

RCAF Station Spider Island

11 June 1943 - 6 August 1945

With the attack on Pearl Harbour, the establishment of a chain of RUs (radar units) for surveillance of the Pacific Coast became a high priority. The RCAF built #9 RU, RCAF Station Spider Island, and seven other stations to provide early warning radar surveillance of the Canadian Pacific Coast. This station, along with RCAF Stn Bella Bella's #9 Bomber Reconnaissance (BR) Squadron, provided the resources to patrol the Bella Bella Sector - from Cape St James to Cape Scott, and from Spider Island 150 miles seaward. Spider Island is part of the Spider Group - a cluster of small islands off the SW shore of Hunter Island in Queen Charlotte Sound. During World War II, the pilots named many of the unnamed geographical features after fighter planes such as Kittyhawk, Hurricane, Spitfire, and Mosquito. Breadner Point, the Ops Site, was named after the Chief of Air Staff in 1943, Air Marshall L.S. Breadner.



The construction of the camp site was started in late summer of 1942 with Marwell Construction doing the buildings, and #9 Construction Maintenance Unit (#9 CMU) carrying out the infrastructure work. By the time the permanent personnel arrived on 1 November, #9 CMU and Marwell had work well under way on the 12 buildings on the camp site. Good progress was made and before long the road was finished, then the power lines, and finally the fresh water system. As most of the construction was finished by early April, #9 CMU started moving out with the last of the men leaving on 13 April.

#9 CMU had established a work camp at the Ops Site and by early December 1942, work was well under way on the Operations building and power house. Finally, on 3 March, the large secret radar equipment was moved to the Ops Site, along with the guards. By the start of April, #2 Maintenance Unit (#2MU) began installation of the radar equipment and actual operations kicked off at 2055 on 11 June 1943. It had taken slightly less than a year to get #9 RU from bush to an operational radar unit.

RCAF Station Spider Island started with 13 personnel, increased to 70 by September 1943, and then dropped back to 28 on disbandment. Spider Island facilities were fairly standard for a radio unit with four quarters (one for each shift), ablutions, recreation, mess and kitchen, hospital, administration, oil storage and garage, plus two docks and a 3.5-kilometre road running from the northeast corner of the island to Breadner Point. There was a large lake close to the camp site for fresh water and there was ample wood nearby. This RU had its fair share of bad weather and there was frequent damage to the lines and roads. The radar array had to be locked down frequently due to high winds.

Transportation to the Ops Site was by truck, unless it was broken down or there was too much snow or ice on the road, and then the personnel walked to and from work. The station maintained a high standard of cleanliness and the grounds were drained, cleared, and levelled and then kept neat, as were the buildings. Even the hydrants were painted, a flag pole was put up, street lights were installed and gardens were planted. All this made the station as livable as could be expected during wartime in the sticks.

RCAF Stn Bella Bella was the administrative and supply station and used its aircraft and marine section for support duty, giving Spider Island the best transportation system on the West Coast. Personnel could go on 48-hour passes to Bella Bella or Ocean Falls as there were almost daily runs by either aircraft or boat. There was a boat that did the Spider Island / Namu / Shearwater run to pick up mail and supplies from Namu for delivery to the stations. There were many recreational activities which the entertainment committee looked after. There were two movies a week, tournaments of various kinds, a station paper (*The Spider Web*), smokers, etc. There was a need for outdoor sports, so volleyball and badminton courts were built and tournaments organized. Because of the unit's great transportation network, there were many visiting entertainment groups and shows that performed at the station and the men went to Bella Bella for dances or brought ladies from Ocean Falls for dances in the Mess Hall. They must have been well organized and fun affairs as up to 20-30 girls at a time came on for a 45 mile boat each way every few months. It was a great morale builder.

With the announcement of VE Day on 7 May 1945, all the off-duty personnel gathered in the PT building and celebrated. Musters out of the services increased and manning levels were dropping. Then on 6 August 1945, the operational order arrived stating that, effective 0900 hours, the Station was to cease operations but the M/F Beacon and W/T were to remain operational. The next day, the dismantling of the radar equipment and preparing it for shipment commenced and by 10 August, #9 Radio Unit Spider Island was officially disbanded.



Afterwards, a detachment of four men remained on the island at the camp site operating the MF beacon and radio facilities to maintain a 24/7 radio signal that aircraft used when flying between California and Alaska. This lasted until 1947 when advances in navigation and improvement in aircraft range made the detachment obsolete and it was closed. RCAF Stn Bella Bella was later purchased by F/L Widsten who started developing it into the busy commercial centre it is today. It is still family run and services the central coast as a transportation centre and fishing resort.

