By Comet 4 to New York

We should have had the intelligence to realize that something was much very up, from the curious title of the flight ("Pre-inaugural proving") and the manner in which Freddie Gillman and his B.O.A.C. public-relations staff were searching desperately for us twelve hours before take-off. Again, when we heard vague hints at London Airport on that Thursday morning that menus had already been printed for the first commercial flight London-New York and dated Saturday, October 4, we should have collected our wits and realized that the undercover battle between P.A.A. and B.O.A.C. was as good as won.

There, in the crowded little Monarch lounge on the North Side, were B.O.A.C. managing director Basil Smallpeice and D.H. managing director Aubrey Burke—both booked to fly with us to New York on flight CFP 001. More evidence that this was not just a Press jolly. But there was no official comment from anyone.

It took us something like five-and-a-half hours between London and Gander to discover that Comet 4 G-APDB would be one of the winners in the biggest aviation Autumn Double yet. By the time we had landed at Gander it was clear from the carefully worded phrases of every B.O.A.C. man aboard—including the managing director—that it needed only the final clearance from the Port of New York Authority (and a clutch of fare-paying passengers to make it legal) for the first-ever pure-jet passenger service across the Atlantic to begin. So Gander’s cable office had the biggest rush in its history as the national Press queued to get off their stories.

We had reported to Victoria at 0900, regarding with barely concealed sneers the peasants about to fly in fan-propelled aeroplanes. But coach after coach left before we were called. We had coffee, which was good, and on our way back to Gander due at 1100 had been put back. Some small aileron snag, we gathered later, and a short test flight needed after it had been put right.

It was just before 1226 that we taxied out and just on 1230 when Captain Tom Stoney turned onto the runway and started rolling. Sixty seconds later we were over Windsor and climbing like a fighter. At 1246 we were over Filton. At the time we reached the Irish Sea we were at 32,000 ft—ground speed 465 m.p.h. with a 20 kt headwind. We tried to get clearance to 36,000 ft, but opposing traffic at 37,000 kept us down.

The traffic was a B-47 on its way to Britain. Over weather-flight Juliet (she reported seeing us) we were in good radio communication with Shannon, Gander and London. By that time the B-47 had been cleared down to 31,000 ft and up we went to 35,000, waiting for clearance to 39,000. Tom Stoney gave our E.T.A. at Gander as 1430 (1400 Gander time). He was two minutes out. We finished lunch at 1530 B.S.T. Fifteen minutes later we were somewhere near weather-ship Charlie, 900 miles from Gander and 1,450 from London.

And Delta Bravo was going like a bomb. Gander we reached in 5 hr 28 min. We had flown 2,360 miles at an average speed of 430 m.p.h. Maximum height was 39,000 ft, outside temperature —57 deg C.

Refuelling took us 1 hr and 17 min (45 min allowed as schedule). Gander was its usual dreary self and glad we were to get back into the Comet. But for the 1,140 miles to Idlewild we had to mix it with 115 m.p.h. headwinds, which brought our ground speed down to 335 m.p.h. So we took 3 hr 25 min for that last leg. The only incident on the flight was an unlucky accident to Peggy Thorne, one of our two stewardesses. Somebody had left an inspection hatch open in the forward galley and down she went, grazing a leg badly. But she was on her feet for that memorable return flight on Saturday.

For the 3,500 miles from London to New York our flying time was 8 hr 53 min—elapsed time, 10 hr 32 min. We arrived relaxed and exhilarated—and feeling very patriotic.

Off we went to our hotel—the new International at Idlewild; and very good it is, too. Mr. Smallpeice dined us for lunch next day, promised to tell us what he could about the talks. We went to bed after carving a neat little 707 out of our cake of courtesy soap and sticking pins in it.

Sure enough, next day Mr. Smallpeice promised a statement at 7.30 p.m. But there was victory in the air and I’m certain that not a single British newspaperman had failed to file, hours before, a story giving the news of the Autumn Double as hard as he could. And somehow they got hold of the name of a U.S. businessman who’d booked his seat way back in 1952. It was an enthusiastic crowd of B.O.A.C. men and women—British and American—who gathered in the Speedbird Club in B.O.A.C.’s new Fifth Avenue offices that evening. And when the managing director announced that Idlewild had given the go-ahead to jetliners the bar steadily began to run out of beer.

Here are the rules laid down for pure-jet operation in general:

1. When weather and winds permit, jets must take-off from runways 25 and 22, which face south-west and take aircraft over Jamaica Bay during initial climb.

2. If they can’t take-off over water, runways 13 Right, 31 Left and 7 may be used so long as turns are made as soon as possible away from communities and the minimum altitude over any community is 1,200 ft. Power must be cut back before reaching the first populated area.

3. No other runways may be used without prior permission.

4. Take-offs between 2200 hr and 0700 hr must be confined to the two runways leading over the water.

Pan American at once objected to these rules. Said the airline, in effect: “They mean preferential treatment for the Comet.” And it was suggested that B.O.A.C.’s initial Comet crossings would be merely “token flights.” Mr. Smallpeice then went on record as saying that “Any suggestions that conditions are not reasonable are not only without foundation but also show considerable lack of good sportsmanship.”

Finally, it was interesting to see at London Airport—when we arrived back by Stratocruiser on Sunday morning—painter’s ladders up against a big PanAm hoarding which was shouting something about “First Atlantic jet service.”