

VII. RIVERS BASE TODAY

by Johnnie Bachusky

Research Information from the
Ghost Towns of Manitoba Site
www.ghosttownscanada.ca

CFB Rivers, located seven kilometres west of the Town of Rivers, 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 Gimli.

In 1980 the Oo-Za-We-Kwun Centre closed and the land was sold by the Federal Government. Hangar Farms Ltd, a hog farm operation, opened at the site in 1988.

Today, only small parts of the old air station still exist, including the old supply buildings, two World War II era hangars, a post-war "arch style" hangar, the power plant, the fire hall, some of the two-story H-huts, and five of the PMQs. The entire airfield remains, and used by crop dusting airplanes, although a reservoir sits across one of the runways.

In the mid 1990's, the RCAF returned to the former RCAF Station Rivers, with the help of some movie magic, in the movie "For The Moment", a film about an Australian pilot who comes to Manitoba to train under the BCATP, starring Russel 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.

RCAF Station Rivers originally opened in May 1942 under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan as No. 1 Air Navigation School (No. 1 ANS). As the war progressed, RCAF Station 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.

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 moved 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 Camp Rivers. 444 Air Observation Post Squadron was formed on 1 October 1947, but disbanded 1 April 1949.

In 1948, the Joint Air Photo Interpretation School opened at Rivers. The school closed in 1960.

The Basic Helicopter Training Unit was established at Rivers in August 1953, initially to train RCAF pilots, but by 1956, Army helicopter pilots were also training at Rivers.

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.

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.

The Bill Hillman Military Tribute Series
Presents
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CJATC RIVERS, MANITOBA

Tragedy and hauntings at ghost base CFB Rivers
Half a century ago the Manitoba military base was considered one of the finest in Canada but today it is derelict and the site of a tragic death three months ago as well as a lingering ghost
By Johnnie Bachusky | Red Deer Express | August 18, 2010

BETTER TIMES - Photo courtesy of Bill Hillman
An aerial photograph of CFB Rivers during its vibrant day in the early 1960s.

From a distance CFB Rivers does not look any different than it did in its heyday a half century ago.

The towering steam plant that provided heat for the entire base still shimmers under a hot summer sun. Visitors can make out the old hangers from several kilometres away. Sometimes small commercial planes can be seen taking off from the runways.

But when visitors arrive at the base gate they are faced with dereliction and despair. Sadly, this once vibrant Canadian Armed Forces base on the Manitoba prairie, which sprawls out more than 3,200 acres, is now a crumbling locale recovering from a recent tragedy, and the scene of a mysterious haunting that occurred six years ago at the ancient arched hanger.

In the meantime, while scores and scores of former CFB Rivers residents marvel at the wonderful memories they retain, many choose never to return. It is simply too sad, too heartbreaking to see the incredible state of dereliction of this once proud military community five kilometres southwest of the Town of Rivers.

“It was such a popular base. Everyone who trained there loved it. It was a tremendous loss to the surrounding communities when it was taken away. It was like losing a favourite uncle,” said Bill Hillman, a 67-year-old career educator and musician from Brandon. Before the base officially closed in 1971 Bill and his wife Sue-On performed at numerous shows on the base. Bill also worked countless hours there as a summer student.

“I had an uncle who trained on helicopters there. It meant so much. But there is not much remaining there now. It is so sad to see.”

CFB Rivers first opened in 1942 as part of the country's Second World War commitment to the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

The base later became the country's main para-training centre for army, navy and air force personnel. In 1953, the Basic Helicopter Training Unit (BHTU) was established and it became the first tri-service flying training unit in Canada.

In the meantime, more than 450 homes were constructed at CFB Rivers for more than 2,000 military citizens. The community boasted first-class amenities, including a full hospital, dentist, two churches, a 24-room school, bowling alley, movie theatre, a full grocery store, butcher shop, auto club, gas station and a recreation centre.

But with the Canadian military unifying in 1968 and Ottawa making budget cuts, CFB Rivers was declared surplus to defence needs, as were several other bases across the country in subsequent years - including CFB Penhold, and it closed in September 1971. After the base was abandoned the land and its buildings were turned over to various community uses until 1988 when it was purchased by Larry Friesen who opened Hangar Farms Ltd., a hog farm operation.

Sadly, however, it was in the late 1980s when the deterioration of the old base accelerated. Fires destroyed two old military hangers, and the condition of many abandoned buildings rapidly declined.

Meanwhile, former residents regularly come back to visit and Friesen was always happy to chat and give a tour.

But on April 28 tragedy struck the base.

Friesen fell about seven metres to his death while working on a hanger roof. His death, officially ruled as an accident, shocked and saddened many in the surrounding area.

“He shouldn't have even been up there. It (accident) was right in my building, right out my door,” said Gary Ringland, 59, a fertilizer company supervisor at the base. “Larry was an interesting person. He had stories for everything.”

Ringland, who has worked on the base for the past 15 years, has many stories of his own.

He was raised at CFB Rivers from 1951 to 1968. His father was a military cook, raising an astounding 15 children in a three-bedroom home on the base. His family was in fact the first and largest on the base.

“It was good. You knew everybody. But If you did anything wrong your dad knew before you got home. The military police kept tabs on everybody,” said Ringland, chuckling. “But there was lots to do for kids, just like a regular town.”

When the base closed Ringland moved with his family for a few years to nearby Rapid City. He then went to Calgary where he worked many years for a fibre glass company.

But home kept calling and he returned to work at CFB Rivers in the mid 1990s.

“It felt funny because I lived here so long and when I came back there was nothing left and nothing maintained,” said Ringland. “It was eerie because what used to be there were mess halls and stuff but they were ripped down.”

The eeriness took a dramatic turn six years ago when he was in the old arch hanger. It was an incident Ringland has never forgotten.

In the evening while loading fertilizer he heard something move above on a catwalk near an abandoned office.

“It looked like someone was walking across – watching us. I looked at the guy on the ground and he didn't see anything. And the driver's wife who was outside had the hair on her arm stand up at the same time. She never saw but she just had bad vibes,” said Ringland, adding there was no reason for anybody to be up on the catwalk. “And to this day she still won't get out of her truck. Her husband does but he doesn't like to get out either. It is kind of eerie.”

Ringland said when he now enters the arch hanger he still looks up to see if anything is walking along the catwalk. He also admits to making sure the loader lights are always on.

These days, however, Ringland has become the ghost base's unofficial tour guide.

But there is some uncertainty with the future now due to Friesen's tragic passing. In the meantime the old Second World War site is crumbling fast.

But at least for a little while anyway, and maybe for sometime beyond, there are plenty of memories to hold on to at CFB Rivers - and a mysterious and eerie ghost to wonder about.

PHOTO GALLERY

Johnnie Bachusky/Red Deer Express

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Gary Ringland, in front of the CFB Rivers' crumbling steam plant,
has worked at the ghost base for the past 15 years.
He also grew up there.
Six years ago he swears he encountered a ghost inside the old arched hanger.

HOUSING RELICS -

The green abandoned single men's barracks at the base, painted this colour for a 1996 movie, For The Moment, a film starring Hollywood superstar Russell Crowe.

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SUMMER MEMORIES

The swimming pool at the base once provided fun and recreation for hundreds on each hot summer day. Today it is derelict.