Airport-from sheep's pasture to paved strip

A single-engine biplane that touched down in a sheep's pasture in 1928 was the first aircraft to land in Vanderhoof, reports the historical book, "Vanderhoof - The Town That Wouldn't Wait". In its account on "The Airways", the book goes on to explain how the present Vanderhoof Airport, located north of the Village, developed as the Defense Department took it over during the Second World War to use it as an alternate landing strip to Prince George. Planes coming up from the United States usually had to refuel in north central B.C. before continuing north.

While no such emergency occurred calling for a military landing at Vanderhoof, Scotty Almond, who was in charge as a Leading Aircraftsman from 1944 to 1946, says the runway had to be prepared at all times anyway, just in case. "We would be out there with the big rollers after every snowfall, or if we got a special code telling of increased activity. Sometimes we'd be out there in the middle of the night; all the local farmers thought those guys in the Air Force were crazy!"

With their two TD 18 bulldozers, the airmen had the only heavy equipment for snow removal in the vicinity. Sometimes the mayor of Vanderhoof, Ernie Philpott, would ask them to plow the streets of the Village. The airmen gladly did so, although in the midst of their good deeds they angered the odd Village resident who had his outhouse accidentally knocked over.

Up to twenty Air Force men were stationed for maintenance at the airport, although in the later years of the war, Almond was the lone caretaker. The Western Air Command had built barracks, a recreation hall, a mess hall, a garage and an office. Power and communications were supplied by the Department of Transport. Four look-alike residences, which still stand at the airport, were constructed by the DOT to house personnel who monitored and reported the weather and kept communication channels open twenty-four hours a day.

Before he transferred the inventory from the Air Force to the DOT after the end of the war, Almond can remember the airport being visited frequently by deer, coyotes and timber wolves during his time there. One form of wildlife, however, was not welcome. "Mice were always eating the wires of the airport lights, and those things had to be functional at all times," he recalls.

According to "The Town That Wouldn't Wait", the DOT maintained the runway until April, 1959, when control and maintenance was handed to the Village at a cost of $1.00 per year. All buildings except the four houses, the range station office, the power plant and the pumphouse were taken down.

In August, 1978, the Village received a $400,000 grant from the provincial government to upgrade the airport. The lowest bidder on the project, Columbia Bitulithic Ltd., submitted a price higher than the grant, resulting in a delay while negotiations to change the design and lower the price were carried out. The contractor began laying down pit-run material in late September. Heavy rains in October frustrated attempts to compact the course crush base; thus, it was decided to leave the compaction and fine grading until the following summer.

Work resumed in early July, 1979, after the Village received another grant of $110,000 to complete the paving program. After the compaction and fine grading was done, paving began on July 30 using asphalt hauled from Prince George. By August 8, the paving of the apron, taxiway and main runway (now 4,000 by 72½ feet) was finished.

The Village applied this spring for airport lighting and a non-directional beacon and will be soon hearing word on them from the provincial government. In the meantime, the government has commissioned a feasibility study, which began in early June, to be done of airports at Houston, Granisle, Burns Lake, Fraser Lake and Vanderhoof, to determine what type of facilities and upgrading are needed. Village Administrator, Brian Ritchie, says the results of the study "could decide what type of airport we are destined to be."

There have been attempts to set up regularly scheduled commercial flying services for Vanderhoof, such as with Harrison Airways in 1972-75, but they have fallen through because of lack of demand and inadequate runways. However, the new paved runway has revived optimism towards receiving such services and inquiries have been made in that direction to CP Air and Pacific Western Airlines. "We should be receiving responses soon," says Ritchie.

Rather than ending up with a direct link service to Vancouver, Ritchie expects that Vanderhoof will eventually be part of a "feeder system", whereby commercial aircraft will land regularly in a series of small communities while en route to the larger centers.

Meanwhile, Mayor Don Grantham has been pushing to have the Vanderhoof Airport designated an alternate to Prince George, which at the least, would involve an additional 1,000 feet to the paved runway.

There are now five businesses in operation at the Vanderhoof Airport. Vanderhoof Flying Services, which started in 1970, and the Blue Mountain Flyers, which formed in 1975, both offer flight training and plane rentals. The other businesses include Vandarrell Sales and Rentals, Northern Mountain Helicopters, and Coast Mountain Flight Service.

Airshows have been periodically part of Vanderhoof summers since the mid-sixties, when the Vanderhoof Flying Club began organizing them. The Blue Mountain Flyers have been building the airshow into a region-wide success since the mid-seventies, and it is now the second largest in the province. The Flyers drew 1,500 spectators to their first show, 3,500 to their show the following year, and 6,000 to the show in 1979. Ten thousand spectators are expected to turn up for the 1980 two-day spectacular on July 26 and 27.