

Airport manager: it's crisis after crisis

By JIM ROBINSON
City Editor

Anyone who saw the motion picture, Airport, will remember the airport manager, played by Burt Lancaster. He was in constant company of a beautiful blonde as he casually solved crisis after crisis, much as we would decide whether to have honey or jam on our toast.

H.E.A. Devitt is the International Airport manager. He saw the film and said that much of it conforms to what really goes on at the airport, "except for the girl, of course."

Any time an aircraft is in trouble, Hugh Devitt has to be sure that foam trucks, which he helped design several years ago, ground crews, back-up crews, and all ancillary services are ready to go when the aircraft touches down.

That's the instant he and his people take over. As long as the aircraft is in the air it is the province of air-traffic control. Anything and everything on the ground is the responsibility of Hugh Devitt.

"It's like being the manager of a giant hotel in a way. You have to make sure everything is ready to accept the guests and that they have every service they expect.

"As soon as one aircraft leaves a boarding gate, your Gate Assignment Group has to get it cleaned and ready for the next aircraft that pulls up to the terminal," he said.

No course

How does a person get to be an airport manager? There certainly aren't any courses for it at Sheridan College. Mr. Devitt didn't go to school to be an airport manager, he was an engineer.

"And all along it was my background with wheels that was leading up, although I didn't know it, to the job as airport manager," he said.

He began in the Royal Canadian Engineers and just after World War II he was in Britain instructing British engineers how to construct runways quickly for tactical jet fighter operations. The theory here was to build a runway "cheap and fast."

There followed a stint in the Canadian Army Staff College. He was then appointed the man in charge of keeping the Alaska Highway in operation. It had to be open every day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Based at Whitehorse, starting in 1957, he had 500 men and hundreds of pieces of equipment to marshal over the 1,221 miles of the highway, then the responsibility of the Canadian Army.

It was challenging, he says, because of the topography and extremes in climate that could snap the highway like peanut brittle in the cold and swallow it up in the muskeg during thaw.

"I'm a philosopher. I believe that the north is the greatest training ground in the world.

"Anyone who has been in the north learns to tackle anything," he said.

The year 1962 brought with it a great change in the, then, Department of Transport (DOT). Airports had been seen as the great method of tying this country together.

Best service

The DOT needed a man who knew about maintaining runways and keeping machinery moving to give the best service. They needed a man with "wheels background" and the obvious choice was Hugh Devitt.

"And with that they persuaded me to become a civilian," he said.

It meant traveling, and living, in just about every corner of Canada or as he says, from "Gander to Victoria to Resolute Bay." The job was to get landing strips working and in operation.

The year 1965 brought a 43-year-old Devitt back to Ottawa and into the midst of a massive revamping of the DOT. The byword was efficiency and Hugh Devitt was called in to use his "wheels background" to upgrade ground support at air fields.

One of the first things he did was get plans on the drawing board for a new kind of fire unit at airports. Stipulated was a Canadian chassis of great strength and speed plus an effective foam flame retardant.

The result is the type of vehicle for crash control now used at every Canadian airport.

Jumping a few years forward here, all the crash trucks at the airport are now painted chrome yellow instead of red. The reason for this is that yellow has been determined the most easily seen color by the human eye.

Take a look at the snow removal equipment at International Airport sometime. The plows have rubber tips instead of steel and they tow what looks like a monster Fuller brush. This combination creates a vortex of the water and slush on a runway that sweeps itself to the side. This enables the snow blowers to cast it off into the hinterlands.

Dedicated

He has 382 people beneath him at International Airport and they have to do everything from sweeping floors to assigning a jetliner to a specific gate.

"My motto is I want this airport to be better today

than it was yesterday.

"If I see something that can be improved, I want it done. Every person here is dedicated to that ideal," he said.

An average day for Airport Manager Devitt begins, as it did last Thursday, at 8 a.m. Each day he visits a terminal and takes a long walk around to make sure everything is working as it should.

That's followed by a conference with the president of a firm that supplies signs to the airport.

"If you want me to be honest, people don't see signs. Even though there is a display board at every entrance to a terminal showing where everything is, they still ask the first uniformed person they see.

"Right now we are looking at pictograms. These are the international symbols that people instantly recognize.

That meeting completed, he is off to discuss a problem with more officials over lunch. Following that he has a staff conference. Then comes the "inevitable flow of paper work." Finally, at 8 p.m. he flies to Ottawa for a conference with the Ministry of Transport.

But when does Hugh Devitt assume the role portrayed by Burt Lancaster? Quite often is the answer. Not long ago, if readers will remember, we had a heavy snowfall during the middle of the week. Wearing parka and slush boots, he was out with the crews trying to get the snow off the runway so the stacked-up jets in the air could land.

Proud

He says he is proud of the operation at International Airport and he takes that from the best possible source, the pilots.

"You don't find too many pilots who knock the TIA (Toronto International Airport). Sure we have some problems, but I think on the whole this airport is one of the best in Canada.

"Just in terms of people, we handle 40,000 to 45,000 people per day and 20,000 cars and that doesn't even begin to include the number of people coming to greet flights," he said.

Mr. Devitt said he has been to a number of airports and he still thinks that International is just about the best.

"There's really only one that I can think of that is perhaps better and that's Tampa International Airport in Florida.

If International, here, is that good then one must assume that the handling of it is just as good.

"I guess it's because I'm an eternal optimist," says Mr. Devitt. "In this business, you have to be."

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Devitt, H. E. A.



Everything that happens on the ground at the International Airport is the responsibility of this man, H. E. A. Devitt, who is the airport manager. Mr. Devitt's motto is "one I wouldn't change for any other." is to make the airport better today than it was yesterday. Mr. Devitt says the job is "one I wouldn't change for any other." News Photo by Fred Loek.

Real Region Bids: Devitt,
Hugh E. A.

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