

## **Gander's Role in Response to the Events of September 11, 2001**

The people of Gander followed the events of September 11, 2001, as they unfolded and reacted with the same horror and disbelief shared the world over at watching those images over and over throughout that morning. And, as the reality of what had happened settled in, they instinctively knew that this day would change the world.

It seemed obvious that air travel, at the very least, would be in for a rough period, if indeed it would ever fully recover, and with Gander's inherent ties to the aviation industry, thoughts eventually turned to how that would impact the town over the long term. In those first hours, however, no one imagined that the impact would be so immediate or overwhelming.

Claude Elliott had already been Mayor of Gander for five years and had served as Councillor and Deputy Mayor for the previous six. He understood the significance of Gander's location to the global aviation industry and, when the possibility of closing North American airspace was raised, he knew immediately that the airport town would play a vital role. He knew that there might be as many as 1,000 aircraft plying the North Atlantic corridor at any given time. Even if those closer to Europe were turned back, airports all along the eastern seaboard would still be in for a busy day.

At 11:15 a.m., Mayor Elliott spoke with the Town Manager to discuss possible scenarios. Gander was initially told to expect up to 50 commercial airliners, carrying some 10,000 passengers and crew, to land in quick succession. For a town of 10,000 residents, it was a daunting prospect. By 11:45, the Mayor had activated the Town's Emergency Operations Centre, as did the airport itself, 9 Wing CFB Gander and the local hospital. He officially declared a state of emergency at 4 p.m.

Still, even enlisting all of the town's resources, housing, feeding and caring for so many unexpected guests would be impossible for more than a few hours. Neighbouring communities were contacted and responded without hesitation until virtually every school, church and hall in the region was booked to accommodate the passengers of one or more aircraft. Pilots and flight crew - who would have to be well-rested and flight-ready at a moment's notice - would fill all of Gander's available hotel rooms.

At the airport, a single runway remained active as wide-body aircraft filled the parking apron, taxiways and ultimately the other runways, until 38 passenger planes and four military flights, carrying some 6,700 passengers and crew from nearly 100 countries around the globe, were safe on the ground. But, that was only the beginning. With the very real possibility that some of those flights were carrying now-thwarted terrorists, all passengers and their baggage had to be fully screened before they were allowed to disembark. It would be nearly 24 hours before the last passengers were released into the community, and nearly a week before the last of our unexpected guests were once again on their way.

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As word of the arriving aircraft spread throughout the community, donations of bedding and food began pouring in, even before arrangements could be made for collection and distribution. The still-new Gander Community Centre quickly became the main staging point. Ice had already been laid for the upcoming hockey season, so pallettes of perishable goods soon found their way to what Mayor Elliott referred to as “Newfoundland’s biggest refrigerator”.

Businesses were equally quick to step up. The local Canadian Tire store filled a truck with whatever stock they imagined stranded travelers might need, and Wal-Mart management ordered its cashiers to ring up purchases as usual, but to accept no payment from the “plane people”, as they would become known. Two local pharmacies would spend much of the next week verifying and filling prescriptions for the stranded passengers, again at no charge.

But, the passengers weren’t alone in their need for care and comfort. Many of those aircraft were also transporting animals, mostly pets, but also a pair of pygmy chimpanzees on their way to a new home at Ohio’s Columbus Zoo. It took volunteers from the Gander & Area SPCA the best part of two days to break through the heightened security to eventually crawl on hands and knees through the cargo holds to rescue the frightened, hungry and dehydrated animals.

Throughout the 9/11 experience at Gander, Mayor Elliott remained hands-on, insisting on continuous updates from the EOC while touring the facilities housing visitors, lending emotional support where needed, personally transporting guests and running errands with the many other volunteers. He lent his office to the Mayor of Frankfurt who was among the stranded passengers, and met with senior management of Lufthansa Airlines, which would later name an aircraft ‘Gander-Halifax’ in gratitude. Still, the Mayor himself declines personal thanks, deferring to the greater community.

“It truly was a community effort in every sense,” Mayor Elliott insists. “What the terrorists accomplished on September 11 only brought us closer together and gave us the opportunity to show the world how easy it is to bring care and comfort and how hard it is to break our spirit.”

Those days in Gander had a profound impact on the stranded passengers, spawning numerous lifelong friendships, a major scholarship fund and at least one marriage. The story has become the subject of a book and several movies and documentaries, including one by veteran American broadcaster Tom Brokaw which aired during coverage of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver. Brokaw’s Operation Yellow Ribbon triggered a new outpouring of thanks and praise from around the world.

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On the 10th anniversary of 9/11, U.S. Congresswoman Louise Slaughter sponsored a Congressional Resolution singling Gander out for its “immeasurable assistance” that day; President Barack Obama cited the Town in his thanks to Canada and Mayor Elliott led a delegation to Washington to accept a special International Community Resiliency Award as part of the American anniversary observance. The Town of Gander was also presented with not one, but two pieces of steel from the collapsed World Trade Centre buildings, widely considered the most sacred symbol of the 9/11 experience.

“We have received far more thanks for our actions than we expected,” Mayor Elliott notes. “The smiles on the faces of our guests as they headed back to their flights; the hugs, the tears, and the knowledge that each of us had helped someone who needed comfort or reassurance were thanks enough when we, ourselves, had been so fortunate to have shared this extraordinary experience.

“One woman told me when she was leaving that September 11 showed us the very worst of mankind, but that her time in Gander restored her faith in humanity and that here she saw the very best of mankind,” he relates. “I can think of no better legacy from those events than the message to the world that hope and compassion will always triumph over hatred and violence.”