

GEOGRAPHY

# Sub-Arctic Flight

Iceland is a pause in flight to Europe and war; our airmen routinely fly bombers there from Labrador. "Briefing" for trans-ocean flight is dramatic.

By WATSON DAVIS

See Front Cover

*Mr. Davis continues his narrative of an air visit to USA air bases on the North Atlantic route to Europe. See SNL, Dec. 9. The photograph on the cover of this SCIENCE NEWS LETTER was taken while the party was flying over the Greenland Ice Cap.*

► ICELAND—From Meeks Field here it is a few hours' hop to the Old World in flames and a few hours air time to the New World from which there are coming streams of planes to extinguish world turmoil with bullets and bombs.

This is a key Army Transport Command airport for crossing the North Atlantic in war or peace. American troops maintain it at the invitation of what is at once the oldest and the newest American republic. It is just as American as any part of the USA and yet it is a few minutes ride in an Army C-47 (DC-3 to you old airline riders) to Reykjavik, Iceland's capital city with 45,000 population—of whom, it seems, 40,000 can talk to the USA GIs in English, if not in American.

Iceland is still a war zone, with the Royal Navy still fighting submarines off the coast in sight of land. Our ack-ack is still alert and eager to get a crack at any Nazi planes. Just five days before the party of American writers arrived a small Icelandic ship returning from the United States was torpedoed by a German submarine with heavy loss of life.

Iceland is a neutral although occupied country, but Icelanders and their press are not neutral in condemning this attack upon them.

Geographers argue as to whether Iceland belongs to the American side of the world or the European. Its language and culture are closely bound to Europe, particularly to all Scandinavia. Denmark furnished Iceland a king up until June of this year, when the present republic was proclaimed.

America is furnishing commercial and cultural cooperation beyond the job the military is doing, and this, along with

the aviation links, will tend to make Iceland more a part of the Western hemisphere in fact.

A new land geologically, with hot springs and active volcanoes, Iceland will have a rebirth as a major stepping stone between Europe and North America, recapitulating in a very different way the voyages of those pioneering Icelanders who founded Vineland in the New World centuries before Columbus.

Thanks to the Army's Air Transport Command, the aerial pioneering has been done. Reykjavik to New York's 27 days by boat is now less than half that number of hours by air. Thousands of young men are flying eastward these above-ocean lanes with only maps, briefing, good warplanes and instruments and the extraordinary navigational aids given them by radio and weather reporting. Thousands of war casualties are being flown westward in comfort, so far as transport is concerned.

To Iceland these war developments mean more than normal progress. They are the instigations of a peaceful, helpful revolution that will remove this little country from the world list of inaccessible and remote places. Icelanders have known much more about the USA than we have known about them and thousands of them have come to live in the United States. Western Icelanders they are called. Thousands of American officers and men who have been on duty here now know about the Icelanders and Iceland.

The terrain may be bleak, the winds cold, the roads rough and the prices high, but American soldiers too will want to come back when they have time for vacation trips to hot springs and glaciers and when the times and grass are greener.

► GOOSE BAY, LABRADOR—Upon Labrador's Plateau, more than 100 miles from the sea, lies this airport that is a major station for the dispatching of warplanes from the United States and Canada to Europe.

From its long, concreted runways, its hangars and its barracks to the nearest village, Mud Lake (population six families) is 10 miles. Goose is as far north

of Maine as Washington is south. Northwest River, 150 people, the location of one of the Grenfell missions, is 22 miles away.

The U. S. Army's Air Transport Command and the Royal Canadian Air Force operate this field in complete harmony, with the gray-blue of the RCAF and the RAF almost as prevalent as the familiar browns of our own flyers.

A couple of feet of snow lies over the spruce-dotted landscape, with mechanical snow removers chopping the ramps and runways wider night and day, sending geyser-like showers of pulverized snow into the air. Arctic clothing is worn by officers and men alike.

Only air transport and radio connect this base with the outside world now. The good deepwater connection to the Atlantic through Hamilton inlet is now frozen and will be until next June or July. Major supplies are brought in by water during the three summer months.

Isolated as this post actually is, yesterday's Chicago or New York newspaper is likely to be lying around the recreation rooms.

There was no Goose Bay Airport three years ago. When the North Atlantic route to Europe was being established, the usefulness of a hopping-off place inland in Labrador, where the mists of the oceans would be lacking, was foreseen. Surveys were made and the Canadians selected the area that is now known as Goose Bay.

Canadian civilian engineers landed by ship on Sept. 29, 1941, bringing with them bulldozers, concrete mixers, lumber, cement and other materials for starting an airport. On Dec. 6 planes landed on the first runway. American forces came in the following April and by Thanksgiving Day had moved into their own barracks.

Since then the ATC base has grown and improved. There are now ample facilities for housing and feeding tactical pilots and crews (meaning the boys who run the warplanes), as well as Vips (Very Important Persons) such as generals, diplomats, etc., and Vups (Very Unimportant Persons) such as the party of war correspondents visiting the bases of the North Atlantic Division of the Air Transport Command.

The present commanding officer of Goose Bay Base is a colorful personality and aviation pioneer, Lt. Col. B. R. J. (Fish) Hassell, whose experience dates back to aviation's early days. He is the only man who has landed on the Greenland ice cap and walked off it unaided.

An advocate of flying in the subarctic when few believed it could be done, Fish is very much in his element as the C.O. of a snow-decorated base that pushes scores of planes onto the fighting fronts with great regularity.

► **GOOSE BAY, LABRADOR**—They are eager young boys who in peaceful times would be playing on college football teams and horsing around fraternity houses. They are young airmen of the war—pilots, co-pilots, navigators—the men who fly and guide the flying machines of the Army Air Force Europe-bound.

The big, barnlike briefing room is filled with them, listening with impatient attention to the Air Transport Command briefing officer, a major sitting on the corner of the desk in front—a sort of coach or professor. It is quite a game to be playing. Crossing the North Atlantic for their first time—Labrador to Iceland direct—with full responsibility for ships worth hundreds of thousands of dollars and the ten lives aboard the giant B-17s and B-24s. Greater responsibility than that, in fact, for in a few weeks they are to spearhead in the air our drives upon Germany.

Outside on the airfield their crew chiefs and other crew members are warming up the engines in the winter evening cold, checking and then checking again the hundreds of pieces of equipment that must be kept in order on a big bomber that it may fly speedily and safely. In another briefing room, the radio operators are being told the details of their jobs on the hop to begin in a few hours—how to call this station and that and how to use radio aids to aviation that now mark airways on icy oceans.

"We'll have a movie first," says the major. A screen drops down over the background of maps and charts. "Confidential" warns the opening flash.

This is old stuff to these lads, almost everything they work with is marked "confidential" or "secret." With quiet confidence the movie narrator's voice points the screen story of the trip to come—how to take off from Goose Bay, what next landmark and radio range to watch for, what to expect in Davis strait. Greenland's mountains and ice cap are shown rising out of the sea. The way up a fjord to the American Air Transport Command on Greenland's southern tip, BW1, is shown.

"We don't expect you to have to land here but here is the way to do it if you

have to," the briefing movie says.

We of the press knew it could be done, for our airplane had done it a few days earlier.

"Minimum altitude for contact flying over the ice cap is 11,000 feet," the briefing movie warns. "Out over the sea again on the way to Iceland halfway to this journey's end, check on this radio range, calls this station to let them know where you are and when you expect to arrive (E T A is the way 'estimated time of arrival' is said over the radio). Then the approaches to Meeks Field circle this way, please call in at this point. The runway is so wide and so long. Then there is a field at Reykjavik that you may have to use if you do come in this way. Your alternate (meaning the field the plane will be headed for if weather is unexpectedly bad at Meeks Field) is in the United Kingdom."

Yes, you will have enough gas to get there if you have to. And the movie shows the way, although seldom does any pilot need to head there. "Oh, yes," the briefing movie voice seems to say as a sort of after-thought, "there is an emergency field farther north on the east coast of Greenland, BE2, that we don't expect you to use, but here is the way to it."

And the pilots saw what we had seen a few days before when we had flown the same route to inspect this aviation outpost from the air. The towering mountains that surround the little landing strip at BE2 were good for a laugh from the pilots.

So ended a very effective educational movie—but unlike one in school it may have given life-or-death information.

"Now that you see all that scenery" said the major, taking over from the screen, "we are going to send you on a rhumb line route that will pass miles away from Greenland."

About radio information you receive enroute, explained the major, don't rely on it absolutely. Check it with dead reckoning. Occasionally a German submarine will try to give you false radio bearings or jam a radio range, but that does not happen often and you have plenty of ways to check on such false information.

Now the weatherman has arrived with a stack of flight plans, codes, etc., that chart in three dimensions the way that these boys will fly from America to Iceland. Tonight the most favorable altitude is so many thousands of feet. There is no cause for worry about the weather, no icing is expected; which is pleasing prognostication because ice on wings and



**START CLIMBING, SOLDIER!**—*This is the slogan at Northington General Hospital in Tuscaloosa, Ala., where the Army's reconditioning program is in full swing (See SNL, Dec. 9). A man with an injured leg is seen on the hospital's obstacle course.*

in carburetors is one of the great dangers of winter flying.

"We have been working on this forecast for the last 24 hours," the meteorologist tells the pilots and aviators. "Hundreds of weather observers in the Far North as well as in Greenland have sent in their reports. Planes have reported from the very areas you will fly. We believe that we are telling you just what kind of weather you will run into—and it's good flying weather. You'll have a good crossing."

Questions? Just a few.

"O.K.," says the briefing major, "make out your clearances, pick up your flight lunches, be sure you have all your charts and papers. Please be careful in taxiing to take-off position. Get going, gentlemen."

The night noises of Goose Bay plateau, with its scrub spruce, consist of roaring engines, screeching brakes, the sweeping up-roar of take-offs. Another air fleet is off to war.

P.S. They all got to Iceland safely, about 10 hours after take-off from Goose Bay, including that young pilot who during briefing was fondly playing with a deflated football.

*Science News Letter, December 16, 1944*

*Sugar* is a pure organic compound that is prepared in the United States in much larger quantity than any other.