

Places That Matter Plaque Installation- Jericho Arts Centre - Sept 22, 2012.

Presentation by Cameron Cathcart, Chair of the Vancouver Remembrance Day Committee on behalf of the Air Force Officers Association at Jericho Arts Centre, Vancouver, BC.

Places That Matter is an initiative of the Vancouver Heritage Foundation to celebrate the 125th anniversary of Vancouver by recognizing, with the installation of individual plaques, 125 historic or heritage Places That Matter throughout the city.

Good afternoon everyone.

I've been asked to say a few words about the military history of Royal Canadian Air Force Station Jericho Beach. It is my pleasure to do so on behalf of RCAF veterans and to recognize those who are present today.

I'm always delighted to talk about 'footprints of the past' that can be found throughout Vancouver, particularly if they involve our local military heritage.

The old Jericho Beach RCAF Station, and in particular this building is one such footprint, along with a few others.

For example the neighboring Youth Hostel was the NCO's quarters during World War Two and Aberthau, designed by BC-born architect Samuel Maclure, was once the Spencer Estate.

Aberthau served as the officer's mess and today is the West Point Grey Community Centre.

Long before this particular building went up in 1940, the Flying Boat Station was established at the beach 20 years before, in 1920.

At that time the federal government of the day was gingerly starting to use aircraft to track smugglers, conduct fishery and forestry patrols, aerial surveys and serve remote communities on our coast.

It paid off because the use of 'flying boats' as they were called, flourished.

In some ways Jericho was the birthplace of British Columbia's respected floatplane business, which today - 92 years later - serves our coastal communities, logging operations and mining exploration on a regular basis

In the 1920's the 'flying boats' were flimsy, temperamental machines with limited range. However they included the very latest in aircraft design of the day: the Curtiss, Vickers Vedette and the Stranraer. There was even one model called the Vickers Vancouver.

By 1924 the newly formed Royal Canadian Air Force took over and the base was expanded with hangars, repair shops, barracks and a headquarters, thus establishing a presence in BC for the young air force.

During the Depression of the early 30's activity at Jericho slowed but was not suspended. This worked to the advantage of the air force because in 1937 with war clouds beginning to emerge, Jericho had become the control point of all western flying operations. It became a beehive of activity.

When the Second War broke out Jericho got busier; transformed almost overnight into the main base on the west coast in defence of Canada, for all of the military including the army, navy and of course the air force.

In fact today the army remains. British Columbia's Reserve Army headquarters is located at Jericho Garrison on 4th Avenue, using the same wooden building originally constructed 70 years ago as the RCAF's headquarters.

Since the early 1940's, the area from Trimble on the west to Highbury on the east, and from 8th Avenue to the beach, Jericho has a distinguished military heritage.

And what of this footprint; this building, now the Jericho Arts Centre, erected during World War Two as the RCAF Recreation Hall? Thankfully, it remains a living footprint of those heady days.

Imagine if you will the weekly dances right here - 70 years ago, when airmen from the nearby barracks (located just across the rugby field where the forest has reclaimed the land) met with WD's (the women's division) of the RCAF, along with young civilian women from the city.

They danced the night away, likely to the music of 'Mart Kenny and his Western Gentlemen' probably ending the evening of dancing to Kenney's famous tune "The West, a Nest and You Dear".

We're certain that another band that played here from time was the Dal Richards Orchestra. And perhaps the singer was a very young teenager named Juliette, who got her start with Dal's band in 1940.

Dal as we all know is still going strong and leading his band at the age of 94. Juliette, I'm happy to report, is still with us too.

Civilian orchestras were not the only attraction of course. The RCAF had a lot of talented musicians (it still does) and I'm sure that dances were held with pick up bands from the Jericho Base.

These were the happy times during the dark days of war. Now we are in a new place, surrounded by old walls.

After so many years the activity within remains the same: happy, festive, peaceful and creative. The Jericho Arts Centre is a marvelous example of restorative re-use.

This 'footprint of the past' has come full circle.

(With acknowledgement to Chris Weicht, author of 'Jericho Beach and the West Coast Flying Boat Stations').