

Stations Of The RCAF: Winnipeg

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In the heart of the continent, Canada's fourth largest city produces championship – calibre air observers as well as football teams.

EARLY in the Second World War, just when the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan was getting into its stride, an official report was made on the standard of Canadian-trained aircrew flying in Europe. The report was complimentary throughout, and one major portion of it began, "In particular, the high quality of the observers ..."

Almost two decades have passed since then, but the standard of Canadian observers has remained consistently high. Today the torch of aerial navigation, which has lighted so many corners of the world, is kept burning at RCAF Station Winnipeg. There, at No. 2 Air Observers School, all the navigators, radio officers, and air interception observers in the RCAF receive their basic and advanced training; while at Central Navigation School observers who have been in the field for some years receive post-graduate courses to make them instructors or specialists.

Station Winnipeg, as it exists today, is devoted very largely to observer training. This, however, has not always been the case. RCAF units in Winnipeg have had a long, varied and honourable history, which spans almost the whole era of flying in Canada.

THE ROARING TWENTIES

Even before the RCAF was formed, a unit of the Air Board existed as a winter overhaul base for water-based aircraft—ancient, slow and stately *F3* and *HS2L* flying boats which flew fire-watching patrols out of sub-stations at Victoria Beach and Norway House on Lake Winnipeg, and from The Pas, beginning in 1922. Later, detachments were formed at Lac du Bonnet, Cormorant Lake, Ladder Lake, Lake Winnipegosis, Ile a la Crosse, and other northern bodies of water as operational needs dictated. The unit, called "No. 1 Wing" when the RCAF was formed in 1924, became "Winnipeg Air Station" in 1927.

In Winnipeg, rather crude facilities were available at the foot of Brandon Avenue, where the aircraft landed on the Red River, for the changing of floats and minor repairs. The RCAF station proper, which was devoted mainly to maintenance, was located downtown on Maryland Avenue. Winnipeg also served as an operational centre for the early photographic detachments. In 1925 a building on Notre Dame Avenue was taken over, to replace accommodation for headquarters staff previously located at Fort Osborne Barracks.

Most of the northern stations were closed during the depression, and so was the overhaul base. However, in 1933 it moved to an old warehouse on Empress Street, then on the outskirts of the city. In 1937 the unit was re-designated No. 2 Equipment Depot, and part of the stock of No. 1 Aircraft Depot in Ottawa was shipped out to Winnipeg, to give the new unit a start.

In 1934 No. 112 Army Co-operation Squadron (of what was then termed the Non-Permanent Air Force) had been formed, with a hanger at Stevenson Field and five *Gypsy Moths*. Tacked to the walls of the crew-rooms were posters showing *Camels* exuberantly stunting while black-crossed *Fokkers* spun down in flames, with the admonition, "Don't stunt after a victory; bullet-weakened wings often come off".

SECOND WORLD WAR

With the outbreak of war, however, immense changes were made. No. 112 Sqn went overseas almost at once to be blooded in the Battle of Britain and later to become 402 (Fighter) Sqn. It was disbanded in 1945, reformed in 1946 as an auxiliary unit, and is still based in Winnipeg.

When the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan was established, Winnipeg at once became a prairie training focal point. In 1940, No. 2 Training Command was established with headquarters in downtown Winnipeg. At Stevenson field No. 14 Elementary Flying Training School was set up with its *Tiger Moths*; as forerunners of the observer-training units for which Winnipeg was destined to become so widely known. No. 3 Wireless School operated *Fleet Forts* from the east side of the field, while No. 5 Air Observer School flew its *Ansons* from the present civilian terminal area, and later from the south side. Both the EFTS and the AOS were operated by civilian companies.

Wartime logistic units at Winnipeg included No. 7 Equipment Depot, formed to cater for the BCATP units as No. 2 ED did for units of the Home War Establishment, No. 8 Repair Depot, No. 15 Technical Detachment, No. 2 Construction and Maintenance Unit, No. 170 Ferry Squadron, and three units on the University of Manitoba campus. Some other units contained their quota of individualists — one wing commander from No. 7 ED, feeling that detailing a staff car to take him to an official reception at the Royal Alexandra Hotel was an unjustified expenditure of public funds in wartime, rode there on a bicycle which he handed to an astonished doorman. The BCATP finished its job in 1945 and its units were disbanded.

POST WAR CHANGES

In March 1947, RCAF Station Winnipeg was formed, consisting of No. 111 Composite Flight, with its mixed bag of communications and rescue aircraft, and 402 (Auxiliary) Sqn. No. 11 Group of Northwest Air Command was located in Winnipeg briefly until it moved to Edmonton in 1951 as Tactical Air Command. No. 14 Training Group took its place in that year to administer the western training stations that were coming back to life as the Korean War put a new emphasis on military activities. No. 14 Group was absorbed in the fall of 1959, when Training Command Headquarters moved from Trenton to Winnipeg.

The actual buildings and plant of Station Winnipeg in 1947 were those inherited from the wartime units, and were grouped on the south side of Stevenson Field. At the outbreak of the Korean War it was decided to remove basic training units from both coasts, and to concentrate air training schools in the prairie provinces. Winnipeg was chosen as the centre for observer training. Navigator training, which in the post-war years had taken place at Summerside, P.E.I., commenced once more at Winnipeg in 1951, to cope with the flood of trainees from a dozen NATO countries.

This called for a great expansion of all buildings and facilities. 1952 saw the construction of three hangars at a cost of a million and a quarter dollars each, instructional buildings, and all the necessary ancillary buildings such as messes, quarters, fire-halls, heating plants and guard houses, which form part of a modern air station. By the time instruction at Summerside had been phased out and all navigators were being trained in Winnipeg, No. 2 Air Observer School was the largest aircrew training in the RCAF.

OBSERVER TRAINING

The first Winnipeg-trained observers were long-range navigators, but before long, with the advent of the *CF-100*, a requirement arose for air interception observers to operate the radar set in the back seat of all-weather fighters. Using USA-trained instructors, a section of the AOS was devoted to turning out AI-observers in numbers sufficient to man the nine RCAF all-weather fighter squadrons in Canada, plus four others in Europe. When the Air Radio Officers' School at Clinton, Ont. (which had

trained the aircrew charged with running the electronic devices carried aboard modern transport or maritime aircraft), was transferred to Winnipeg, all observer training thus was done at one station, and indeed in one building.

After their basic training has been completed and they have done tours of duty in the field, observers qualify themselves for post-graduate training. This also is done at Winnipeg, at Central Navigation School. Originally called Specialist Wing of the Air Navigation School at Summerside, it was elevated to the dignity of a school in its own right when it was moved to Winnipeg.

Instruction at Winnipeg is centered in Mawdesley Hall (Named for Group Captain F. J. Mawdesley, AFC, ret.), the ground instructional school. There cadets fresh from Primary Training School at Centralia embark upon their observer training. The present system at AOS calls for a three-prong programme of instruction; all students take an initial basic course lasting 22 weeks. During this time they receive instruction in the basics of navigation, maps, meteorology, instruments, airmanship, magnetism and compasses, with heavy emphasis on electronics and radio, together with training in leadership and officer development. At the end of this phase of their training they are selected for advanced training in one of the three observer specialties: Radio, Long-range Navigation, or Air Interception. After a period of leave they return to Mawdesley Hall for the applied portion of their course, which lasts for 25 weeks in the case of radio officers, 23 weeks for long-range navigators, and 18 weeks for those chosen for air interception duties.

Long-range navigators learn how to guide aircraft anywhere in the world, using any one of a multiplicity of techniques and aids: from polar navigation techniques over the Arctic to maritime navigation methods suitable for the Indian Ocean, and from the manipulation of German-developed "Consol" over the North Atlantic to American "Loran" over the Pacific. AI observers learn how to direct their all-weather fighters on radar intercepts and to navigate jets using aids like the radio compass. Radio observers learn to operate any one of a dozen different kinds of radio sets, to send and receive morse code at 22 words a minute or faster, and to make sense out of the complicated procedure—almost a language in itself—which has been devised to cram the maximum of information into the minimum number of message letters.

IN THE AIR

Training, of course, is by no means confined to the classrooms of Mawdesley Hall. AOS uses three types of aircraft—*Expeditors*, *Dakotas* and *Mitchells*. The *Expeditors* are used for air exercises during the basic portion of the course, while *Dakotas* in two configurations — navigation trainers and radio trainers — are used on the applied portion. *Mitchells* are used exclusively for AI training.

Flying Wing of AOS has a larger strength of pilots (approx. 140) than any other single unit in Canada. While transporting embryo observers may not be the most exciting type of flying, the nature of the task does provide a degree of variety. Flying for the post-graduate courses is more advanced to that performed during the basic and applied courses. Besides training missions, a certain amount of flying involves evaluation of new equipment.

SPECIALISTS

Central Navigation School is responsible for all post-graduate training and courses given there include the Staff Officer Navigation Instructor Course (SONI), the Staff Officer Radio Instructor Course (SORI) and Staff Officer Air Interception Course (SO(AI)I). The object of these courses, which last 17 weeks each, is to qualify officers to act as instructors or take charge of sections at squadrons or stations.

The most advanced course given at CNS is the Specialist Navigation Course, of 40 weeks duration. Graduates are qualified to hold as responsible navigation posts as anybody in the world. Only one

course is held each year composed of six students, usually including one USAF officer. The syllabus includes a thorough grounding in higher mathematics, physics and aerodynamics, with an intense study in all navigation subjects, electronics, meteorology and English. The course includes visits to important aviation centres, factories and research centres in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. Although failures are very few, this is only because of the rigid selection of the candidates, and the pressure of the course is extreme as long as it lasts. There is a rumour, indeed, that students should not pick up pencils dropped on the floor until the end of the period; one student did so, and missed a year of college algebra as he bent over.

The period during which AOS worked at its highest capacity was June, July and August 1955 when the RCAF was reaching its full establishment and the NATO buildup was going on. Before NATO training stopped (Its termination was marked on 19 July 1958 by the most impressive military parade Station Winnipeg had ever seen.), observer training had been given to men from Denmark, Norway, Italy, France, Turkey, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Greece, Portugal and the United Kingdom, concurrently with the regular flow of RCAF candidates.

Station Winnipeg, because of its location, is home for a wide variety of RCAF activities. As mentioned previously, its most recently arrived formation is Training Command Headquarters, which moved there last September from Trenton. TCHQ occupies the building which began its career as the ground instructional school for No. 5 AOS during the war, later accommodated No. 2 TCHQ, then in the post-war period TACHQ and 14 Grp HQ before it became the home of CNS. When CNS moved under the same roof as AOS, TCHQ moved in. This chain of events proves conclusively that there is nothing so permanent as a temporary building.

SEARCH AND RESCUE

The most photogenic unit, and the one which has the most varied and interesting duties, is No. 111 Composite Unit—charged with the duties of search and rescue, transport and communications for TCHQ, and provision of a practice flight for staff officers whose normal jobs put them at the controls of walnut four-inkwell bombers. In its search and rescue role, 111 KU looks after the largest area of its kind in the world—2 ½ million square miles of some of the most desolate country in the world.

For over a decade it has been the focal point for searches and mercy trips which have made headlines all over the world: the *Dakota* trip to Arctic Bay on Baffin Island to bring out Canon John H. Turner in 1947, and "Operation Attaché", the search for a United States and a British Naval Attaché lost along with a United States coastguard pilot in a light aircraft near The Pas in September 1948, are only two. A steady stream of sick Eskimos and Indians (usually suffering from tuberculosis) from the Military Hospital at Fort Churchill to Deer Lodge Hospital in Winnipeg keeps a *Dakota* busy flying air-evacuation trips from Churchill to Winnipeg, although the primary task of the flight is to provide a service for military personnel at that sub-arctic base. No. 111 crews, ready at half-an-hour's notice to take off to look for a lost aircraft, fishing boat or traveller, or to transport a sick or injured man or woman, have attracted considerable attention from newspapers, magazines, radio and TV, and have twice gained that supreme accolade of today's world: moving-picture treatment. The para-rescue teams, with their mediaeval-looking armour and their willingness to jump to the rescue of the unfortunate, and No. 111 *Otter* aircraft, resplendent in red fluorescent paint, were featured in the picture "Last Chance", filmed at Jasper during the summer of 1959. The KU also operates helicopters, *Dakotas*, *Expeditors*, *Lancasters* and *T-33* jets. With every pilot required, for safety's sake, to restrict his flying activities to not more than two types of aircraft, finding the right pilot for the right aircraft is often by no means an easy task.

VARIETY OF ROLES

One duty facing Station Winnipeg, because it sits at the aerial crossroads of Canada, is the provision of servicing for the dozens of transient aircraft which funnel through Stevenson Field on their way east or west. In the summer, this involves merely effort; but in the winter, with the mercury down to 20 or 30 below zero, the job becomes a difficult one indeed. One perennial trouble lies simply in keeping lubricating oil liquid enough to allow it to be fed into oil tanks.

Winnipeg's central location makes it the logical site for No. 3 Communications Unit, which serves as the main central relay point for messages being sent from one end of Canada to the other, and also re-routes messages to the four points of the compass as they are received. No. 3 CU maintains a communications link with aircraft in flight in the general Winnipeg area.

Also based here is No. 51 Ground Observer Corps Detachment, whose task is maintaining liaison with ground observers scattered across the whole north of Canada. Most of No. 51 GobC personnel are on the road, visiting Hudson's Bay posts, trappers, RCMP posts, prospectors and traders, bringing them up to date on what types of aircraft to look for and report. Journeying by rail (including speeder), road, water and by air, detachment members see a great deal of Canada that is not too often surveyed by human eyes.

Another group of men who spend a good deal of their time travelling are the members of the Western Special Investigation Detachment. All air force policemen, they go wherever on the prairies duty calls them, usually on confidential missions.

Besides regular units, Station Winnipeg plays host to and provides housekeeping facilities for several auxiliary units. Best known is 402 (Aux.) Sqn, equipped with *Expeditors* and ready for a civil-defence role in case of war. In addition, No. 2402 Aircraft Control and Warning Sqn operates radar and trains its personnel to operate ground radars and control all-weather fighters. No. 3052 Technical Training Unit operates during the summer months to train youthful auxiliary personnel (mostly high-school boys and girls) to be technicians.

EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Recreation has not been neglected at Station Winnipeg. In its modern recreation centre, complete with a bowling alley, a swimming pool, a rifle range and a well-equipped gym, facilities are available for almost any kind of physical exercise. Curling, which is almost a disease at Winnipeg, is played by all ages of both sexes in a steelox building erected and equipped at non-public funds expense during the winter of 1956-7. A drama group, which has led an extremely successful life over the past few years, carries on its activities from the former cinema on the south side. A well-equipped hobby shop, a car club, an archery club, model aircraft club, stamp clubs, rifle clubs and skin-diving clubs are just a few of the many extra-curricular activities participated in by the station's growing population.

After nearly 40 years of life, Station Winnipeg is more vital and more active than ever. Actually a small city in its own right, it is home for more than 3000 service and civilian personnel — whose monthly payroll of close to one million dollars is a significant factor in the economy of the area as a whole.