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Information Management Group

Groupe de gestion de l'information

IM Wired to the Web

CFS Alert – 50 Years of SIGINT



CFS Alert – 50 Years of SIGINT Special Edition

Welcome to the 2008 special edition of *IM Wired to the Web* marking recent events to celebrate Canadian Forces Station Alert – 50 years of signals intelligence.

Events were held on 4 September 2008 at Canadian Forces Station Alert and from 12 to 14 September 2008 at the main operational link for the Station, CFS Leitrim. These events recognized Canadian Forces personnel who have served in Alert as well as the aircrews, and construction and engineering teams who supported those in Alert.

Ceremonies at CFS Alert provided some pioneers who were stationed there in the 1950s and beyond, the opportunity to reconnect to a memorable past. A commemorative plaque was unveiled, a mess dinner was held and the Amateur Radio Club, which had been dormant for 10 years, was reactivated to briefly reconnect with the worldwide amateur radio community. At CFS Leitrim, there was a meet and greet on 12 September. Activities for 13 September consisted of

tours of CFS Leitrim, presentations of the Special Service Medal to the early pioneers, the unveiling of a plaque commemorating the occasion, displays of many artefacts from Alert, and an evening gathering.

A brunch and closing ceremony were held on 14 September.

Congratulations to the "Frozen Chosen" on this golden anniversary!



Photo: Cpl Angela Abbey, Combat Camera



Did You Know?

Alert Crest

The black and yellow background of the Alert crest signifies the two conditions of twenty-four hours of darkness and daylight, which prevail in the Arctic. The muskox, a hardy animal who lives and survives despite the many hardships of the icy, barren and forbidding wastes of the Arctic, is suitably symbolic of those who man this northern station.

The motto, "INUIT NUNANGATA UNGATA – Beyond the Inuit land," is significant because no Inuit have been known to go and live as far north as Alert, except DND or other Federal employees.

Name

Canadian Forces Station Alert was not actually known by this name until 1966. Up until this point, it was known as Alert Wireless Station.



Message from the DGIMO

This month, events took place to celebrate 50 years of signals intelligence (SIGINT) at Canadian Forces Station (CFS) Alert. Over the past 50 years, the "Frozen Chosen" have worked tirelessly at the top of the world. I had the distinct pleasure of accompanying some of the "Frozen Chosen" to Alert and to recognize their contributions over the years, as well as attending the ceremonies at CFS Leitrim.

Those who have served at and supported CFS Alert have played a significant role in Canada's history, and the Station continues to be a site of great importance today. Both the events at CFS Alert and at CFS Leitrim were truly fitting tributes to those who have served and supported the Station over the past 50 years. These events have not only drawn attention to and celebrated these individuals' tremendous contributions on behalf of Canadians, they have also provided a wonderful opportunity for old friends and colleagues to reconnect and reminisce about their time at Alert. Although

some of those in attendance have not have seen each other for as long as 50 years, the camaraderie displayed at these celebrations is a testament to the bonds that exist between those with a connection to Alert.

The success of these events was the result of the many individuals who both attended and contributed to the celebrations. Your presence and participation were essential and were ultimately what these events were all about.

At this time, I would also like to draw attention to the contributions of the lead organizers: Capt Tom Jenkins, Capt Brian Kebic and CPO1 Neil O'Hare. In addition to organizing the events, these individuals took the time to ensure that special details, such as artefacts, calendars, photo books, and a commemorative coin would help mark this important occasion. Their outstanding efforts have produced an event that will be remembered fondly by all those in attendance.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without the assistance and support of many others, particularly the following members of the organizing committee:

- CWO Bob Schofield
(2 EW (Electronic Warfare) Sqn Kingston (HAM - Amateur Radio))
- Mr. Ken Halcrow
(HAM - Amateur Radio)
- Mr. Wayne Moore
(SRS (Supplementary Radio Systems) Old Timers)
- Mr. Lynn Wartman
(SRS (Supplementary Radio Systems) Old Timers)
- Mr. Jim Humes
(SRS (Supplementary Radio Systems) Old Timers)
- Mr. George Stewart
(COS (IM) - Alert flights)
- Mr. Peter Cork
(CSEC (Communications Security Establishment Canada (formerly CSE))
- Mr. Rick Gallant (Leitrim Mess)
- Ms. Louise Marin
(Communications and Public Affairs Officer)

To all those who participated and assisted in the event, thank you for your contribution to a truly remarkable series of events.

BGen Jim Ferron





Message from the COS(IM)

This September, celebrations marking 50 years of signals intelligence (SIGINT) at CFS Alert took place at CFS Alert and at CFS Leitrim. In the context of signals intelligence, the past 50 years have been a period of significant achievement and progress. During this time, those who have served and supported the Station have always worked far from the spotlight, but these events allow them to receive some of the recognition that they deserve.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, Canada recognized the strategic importance of CFS Alert's northern location, and the site expanded its role to make SIGINT its first priority. Today, CFS Alert reports through CFIQG to ADM(IM). The Station continues to play an important role in Canadian defence and security. It continues to act as a key Government of Canada strategic presence and investment supporting CSEC, CDI, our Allies and other departments and agencies.

Over the years, technological advances led to the reduction in the number of personnel required for the

operational/signals intelligence role. Today, SIGINT collection continues to be the primary mission of this isolated Station. In addition to its primary mission, our presence at CFS Alert also allows for the support of exploration, research, other government departments (e.g. Environment Canada), and other military patrols.

I would like to personally recognize the sacrifices of the individuals who worked at CFS Alert in the early days, before the widespread use of the Internet. In those days, CFS Alert was an even more remote posting than it is today. Most of the signallers who served at the Station were posted there multiple times. Whether they provided support to the Station or were directly engaged in SIGINT work, the communications researchers and all those who have served at CFS Alert contributed to the Station's support to Canada's strategic role with respect to our allies over the course of the past five decades.

In anticipation of the September celebrations, I had the pleasure of joining the Chief of Defence Staff and the

Minister of National Defence while they visited CFS Alert in late August in recognition of this important anniversary. They were provided with a preview of a plaque that would be unveiled at the official ceremony at CFS Alert in September in recognition of the men and women who have served at the Station.

Those who attended the CFS Alert or the CFS Leitrim ceremonies widely agreed that it was a great honour to be there and to stand among serving and former military members and civilians who had been deployed to the Station. I was very pleased to attend the activities in Leitrim where hundreds who had served in Alert gathered to salute the golden anniversary of Canada's SIGINT presence in Alert.

As the CF J6, I am proud of the success of CFS Alert's mission. This success is due to the efforts of all the men and women who have worked in and supported this isolated area of the world. Their contribution is recognized by Canada and our allies. To all those who served and to those of you currently at the Station, I wish to express my sincerest thanks and congratulate you on marking 50 years of SIGINT at CFS Alert.

BRAVO ZULU!

MGen A.G. Hines



Photo: Chief of the Defence Staff, General Walt Natynczyk and the Honourable Peter Gordon MacKay, Minister of National Defence and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency travelled to Alert, Canada's most northern community, accompanied by Member of Parliament, Mr. Steven Fletcher to recognize the CFS Alert - 50 Years of SIGINT.

The Lifeline to CFS Alert

Speak to anyone who has served at Canadian Forces Station (CFS) Alert and they will no doubt tell you about the adventurous and long journey it takes to get there.

Aircraft have been, and still are, the lifeline of personnel at CFS Alert. In addition to being the only means of transportation, aircraft bring all required supplies to Alert. Before advances in technology, they were also the only contact with home by means of written letters delivered with weekly supplies.

On behalf of all of the "Frozen Chosen" a heartfelt "thank you" to all of the members of the aircrews who supplied Alert throughout the years. You made it possible for all of us to stand guard on top of the world.

Following are some stories that highlight how integral aircraft are and have been to life at Alert. The stories that follow are all part of Alert's history, and part of the cherished memories of the people who have served there.

"19 Dec 1957: The North Star aircraft that was due in today turned around at Thule Air Force Base and went back to Resolute Bay. Morale sure took a big drop, especially when we heard that there was 657 pounds of mail on board. Still, it's a shame with Christmas so near.

14 Jan 1958: The aircraft got in today!! Plenty of mail and Christmas parcels for all! You've never seen a happier bunch in all your life. Plenty to catch up on for the mail has piled up since November."

– **Earle Smith** was a member of the RCAF from 1948 to 1968 and a Communications Operator and Radar Technician who was posted to Alert from August 1957 to February 1958. Throughout his tour in Alert, Mr. Smith kept a diary of his daily activities.

"The trip to Alert in 1959: This plane ride was definitely "cargo class". The strip in Churchill was major league because of the aircraft it accommodated during the cold war years. Eventually the C119 rumbled down the strip and the bumblebee was airborne.

The precious cargo filling her belly was a load of building materials, assorted food supplies, a small pallet of beer cases and, of course, the personnel change for Alert. The cargo area never did warm up and the endless flight to Alert was very cold and very noisy thanks to natural and man-made noise. A long time was spent trying to move amongst the cargo and get comfortable. Time stood still as we droned on into darkness."

– CPO2 (retired) **Mike Juhas** was a member of the Communicator Special/Communicator Research Operator occupation with the Royal Canadian Navy/Canadian Forces from July 1956 to May 1986.

"CC130 (Hercules) aircraft have supported CFS Alert since the early 1960s.

Up until 1984 the Hercules aircraft were indeed the main source of contact with personnel in the south (other than by HAM Radio Phone Patches), as these aircraft carried the mail.

With the advent of the High Arctic Data Communication System (HADCS) that came into operation in 1984/85 and the technological developments since then, phone calls home became more common and the availability of this means of communications has increased ten-fold for the personnel currently serving there. Television and the quality of entertainment, as well as the availability of the Internet at the Station have also changed the whole aspect of being at Alert. While DND provides as many amenities to the personnel serving at this remote location as possible, we can never take away the sense of isolation felt at Alert, no matter what is provided."

– **George Stewart**, Chief of Staff (Information Management) G4 - Logistic Support since 1985. He also served at Alert during a 30-year military career.

The Lifeline to CFS Alert (continued)

"One of the great things I remember about plane day was going to the runway to watch the arrival, and at times, walking all the way to the end, then laying down in the grass to watch the plane fly overhead. It appeared to be only a few feet over us but was actually likely 50 feet or more before it passed overhead and touched down a short distance from where we were. It seemed like the plane was going to drop out of the sky, and although some would say that was a funny way to get a few kicks, I must admit it did get the blood pressure up somewhat."

– **John Belland**, Retired ComRsch 291



"In my mind, the worst part of Alert was getting there. It was a long flight in a Herc, whether it was from Churchill, Inuvik, Ottawa or Trenton. My first tour arrival and departure I remember well because on the way up, the Herc, which was relatively new to the Air Force at the time, experienced hydraulic problems just outside of Resolute. By the time we landed, the back end was filled with black smoke. As soon as the wheels hit the tarmac, the ramp was dropped to clear the air. Our flight to Alert continued, but I believe it was at a reduced altitude of 8000 ft. This was in August 1963.

In the early days, plane day was the highlight of the week what with fresh supplies and mail and of course replacement personnel. It really was a major disappointment if the aircraft was delayed, even for a day. The Hurricane communication system certainly helped morale but I believe the aircraft schedule was the major focus for most people in Alert."

– **Mike Peachey**, Six tours in Alert from 1963-1983

"I served in Alert in the 60's, 70's, 80's and 90's and 2000's. It's amazing to see the different responses to the sound of those turbo prop engines on their way!

In the 60's it was a way of life. You would wait or look through the binoculars for a sight of the once-a-week plane. In the 70's there might be the odd special flight so sometimes you would get to go through the routine twice. With the advent of the great construction boom in the late 70's and early 80's, there were planes virtually every day. In fact, if you didn't like the sound of those Turboprops, it became menacing.

Be assured that in the early days, that sound meant fresh food and MAIL. The day most looked forward to in Alert was probably mail day, whatever day that might be. Payday didn't mean anything; mail was the thing."

– **Brian Hartnett**, SWO three times in Alert

The Lifeline to CFS Alert (continued)

"To all those who served at the most northern, permanently inhabited settlement in the world, CFS Alert, the weekly Hercules aircraft was their lifeline. One of the sweetest sounds that I can remember from my six Alert tours was the Hercules reversing its props after it had made a safe landing on the dirt or snow covered runway. This sound could be heard all over the Station and it meant that we were getting mail, fresh rations, new faces and best of all, for those who were anxiously waiting to start their trip home, their 'ride' south was parked on the runway. The only other sound that equaled the Herc was when Station personnel were informed that Air Command was adding a 'Special' to the weekly Hercules flight. This announcement was made even sweeter if you were given the authority to go home a few days ahead of your scheduled departure date."

– LCdr (retired) **Ray Lebeau** served six tours in Alert, and was Canadian Forces Supplementary Radio System (CFSRS) representative for the Pay Studies Team in 1987. He was also a member of CFSRS Ops/Tech evaluation teams in 1988 and 1989.



"Every Wednesday virtually everyone in camp had an interest in the weather forecast. Bad weather meant no Herc'. That meant no mail, no fresh fruit, no new movies and most disappointingly, no replacement personnel for those who had completed their 'One Eighty Three and a Wakie'. No matter how you counted, a complete six-month tour was 183 days and a wake up on the day of departure.

My tour at Alert was one of the highlights of my life, but none of it could have been if not for the Hercules workhorse and the fantastic crews who maintained that critical air link with the south."

– **Ron 'Hutch' Hutchinson** served at CFS Alert (then Alert Wireless Station) as a civilian DND intercept operator for eighteen months, from Oct 1963 to April 1965.

CFS Alert Milestones

Over the years, since its conception first as the Joint Arctic Weather Station and until later as a Signal Intelligence station, CFS Alert has achieved many milestones that its former personnel may recall. Some of these milestones include:

1875 – the crew of HMCS ALERT winters off Cape Sheridan, approximately 10 kilometers from the current site of CFS Alert



Photo: Peter Johnson

1950 – Alert is established as a Joint Arctic Weather Station (JAWS) site, part of a chain of arctic weather stations operated by the United States and Canada

1950 – RCAF Lancaster aircraft crashes during re-supply mission, killing all 9 crew members

1956 – a hear-ability study is conducted by the Canadian

military in numerous Arctic locations, including Alert and Resolute Bay

1957 – HAM (amateur) radio is first used at Alert

1958 – on 01 September, the Canadian Army assumes control of Alert Wireless Station and commences signals intelligence operations on the site

1959 – first major expansion of Alert occurs

1966 – on 11 July the Canadian Forces Supplementary Radio System (CFSRS, the predecessor to the Canadian Forces Information Operations Group) is authorized as a formation. Sites belonging to the organization had their names changed from wireless stations to Canadian Forces Stations (CFS), including CFS Alert

1975 – Lancaster Hall, a new transmitter building, opens

1976 – first of new living quarters, Chimo Hall, opens; followed by Ladner Hall and Whitehorse Hall in successive years

1980 – new operations building, Polaris Hall, opens

1980 – UHF link between Alert and Eureka is established, providing first telephone service into Alert

1980 – women serve in Alert for first time as part of the Women In Non Traditional Roles study done by the CF

1981 – construction of High Arctic Data Communication System (HADCS) begins; completed in 1982

1983 – employment of women at CFS Alert is fully authorized

1984 – HAPS (Headquarters, Administration & Personnel Support) building opens

1991 – BOXTOP Flight 22 crashes near Alert, killing 5

1997 – final HAM radio contact made from Alert

1997 – equipment remoting project is completed, allowing Alert's manning to be reduced from in excess of 200 down to 69 personnel

1998 – HADCS II upgrade completed

2008 – outsourcing of various positions in Alert reduces the number of people there to a strength of 21 military and 32 civilians



Photo: Cpl Angela Abbey, Combat Camera