

Let me say a word about the setting. The Churchill River runs north and south and the townsite of Churchill, consisting of the Oblate Fathers' Mission, the grain elevator, the railway station and the Hudson's Bay Company store, plus about fifty houses and shacks, is situated on a spit of land to the east of the river. Five or six miles to the south-east, between the river and the sea, there is an extensive gravel bank stretching out over a fairly flat area about a mile square. This is where the camp and airfield are located.

The modern military history of Churchill dates from 1943 and reflects the fears and anxieties of that fateful year. The United States Army began the construction of an air and hospital base. The airfield was designed as a key station on what was known as The Crimson Staging Route, by which planes would be ferried by short flights via Southampton Island, Frobisher Bay, Greenland, and Iceland as an alternative to the routes based on Gander Lake in Newfoundland or Goose Bay in Labrador. There was also to be a large military hospital for the evacuation of wounded from Western Europe. Work had been finished on two runways of 6,000 feet, nearly finished on a large hospital and partly finished on ninety smaller buildings when the end of the war in Europe made it no longer necessary to proceed with such plans. The station was never used for either purpose for which it was intended. Not a single plane was flown to Europe and not a single wounded man was evacuated via Churchill.

In September 1944 the Canadian and United States governments arrived at an agreement by which all U.S. establishments in the Canadian north would be acquired by Canada in consideration of a lump sum payment. Canada owns the air station and buildings at Churchill.

Except for the short spell of activity while it was used as the base of Exercise Muskox, Churchill remained virtually inactive until the Permanent Joint Board on Defence recommended in September 1946 that it should be used as a joint testing station.

This choice was made for the following reasons:

- (a) Churchill is the most northern place having rail transportation the year round. It also has sea transportation for three months each year.
- (b) The abandoned American project provided ready shelter and an excellent airfield.
- (c) Its location enables it to serve as a base of communications and supplies for other activities further north.
- (d) Being just above the tree line (there are neither trees nor grass), Churchill provides access to both the bush and the barrens.
- (e) Its climate is truly arctic, comparable to places much further north in other parts of the world, and the high winds that prevail greatly heighten the effect of the cold.

The location and climate, particularly the climate, give rise to many of the most difficult problems. Our first efforts have been concentrated on learning more about how to exist in the north. Certainly until we know how to live there we cannot fight there. At somewhere around 40 or 50 below a man must devote almost all his energies to keeping alive.