

Aircraft shatter peace of Innu people

There is no warning. Flying at 450 knots, sometimes as low as 100 feet above ground, NATO fighter aircraft — German Phantom II's and British Tornados — scream overhead, exhaust fumes rippling the tents and shaking the trees. The children are terrified; some of them run into the forest and the adults have to spend several hours to find them. Another afternoon that could have been spent hunting and trapping has been wasted.

On a quiet river, 57-year-old Francois Bellefleur, an Innu hunter, is canoeing with his two youngest children. "We couldn't hear them coming up from behind us on the river. We couldn't hear them at all. (My children) were paddling in the canoe on the other side. They just jumped out of the canoe when the planes took us by surprise, because they were frightened. And if they had jumped off in the deep water, I could have lost them."

The planes are part of NATO training exercises, using highly sophisticated navigational equipment to fly very low over Quebec-Labrador terrain. The pilots can pretend they are flying over eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and this year they are going to pretend to drop bombs. They are training to fight in a nuclear war and are part of Canada's attempt to meet some NATO commitments without spending any money. Two hundred feet below them, a way of life struggling to reassert itself is once again threatened.

Last October, Innu from Sheshashie, La Romain, St. Augustine and Mingan — communities on the Quebec-Labrador peninsula — began an international campaign to publicize the militarization of their territory and the threat to their culture from these training exercises. Since then, a number of social action and peace groups, including Oxfam, Ploughshares, the Catholic Social Action Committee and the Status of Women's Council have joined the Innu's protest. The Wilderness Society has also joined in, concerned, as are the native people, about the effect on wildlife of these flights.

"We decided to go after this issue from a number of different angles," says Peter Armitage, a graduate student in anthropology at the Memorial University of Newfoundland.



"Not only does (low level flying) represent an escalation of the arms race by helping develop this technology, but it also draws Canada more into the nuclear club. You might see some of the aircraft involved, particularly the Tornado, as a manned cruise missile. The other angle is the environmental issue — the fact that there might be a severe impact on wildlife."

Finally, says Armitage, is the effect on the health and culture of the Innu people. "If Innu people are exposed to severe noise, they will be continuing their way of life in the bush because it's very frightening for them to go to the bush and encounter these aircraft. The kids freak out basically... and adults don't like it very much either. Some families have said they are no longer going out in the country where these aircraft are conducting low-level training exercises."

The federal and provincial governments signed a ten-year agreement on flight training with the West German government in 1983 and have no intention of breaking it. The Department of National Defense is also actively encouraging other NATO countries to train in Labrador-Quebec.

The local business community of Happy Valley-Goose Bay and the Newfoundland government are all for it. Intensifying military involvement will be an economic boost to a chronically depressed region. In October, former Newfoundland Minister of Rural, Agricultural and Northern Development Joe Goudie, expressed the government's hope for more military activity. "If the West German Training opera-

tion is added to by the operations of the other NATO allies, the possibility exists that Goose Bay's economy, which has been stagnant since the American withdrawal in 1976, will again be revived."

The Innu would probably be the last to benefit from any such revival.

"The military claims that about \$100,000 a year will be brought in," says Armitage. "Probably 40 percent of that would go into gasoline. There are a few business people out of Goose Bay who would probably benefit from it... the guy that supplies the gas."

Joe Goudie also said in October 1984, that there was no evidence to support Innu claims that low-level flying had adverse effects on their traditional activities, their health or on caribou migration.

Armitage calls that statement "highly irresponsible".

"There is substantial circumstantial and direct evidence from a number of sources to say that there is a negative impact on the wildlife and on people's health".

Armitage cites evidence to suggest that very loud unexpected noise can be extremely stressful. "It can result in reduced task performance and an overall reduced tolerance for stress of any kind. So if people are flown over four or five times a day then the stress level goes up and then they are less able to deal with their children or with marital stress."

The government's opinions are based on a report submitted by the Department of National Defense in 1981 which reported no adverse effects on the environment or the people in the area of the training operations then already underway. No independent studies were commissioned,

nor were any public hearings or consultations with the Innu undertaken. In October 1984, the government promised to study the caribou migration patterns so the planes could avoid them. No such study has been done.

Even the DND report has some alarming facts, says Armitage, including noise levels produced by the planes which approach the threshold of pain. Armitage also says there is evidence the noise is much higher because the planes often fly lower than the military reports and sometimes several planes fly simultaneously.

"The Innu people report not being able to hear — being momentarily deaf for a number of seconds and having ringing in their ears for an hour or two afterwards."

Government and the business community have suggested that Innu concerns over low-level flying are just opportunistic

attempts to press land claims and other political issues, but it is the Innu who are forced to stay in the communities because of the fear of being flown over.

"The upsetting thing about this is that in Innu communities like Sheshashie, there's severe social problems which have their origin in the ways the people have been treated by the provincial government. One of the reasons they go into the country is to get away from the stress that's created in the community. No sooner do they arrive in the bush than there's another source of stress."

"The very tragic thing about these military flights," says Armitage, "is that they're happening at a time when the Innu are really working hard to get back to the country. In fact, in some of these communities, such as La Romaine, there's been something of a cultural renaissance in the last five years." After years of being "basically coerced" into staying in the villages to qualify for government programs, they are beginning to take their families back into the bush.

"They are trying desperately to rehabilitate their culture. You can really see it in these communities. They want their kids to learn about the way of life in the bush."

Low-level military flying is regarded by the Innu as another unwanted intrusion onto their territory and way of life, along with the pipelines, highways, mines and dams that have already disrupted their life.

"We forget about the claims that we're trying to help preserve their culture. We pay lip service to it and then in practice, through our actions, we do everything possible to destroy their culture. It is the great double standard of Canadian society."



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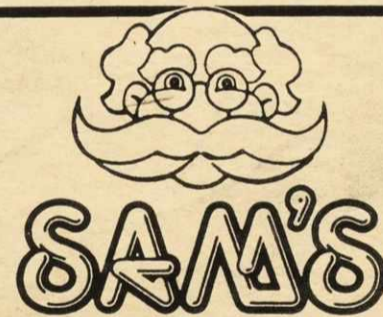
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