

RCAF STATION ALLIFORD BAY

Western Air Command's (W.A.C.) plan for the defence of the west coast called for an advanced bomber reconnaissance squadron on the Queen Charlotte Islands. The BC Reconnaissance Party carried out a search in 1937 and Alliford Bay in Skidegate Inlet opposite Queen Charlotte City was chosen. RCAF Stn Alliford Bay had the distinction of being the most westerly and the most isolated of all the West Coast Flying Boat Stations but also having the reputation of being the happiest, most colourful and most self-contained station.

Construction began in 1938 but as war clouds gathered construction was speeded up through 1939. On the outbreak of war a detachment was dispatched at once to protect the base from possible damage or capture. On 27 April 1940, No.6 (BR) Squadron, stationed at Jericho Beach, Vancouver, received orders to move to its war station at Alliford Bay and moved on 13 May 1940. The Shark aircraft on the strength of the squadron flew to the new base and the personnel were transported by the coastal steamer H.M.C.S. "Sans Peur" while work was being done on the hangar, a pier, and equipment buildings, with accommodation buildings already erected. Preparing the station and setting up the technical equipment was hard work but it molded "the spirit" as personnel accepted the hardships and worked to make the unit a good one. Dependents were not allowed to live on or near the station so Alliford Bay and other isolated locations would exchange personnel after six months in isolation. This policy was greeted with enthusiasm and improved morale.

The YMCA posted a representative who arranged entertainment for the men, mainly movies and athletics, using YMCA equipment. The closest community was a Haida village across Skidegate Inlet and many community members were ardent baseball and soccer fans. Games were arranged and it was noted in the daily diary that the Haida won most of them.

In June 1940, the Irish Fusiliers took over ground defence with a semi-annual rotation. In February 1941, the Rocky Mountain Rangers relieved the Irish Fusiliers, who were relieved in July 1941 by the 2nd Battalion, Canadian Scottish. In March 1942, the Edmonton Fusiliers replaced the Canadian Scottish and so on until the war's end.

The first operational flight was carried out on 30 May 1940 when F/L Gill in Shark 524 made a reconnaissance flight around the north end of the Queen Charlotte Islands. On several occasions, the squadron assisted the island's inhabitants by undertaking mercy flights or search missions.

The first accident occurred on 19 July 1940 when Shark 525 overturned while landing on glassy water. The crew were not injured. Another accident occurred on 27 July, this time fatal. Shark 517, piloted by F/O Robert M. Halpenny and two crew member, was carrying out dive bombing practice. It was seen to enter a steep dive, then the top wing broke off and the aircraft appeared to disintegrate, crashed into the water, burst into flames and immediately sank. The use of Sharks in dive bombing practice ended with tragic finality.

Canada entered the war wholly unprepared in first line aircraft. The best that could be said for the Stranraer Flying Boat and Shark was that they were there, and both aircrew and groundcrew did a magnificent job with what they had. The Stranraer allowed the squadron to carry out the long seaward patrols which Japan's entry in the war made so necessary.

In December 1941, W.A.C. ordered the station to adopt Alert No. 2 on receipt of the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbour. Later that day, Alert No. 1 was adopted and a complete blackout of the area including the village and Queen Charlotte City was enforced. Patrols were intensified, Station personnel reacting swiftly with aircrews on immediate standby. Maintenance crews worked around the clock to ensure that every plane was ready for service. Air patrols were intensified, the station defences were manned, and surprise drills were called to test the men's efficiency in dealing with gas attacks. The Squadron's only Stranraer, which had been taken on strength in October, was on patrol throughout the days, while the Sharks waited patiently, bombed up but with nowhere to go.

BC's Lieutenant-Governor arrived aboard the HMCS "Prince Rupert" in July 1942 to inspect the station and Sandspit. Later that summer, No. 6 (BR) Squadron took part in a

search for a sub sighted and attacked by 7 (BR) Squadron. On 16 November 1942, W.A.C. ordered No. 6 (BR) Squadron to move to Bella Bella to give practice to entire squadrons in mobility in case of emergency. No. 6 (BR) remained at Bella Bella until December 1942 carrying out local operations with 9 (BR) Squadron from Bella Bella taking over duties at Alliford Bay. 1943 began tragically with the loss of Stranraer #935 and its crew. On February 14, while on a training flight, the Stranraer crashed in Skidegate Channel between Maude and Lina Islands. P/O DS MacLennan and crew were all killed. Evidence indicated that the aircraft's four depth charges had exploded after impact.

"Kwana," a tiny deer of that species peculiar to the Queen Charlotte Islands, became the station pet and was incorporated into the official Station crest. She was absolutely without fear as there are no predatory animals on the islands. In January, 1944, Kwana ran into barbed wire accidentally charged by downed power lines and died.

During April 1943, the first Canso aircraft arrived with two more Cansos delivered in July bringing the aircraft up to three Stranraers and three Cansos. This allowed the station to carry out longer patrols and training more consistent with modern operational requirements. Alliford Bay was very important in the scheme of defence for Canada's west coast, able to fulfill its service responsibility with proper equipment. By March 1944, there were seven Catalinas, two Canso "A"s and one Stranraer on strength. In April 1944, No. 6 (BR) Sqn was ordered to move to Coal Harbour in Holberg Inlet on the north end of Vancouver Island and 7 (BR) moved from Prince Rupert to Alliford Bay to replace No. 6 as Prince Rupert was no longer operational.

During their years at the Station, the

Squadron aircrews set several records. On 14 June 1944, a fisherman reported sighting a submarine surfaced off Zayas Island in Dixon Entrance. Four patrols were made from 0425 hrs to 2300 hrs. Although the anti-sub equipment on one of the patrolling aircraft reacted once, the fog was too thick to make visual contact. One patrol lasted 18.10 hrs, the longest made in W.A.C. to that point. Then on June 24, a Canso completed a night patrol of 20 hours and 40 minutes - the longest patrol in W.A.C. records.

29 August 1944 was a red letter day and one to be remembered: S/O D.G Gratton-Smith and Cpl R.M. Harrison of the advance party of the Women's Division arrived! Number 7 (BR) Squadron completed its last mission on July 14, 1945 when F/O Craddock and crew flew Canso A 10070 on an anti-submarine patrol. The Squadron was disbanded on July 24, 1945 and the Station was reduced to care & maintenance basis. The site was eventually sold and became a dry land sort.

