

# **Communications in Troubled Times: The Case of Ireland and Newfoundland**

Donard de Cogan (ddc@sys.uea.ac.uk)

School of information Systems, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ (UK)

Newfoundland and Ireland have been intimately linked in the global communications network since 1858. There is much written about the brighter sides of wireless and cable links, but not so much has been mentioned of the darker side - communications during conflict. This paper will seek to address some of the relevant issues.

Even as the first permanent telegraph cables were installed there was a troubled side as some the following paraphrases from Anglo American Telegraph service messages in Provincial Archives in St Johns show:

"Send us better thermometers. Those that we have don't go low enough  
ps. can we have roof insulation and double glazing?"

"Don't send further weather reports to the Board of trade in London as the Newfoundland weather seems to have so little relevance to weather in the UK."

Fenian activity threatened the security of the cables in Ireland. The following is from an unpublished manuscript "36 Years in the Telegraph Service" by James Graves, who was Superintendent of the Valentia island cable station from 1866 - 1909.

"December 1867

There were several temporary interruptions of our London wire during the 27th December and on the 28th Lieut. Marescaux, commander of H.M.S. "Orwell", then in the harbour, informed me that he had "received private intelligence from the Admiral to the effect that a Fenian privateer was expected to arrive off the S.W. coast of Ireland and from information received it was expected that an attempt would be made to damage our Cables". An extra force of constabulary arrived for the protection of the Station at 10.30 p.m."

The Valentia cables played an important part in the Easter 1916 Rebellion that is such an important part of Irish history. It being within the period of the First World War, there was strict censorship and shortly before the event an operator named Eugene Ring sent an unauthorised message "Do you want to buy a bicycle" to the operator at the other end. It was immediately intercepted by the censor, which demonstrated to the activists amongst the station staff that this route was impenetrable. Accordingly, his brother Tim Ring went to Fermoy, where he was not known and sent what appeared to be an innocuous telegram "Tommy successfully operated on today". The news of the Rebellion then broke in New York and it was not possible for wartime

censorship to conceal the facts. There were several repercussions, amongst which was the imposition of a guard at the Valentia station.



The cable room (lower right-side) has anti-blast/black-out shutters in place and it looks as if they are about to be installed in the room that housed the artificial line.

The Service Message records in Provincial Archives in St. Johns reveal that the Newfoundland and Irish cable stations assumed a particular importance during the Civil War that followed Irish independence. There was total breakdown of communications in Ireland. Government forces engaged in some of the first sea-born landings this century and occupied both Valentia and Waterville cable stations, but were denied the hinterland by the republican forces. The following extract from the Newfoundland archives is significant for several reasons:

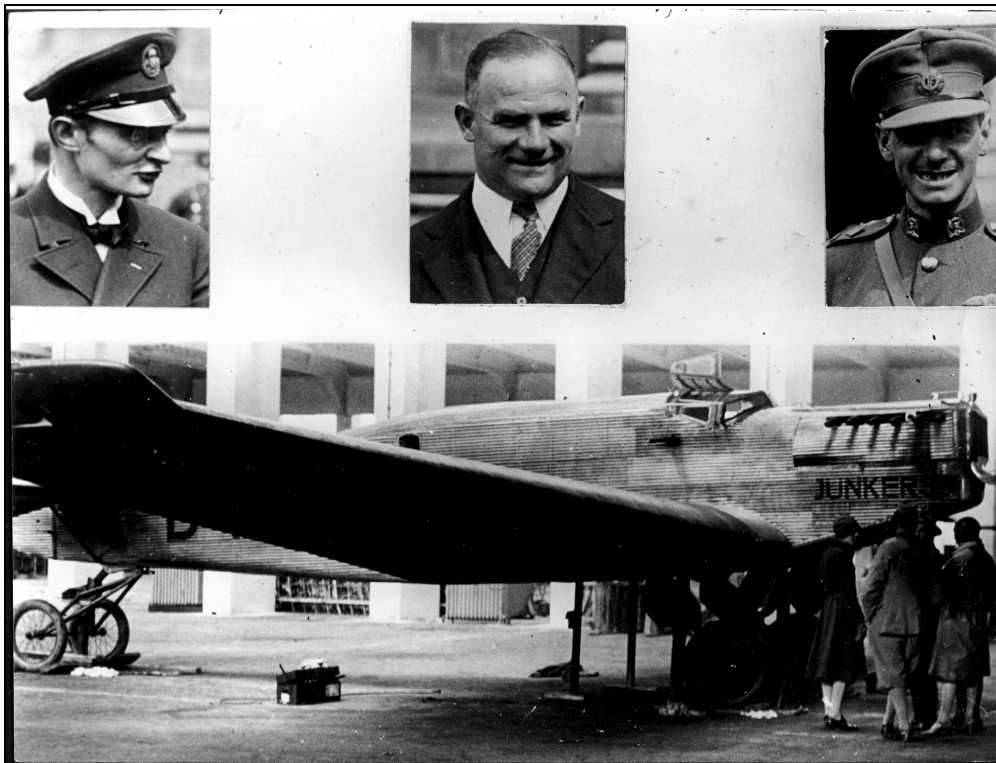
<p>Trouble Va.</p>	<p>Pz Su. Ldn. - Sept Va. via Pz &amp; HC. Sept. 10/12.          Following for Captain O'Donoghue, Valentia -          Quote - Kermare captured. Commandant O'Connor          dead. Inform Joly at once. Irregulars boarded          the Shark at Kermare yesterday evening and          are advancing towards Waterville and Cahirciveen.          wearing the uniforms of the captured garrison.          Valentia Wireless Station is to get in touch          with nearest destroyer at once to hold up the          Shark &amp; take all on board prisoners.          Signed Commandant Griffin, Cable Station,          Waterville. unquote.</p>
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The destroyer which is referred to here was of course a Royal Navy destroyer and the involvement of the Navy during the Irish Civil War is something that is not normally acknowledged. Under the Anglo-Irish Treaty two wireless stations (Valentia and Malin Head) remained under British control and in fact, did so until approximately 1950 (their role during the second world war has yet to be clarified). The final item of significance lies in the header

"Pz Su Ldn-Supt Va via Pz and HC"

Valentia was operated by the Western Union who also had cables landed at Penzance in Cornwall (Pz). The Waterville station (12 miles from Valentia) was operated by the Commercial Cable Co, who had a cable link to Weston-super-Mare in Somerset. Thus, a routing: Waterville, Weston, Penzance, Newfoundland, Heart's Content, Valentia, by its temporary nature, probably represents one of the first true 'internet' connections.

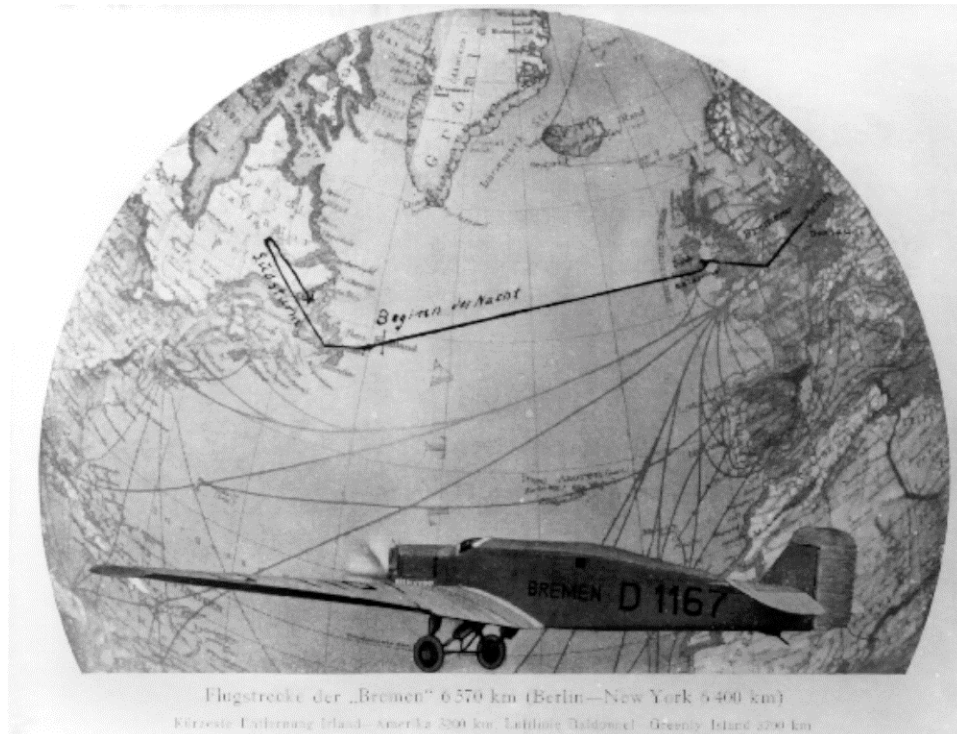
There were three very significant events in 1929. A submarine earthquake between Newfoundland and Cape Breton Island resulted in almost total breakdown of cable communications but, the situation was less critical from a global perspective due to the fact that much traffic could be diverted to wireless. This event demonstrated that wireless and cable could complement each other. There was an attempt to establish a single channel telephone cable between Ireland and Newfoundland, but cost and the Depression killed that off. However, the most significant was the first east to west flight by the Junkers 'Bremen'. Much is talked about the west to east trans-Atlantic flight of Alcock and Brown, but it should be remembered that they were travelling with the prevailing weather systems.



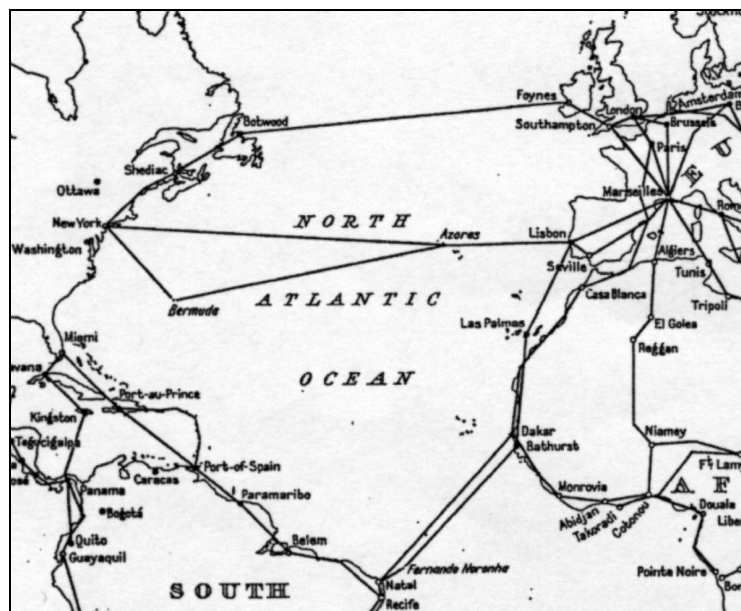
The Bremen was flown by Kohl and von Huenefeld with Fitzmaurice of the Irish Air Corps as navigator. After a long wait for suitable weather they took off from Baldonnell Aerodrome. Their major problems came when they were faced with a very strong head-wind which blew them badly off course. Realising their mistake, they back-tracked and eventually made a forced



landing on Greenly island in the Straits of Belle Isle. They were lucky, but their adventure did help to underline the fact that routine flight was going to require accurate weather information.

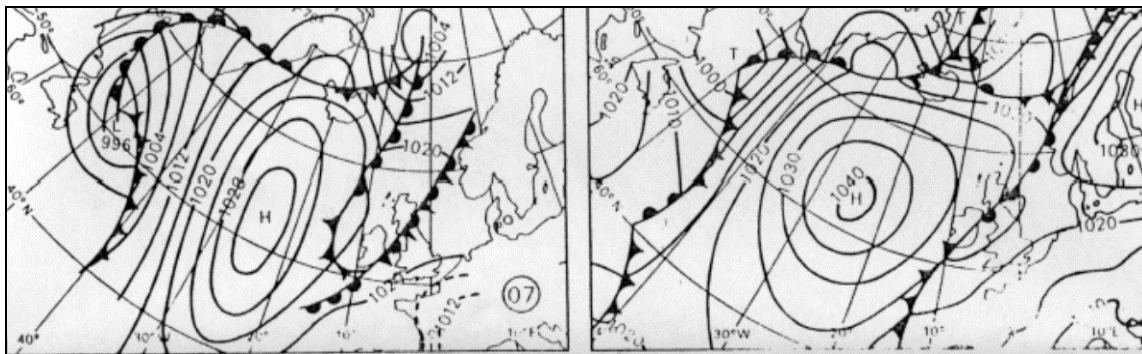


Much work was done during the succeeding ten years. A flying-boat service was projected and Charles Lindberg assisted in identifying Foynes (in Ireland) and Botwood (near Gander in Newfoundland) as suitable termini. Operational procedures were established and this included the provision and exchange of meteorological information. The Canadians were involved at Botwood and as the Irish Met Service was in its infancy, officers were seconded from the equivalent British service and also provided tuition to the new batch of Irish trainees.



Because Botwood iced over in winter the route via Foynes was intended to be used during the summer months only, otherwise, the longer route via the Azores was used. Before take-off pilots were briefed by weather officers about what might be anticipated en-route. On the flight from Foynes aircraft were in wireless contact until the half-way point was reached, when they were handed over to Canadian control. The first scheduled flights according to this operational pattern were inaugurated in August 1939, less than a month before the outbreak of the second world war.

The start of war saw the suspension of commercial flights and Foynes entered a quiet period. Ireland declared its neutrality, while Newfoundland became a nerve centre for Allied convoys. However, meteorological information became an instrument of war and Ireland, by its exclusive provision of weather data to Britain, was definitely operating on the side of the Allies. The synoptic charts for 7 February 1942, shown below give some idea of this.

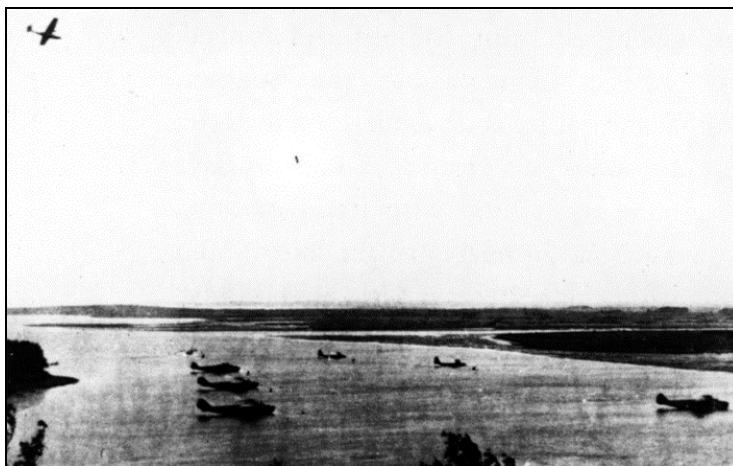
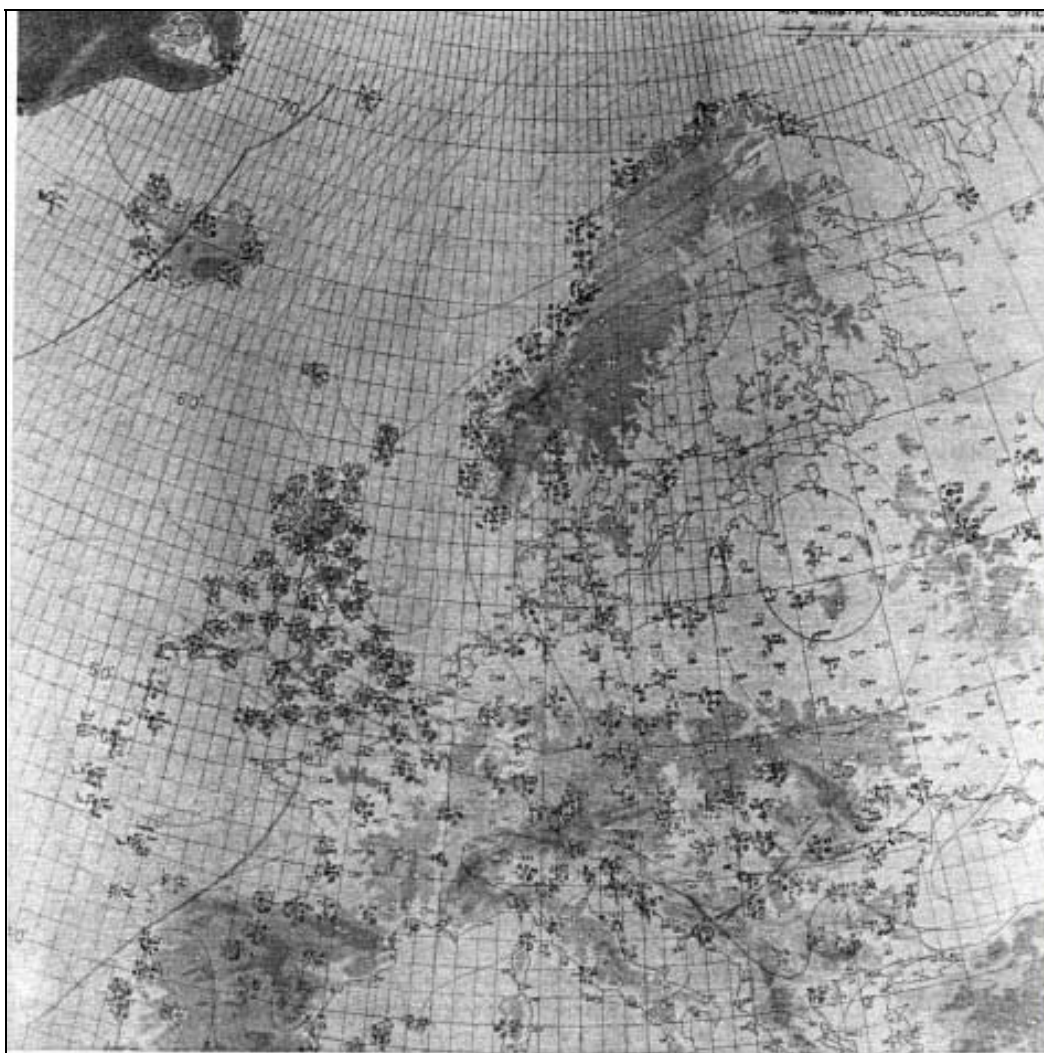


This is particularly significant, as it was the situation just a few days before the 'Channel Dash', when the German ships, Scharnhorst, Gneisenau and Prince Eugen passed up through the Dover Strait, before the British were aware that they were on the move. The chart on the left represents the British view and clearly shows the effect of information from Newfoundland. The German chart for the same period (on the right) is weak in this area, although it is much more accurate in what was then the key area of the weather over the North Sea (later, the situation was to be played out in reverse, when weather information from Ireland, not available to the Germans, helped the Allies to fix the precise timing of the Normandy landings).

Foynes might have remained a back-water had not France been occupied by the Germans. From that point onwards there were major difficulties in returning to Britain by air from Gibraltar, North Africa, the middle or far east. Even if flights refuelled at Lisbon and skirted the French coast there was still a danger of attack by German fighters.

In order to overcome this problem, it was necessary for flying-boats to take-off from Lisbon at dusk, fly up along the Portuguese coast before striking out into deep Atlantic on a broad arc that took them into Foynes at dawn. They were refuelled there before flying on to bases such as Southampton and Poole in Britain. The synoptic chart for 18 July 1943 which is shown below indicates that weather reports were being transmitted by aircraft while in flight along this route. The other annotations on the chart would suggest that by then, Britain was getting adequate weather data from much of occupied Europe. These might have come from agents, but it is more likely to have been via Met. Recce flights as well as a significant penetration of German Meteo ciphers.





The picture of flying-boats at Foynes during this time gives some evidence of its strategic importance.

So, we can conclude that the links between Ireland and Newfoundland are not merely restricted to cable telegraphs. Radio links for air-traffic and the exchange of weather data presumably continue to the present day. The links in troubled times have been particularly significant. The evidence that has been collected as part of this research confirms that, contrary to popular belief, Ireland's neutrality was probably as biased towards the Allied cause as that of Portugal. However, bad press and the pursuit of gratuitous political aims have very successfully concealed these facts for almost sixty years.