

PREFACE: GENESIS

My attachment to Jericho Beach began in my early teens. I joined 531 Squadron Royal Canadian Air Cadets at New Westminster, and, in company with a number of other “sprogs” of assorted sizes and shapes, I was dispatched to RCAF Jericho Beach to be issued a uniform. Ill-fitting though it was, once that uniform was buttoned up over my awkward length I was a new man, purpose-filled, patriotic, and proud.

A few years later I enlisted in the RCAF Reserve unit and was able to visit the hallowed Air Force halls at Jericho Beach on many occasions. I had little interest then in the history of this venerable establishment, but the impressions were tucked away in the recesses of my young mind for a later rediscovery.

Many, many years later I took a position as the Chief Pilot and Operations Manager for a company that was in the process of developing a Native-owned airline, and the job required a temporary move up the west coast to Bella Bella. On the Shearwater side of Denny Island I discovered intriguing evidence of wartime activity.

The mouldering, decrepit, and in most cases, abandoned buildings of an RCAF Flying Boat Station piqued my curiosity. The one remaining hangar had been “pre-empted” by a local shipyard as a dry repair facility; the massive concrete slipway provided a handy means to launch and retrieve customers’ boats. A second concrete ramp was always in use by visiting amphibious aircraft: Grumman Goose, Cessna 206, De Havilland Beaver, and a small logging company operated a dryland log-sort on the large concrete pad at the top of the ramp. The airmen’s barracks, in a very poor state of repair, was used occasionally by transients, but the base hospital building was well maintained and served as a schoolhouse for the local children.

I also kept coming across intact sections of what I determined must have been a narrow, corrugated roadway made out of wooden boards. At one time it must have tracked uninterrupted through the seemingly endless knarled and stunted cedar growth, crossing the muskeg-like floor of the forested island to end at an abandoned BC Packers fish cannery. Here I found another group of buildings and elevated docks; obviously in their last stages of practical use in this sodden west coast climate.

Very few of the local residents had any detailed knowledge of the bits and pieces of history decayed around them, and even fewer had any interest in the story that these “artifacts” had to tell. The entire image of an almost forgotten history was presided over by the watchful eye of the Raven.

That winter in Bella Bella the fading echo of something that I as yet did not fully understand prompted me to begin a journal in which I recorded what I saw, and what I felt. Engrossed in my self-appointed record-keeping, I shortened the length of the long, stormy evenings and gradually developed an uncanny sense of kinship with the men who had been stationed on this remote island almost forty-five years before.

Late in 1994 a newspaper article prophesying the closure of the last vestiges of a military presence at Jericho Beach rekindled my interest in the former Air Station. I contacted the Commanding Officer at the Army facility at Jericho, Major Paul Crowber, CD, who was enthusiastic about my suggestion of a written history of the Vancouver Station and offered any assistance, short of funding, that he and his staff could provide.

Through the LEGION and the AIRFORCE magazines I addressed an appeal to airmen who had been stationed at Jericho Beach Air Station, as well as to the airmen who had manned the RCAF Flying Boat Stations on the west coast; I needed their help in my quest to record this period of aviation history. The results were phenomenal. A number of the former airmen telephoned to talk