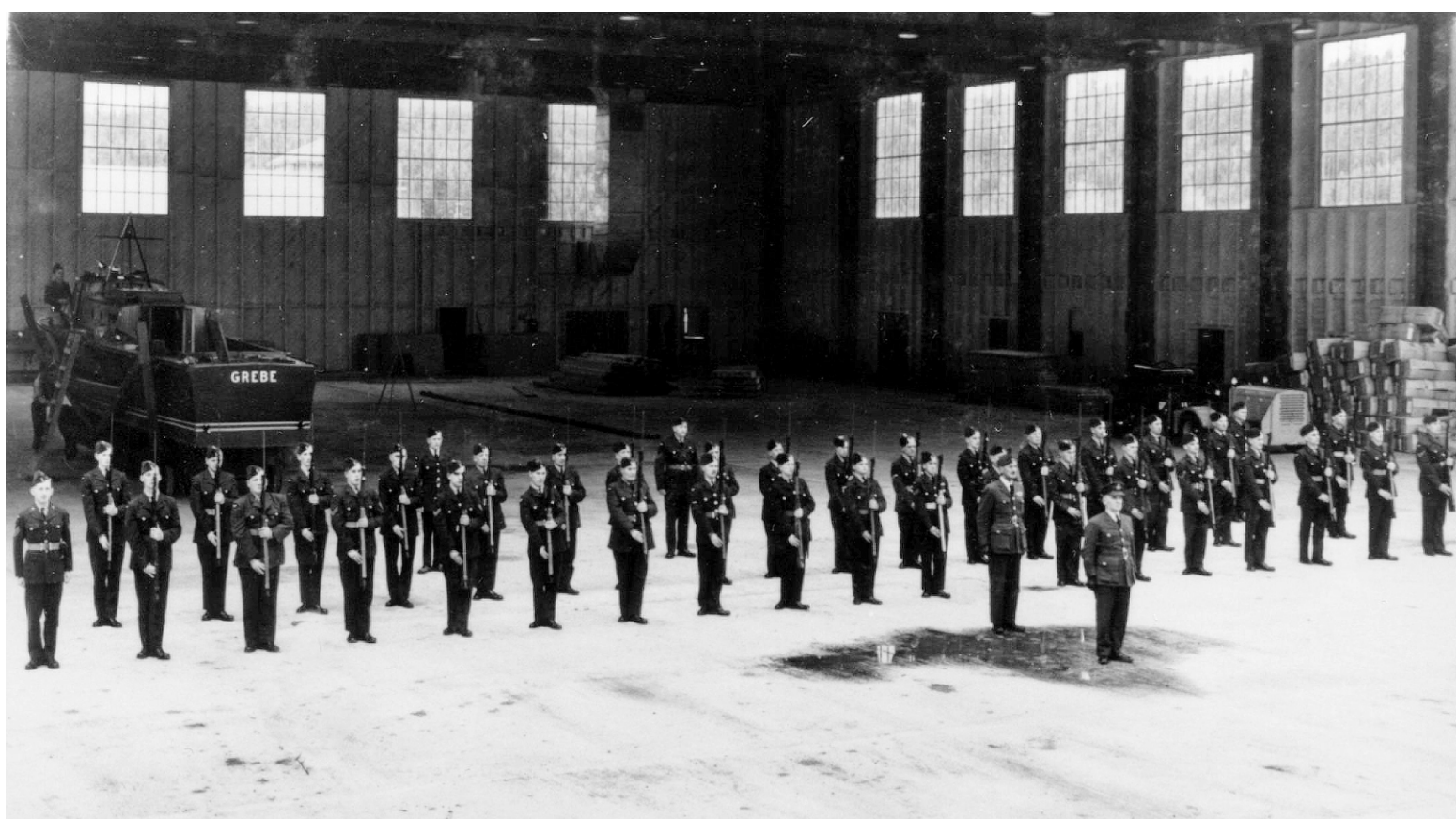# RCAF Station Coal Harbour

Coal Harbour is located on Rupert Arm in the traditional territory of the Hoyalas people, now the Quatsino First Nation. It was named after coal deposits first investigated around 1884 by the Northwest Coal Company. The mines, however, soon closed because of the inferior quality of the coal. A mention of two of His Majesty's ships taking on coal here in 1892 can be considered the community's first role in the defence of Canada. The Hole family moved here in 1918, taking over the boarding house and opening a general store. Coal Harbour soon became the distribution centre for the Sound.

On 29 June 1940, with WWII under way, eight airmen arrived to establish a base and by the end of August 1940, RCAF Station Coal Harbour was born. The station included 700 RCAF personnel plus a 300-person army security force and 100 civilian workers. Around 300 servicemen built houses on property, rented from the Hole family, to move their wives in. These dependants were forced to leave after the attack on Pearl Harbour and weren't allowed to return until March 1943. At its peak, Coal Harbour's population reached a total of nearly 1500 people.

It took awhile for the station to become operational. On 27 February 1941, four officers and seventy-six men of the B.C. Regiment were posted to Coal Harbour for the defence of the station. On 21 November 1941, # 120 (BR) Squadron received orders to proceed to Coal Harbour from Patricia Bay, and by 11 December 1941, the squadron had completed its first anti-submarine patrol. The squadron was responsible for patrolling an area up to 150 miles off shore, from the entrance to Queen Charlotte Strait, off the northern tip of Vancouver Island, south to Estevan Point - an area bounded by No. 9 (BR) Squadron at Bella Bella, and by No. 4 (BR) Squadron at Ucluelet. The station was originally equipped with Stranraer aircraft but these proved to be inadequate for such a large patrol area and were replaced by Cansos, and later, Catalinas. In April 1942, the Squadron recorded its first submarine sighting.

On 23 August 1942, Stranraer #951 was lost at sea with all hands, the first of three fatal crashes of aircraft stationed at Coal Harbour. Norseman 695 crashed on 4 February 1944 at Port Alice, and Canso 11043 crashed here on 31 July 1945, the day of its final operational mission.
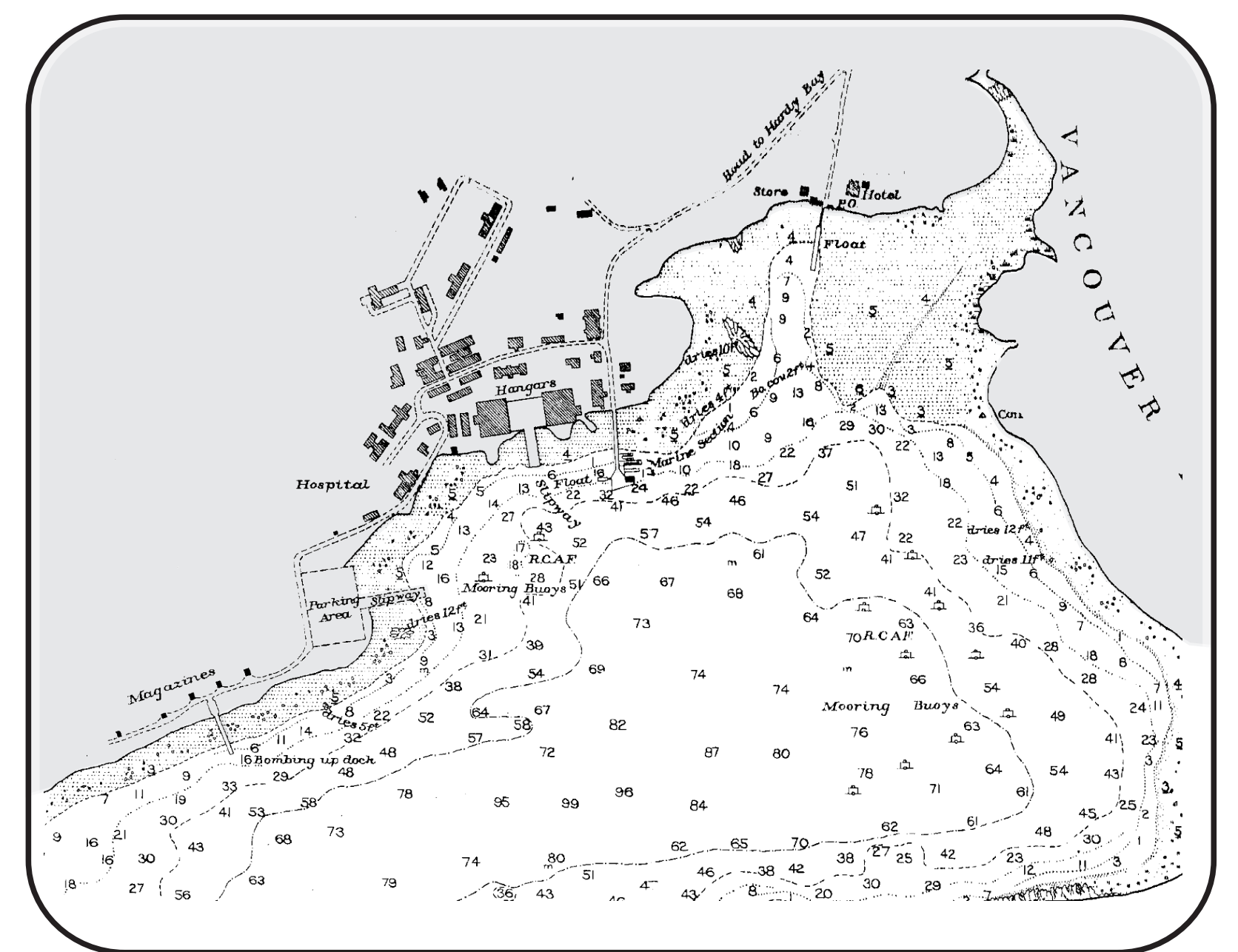
On 6 April 1943, the first Canso arrived at RCAF Station Coal Harbour and took off on daily patrol. On 21 April 1944, No. 120 (BR) Squadron flew its final patrol at RCAF Station Coal Harbour and was disbanded on 1 May 1944. On 21 April 1944, No. 6 (BR) Squadron received orders to move to Coal Harbour from RCAF Station Alliford Bay, on the Queen Charlotte Islands. The move was completed on 23 April. In January 1945, a station Canso forced a Japanese fire balloon down in tangled undergrowth less than a mile inland on Rupert Inlet. It was later recovered, nearly intact.

On 1 August 1945, No. 6 (BR) Squadron flew its last patrol and was disbanded on 7 August 1945. RCAF Station Coal Harbour closed at the end of August 1945, reduced to a care and maintenance basis. The population quickly plummeted to 100 people and stayed that way until 1948, when a whaling station was established and industry revived. The whaling station was the last one on the North American coast when it closed in 1967. It had managed to catch well over 10,000 whales in its 19-year history. Then in the 1970s, Coal Harbour's fortunes rose again when the Island Copper Mine began operations, lasting until the end of 1995.

Coal Harbour remains today a pleasant, modern hamlet with many reminders of its historic past, including one of the original RCAF hangars which houses Aircab's Air Force and Whaling Museum.

September 2017