

Alert, world's most northern station

Less than 900 kilometres (560 miles) from the North Pole and far from any civilization, some 200 Canadian servicemen keep the most northerly inhabited site, Canadian Forces Station (CFS) Alert, running smoothly.

CFS Alert goes back to 1950, when the Canadian Department of Transport and the U.S. Weather Bureau decided to set up a joint meteorological station at the northern end of Ellesmere Island. There was no landing strip at the beginning, so all equipment and supplies had to be dropped by parachute by the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF).

Alert today

In 1956, the RCAF decided to set up a post at Alert, near the Canadian-American camp, to carry out communications research. Two years later, the army took over and made major changes to the antiquated facilities.

Since then, Alert has undergone continuous expansion. It now has all the services of modern society. Station personnel have individual bedrooms in living quarters that would be the envy of many service members in large bases to the south. The three barrack blocks built during the past five years have kitchenettes, lounges, washers, dryers and closed-circuit colour televisions.

Working conditions are also excellent. A new, well-equipped operations room has just been opened, following completion of the filtration plant.

Residents at Alert have plenty to occupy their free time. A video-cassette system rebroadcasts television programs from Canadian and American stations eight hours a day. Each of the three messes holds a nightly film show. Every

week the *Hercules* providing a link between Alert and Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Trenton delivers mail and a selection of some 120 newspapers and magazines.

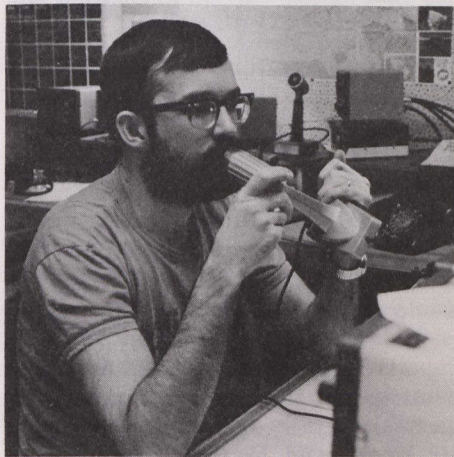
An FM station plays music 24 hours a day. Selections are drawn from a record library containing over 4,800 albums and about 13,000 45 rpms. Members of the station act as disc jockeys during their off-duty hours. An amateur radio station provides a radio and telephone link to families almost every day.

For sports buffs, CFS Alert has a weightlifting room and gymnasium, plus curling and bowling clubs, allowing members to work off excess energy.

Acclimatising oneself

A serviceman, who is on his first assignment at Alert must approach his apprenticeship with a different set of values. He must accustom himself to six months of isolation from the outside world and must learn to live in a group so as not to disrupt the smooth functioning of the station.

Winter temperatures often dip below -50 degree Celsius and the polar night (a



Amateur radio ham Corporal B. McBride.



Fishing is a favourite pastime.

period of complete darkness) lasts from October 12 to March 3. (A period of complete daylight extends from April 8 to September 5.)

Providing essentials

Because of CFS Alert's isolation and extreme weather conditions, it has a number of peculiarities. One thousand kilowatt hours of electricity are provided by five diesel-powered generators housed in two separate buildings in case of fire. They consume over half the station's Arctic diesel fuel.

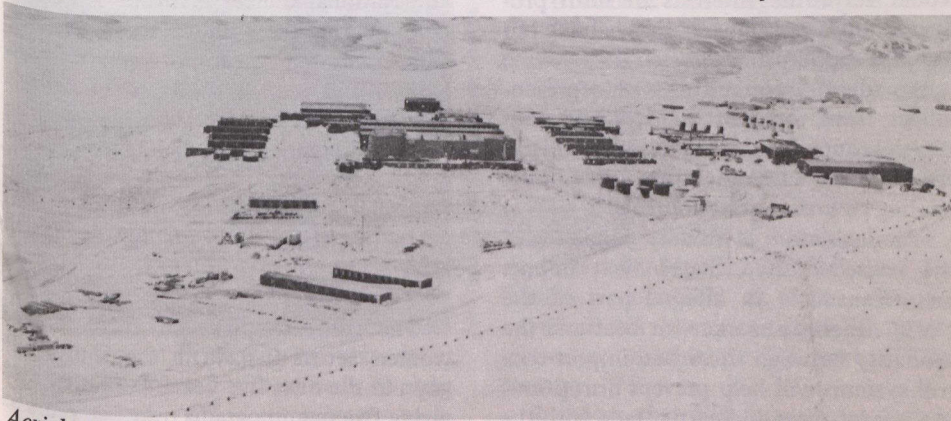
Heating is provided separately by furnaces — two to a building. The station consumes about 16,000 gallons of water each day pumped from Dumbell Lake, two kilometres (about one mile) away, and heated to 15 degrees Celsius before being piped into the filtration plant through a long jacketed pipeline containing an electrical heating element. Two enormous reservoirs each hold 50,000 gallons of water, which is reheated before being piped throughout the station.

Transportation is provided by 48 vehicles of all types, including several tracked vehicles maintained by six mechanics.

Medical care is provided by two medical assistants. Intensive care or surgery cases are air evacuated to the south. Emergencies can also be referred to the doctor at the American Air Force Base Thule, less than 675 kilometres (420 miles) away.

Supplies are brought in entirely by air. Urgently needed equipment and perishable foodstuffs are brought in on weekly flights. All other materiel, including fuel, is brought to Thule in ships and flown into Alert usually by three *Hercules*, which run a shuttle until the operation (known as Boxtop) is finished. Three Boxtop operations are held each year.

(Article by Captain Gérard Baril in Sentinel, 1980/3.)



Aerial view of Alert, situated at least 900 kilometres from the North Pole.

Danny Bryantovich photos