

# RCAF STATION BELLA BELLA



Bella Bella has a long history of aviation and was an early air force presence on the Central B.C. Coast. In July of 1923 Squadron Leader Earl Godfrey arrived and landed to refuel a Canadian Air Force Curtiss HS-2L flying boat. He was on his way from Jericho

Beach at Vancouver to Prince Rupert, the first successful Canadian flight along the west coast. Previously in 1920 Lieutenant Harry Brown had attempted the first flight up the coast in his Curtis JN-4 seaplane, landing short of Bella Bella at Nalau Island with an engine failure. In July 1922 US Air Service pilot Lieutenant Roy Jones made the first successful flight up the coast from Seattle to Alaska, with a refuelling stop at Bella Bella.

There were no airports on the BC coast until almost the end of World War Two, hence the need for the five Flying Boat Stations to protect the western entrance to North America. The Royal Canadian Air Force determined quite early that the community of Bella Bella was strategic to its needs, and with war clouds on the horizon it established a detachment here in 1938. It was soon decided that the best location of the station would be on Denny Island adjacent to Klik-Tso-Atli Harbour with the station to be constructed behind Shearwater Island.

In June 1940 construction began on a full sized RCAF Station including two full size flying boat hangars with ramps for beaching aircraft, as well as accommodations for up to 1,000 men, a hospital, and administration and messing facilities. By November 1941 twenty-one buildings were ready for use. The Coast Construction Company of Vancouver accomplished the actual construction with considerable help from native Heiltsuk workers, including the future chief, Vivian Wilson.

On December 7, 1941 the station received notification that a state of war existed with Japan after that country had attacked Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands. On December 8, 1941 Squadron Leader Fred. S. Carpenter arrived at the station with two Supermarine Stranraer flying boats from Patricia Bay at Victoria, #949 and #936. Carpenter immediately assumed command of No 9 (BR) Bomber Reconnaissance Squadron. Operational patrols commenced immediately with the two Stranraer flying boats responding to the sighting of a Japanese submarine in Queen Charlotte Strait north of Vancouver Island. On their return they were both refuelled to capacity from a tender carrying 45-gallon drums. Aircraft patrols continued from the station day and night in most weather conditions searching for the nine enemy submarines that were sinking boats travelling the coast.

By February 1942 455 personnel crowded into the unfinished barrack buildings. The off-duty airmen used their time efficiently, building the Santa Bella Trail from the RCAF station to the B.C Packers store and post office on the opposite side of Denny Island. In December 1942 the station received its first Consolidated PBV-5A Canso aircraft, which allowed 9BR Squadron to extend its patrols out over the Pacific for up to 28 hours.

In April 1943 the station Commanding Officer S/L Galloway ordered a control tower be built on Shearwater Island but the tower operators found that the island's trees obscured their view. Galloway responding by ordering his Armaments Officer to top the trees with machine gun fire. That worked fine but an army detachment across the bay had to take cover as their position was being peppered by the gunfire!

By the end of July 1944 the station's strength including army personnel was 750. The Japanese had suffered major defeats by then and the threat of an invasion on the west coast of North America had diminished. For economic reasons as well as the difficulty of supplying these remote stations a decision was made to disband No 9 (BR) Squadron. RCAF Station Bella Bella was closed effective September 1, 1944. The last entry in the Station's diary sums up the unsung heroism on the Bella Bella Station:

"The reports of the presence of enemy craft in our waters are investigated thoroughly and, no matter how inaccurate the report may seem to be, the squadron personnel embark on the searches with enthusiasm and keenness. The fact that the West Coast stations saw little action is in part due to their unceasing vigilance. They made the waters of the Pacific adjacent to the coast a most unhealthy and unproductive locality for the enemy. There was not a glamorous job. They received no applause from the people and none from the Service. They had a dirty, dangerous, monotonous job to do and they did it. That was their reward"

