

Fallow Years and the Cold War, 1946-1965

Penhold Lies Fallow, 1946-1951

Even before the Second World War ended decisions needed to be made about the many Canadian airports and landing strips built or used by military aviation – which should be retained for postwar civilian use and which abandoned. One list had 163 to be retained, 76 to be disposed, 29 to be offered to municipalities, 3 permanent RCAF fields and 5 for further study. Very early on Penhold was designated for permanent retention.

Almost immediately, however, the Department of Transport let a contract to have all the buildings at Penhold demolished, excluding the hangars, which the RCAF had borrowed back to store surplus Avro Lancaster four-engined bombers. A few other buildings were not destroyed. The RCAF continued to use Hangars nos. 1, 3, 4, 5 and 7 through to 1950. DOT occupied Hangar no. 2, and no. 6 was unused because of its susceptibility to flooding. The Province of Alberta made overtures to acquire Hangar no. 4. The airport was once again licensed for civilian operations in August 1950.

In 1951 the airport hosted an airshow, which some five thousand attended. Also, 40 paratroops from the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry made the first military parachute drop in the area. As well, local rumours suggested that Penhold would again soon be training aircrew.

The RCAF Returns: NATO Air Training, 1951-1965

As the Cold War deepened, at a meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Defence Committee in Paris in November 1949, Canada offered to train aircrew for NATO member countries. On 7 October 1950, the first group, five Norwegians, nine Italians and seven Belgians arrived at Summerside, P.E.I. By the time the agreement was terminated in 1958, 5,575 had trained in Canada, and more trained after that time under agreements with individual member states. Although on a smaller scale in a rapidly-growing nation, this was reminiscent of the BCATP and Royal Flying Corps Canada.

The RCAF selected Penhold to become part of this new air training scheme. "It is our wish to take over the whole of the airport with the exception of the radio range and the buildings required for its operation," wrote the Deputy Minister of National Defence. For its part, the Department of Transport transferred the airport, hangars, remaining buildings and facilities of the station, including:

Building	No.1 – Ground Instruction School and Headquarters
	23 – Motor Transport Section
	24 – Guard House and Post Office
	29 – Watch Office and Tower
	30 – Dental Clinic
	32 – Maintenance Section
	34 – Wireless Station
	40 – Coal Compound

44 – Water Reservoir and Pumphouse
56 – Sewage Disposal Plant
And the Revolving Runway Beacon.

It is an important point that the transfer deliberately excluded the original land, Crown title to which remained with the Department of Transport.

The RCAF's programme for Penhold included considerable expansion and the construction gave a boost to the economy of central Alberta, which was also undergoing a boom with the discovery in 1953 of a major oilfield only a few kilometers northeast of Red Deer. The city's population jumped from 7,575 to nearly 11,000 between 1951 and 1954.

The RCAF's requirements also included considerable land expropriation. Although the runways were not initially lengthened beyond the 1,075 metre maximum, much longer approaches were cleared. Land was also required for the future married quarters and a Very High Frequency Automatic Direction Finder (VHR/ADF) site. Although the land purchases, through expropriation, were negotiated through DOT agents, it is clear that the purchase of these additional lands were for the Crown represented by the Department of National Defence.

Apart from the hangars, the RCAF had to rebuild nearly all the station buildings. The base was activated on 12 May 1952, but men messed in part of Hanger no. 7, where a temporary kitchen was located. Initially, quarters were in a hangar lean-to. Construction went ahead rapidly. In August officers occupied the new administration building. A temporary Steelex ground instructional school (GIS) building was begun. The contractor handed over the new guardhouse in November and the supply depot warehouse the next month. Two barracks blocks were also completed in December and a composite mess opened in part of the new mess hall.

Work continued vigorously through 1953 and 1954. There was some unease early in 1953 as personnel flooded onto the station and the flying programme began, but there were no PMQs and suitable accommodation was scarce in the Red Deer area. The new fire hall was occupied in April 1953. In May two more barracks blocks opened, but accommodation on station was still stretched. Work on the married quarters began on 6 August. The Station Penhold branch of the Bank of Montreal opened for business on 9 September. The new officers' mess was occupied by the RCAF on 23 October, and a flight cadet mess opened on 16 December. On 25 February the 25-yard range officially opened, and in March the Ghostpine Lake navigational beacon became a station facility. In the same month the new station chapels were accepted, followed by the new GIS, a drill and recreation hall and airmen's mixed canteen. On 1 September 1954 the new PMQ area was dedicated as Mynarski Park, in memory of Andrew Mynarski, VC, the Second World War air gunner who had lost his life trying to rescue his crewmate in a burning Avro Lancaster. At the same time the base school was dedicated as Anderson of Craigmyle School to honour three Craigmyle brothers who died on active service with the RCAF during the Second World War.

Although the station was largely complete by the end of 1954, construction of individual facilities continued. In September 1955 a community centre opened within Mynarski Park. In September 1957 a new and larger control tower, for which it had been necessary to purchase still more land, was constructed, although because of shortages of equipment it only finally came into use in 1961. The old tower was renovated as the headquarters for the flying programme, as well as for the Flight Planning and Meteorological Sections. In 1958 a curling rink was built, and second-floor lean-tos were added to the Second World War constructions on Hangars nos. 1, 2 and 3. With increased numbers of personnel on station, a building rental housing development for married quarters, known as Vista Village, was constructed in Red Deer. Meanwhile, on base, a new outdoor swimming pool opened in June 1964.

RCAF Station Penhold's postwar flying programme began when the first aircraft, a Beechcraft Expeditor twin-engined trainer/utility aircraft, arrived on 17 December 1952. Although the station would be known for training on the North American Harvard Mark 4, a few Expeditors remained on strength throughout this period. Training began when 4 Flying Training School (F.T.S.) moved from Lincoln Park in Calgary to Penhold. The first class, made up of 22 RCAF trainees, 6 French Air Force, 10 RAF, 7 Italians and 5 Royal Netherlands Air Force arrived on 25 May 1953. Training began with the 20 Harvards on strength on 8 June, using a mobile control tower as the tower was not yet operational. A mass formation of 44 Harvards flew from Lincoln Park to Penhold on 2 July. Such a dramatic sight was seldom seen in postwar Canada.

No. 4 F.T.S. was organized into six training flights, a standards flight, and advanced flight and a navigation flight. Once again, the goal was to bring pilots to wings standard, a much higher standard for peacetime pilots. On 12 August 16 members of the first class received their diplomas.

Again, even in peacetime, the first fatal casualty was not long in coming. On 30 July 1953 Harvard AJ570 crashed west of Innisfail, killing both the instructor and the RAF student pilot. On 27 October a Danish flight cadet died when his aircraft collided with another while landing. Unlike during the war, the remains of the NATO students were returned to their countries for interment.

As the original NATO agreements terminated, the student makeup changed. Some classes were of RCAF trainees only. In 1961 one course was made up entirely of aspiring pilots in the Royal Canadian Navy's "Venture" plan. In 1963 the station contained 526 all ranks and 234 civilians, about half the Second World War complement, flying 68 Harvards and 2 Expeditors.

Penhold was the site of an RCAF flying experiment – the use of the Beechcraft T-34A Mentor. The RCAF had ordered 25 of these American designed but Canadian-built single-engined trainers, but did not feel that they fit into the training scheme. The first of 18 arrived in Penhold on 19 July 1954 and they flew as trainers until February 1955, when the "Mentor Experiment" ended. One crashed on 2 December, killing the instructor, although the student parachuted to safety. Canada donated Penhold's Mentors

and the remaining aircraft in storage to Greece and Turkey under the Mutual Aid Programme. Although the type was not wanted in Canada, it had a distinguished career of long service as a trainer in the U.S. Air Force.

Penhold suffered one severe fire during this period, on 10 April 1954, when a corporal stealing gasoline from a Harvard in Hangar no. 5 ignited the fuel, probably through a spark of static electricity. Although both the station fire service and the Red Deer Fire Department fought the blaze, the hangar, along with nine Harvards and an Expeditor, was destroyed. Firefighters struggled to save Hangar no. 4 and the nearby bulk aviation gasoline tanks.

By 1960 Penhold was training aviators of the jet age with a 20-year-old piston-driven aeroplane. At the station's Air Force Day airshow in June 1955 a visiting Canadair F-86 Sabre from Namao in Edmonton broke the sound barrier and demonstrated the way to the future. Jet Canadair T-33s and Avro CF-100s also performed, along with the venerable Harvards and North American Mustangs. In 1959 the RCAF carried out preliminary surveys to extend Penhold's runways and the next year Canadair flew a jet trainer, designed as a private venture, to take students from elementary flying to the wings standard. It was rumoured that DND would extend the airport to accommodate jet training and that the U.S. Air Force was interested in the station for its Strategic Air Command refueling tanker role, but DND denied the rumours.

Some of the rumours were true. On 8 March 1963 the DND Deputy Minister finally confirmed that the RCAF intended to base 33 of the new Canadair CL-41 Tutors and 29 T-33s at Penhold. Treasury Board has already approved construction of one 2,440 metre and one 2,140 metre parallel runways. Training would begin on 1 February 1965. The implications, both in terms of additional land needed for the base and the areas (including the village of Penhold) affected by the approaches were considerable.

Department of Transport officials were extremely concerned about the safety aspects of operating jet trainers in the midst of the commercial airways linking Calgary and Edmonton. Even with the Harvards there had been incidents with civilian air traffic. One DOT employee noted in 1959:

The airport at Penhold, as you no doubt are aware, lies on the Amber 2 airway serving Edmonton and Calgary and the undersigned has not yet flown on this airway under VFR conditions without encountering Harvard training aircraft flying back and forth across the airway. Their existence does not add at all to the safety of the airway and any increase in operation from Penhold will be viewed with definite concern by this office.

Perhaps sparked by concern about jet trainers in the airways in the future, commercial operators reported more incidents in 1963. Pacific Western Airlines noted Harvards passing within 1 ½ kilometers of scheduled flights on three occasions. This culminated in what appeared to the captain of a Douglas DC-4 as Harvards preparing to make mock attacks on his airliner.

Officials in DND and DOT met but failed to reach agreement. DOT could not accept the modifications to the airways suggested by the air force officers. Trans-Canada Airlines, the Alberta Flying Farmers, the Alberta Aviation Council and the city councils of Calgary and Edmonton all voiced opposition to DND's plan. Finally, after the Minister of National Defence and the Minister of Transport both became involved, at a last-ditch meeting the RCAF withdrew its proposals. On 24 September 1963 DND announced that flying training would continue until the Harvard was phased out, but jet trainers would not go to Penhold. Land which had already been expropriated for the station's expansion was to be returned to its former owners.

Penhold was the last station to operate the Harvard and W/C F.P. Clark, the station's commanding officer, flew its last operational flight in the RCAF in Harvard Mark 4 no. 20370 on 21 July 1965. This aircraft, which was originally flown to Calgary and Penhold from the factory in Fort William Ontario, was purchased by the City of Red Deer and presented to the base in 1968.

Two other Cold War projects at Penhold have a peripheral bearing on the airport – the Regional Emergency Headquarters with accompanying "Bridge" site and the heavy radar site.

Project "Bridge" grew out of the John Diefenbaker government's concern for national survival in the event of a nuclear attack. A Canadian Army study in August 1959 determined Penhold to be the best location for an emergency seat of government and provincial warning centre for Alberta. Plans called for a semi-underground concrete structure, mounded over with earth to minimize radiation effects located 1 ½ kilometers east of the airport. While construction was underway, the Interim Provincial Warning Centre was located in Building no. 10, a barracks block. In October 1962, as part of a federal government retrenchment initiative, DND decided that the "Bridge" site would be completed, but procurement of emergency rations, tools and spare parts would be deferred: the bunker would have no operational capability and the warning centre would stay in its above-ground quarters. "To prevent deterioration of the structure and the valuable equipment installed and stored therein, it will be necessary to place them on a care and maintenance basis," wrote the Army's Quartermaster-General.

Ironically, later the same month the only real alert for the warning system took place during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the early morning hours of 24 October 1962, some 30 army personnel arrived at Penhold to activate the Interim Provincial Warning Centre in Building no.10.

The other project was the construction of a long-range radar and ground-air transmitter-receiver (GATR) site to operate as part of the Pinetree Line in the North American Air Defence Command (NORAD). Again, the Department of Transport negotiated land purchases on behalf of the Department of National Defence, this time for parts of Sections 23- and 24-37-26 W4th, some 24 kilometres east of the main station. No. 43 Radar Squadron formed on 2 April 1962, initially in a temporary office in Hagar no. 2. It

did not become operational until February 1964. The unit comprised 115 all ranks and its purpose was to search for possible hostile aircraft, identify them and provide height information.

Utilities

The postwar RCAF Station Penhold inherited the wartime utilities, but much had to be rebuilt.

Heating continued to be by steam from coal-fired central heating boilers, with separate boilers for the hangars as had been the case previously. Four temporary oil-fired steam generating plants were used in the winter of 1952-1953 until the central heating plant was re-started. By 1954 a fourth high-pressure steam boiler had been installed in the heating plant. The PMQs had individual oil-fired hot water heating. The Anderson's of Craigmyle School had its own low-pressure steam heating plant. In the summer of 1957 the central heating plant changed from coal to natural gas as the heating agent.

Water supply continued to be from the wells. The first well repaired and brought back into service on 8 July 1952. Rust and sediment in the water caused difficulties for the Photo Section, and the water was also strongly sulphurous. The fire in Hagar no. 5 on 10 April 1954 caused a power failure, which meant that the electric pumps as the wellheads ceased working, but the gasoline pumps continued to pump from the reservoirs. At the end of firefighting only 205 thousand litres, of a 909 thousand litre capacity was left in the reservoirs. By 1959 it was reported that the wells were inadequate and the station was planning to obtain water the Red Deer. At that time the pumphouse and aeration plant were in poor condition.

The sewage plant came back into operation in September 1952. It did not operate without problems as a pumpman was only on site for a half hour each day:

...the lack of a regular attendant for the sewage disposal plant has caused excessive maintenance repairs....

Furthermore, this unit has been living from crisis to crisis in the operation of the sewage disposal plant and it is considered that this acute staff problem in the result of an unrealistic acceptance of the fact that the plant is not automatic regardless of the manufacturers claim [sic]. During the past few weeks, this has been adequately demonstrated by the fact that we have had three instances where pump motors were drowned...

It was only by the merest chance that sewage did not back up and flood every basement in the PMQs – because the overflow in the sewage plant is six inches higher than the PMQ basements.

The radar site has its own sewage system.