

ATLANTIC PIONEERS

They said it couldn't be done, but they did it all the same;
They said it couldn't be done, there was too much freezing rain;
They said it couldn't be done, but seventy years ago
They did it all the same, despite the rain and snow.

The war was going badly, Britain fought to stay alive,
With a desperate need for airplanes, if they were ever to survive.
Shipping planes as cargo was an awkward way to haul,
So why not try to fly them, they are airplanes after all.

The plan was rather simple, 'cos the shipping space was tight;
They'd send the planes to England by a long and bumpy flight.
Not only was it cheaper because airspace was all free,
But the route was rather quicker than the journey by the sea.

"To cross the North Atlantic in the winter can't be done.
You'd be a fool to try it without the summer sun."
But shipping space was precious and with U-boats out in force,
For an eastward mode of transport they would tap another source.

But there were some major problems that they had to overcome,
And it may be worth you noting that this never had been done.
In fact it all the years before the start of World War II
The flights across the ocean had numbered but a few.

The airplane that was needed was of the long-range kind,
But an ocean-crossing aircraft had yet to be designed.
Lockheed who built the Hudson said it might go all the way
With a retrofitted fuel tank mounted in the plane's bomb-bay

Then where to launch the aircraft was the next thing to decide.
They chose the east-most point of land so the ocean was less wide,
A site once known as Hattie's Camp had runways they could spare,
So it was decided they would launch the planes from there.

Some aircrew then were needed, and from civvy street they plucks,
An Aussie, then 9 Yanks, 6 Brits and 6 Canucks.
They trained upon the airplane and then close to Halloween
They flew their planes to Gander to get ready as a team.

They couldn't go November nine; they had to bide their time.
The weather had descended with a sheet of ice-cold rime.
Anyone who flies with ice is a madman or a fool,
So all and sundry scraped the ice with every type of tool.

Then finally on November 10 they readied for the flight,
The planes and crews were waiting and the met was good that night.
Technicians warmed the engines and the systems they did test;
Then they parked them on the runway, 7 Hudsons line abreast.

The Empire needed airplanes, to explain how bad their state,
You only have to understand what was deemed a good loss rate.
So vital were the aircraft that they'd announce success
If only 3 planes made the trip, and 4 were lost, or less.

The navigator shortage made the higher-ups decide
That only one was needed for the trans-Atlantic ride.
"You're to fly in loose formation and if you get split up,
Just aim the plane for Britain and hope for some good luck".

Once airborne out of Gander every captain could decide
If turning back or finishing would be the better ride.
No one chose to turn around, for Britain they did yearn
And they flew in one formation past the point of no return.

The Met-man was an expert, but this was winter 1940,
And the trip was somewhat longer than the average wartime sortie.
Pressure systems were a certainty, with winds of tempest force,
With nothing saying just how much they'd all be blown off course.

The planes had basic heating, other creature comforts few,
And tail winds were essential as to Aldergrove they flew.
The extra fuel tank bolted in just added to their plight,
With fuel smells always evident, they could blow up in flight.

When the seven hit bad weather, they all got the nod to split,
With turbulence and icing clouds the next thing that they hit.
Some climbed to 20,000 feet, and then a little higher,
But the oxygen depletion meant the crews began to tire.

Now when they crossed the longitude that's numbered 20 west,
The powers-that-be decided R/T silence would be best.
And just to make things tricky (lest they help an Axis nation)
The Brits had switched off all the sets that aided navigation.

The only nav aid working for the final hundred mile,
Was a little tiny beacon set atop of Storrey Isle.
It didn't work continually; in fact what they did do
Was every 20 minutes switch the set on for just two.

Without a navigator, all the aircrews they did strain,
As they searched the far horizon for a piece of lush terrain.
And twelve hours out from Gander, with their hair a little thinner,
The doubters had been silenced and the idea was a winner.

When the seven finally made it, due to wartime secrecy,
No pipe and drums did greet them and no shouts of joy or glee.
The aircrew parked the Hudsons, and retreated to the Mess,
And thanked the gods for looking down and granting them success.

Soon 16 other types of plane were flown to many nations,
And played their part in winning many vital operations.
Some said the losses would be great, the successes far too few,
But the losses all amounted to a percentage less than two.

They said it couldn't be done, the flights would be too long;
They said it couldn't be done, but they were all proved wrong.
Ten thousand times they did it, despite the scepticism,
Thanks to hard work and to gusto and to men of long-term vision.

Long haul flights are better now than in early ferry days,
In comfort, speed and distance they're enhanced in many ways.
The advancements really started due to wartime plane demands,
And a visionary's inspiration to create a new Command.

So next time you are flying, and you have a glass of wine,
And you have to choose the in-flight meal that you're about to dine,
And the movie's one you've seen before so you want to get some rest,
Just remember seventy years ago the trip had lots more zest.

Be thankful for the people, who all proved it could be done,
A place in flying history they deservedly have won.
When you go to have a sip of wine, remember to say "cheers",
And be thankful for the Hudsons and the Atlantic Pioneers.