

New role for Goose Bay

NATO needs a low-level-flying training centre, and Canada – as part of its NATO commitment – has offered a suitable site in Labrador. The base would give an economic boost to the area and help reduce low-level flying in Europe; but it will only go ahead if the local environment can be adequately protected.



Jet fighters on approach to Goose Bay air base.

A vital World War II staging post in Labrador could take on a new role as a Tactical Fighter Centre for NATO in the 1990s. If the go-ahead is given to develop the Goose Bay base, NATO air forces will gain a much safer training area than the crowded skies of Europe can provide.

The Goose Bay base became operational in 1942 with the construction of three 7000-ft runways and an ocean harbour. By the end of the war 24000 Canadian and American fighters had passed through it on their way to Europe.

In 1951 a radar site was completed on the base as part of a network of stations known as the 'Pine Tree Line'. The following year the United States Air Force signed a 20-year contract for the use of the Goose Bay facilities, and in the early 1960s the RAF began low-level-flying training there.

In 1971 Canada assumed full control of the radar station and from 1972 to 1975 the USAF moved out. The economy of the central region of Labrador collapsed, with unemployment soaring to almost 20 percent.

The situation changed in the 1980s when the West German Air Force started low-level flight training at Goose Bay, and was joined by the Royal Netherlands Air Force in 1986. In 1980 NATO identified a need for a Tactical Fighter Centre for use by allied air forces, and in 1984 the Canadian government proposed Goose Bay.

A Labrador location would allow NATO air forces to train in privacy; also, the region's weather would suit the visual flight operations

necessary for low-level flight training. The only caveat was that the base had to be environmentally acceptable.

The growing need for low-level flying.

Low-level-flying techniques have developed in response to the steadily improving capabilities of modern anti-aircraft systems. High-flying aircraft are easily detectable and therefore liable to be shot down. By flying low – at 100 feet, for instance – the risk of detection is greatly diminished.

Much of the low-level training in Europe is conducted over densely populated regions and in heavily congested air space. Not only is such activity extremely dangerous in these conditions, but the minimum altitudes are also too high for effective low-level training. Another problem is that there are too many population centres and other sensitive areas that must be avoided.

By contrast, Labrador and North Eastern Quebec have two large low-level-training areas totalling 100000 square kilometres where there are no permanent settlements.

Labrador itself is very sparsely populated, with only 30000 inhabitants living in three major communities and approximately 35 small permanent communities – all outside the current and proposed NATO training area. The region's average population density is a mere 0.1 people per square kilometre compared with 250 per square kilometre in Europe.

Gauging the environmental impact.

However, fears have been expressed that low-level flying might inflict damage on the environment and disturb both the wildlife and the indigenous people who hunt and fish in the area. The people most likely to be affected are 2300 Indians and 1700 Inuit; they live outside the designated low-flying areas, but they do enter the areas from time to time.

In particular the Innu people have raised objections to this proposal alleging that the noise of low-flying aircraft would adversely affect their own health as well as that of the wildlife on which they depend for survival. They claim that the migration and feeding habits of the caribou would be severely disturbed. However, although the Innu obtain much of their food locally, they also use flights subsidised by the Canadian government to go to their traditional fishing and hunting grounds.

A further problem arises in respect of the Innu's long-standing land claim. So far, they have received \$1.4 million in government money to support work on their claim but, despite the government being happy to negotiate this claim, no final proposal has yet been submitted by the Innu.

The Canadian government recognises that land and wildlife are important to the native peoples of Labrador and is actively trying to accommodate their concerns. It therefore initiated a comprehensive environmental review of the ecological, social and economic impact of low-level flight training at Goose Bay. The exhaustive review – which focuses