

## CHAPTER TWO



Bonnie Harris, Constable Oz Fudge, and Linda Humby.

Courtesy of Jane DeFude

**H**arold O'Reilly didn't want to think about his birthday. And he certainly didn't want any fuss just because he was turning fifty. He'd work his regular shift at Gander's air-traffic control center and then celebrate that night by going out to dinner with his wife and family. Located less than a mile from Gander International Airport, the center, commonly referred to as ATC, is a bunkerlike building that keeps track of all flights between Europe and North America. Every day nearly a thousand flights cross the Atlantic. To keep these planes from

bumping into one another, there are approximately forty controllers on duty, each responsible for a different patch of the sky over the water. If a plane is headed toward the United States, once it passes Newfoundland, the controller hands the flight over to his or her counterpart in Montreal or Boston or New York. If a plane is going to Europe, then once it reaches the other side of the ocean, the flight is given to centers in Ireland or France or Spain.

Generally speaking, being a controller in Gander is not as high-pressured as being a controller in a major metropolitan area, where you have hundreds of flights bunched together in a very small space of sky. In those centers the overriding concern is to prevent a midair collision.

Gander controllers worry about this as well, but planes flying across the Atlantic are spaced far enough apart to make it less of a threat. Instead, with long oceanic flights it's all about the jet stream, that ribbon of air that can save a pilot fuel and help him reach his destination a little sooner. Finding the precise altitude of the stream on any given day and easing pilots into it is the art of being a controller in Gander. Gander controllers take pride in making sure pilots and their passengers get from one point on the map to another as smoothly and as comfortably as possible.

Fittingly, the inside of the building where they oversee the journeys of so many travelers has an eerily intense feel to it. There are no windows and the lights in the main rooms are kept low in order to prevent glare on the screens from disrupting the vision of the controllers. As a result, the controllers appear supernatural, bathed in the artificial glow of their own monitors as they control the skies over the Atlantic.

O'Reilly has been coming to work at the Gander ATC for twenty-eight years. He grew up in a small town of a few hundred people in a corner of Newfoundland accessible only by ferry. He was a high-school teacher for a short time, but



wanted to try something different. Being an air-traffic controller certainly fit that description. And now he was the boss.

As the lead supervisor, he was the man in charge of operations. It was his center, his air. He'd been at work a couple of hours when someone told him to come see the television in the break room because a plane had just slammed into the World Trade Center. He arrived just as the second plane hit. His horror was quickly replaced by a feeling of dread that there was more to come. Obviously the airports in New York were going to be closed, O'Reilly concluded. But even he was surprised when he received a call from the air-traffic control center in Boston alerting him that all airspace in the United States had been closed.

The second piece of news from Boston: all American carriers—United, American, Delta, Continental—had to land at the nearest airport immediately. Foreign carriers had a choice: they could turn around and fly home or land in Canada, but they couldn't come into the United States. As O'Reilly talked to Federal Aviation Administration officials in Boston, American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon.

September 11 was certainly shaping up to be an unbelievable birthday.

O'Reilly called his supervisors together. He'd worked with most of these men for years and trusted their judgment. By now everyone in the building knew about the disaster in New York, and as he briefed his supervisors, he tried to read their faces to see if any betrayed a sense of fear or apprehension. If they were scared, O'Reilly thought to himself, they certainly weren't showing it. Instead everyone seemed anxious to confront the challenge ahead.

There were about three hundred planes in their airspace and all of them had to be rerouted and given alternate landing sites. The planes were going to have to change altitudes,

change directions, and converge on a few airports in eastern Canada. Pilots were already hailing the center, trying to figure out what they were supposed to do. O'Reilly kept it simple with just one instruction for his supervisors: "Let's just get those planes on the ground, as soon as possible, without having any accidents."

His supervisors might not have been afraid, but O'Reilly was privately terrified that there would be an accident. It wasn't a question of his not having confidence in the ability of his controllers. The problem in his mind was that there were just too many planes and, because they all had to land as quickly as possible, too little time to see them all in safely.

Without being called, off-duty controllers started arriving at the center within a half hour of the attacks. Eventually every controller working a screen had at least one backup and a supervisor to help. There was no real plan or thought given to which planes should land where. The controllers started dividing planes up among a handful of airports that could accommodate them. St. John's and Stephenville in Newfoundland, Moncton in New Brunswick, Halifax in Nova Scotia, as well as the airports in larger cities like Montreal, Quebec, and even Toronto.

The key for O'Reilly, however, was Gander.

**B**uilt in the mid-thirties, the airport in Gander was initially a military base shared by the United States, England, and Canada. When it opened in 1938, it was the largest airport in the world. Its runways were designed to accommodate the heaviest planes of the day, and the base played a critical role during World War II. Supplies and troops on their way to



After receiving the call from the tower, Tucker met with the head of the local detachment of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the commander of the Canadian military base in Gander, as well as local and federal government officials. They all knew an onslaught was about to hit them. The RCMP and the central government in Ottawa were adamant, though: the planes could land, but nobody would be allowed off.

O'Reilly was amazed at how calmly his controllers were handling the situation. Their first task was to contact all of the planes currently heading for the United States. During that first hour not all of the pilots had heard about the attack, and controllers were told to tell pilots only that "a crisis" in the United States had forced the government to close down its airspace. The pilots had the choice of turning around and returning to Europe or landing in Canada.

Even if pilots asked questions about the events in New York, the controllers were told not to discuss the attack with them. They weren't there to provide news updates or answer questions or knock down rumors, their only concern was to get the planes safely on the ground. The truth was that the controllers weren't the best source for information anyway. The pilots had access to commercial radio stations, while the controllers were working the screens.

Dwayne Puddister, a controller for ten years, was working "high altitude," meaning planes above 28,000 feet. By the time they came into his territory, most planes were already committed to landing in Canada, so Puddister didn't offer them a lot of options.

"There is a crisis in the United States and airspace is

closed," he'd say. "You can land in either St. John's or Gander. You have thirty seconds to decide. After that, I'll decide for you."

Less than a minute later Puddister would come back to them.

"Have you made up your mind?"

If the pilot tried to stall, Puddister would make the decision.

"You're *instructed* to land . . ." And then he'd fill in the blank. The word "instruct" carries a lot of weight in the vernacular of pilots and air-traffic controllers. As a matter of civility, pilots and controllers normally use the word "request." When a controller uses the word "instruct," it's the same as an order. A pilot who refuses to comply can lose his license.

One pilot of a private jet, after being given a choice between Gander and St. John's, started arguing with Puddister, telling the controller he wanted to press ahead to his original destination in the United States. The pilot was flying a Gulfstream V, one of the most expensive and luxurious corporate jets ever made. It was clear to Puddister that the pilot wasn't aware of the attacks in New York and Washington.

"You will not be going to the United States today," Puddister said. "You are *instructed* to land in St. John's."

"You have no idea," the pilot argued. "We have well-to-do people on board."

"You have no idea," Puddister shot back. "I don't care who you have on board. You're going to be landing in St. John's. Now I have no time to deal with your foolishness."

Fellow controller Reg Batson was even more blunt with the pilots.

"Anyone trying to enter U.S. airspace," he warned, "will be shot down."

Batson was juggling ten times the number of aircraft on



his screen that he'd have under normal conditions. As a result, he urged the pilots to stay alert. Broadcasting on a channel for all of the pilots entering his airspace, Batson confided his concern and made an unusually frank request.

"There's a lot happening," he told the pilots, "and it's going to be hard to keep track of all of you. Pay attention to your proximity alarms," he continued, "and keep looking out your windows for other aircraft."

Pilots were on their own as to what they would tell their passengers. They could lie and announce they were landing in Canada because of minor mechanical problems; they could say one of the passengers was ill and they needed to land at the nearest airport for medical reasons; or they could tell the truth.

Whatever they told their passengers, nearly all of the pilots decided to wait until just before they were ready to land to announce that they would be landing in Canada. No sense provoking a possible terrorist on board into action, they all reasoned.

**T**hirty minutes after asking for guidance from Lufthansa's base in Frankfurt, Captain Knoth still hadn't heard back from anyone. While he continued to wait, Knoth summoned the plane's chief purser into the cockpit to brief him about the attacks in New York and Washington. He told the purser not to discuss what was happening with any of the other flight attendants, and to certainly keep the news from the passengers. They were still almost two hours from Canada and Knoth didn't want to spark a panic, or worse, provoke any terrorists who might have been on board. He ordered the purser to barricade the spiral staircase leading to the cockpit and the first-

class section of the plane. He told him to use the food-and-beverage carts to block the access to the stairwell and lock them in place. It wouldn't stop a determined hijacker for long, Knoth thought, but it would slow him down and give the crew a chance to react.

By the time Lufthansa Flight 400 reached the halfway point across the Atlantic, Knoth still hadn't heard from Frankfurt. He made the decision on his own: he was going to continue west rather than turn around. Knoth contacted Gander's air-traffic control center for clearance to fly on to Toronto's airport. Lufthansa had a large base of operations in Toronto, and Knoth assumed they'd best be able to serve the passengers who would likely be stranded for several days.

"Request denied," the controller in Gander said bluntly. "You have to land now."

The controller gave him his options—all in Newfoundland. Through a bizarre coincidence, Knoth happened to have spent time in a flight simulator several months earlier making emergency landings. One of the airports he practiced for was Gander International. And like most transatlantic pilots, Knoth carried maps in his flight bag showing the layout of the airport and its runways.

"We'll take Gander," he said.

**A** little before 11 A.M. local time, Virgin Air Flight 75, on its way from Manchester, England, to Orlando, Florida, became the first diverted airplane to land in Gander. The plane circled the town, came in low from the northeast, and landed on Runway 22. Aboard were 337 passengers, most on their way to a family vacation in Disney World.



given everything that was going wrong in the world, it was reassuring to see that right now, right here, in one small corner of the planet, something was going right.

There was no hatred. No anger. No fear in Gander. Only the spirit of community. Here, everyone was equal, everyone was treated the same. Here, the basic humanity of man wasn't just surviving but thriving. And Baldessarini understood that he was a witness to it and it was affecting him in ways he'd never imagined.

His assistants in Frankfurt thought he was crazy when he called to cancel the private jet. He tried explaining that flying home while the others were left behind would have been an act of betrayal of everything that had happened over the last seventy-two hours. Wherever his fellow passengers went, that's where he would go. However long it took them to get home, that's how long he'd be gone. He was in this until the end.

**D**uring Lufthansa Flight 438's return to Frankfurt, Beth and Billy Wakefield wondered if they had made the right decision. They flew all night Thursday, arriving in Germany Friday morning. After they waited several hours at the airport, an agent for Lufthansa told them he might have good news. He couldn't get them directly home to Nashville, Tennessee, he explained. "But I think I can get you on a flight to Canada," he said. From Canada, the agent explained, they shouldn't have much trouble arranging a flight into the United States.

Beth couldn't believe her ears. Was this some sort of cruel joke? Were there hidden cameras capturing this moment for some sadistic German version of *Bloopers and Practical Jokes*? They had just come from Canada. When the ticket agent realized what had happened to the Wakefields, he apologized and

excused himself. More than ever, Beth had doubts about their decision. Their little girl, Diana, was cutting two new teeth and nursing an ear infection, so she was still crying all the time. Now it looked like they would just be right back where they started.

Then along came more bad news. They wouldn't be able to get on any flight on Friday. They were going to have to spend the night. Only there weren't any hotel rooms left in the city. They were taken ninety minutes outside of Frankfurt to a cottage in the country. By now the Wakefields had no idea where they were.

Saturday night they finally left Germany, this time for good. They flew from Frankfurt to Chicago and boarded an American Airlines flight for Nashville. They arrived at the Nashville airport at 8 A.M. Sunday morning and were greeted by friends. A few hours later Beth and Billy were reunited with their son, Rob.

**S**itting in the faculty lounge of the Lakewood Academy in the town of Glenwood, Rabbi Leivi Sudak believed he'd been brought to this corner of the world for a reason. His trip was supposed to be a one-day journey in which he would fly from London to New York, where he would visit the grave of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the longtime leader of the Lubavitcher movement, who had died in 1994. Once there, he would say his prayers, remembering the names of his family and the people closest to him, and then return to the airport and fly home to England that same night.

In London, Rabbi Sudak spends his working days with disenchanting young people who have taken to the streets and gotten themselves into trouble with drugs and petty crime.



Here in Newfoundland, he realized, there were things for him to learn, especially the lesson that in spite of the tragedies, there are good people in the world. And he was among some of them now.

Baila Hecht felt the same way. The wife of Rabbi Shea Hecht of New York, she happened to be on the same plane with Rabbi Sudak. The two had known each other for many years. Her husband and the rabbi were good friends. Hecht had been traveling home with her thirteen-year-old daughter, Esther, when their flight veered off to Gander.

Most of the people in Gander had had little, if any, contact with someone who was Jewish, and fewer still had ever met an Orthodox Jew. Despite this, the folks in town were not only accepting but genuinely curious. People would regularly come by and ask if it was all right to ask them questions about their beliefs, and both Hecht and Rabbi Sudak enjoyed the discussions that followed.

During one talk with Eithne Smith's husband, Carl, who is a Mountie, the rabbi asked if there was much of a drug problem in Newfoundland. Carl said there was, and added that officials estimated that between 10 and 15 percent of the students in high school had tried marijuana. It was clear to the rabbi, from Carl's voice and demeanor, that he was embarrassed by this figure. In London, the rabbi thought to himself, the number of high school students who had tried marijuana is closer to 80 percent. One reason for the difference was evident to both Hecht and Rabbi Sudak. Looking around the school, they could see a large number of young people from the town working as volunteers alongside their parents. This was the very definition of community for Rabbi Sudak. A community bound by faith and common values. This, too, was one of the lessons Rabbi Sudak believed he was in Newfoundland to be reminded of.

When the call came for them to leave Friday evening, a

new problem surfaced. Three of the seventy-one passengers—Rabbi Sudak, Baila Hecht, and her daughter, Esther—could not travel on the Sabbath. From sundown Friday until sundown Saturday, their faith prevents them not only from traveling, but from engaging in any activity that drew their attention away from their religious observances on the day when God rested after creating the universe, the world, and man. On the Sabbath, Orthodox Jews refrain from riding in a car, cooking meals, watching television, or using any type of machine, including telephones. Even turning on a light switch is prohibited.

As the rest of the passengers from their flight boarded buses for the airport, Rabbi Sudak and the Hechts remained in the school. Two families who lived within walking distance offered to take them in for the night. Rabbi Sudak went with one and the Hechts with the other. More than a test of faith, Rabbi Sudak had a feeling he was meant to stay in Newfoundland for another reason, perhaps another lesson. He just wasn't sure what it might be.

**T**here were 361 passengers aboard American Trans Air Flight 8733, and at least 90 of them were children. ATA is a discount airline favored by travel agents in England who book package tours to the United States. The group on this plane was flying from Manchester, England, to Orlando, Florida. They were going to Disney World.

The thought of so many kids having their hearts broken because their trip to the Magic Kingdom was in jeopardy was distressing for the people in Gander. And when they discovered that at least four of the kids were going to the amusement park to celebrate their birthdays, well, that was more than the



make sure they were okay. He kept them company. Helped them get around town. And checked in on them every day until new flights could be arranged, just like any good member of the family.

**H**annah and Dennis O'Rourke left Dublin early Saturday afternoon. They weren't on the first plane out, as promised, but they did make it onto the second. When their plane landed in New York, their children Patricia O'Keefe and Dennis O'Rourke were waiting to pick them up. Hannah rushed toward them. After all those hours on the plane, she thought they might have new information about Kevin. And if her fears were right, and the family was holding back information from her, they would tell her now. "There's still no news, Ma," Patricia told her.

At least there was still hope, Hannah thought. They drove to Kevin's home in Hewlett, Long Island, and as the car pulled into the driveway, everyone inside the house came spilling out, including Kevin's wife, Maryann. Everyone was crying and hugging and holding on to each other. After the horrors of the past week, Hannah and Dennis's return home gave everyone a chance to release some of their bottled-up emotions. Now, whatever happened, they would face it together. And they would get through it as a family.

**R**abbi Sudak returned to Lakewood Academy on Saturday. By now the passengers from the last plane in Glenwood were on their way to the airport. Since Rabbi Sudak and Baila Hecht

and her daughter, Esther, felt comfortable at the school, Lakewood officials decided to keep the shelter open on Saturday, even if it was just for three people.

For the first time in days the school was quiet. Eithne Smith, the teacher who had helped arrange to have kosher meals brought to the school back on Wednesday, was sitting with Rabbi Sudak in the school office when the fax machine started to hum. Smith retrieved the message. It was from one of the passengers, Werner Kolb, an alumni of Northwest Flight 61, originally scheduled to fly directly from Amsterdam to New York. Kolb had just made it home to the Netherlands and decided to send a note of thanks to everyone at the school for taking care of him.

"It is not possible for me to tell you how I felt during my stay with you," he wrote. "Only once was I treated in a similar way. This was when I was a child. I was liberated in Holland in 1945. You wonderful Canadians have not changed."

Smith could feel her hands shake as she read the note. After four long days, she was exhausted, and Kolb's note filled her with emotion. She started to cry and Rabbi Sudak spoke to her in comforting tones. He told her that the generosity she and others at the school had showed would be remembered and celebrated for a very long time. Their actions were more than just taking in passengers whose flights had been delayed. The Newfoundlanders had provided a caring haven for hundreds of people at a moment when they were scared and far from home. They were made to feel safe and secure when the world around them seemed anything but.

Smith wanted to hug him, to place her arms around him and squeeze and share his strength, but she remembered that this was forbidden, so she just thanked him.

In the afternoon, a man from Gander came to visit the rabbi. He was at least seventy years old and partially blind



from cataracts. He moved stiffly and his health was poor. His name was Eddie Brake.

Although he had lived in Gander for forty years and was a well-known salesman around town, very few people knew he was Jewish. It was a secret he'd kept for a very long time. Even his wife, whom he had been married to for forty-five years, discovered his true religious faith only ten years before when he finally broke down and told her. They had raised seven children, all Catholic like their mother.

The person now known as Ed Brake had been born in Poland in 1929 or 1930, he wasn't sure which. He didn't know the name his parents gave him at birth or, for that matter, his family name. He knew only they were Jewish, and prior to the start of World War II, they had paid to have him smuggled out of Poland and taken to England. Before leaving, Brake remembered being attacked and beaten, and his family living under a constant threat of abuse because they were Jewish.

When he left Poland he was only seven or eight years old. He was adopted by a family in England who moved to Newfoundland in 1936. He grew up in Corner Brook, a bay town on the western edge of the island, and was told never to tell anyone that his birth parents were Jews. Any time he asked questions about being Jewish, his stepparents became enraged, even violent toward him. And so began his secret life as a Jew.

The appearance of Rabbi Sudak stirred up old feelings for Brake. After arriving at Lakewood Academy on Wednesday, the rabbi had asked if there were any Jews in the area, and if so, he would like to meet them. Although hardly anyone knew of Brake's past, one of the people visiting the rabbi told him a little about Brake. The rabbi was eager to meet him.

Brake was scared when he was called and told about the rabbi's wish. He knew his family didn't like it when he discussed his past, and they were still somewhat resentful that he had hidden so much from them for so long. Brake, however,

felt the need to go. "It's time," he said to himself. Since he'd come to Newfoundland as a boy in 1936, he has never entered a synagogue or spoken to a rabbi.

On the way to Lakewood, he thought about what he would say and how much he would share. Inside the faculty lounge, sitting around a table with the rabbi and Baila Hecht and a few teachers, he found it all came spilling out. Although he wasn't certain, he believed his parents and his siblings had been rounded up by the Nazis after the invasion of Poland and taken to the camps, where they died. Brake lowered his head and asked the rabbi to pass his fingers over the back of his skull. The rabbi could feel the dents and depressions Brake said were the result of beatings he suffered at the hands of the police in Poland before his parents sent him away. He had other reminders as well, scars on his back and on his feet. He took off his shoes so the rabbi could see.

Brake told about coming to Newfoundland and being raised in a home where it wasn't permitted to talk about Judaism, a fear that stayed with him throughout his adult life. If his stepparents reacted so violently to his being Jewish, how would others respond if they knew? He decided it was best never to tell anyone about his past. Ten years ago he told his wife and his children, he explained, because he couldn't hold it in any longer.

Despite keeping it a secret, Brake told the rabbi he never stopped thinking of himself as a Jew. He showed the rabbi his walking stick. On the handle was engraved a tiny Star of David. Some nights he would wake up at three in the morning, having just dreamed of the religious music he'd heard as a child in Poland. A few days ago, he added, his mother came to him in a dream.

Brake remained stoic, almost detached, as he recounted the story of his life. He was glad the rabbi had sent for him, though. He had wanted someone like the rabbi to hear what he



had to say so his story would not be lost when he died. Both Rabbi Sudak and Bails Hecht were moved by Brake's words. They told him he should tell his story to more people. They encouraged him to visit schools, like the one they were in now, and to talk to the children about the Holocaust and about anti-Semitism. With so few Jews in Newfoundland, they argued, it was vital for him to come forward and provide a living example to refute those who denied that such events as the Holocaust had ever taken place.

Brake listened to their pleas. His family, though, didn't want him speaking out. They wanted him to leave the past alone. Brake wasn't one to call attention to himself, anyway, he said. "I'm a secretive person," he explained. But he'd needed to tell someone. And now that he'd told the rabbi, he felt a weight lift off him. After almost two hours, it was time for Brake to get home to his wife. He thanked the rabbi and Hecht for listening, picked up his cane with the tiny Star of David, and slowly shuffled out the door.

And with his departure, Rabbi Sudak stopped wondering why he had been brought to Newfoundland.