



RCAF STATION HIGH RIVER

Historic Site Official Opening



During 2002, the Bomber Command Museum of Canada placed a commemorative plaque on the roadside immediately north of the site of the former RCAF Station High River. During the post-flood reconstruction of this road, the plaque was moved to the eastern entrance to the former site of the airfield.

In 2016, the museum approached the Royal Canadian Legion (High River Branch) with the suggestion that the two organizations work together to enhance the new pull-off where the plaque had been placed by erecting signage and a flag pole from which the Royal Canadian Air Force flag would be flown. The Legion Branch spear-headed the effort, making presentations to the town and municipal district and raising the funds required for the 4'x8' sign and the flagpole. Following the success of these efforts, the historic site was officially opened at a ceremony on October 1st.

THE HISTORY

Early in 1921, the Canadian Air Board commenced flying operations at High River using a grass field northeast of the town. The High River Air Station was one of several operated by the Air Board that was used for civil operations. Control of the air station became the responsibility of the Royal Canadian Air Force when it was formed in 1924.



Bessoneau hangars and associated buildings

Four portable "Bessoneau" hangars that had been used by the Royal Flying Corps in France during WW I were erected, and associated buildings were constructed.

The purpose of the station was to fly daily fire patrols over the foothills and mountains between Eckville and Pincher Creek. A huge fire had recently destroyed vast areas of forest in southern Alberta.



De Havilland D.H. 4

With ten De Havilland D.H. 4 aircraft in service in 1921, High River was the most active air station in Canada. 284 flights totaling over 700 hours were recorded during that first summer.

Under the auspices of W.W. Grant, the station was also very involved in radio that was then in its experimental stages. In 1922, the most powerful transmitter in North America was operated at the air station and when Grant was able to speak with someone in Hawaii, it was hailed as a miraculous new step. Grant went on to establish the first commercial radio station in Alberta.

The RCAF Station High River was also involved in air photography, the collection of air samples for botanical studies, and even dropped mailbags to the Prince of Wales when he was visiting his E.P. Ranch west of High River. Early experimentation in the field of parachuting was undertaken at the base and in 1925 a jump from a D.H. 4 aircraft piloted by Punch Dickens, who was then an officer at the base, was an impressive accomplishment.





Visitors' Day at RCAF Station High River c.1924

By 1930, a series of look-out buildings had been established along the eastern slopes of the Rockies and the forest protection flights were curtailed. The station remained as an aircraft storage facility until the beginning of the Second World War.

RCAF Station High River was a major participant in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. This huge, largely Canadian effort included hundreds of schools across Canada. 131,553 aircrew were trained during WW II.

Originally located at Lethbridge, No. 5 Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS) was moved to High River during June 1941. A large hangar, barracks, drill halls, offices and other associated buildings and facilities were hastily constructed. Initially the aircraft flew off of the grass field but later runways were built.

The school officially opened on September 23 with a ceremony attended by 2500 people. It included formation flying, aerobatics, and a parachute jump.

De Havilland Tiger Moths were the first aircraft used at No. 5 EFTS. They were replaced by Fairchild Cornells in late 1942. During 1943, the size of the school was doubled and a second hangar constructed and almost one hundred Cornells were being flown. An emergency and practice landing field was located on the then dry lakebed of nearby Frank Lake.

The social background to the instruction played an important supporting role. No. 5 EFTS had an orchestra, band, recreation hall, a stable to house the horses used by the riding club, and a recreation hall that was used regularly for concerts, dramatic productions, and movies.

Over 4000 pilots had been trained prior to the school closing in December, 1944. An amazing total of 254,603.5 hours had been flown at No. 5 EFTS.



Single hangar and other buildings at No. 5 EFTS



Initially the Tiger Moths flew off of the grass field



Student, instructor, and Tiger Moth at No. 5 EFTS



No. 5 EFTS following the construction of the second hangar and runways



No. 5 EFTS Cornell aircraft in formation



The original No. 5 EFTS hangar is the only building that remains on the site.

