The small seaside community of Shediac played a role significantly larger than its size in the history of transportation in New Brunswick. For hundreds of years the area surrounding Shediac Bay was traversed on land, sea, and railway by First Nations, Acadians, and Loyalists. It served as a resting site on the portage from the Bay of Fundy to the Northumberland Strait, a destination on the first public road in New Brunswick from Moncton, a departure point for ferry service to Summerside and Charlottetown, and the eastern terminus of the European and North American Railway between Shediac and Saint John.

But perhaps the greatest potential for Shediac to become a major transportation centre arrived in the depression years of the last century when the adjacent waters served as a stopover site for aircraft during the primitive years of transatlantic flight.

By 1933 the Great War had been over for fifteen years. The Stock Market crash had spread around the world, and a totalitarian government had just taken power in Germany. Another totalitarian government, the regime of Benito Mussolini, had already been in power for ten years and wished to show the world the progress a decade of Fascist rule had brought to Italy, especially the role Italians had played as pioneers in the field of aviation. And what better way to do this than to fly across the Atlantic Ocean, en masse, with twenty-five flying boats, for an appearance at a World’s Fair in the United States - the Century of Progress Exhibition in Chicago.

Only thirty years had passed since the first powered flight, and only individual planes had yet dared to fly across the broad Atlantic, but Mussolini was determined to show the prowess of his aviators. Under the leadership of his Minister of Aviation, General Italo Balbo, over 100 pilots and crew trained for months before embarking on their journey from the coast of Tuscany on July 1, 1933. The twenty-five Savoia Manchetti S-55 flying boats would make overnight stops at several places along the way. The route would take them to Rome, Amsterdam (Netherlands), Londonderry (Northern Ireland), Reykjavik (Iceland), and Cartwright (Labrador) before landing on the waters of Shediac Bay in New Brunswick on July 14. From there they would go to Montreal before arriving at their Chicago destination. Unfortunately, a mishap near Amsterdam claimed the life of one pilot, injuries to the crew, and a reduction in the number of planes to twenty-four.

The people of Shediac had prepared for a July 14 arrival, installing 25 stone anchors (weighing 2,000 pounds each) for moorings, setting up a fuel depot, and installing telephone and telegraph lines. Over three dozen Mounties were tasked with crowd control and protection of the seaplanes. Even a special Canadian National Railways train was engaged to take spectators from Moncton. However, the planning was thrown into chaos when the organizing committee received
news on the morning of July 13 that the fleet was ahead of schedule, had left Cartwright, and would be arriving later that day – one day early. Amid much scurrying, the welcoming committee hastily assembled a delegation for the late afternoon arrival and reception. Included were Dr. H. Murray McLaren, the federal Minister of Pensions and National Health, Premier L.P.D. Tilley, noted historian and Shediac native Dr. J. Clarence Webster, Mayor Alphonse Sormany, several MPs, senators and local notables, and Mildred Herridge, the sister of New Brunswick native son and Prime Minister at the time, R.B. Bennett. Mrs. Herridge, the wife of the Canadian ambassador to Washington, was forced to quickly travel by car for 350 km. from her summer home in St. Andrews to be on time for the arrival.

When the planes touched down, one by one over a half hour period in the late afternoon, the pilots were taken ashore from their flying boat moorings by a naval tender provided by the Royal Canadian Navy destroyer HMCS Saguenay. They were welcomed and saluted by a guard of honour from the Saguenay, and at the reception that followed, General Balbo, his second-in-command General Aldo Pelligrini, and front man Captain Campanelli, who had spent the previous several weeks in Shediac planning for the occasion, led the aviators in a fascist cheer and salute to their leader Mussolini, Il Duce.

The next day the flotilla was off to Chicago via Montreal where they proved to be a major attraction. Before their arrival, Time magazine printed a major article on the excursion (http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,882165,00.html), with the cover featuring General Balbo smiling from the cockpit of his plane (http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19330626,00.html). The city of Chicago honoured the fascist aviator by naming a street after him (Balbo Avenue) and Mussolini donated a monument in honour of this aviation feat, one which stands across the street from Soldier Field, the home of the Chicago Bears NFL football team. Today many Chicago residents question whether their city should still recognize a fascist success in this way.

On their return flight, Balbo and his men stopped again in Shediac, on July 26. Even larger crowds filled the streets and dockside to see the Italian aviators. In entertaining their guests, the area's French-speakers held an advantage since they were able to communicate directly with the crews without translation. All of the Italian airmen could speak French as well as their native language, but none could speak English. The return flight from Chicago had included stops in New York (where Balbo addressed a crowd at Madison Square Garden) and Boston (Cosco Bay), and would continue to Shoal Harbour (Harbour Grace) Newfoundland, Ponta Delgado in the Azores, and Lisbon, Portugal, before returning to Rome. On August 10, only twenty-three of the flying boats would touch down safely on the Tiber River, since another accident had claimed the life of a second pilot and his plane in Lisbon. To commemorate this aviation feat, Balbo was promoted to the rank of Air Marshall in the Italian Air Force. He had
already received a Distinguished Flying Cross personally from American President Franklin D. Roosevelt while in the United States.

Shediac’s place along the transatlantic flight route gained prominence again when in 1939 Pan American Airlines chose the Bay as a stopover point for its new weekly Clipper III service between New York and Southampton, England. As infrastructure, a Customs House and administration offices for PanAm were constructed at Pointe du Chêne. Boeing 314 flying boats began both regular transatlantic airmail and passenger service in June, 1939, transporting such celebrity passengers as Queen Wilhelmina of the Nertherlands, comedian Bob Hope and actor Edward G. Robinson across the Atlantic through Shediac. Unfortunately for Shediac, the onset of World War II led to cancellation of the service since commercial flight was becoming too dangerous. By war’s end, advances in technology had led to land based aircraft and airfields replacing the necessity for flying boats, and the anticipation of using Shediac Bay as a major landing site had disappeared.

However, Shediac can rightfully claim another connection with history. On January 14, 1943 American President Franklin D. Roosevelt (whose summer home was on Campobello Island) flew across the Atlantic to Casablanca to meet with Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Great Britain about wartime planning. The plane on which he flew was the Dixie Clipper, the same Boeing 314 flying boat that regularly stopped at Shediac in 1939. Thus, the first presidential aircraft, or Air Force One as it is now called, had graced the waters of Shediac Bay with its presence.

And what happened to the Italian Air Marshall Balbo? His life ended on June 28, 1940 when his Savoia-Marchetti SM.79 plane was shot down by friendly anti-aircraft fire over Tobruk, Libya. Only months after his return from North America, Mussolini had sent Balbo to serve as Governor of the Italian colony of Libya in North Africa. At the time of his death, only weeks after Italy had declared war on Great Britain, Balbo had been appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Italian North African forces.

**Related online sites:**

Masses Like Infantry

The Day Balbo Came to Shediac
First Transatlantic Airmail Flight

Pan American Airlines Chooses Shediac

**Artefacts Canada** (Canadian Heritage) has several photographs of the Royal Italian Air Force visit to Shediac that were submitted by the New Brunswick Museum as part of the Louis Merritt Harrison collection:

Seaplanes, Royal Italian Air Force Visit, Shediac, New Brunswick (Document 275 of 516) Accession Number: 1989.83.299

Seaplanes, Royal Italian Air Force Visit, Shediac< New Brunswick (Document 274 of 516) Accession Number: 1989.83.297

General Italo Balbo, Royal Italian Air Force Visit, Shediac, New Brunswick (Document 276 of 516) Accession Number: 1989.83.300

Other photographs of Balbo’s visit to Shediac can be found at the New Brunswick Museum as part of the Louis Merritt Harrison Collection with the following Accession Numbers:

1989.83.766  1989.83.767

Written by Ian Andrews for the Department of Wellness Culture & Sport, January 2009