

NATO meets the Natives

# TESTING, TESTING. . .

Last April, when 20 members of the North Atlantic Peace Organization staged a protest against low-level military flights in Labrador, the weather proved more of an opponent than the unseen NATO forces.

To illustrate their concerns, the group played a cassette recording of the roar of a low-flying jet and attempted to demonstrate how low the planes fly by holding balloons 100 feet off the ground. But the balloons were caught by an unexpected gust of wind, and carried to a tree where they burst and slowly drifted away.

The symbolism of this event was not lost on the protestors, who are aware of the seeming futility of fighting the increased militarization of Labrador. The event received little media attention, and less support from Newfoundlanders — indicative of the poor emphasis placed on peace concerns in the debate surrounding the proposed NATO base for Goose Bay in western Labrador.

The three main players in the debate — the military, the native Innu, and the white residents of Happy Valley-Goose Bay — all see Labrador as a land with great potential, but they cannot agree on what exactly the land has potential for.



Labrador is a flier's and hunter's dream. Its rugged terrain is a mix of tundra mountains and spruce forest, it is admired by the military for its wide, open space. According to a pamphlet recently published by the Department of National Defence, there

is "space, for expansion of the airfield and facilities, space, to fly unimpeded over huge, unpopulated areas."

Goose Bay has been a military centre since 1941, when the United States established an air forces base there. The Americans pulled out seven years ago, crippling the local economy, but there is still constant military activity. The U.S. Air Force uses the base as a refueling stop for transport aircraft travelling to and from Europe. The Royal Air Force and the German Air Force use the base for low-level training with Vulcan, Tornado and Alpha military aircraft, some of which are nuclear-capable.

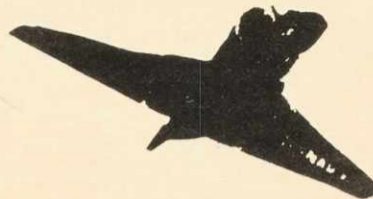
**"My children jumped out of the canoe when the planes took us by surprise, because they were frightened."**

"We have a fairly large operation here now," says Colonel John David of the Goose Bay base. And things could become much busier, if the NATO study group chooses the site over a base in Konya, Turkey. The decision, expected early this year, will be based on cost, available facilities, and how suitable the land is for such a base.

David says an interim NATO report indicates the Konya base is likely to be chosen. Still, Goose bay could be chosen if Konya can not provide required facilities.

Concern about the proposed base is magnified by low-level training flights in Labrador. The most vocal opponents of these flights are the native Innu — whose name means The People — of Labrador and Quebec, who say the flights not only

disrupt their traditional way of life, but are a facet of what leader Penote Ben Michel calls a cultural genocide against his people.



As well, the loudness of the flights is damaging to their health, the Innu say. Hunter Francois Bellefleur recalls an encounter with a low-level training exercise: "We couldn't hear them coming up from behind us on the river. We couldn't hear them at all. (My children) jumped out of the canoe when the planes took us by surprise, because they were frightened. And if they had jumped off in deep water, I could have lost them."

However, the military has been quick to dismiss such complaints. David agrees a jet flying overhead could frighten an unsuspecting person, but said the damage is no greater than that caused by stereo headphones. (This same point was made in May by Newfoundland MP John Crosbie, while entertaining NATO officials visiting Goose Bay. Crosbie said those truly concerned about hearing loss should "look at the young people with the headphones". Ironically, three Innu leaders were not allowed into that dinner or to contest Crosbie's statement, because they were not wearing the required ties.)

David said the noise level caused by low-level aircraft is not as high as the Innu claim. "Given the decibel level, you would have to overfly a person 450 to 900 times in order to surpass the American-set noise level," he said.

Henry Shouse, mayor of Happy Valley-Goose Bay and a strong supporter of the proposed base, doesn't consider noise made by the flights to be damaging to anyone. "It's there before you know it and gone before you know it. It's like a clap of thunder," he said.

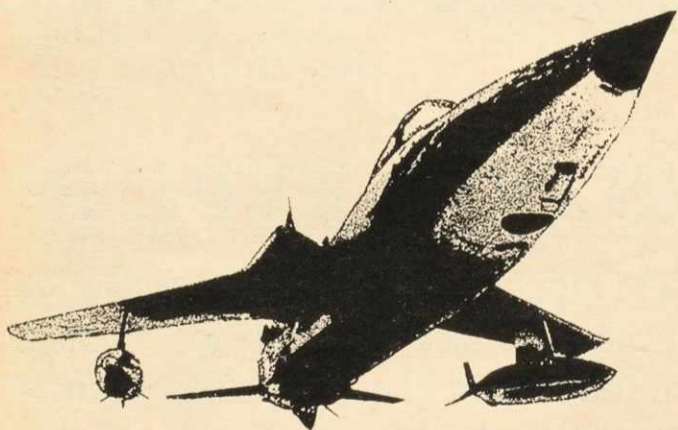
But a report released in September by the Conseil Attimek-Montaignais indicates noise from low-level flights can indeed cause hearing damage. The pain threshold of the human ear is 110 to 130 decibels dBA, and irreversible ear damage can be caused by hearing a noise that is more than 140 decibels dBA for five milliseconds. Impulse noise, the noise made by planes, is so named because it rises suddenly, and humans don't have the ability to prepare for such intense noise.

Using statistics gathered by the U.S. and Royal air forces, the report shows as an example that noise made by the Phantom II plane, used by the German air force, surpasses the pain threshold and the point of permanent damage.

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Peter Armitage, an anthropologist who has worked for several years in Innu communities, says effects of low-level flying on the Innu are serious and far reaching.

"Prolonged exposure can cause many physiological and psychological problems," said Armitage, adding a recent report by the Canadian Public Health Association makes several inappropriate recommendations for dealing with the intense noise.



By Beth Ryan and Jeff Paddock

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