

military flying activities in labrador and québec

introduction

On page 2 of the autumn 1987 issue of Nastawgan, Herb Pohl tells of a heartstopping encounter with low-level military training flights in eastern Québec and Labrador: "Early the following morning we reached Elson Lake where east and west branches of the George River combine. The event was highlighted by our first exposure to jets of the German airforce screaming past at treetop level. Because they travel at supersonic speed, there is no advance warning of their approach, and the sudden eardrum-shattering explosion of noise in this tranquil setting invariably scares the daylights out of one."

This was not the first time that the subject of low-level training flights was mentioned in our newsletter. In the summer 1987 issue Alex Hall discussed plans for similar military exercises in the Northwest Territories and Alberta.

The wide-open airspace of Canada's north country obviously provides ideal training opportunities, at least from the military point of view, for men and machines of the western world's highly sophisticated airforces. However, people and wildlife actually living in these vast regions have the right to lead an undisturbed, peaceful existence. It is first of all their homeland and they object as much to being disturbed by screaming jetplanes suddenly flying over at treetop level as city dwellers would undoubtedly do under similar circumstances. There obviously exists a difficult, even frightening situation characterized by conflicting priorities: environment vs. development.

Because the WCA is dedicated to the preservation of an unspoiled natural environment, in particular as it relates to wilderness canoeing, I gave one of our members, Barbara Kitowski, who lives in Labrador, the assignment to study this complex issue and collect information for a report to be presented in Nastawgan. Barbara came to Labrador three years ago as an outpost nurse; she presently operates her own business of outdoors adventure outfitting and guiding. Summer and winter she and her partner take paying customers out into the wild country she has learned to understand, respect, and love.

The information Barbara collected for this special report came from FEARO (Federal Environmental Assessment Review Office), the Commanding Officer of the airforce base in Goose Bay, and local folk who have worked and still work in conjunction with the base; it also includes some of her own observations.

I hope that this report will give some insight into a difficult conflict-of-interest problem that is by no means a new one and for which no satisfactory solution seems to be available.

Editor

low-level flying

Barbara Kitowski

Not so long ago, dogsleds, umiaks, and skin-covered kayaks carried Eskimos to their destinations along the Labrador coast. Canoes and foot power saw the Indians through their seasonal migrations between sea coast and inland nomadic camps. The chance white settler who made his home in Labrador would quickly adopt the ways of the indigenous population or perish.

In 1941, the federal government wanted to augment the airfield facilities of Newfoundland, in order to facilitate the ferrying of aircraft across the Atlantic. It was wartime, and the work was urgent. A surveyor by the name of Eric Fry was sent to Labrador to mark sites from North West River to Hebron. With the guiding assistance of a local settler, Robert Michelin, an ideal area was identified at Goose Bay.

Shortly, thousands of construction men and armed forces men descended upon the isolated people of Labrador. These outsiders were treated with hospitable acceptance, but they brought irreversible change.

After the war, the base served refuelling purposes and offered facilities for survival training. In 1954, the British Royal Air Force began low-level flying in Labrador. In the 1960s there was intense activity at the base with practice flights carrying live weapons and full fuel cargoes, inspired by the Cuban missile crisis and the Viet Nam conflict. A tanker supplied fuel to nuclear bombers. All this required strong security including guardhouses and checkgates.

Then in the 1980s, Canada took steps to assert sovereignty over its entire territory, which included the acceleration of national defense. Low-level flying had been done extensively in Europe in areas with over 63,000,000 people, masses of power lines, and with many gliders and small aircraft to avoid. The Germans approached External Affairs Canada about utilizing Canada for these flights. Goose Bay was suggested because there was an existing air base with all the operational equipment already in place. Also, Labrador had fewer people and unlimited visibility. In 1981, the Germans began low-level flying and in 1984 the Royal Air Force added Tornados to their force of Vulcans. In 1986, a multi-national agreement was formalized, allowing low-level flying, 60% over Labrador and 40% over Québec. Participating countries are Germany (flying Alphas, Tornados, and F4's), The Netherlands (flying Fl6's), England (flying Tornados), and Canada (flying F18's). The United States utilizes Goose Bay as a refuelling stop and for winter survival training, but is not involved with low-level tactics.

Why low-level flights anyway? The issue was forced by air defense technology. Air surveillance had improved to the point that weapons could be directed against airborne vehicles very accurately. With low-level flying, down to 15 m (50 ft) above ground, radar is ineffective because of ground clutter. Also, structures such as buildings and trees