lifts a ship off the runway here," says Captain Siple, "you can count that one delivered."

First Trip

THE PILOT usually makes his first trip over as a co-pilot. Then he makes his first trip as a captain-pilot in charge of a Lockheed Hudson. The pilots give a cynical reason for this. A Hudson, they say, costs about $50,000; a Liberator costs $350,000 and up. A pilot is physically capable of making three trips a month. After five trips he is given a rest. He has to take an oath of secrecy and sign articles which bind him to fitness and obedience. Civilian pilots (captains) get $1,000 a month, co-pilots $800, navigators $800 and radio operators $600. Most of them feel keenly about the cause for which they are flying. One pilot, who was killed in a crash, used to turn over to the Red Cross $800 of his $1,000 pay. Service pilots get service pay.

The pilots are usually returned by air, either by Clipper or in one of the Command's Liberators. Sometimes they come back by boat, and they hate it. If you ask a pilot for a story of heroism in the Ferry Command he will probably tell you about some pilot who took twenty-nine days to come back on a tramp steamer.

Besides the North Atlantic ferry, the Command flies Consolidated flying boats—the PB-Y's—from Bermuda. The PB-Y, known as the Catalina, won world-wide prominence when one of them spotted the Bismarck. They cruise along comfortably at 112 miles an hour, and with the usual tail wind make the 3,000 nautical miles to England (the route Mr. Churchill took) in twenty-four hours. More than a hundred of these have been ferried and not one has been lost, though one arrived with its ailerons torn off.

Bombers for the northern route are flown across the United States from the American factories by American crews. Canadian crews go to work on them in Canada. Compasses are swung, R.A.F. radio equipment, flotation gear and oxygen tanks are installed. The motors get a forty-hour check and the aircraft is ready to go. Lockheed Hudsons carry a crew of three, a captain, navigator and radio operator. The Liberators carry five— captain, co-pilot, navigator, flight engineer and radio operator.

Empty, this big aircraft weighs 32,000 pounds; loaded, 56,000 pounds—and every one of them takes off fully loaded. For these bombers are carriers too, helping to conserve shipping space. There is a freight office at Dorval stacked with packages, each marked with a priority number. Besides passengers and mail they carry templates, spare parts, blueprints, radio parts, food, vitamin pills (especially vitamin "A" which helps the night fighters to see in the dark), secret things and things needed in a hurry. They have carried radium, live frogs—for research purposes—and something which smelled so bad the pilots still wonder what it was.

The Ferry Command is not keen on carrying passengers, because a passenger means 200 pounds less freight capacity, but they have a distinguished clientele. Persons carried are usually senior officers and people on government business. They flew Prime Minister Mackenzie King across last fall. Some of the names which have appeared on their passenger list are Lord Beaverbrook, Lord Douglas Hamilton, the Duke of Kent, American Ambassador John Winant, Air Marshal Breadner, Col. J. L. Ralston, Geoffrey Shakespeare, Capt. Harold Balfour, Malcolm MacDonald, Brigadier Vanier, Harry Hopkins, Robert Sherwood, Robert Riskin, screen writer, and Robert Montgomery.

The service is free but to be taken as a passenger you must be recommended by one of the Allied Governments and okayed by the commander in chief.

In an office at Dorval there is a table covered with bronze plaques. Each one has a legend:

In Honorable Memory of ....
Pioneer of the North Atlantic
Killed in line of duty
In Memory of his achievements.

There are fifty-four of these and they all bear one of three dates. They commemorate the worst three days of the Ferry Command when in quick and tragic sequence three aircraft, carrying returning personnel, crashed in the British Isles. Twenty-two were killed on August 10, twenty-two on August 14 and ten on September 1, 1941. The enquiries found that the cause of the crashes was pilot error.

The number of bombers lost during actual ferrying operations has not been made public but it is less than one per cent of the bombers flown across.

Delivery of aircraft across the Atlantic, though now the business of the R.A.F., was pioneered by civilians. In 1940 the British Ministry of Aircraft Production, which was buying airplanes in the United States, decided to investigate delivery by air. The first flights were organized by experienced Britishers, working with the Canadian Pacific Railway Company, Then came the Atlantic Ferry Organization—Atfero for short —headed by Morris Wilson, president of the Royal Bank and the North American representative of the Ministry of Aircraft Production. Under Mr. Wilson and Harold M. Long, a Montreal businessman, Atfero grew into a big transatlantic airline. The R.A.F. Ferry Command took over in August, 1941.

The walls of Sir Frederick's office are covered with pictures of sailing vessels, for the sea was his first love and he holds a Master's certificate in sail and steam. He flew with the Navy in the first World War, learning to lift rickety seaplanes off the decks of ordinary ships. He served in Mesopotamia and East Africa and after the war, in White Russia. At the outbreak of the second World War he was Chief of the Coastal Command in England, the post he held for the first two years of the struggle. He is easy to meet and to talk to; he understands and appreciates the public interest in his job. But he has picked up an Americanism. Just before he talks most interestingly, he is apt to say, "Of course, this is quite off the record."

Sir Frederick never fails to pay tribute to the pioneer organization, Atfero. "They did most of the hard work, we are just carrying on."

Britain Ahead

THE SCENE is an airport in Newfoundland Flight LX12, a Liberator, is waiting, ready Her engines have been rechecked, her fuel tanks "topped"—filled so full that not a bubble of air remains— and now she is ready for her 2,200 mile hop. Her captain is Alec Lilly, born in Moose Jaw, ex-Mounted Policeman, aged twenty-nine, with 3,500 hours in the air. He used to fly government officials and the crisp new treaty money to the Indians in the north. This will be his sixth trip across. His radio operator is an English civilian, his navigator a sergeant of the R.C.A.F. going to join a squadron in England.

The ground crew moves away from the aircraft

"All set, Captain."

The noise of the motors seta the echoes clanging among the hangars. It moves off belly-low, turns and

faces into the western wind. The captain turns in his seat to look at his crew. All are in their places. Across from him the co-pilot has buckled his belt and is staring straight ahead. It is his first trip across. Everyone feels tense. The bomber is heavily loaded, she carries 1,800 gallons of gasoline. A swerve on the take-off may mean explosion and disaster.

"Let's go."

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