

RCAF STATION PORT HARDY

In the mid 1930s with war on the horizon and Sea Island (Vancouver), and Patricia Bay (Victoria) the only land based airfields on the entire B.C. coast, it was recognized that an airport was needed at the northern end of Vancouver Island. By 1939 Western Air Command's B.C. Reconnaissance Detachment had completed a survey of coastal sites for airports capable of supporting land based aircraft. Thomas Point, a mile and a half southeast of Port Hardy, was chosen. Authority to establish a bomber reconnaissance squadron at this station was given by Western Air Command as Secret Organization Order No. 117 on April 28, 1943.

General Construction Company was selected as the clearing contractor and Marwell Construction was selected to erect the hangars and airfield buildings. Machinery was landed at "Jokerville" and the gravel pit behind Fort Rupert provided runway construction material. The station soon had modern facilities including an RCAF air operations and control tower, two hangars and an extensive triangle runway. Living quarters were constructed to house the military personnel as well as a recreational hall, cook house, and mess halls. There was also a company of BC Reserve Infantry on detachment to provide for the ground security. A seven mile long road was built to link to the Post Office, the dock, and the soon to be built fifty bed RCAF hospital at nearby Port Hardy. A ten mile gravel road was also built to the RCAF float plane station at Coal Harbour.

RCAF Station Port Hardy was large, operated by a staff of several hundred men, many of whom were married. Like other airmen in remote areas, they made every effort to relocate their families close by. A community of cabins and tarpaper shacks soon sprang up, built by the airmen themselves on crown land near the station. (Air Force officialdom turned a blind eye to their presence.) The homes, often consisting of just two rooms - a bedroom and combination living room/kitchen - while not elaborate were sufficient to the needs. An outhouse was standard and most residents had to carry water from the closest spring. "Jokerville" had an elected a Mayor and an active social life.

In March 1943, No. 14 (F) Squadron's P40 Kittyhawks, en route from Sea Island (Vancouver) to Alaska, were the first aircraft to use the unfinished airfield at Port Hardy. On May 14, 1943, a permanent detachment of four utility aircraft from No. 122 Squadron Composite

Flight was stationed at Port Hardy for communication purposes and remained there until the station was closed.

No. 8 (BR) Squadron, commanded by Squadron Leader H. M. Lay, was assigned to the new station, arriving on December 11, 1943, with its Lockheed Vega Ventura G.R. Mark V aircraft. A flight of four Venturas had arrived at the station earlier on October 19. The squadron became fully operational on January 3, 1944, with W/C R.H. Little being appointed Commanding Officer of the station.

United States Air Force and RCAF transport and operational aircraft enroute to and from Alaska and the Aleutian Islands from Seattle and Vancouver were quick to use the Port Hardy airport as a convenient refueling stop. However, Port Hardy's day in the sun was short lived. On 3 March 1944, after just two months as an operational base, W.A.C. issued Operations Order No. 20 for 8 (BR) Squadron to move to Patricia Bay. This was followed on March 10, 1944 by Organization Order No. 5 entitled "The Revised Defence of Canada Plan 1945" which ordered the disbandment of RCAF Station Port Hardy, but on the same day Order #183 qualified the disbandment, stating: "In order to utilize existing facilities and effect economy, the re-organization of units in Western Air Command is necessitated. It is the intention to form Coastal Staging Units at Port Hardy, Masset and Sandspit, B.C. Effective April 1, 1944. RCAF Station Port Hardy is to be re-organized as No. 21 Staging Unit."

With the station disbandment, W/C Little relinquished the station command to F/L G.G. Bruer, the Senior Flying Control Officer at Port Hardy, who administered the stop-over and refueling needs of transient aircraft and crews, as well as weather reporting and servicing the radio range which facilitated navigation for aircraft flying the B.C. coast.

On 18 July 1944 at 1115 hrs tragedy struck. RCAF DC-3 966, filled with RCAF personnel and freight crashed on the airport perimeter just after takeoff on runway 10-28. Six persons were killed, four seriously injured and four slightly injured. The hospital in Port Hardy, not yet operational, provided assistance and the wounded were taken to the Coal Harbour hospital.

In 1945, Pan American Airways stationed staff here to provide services for their aircraft enroute to Alaska. However, with the introduction of larger aircraft with greater range the stop became unnecessary and PanAm's staff departed.

On 1 January 1946, the administration of Port Hardy Airport passed from the RCAF to the Department of Transport. It was duly licensed on February 14, 1946, as an approved alternate airport and refueling centre to service Amber Airway No. 1 from Seattle, Washington, to Anchorage, Alaska. It later went on to be a very successful civilian airport and a great asset to the community of Port Hardy and the North Island region in general. John Burtnick, a DOT employee, became the Imperial Oil agent and began a fifty-four year career refuelling planes, taking only one fourteen day holiday during that time. Several of the unused RCAF buildings were turned into accommodation for the DOT personnel and eventually were moved to locations nearby for various purposes. The current Port Hardy Legion building was originally the Sergeant's Mess, the Officers Mess was split in two parts and became the St Columba's and St Bonaventure churches. The large barrack hall was dismantled and re-erected as the Avalon School. The hospital, located near the Glenlion River, was transported by barge to Alert Bay in 1947 and served as their hospital for a number of years.

