

Pivotal Events in Rivers and Daly/ Canadian Joint Air Training Centre

Documents

A History of Rivers Air Base
The Rivers Banner

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Longtime residents of the Rivers area will probably remember a time when the air buzzed with the sound of RCAF aircraft from an airfield south-west of Rivers. Early in the Second World War, the Royal Canadian Air Force entered into an ambitious project: the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, an astounding program that saw 130,000 personnel from Great Britain and the Commonwealth graduate from 107 training schools across Canada.

RCAF Station Rivers opened May 1942 when No. 1 Air Navigation School (No. 1 ANS) re-located to Rivers from RCAF Station Trenton, becoming No. 1 Central Navigation School (No. 1 CNS). As the war progressed, Rivers also became a training centre for Army pilots and parachutists, as well as flying instructors from the Army, RCN and RCAF. Additionally, the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals and the Air Dispatch School made Rivers their home.

By the time No. 1 CNS disbanded in August 1945, No. 1 ANS and No. 1 CNS had trained a combined total of 11, 406 Commonwealth navigators.

RCAF Station Rivers would remain open after the war, becoming part of the post-war RCAF. In 1947, the Canadian Parachute Training Centre, established at Camp Shilo in 1942, merged with the Airborne School of the Canadian Joint Air Training Centre and re-located to RCAF Station Rivers, making the station Canada's main para-training centre.

Also in 1947, the Army Aviation Tactical Training School was established at Rivers to provide pilot training to Army aviators, as well as helicopter instructor training for the Army, RCN and RCAF. No. 6 Signal Regiment, Royal Canadian Corps of Signals and the Air Support Signals Unit provided communications duties at Rivers. 444 Air Observation Post Squadron was formed on 1 October 1947, but had a brief stay at the station as it disbanded 1 April 1949.

In 1948, the Joint Air Photo Interpretation School opened at RCAF Station Rivers. The school closed in 1960 and its personnel merged with the Air Photo Interpretation Centre at RCAF Station Rockcliffe, who became fully responsible for training photo-interpretors.

The Basic Helicopter Training Unit (BHTU) was established at RCAF Station Rivers in

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August 1953, initially to train RCAF pilots, but by 1956, Army helicopter pilots were also training at Rivers at the Army Air Tactical Training School (AATTS). After the closure of the helicopter school at RCN Air Station HMCS Shearwater, the Royal Canadian Navy began sending trainees to Rivers as well, making the BHTU the first tri-service flying training unit in Canada.

In 1956, with the Royal Canadian Navy having recently acquired its first fighter jet, the F2H3 Banshee, pilots from VF 870 and VF 871 Squadrons were also sent to Rivers for training. The RCN training program at Rivers continued until the disbandment of VF 871 Squadron in 1962.

The first helicopter employed by military forces in Canada was the RCAF's Sikorsky H-5 (S-51) in 1947. RCAF Station Rivers used the H-5 as a rotary wing trainer, but it was also used by the Royal Canadian Air Force in search and rescue roles.

In December 1963, No. 1 Transport Helicopter Platoon (No. 1 THP), a unit of the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps, was established at RCAF Station Rivers, along with their fleet of CH-113A Voyageur transport helicopters and one CH-112 Nomad. The platoon's function was to support the Army on field exercises. No. 1 THP moved to RCAF Station St. Hubert in 1966, but also established a detachment at RCAF Station Namao. In 1968, No. 1 THP was re-designated 450 (Heavy Transport) Helicopter Squadron.

408 Tactical Fighter Squadron, whose primary functions were reconnaissance and weapons delivery, moved to Rivers in 1964 from RCAF Station Rockcliffe, and remained until disbanded on 1 April 1970.

As a result of the Unification, RCAF Station Rivers was re-named CFB Rivers.

With the coming of the Canadair CF-5 Freedom Fighter into service, the runways at Rivers proved to be too short to handle the new jet. No. 4 Fighter Training School (formerly the BHTU and the AATTS) re-located to CFB Portage La Prairie in July 1970 and the Canadian Parachute Training Centre moved to CFB Edmonton, precipitating the eventual demise of the base itself.

CFB Rivers was declared surplus to defence needs and as a result, the station closed in September 1971.

In September 1972, the land was turned over to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development for use as an industrial training centre for Manitoba Indians, the Oo-Za-We-Kwun Centre. The Rivers Gliding School, a summer Air Cadet glider camp opened at the former base in 1974, remaining until 1984, when it re-located to CFB Gimli.

The Oo-Za-We-Kwun Centre closed in 1980 and the land was sold by the Federal Government. Larry and Bonnie Friesen opened Hangar Farms Ltd. at this site in 1988. The Friesen's continue to operate a hog farm at this location today.

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Only small parts of the old air station remain today including old supply buildings, two Second World War era hangars, a 1950s era arch-style hangar, power plant, fire hall, some two-story H-huts, ruins of the messes and five permanent married quarters. The entire airfield remains completely intact and although a reservoir sits across one of the runways, it is used by crop dusting airplanes and drift racing practice groups.

In the mid 1990s, the RCAF returned to Rivers with the help of some movie magic in the film "For The Moment", a film about an Australian pilot who comes to Manitoba to train under the BCATP, starring Russell Crowe. While most of the movie was filmed at the Brandon Airport, scenes of the actors standing outside their barracks were filmed at Rivers, requiring a fresh coat of green paint to be applied to the old buildings.

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