VIMM Newsletter
Spring 2026 Vancouver Island Military Museum

Canadian Forces Station (CFS) ALERT – A Short History

by Roger Bird

Canadian Forces Station Alert is a signals intelligence facility located 817 km from the North Pole and just 40 km south of the northernmost point in Canada. It is the most northerly, permanently inhabited location in the world. The name came from *HMS Alert*, which wintered in a small bay near Cape Sheridan in 1875-1876.

Russian radio and telephone messages are monitored at Alert which is closer to Moscow than Ottawa.

In 1950, *Alert* was first established by the Canadian Department of Transport and the US Weather Bureau with the construction of *Joint Weather Station (JAWS)*. An airfield and small building were built to service various weather monitoring equipment. The *JAWS* facility extended Canadian sovereignty over a large uninhabited area which Canada claimed as its (sovereign) territory. During the Cold War, *Alert* was strategically important because of its proximity to the Soviet Union - *Alert* was the closest point in North America to the northwestern area of Russia. In fact, *Alert* is closer to Moscow than it is to Ottawa. Thus, the possibility of utilizing the site for the purpose of intercepting radio signals was deemed to warrant a military presence. In 1956, the Royal Canadian Air Force, which was expanding its presence throughout the high Arctic with the construction of the *Distant Early Warning Line* (DEW Line) radar network, established a building uphill from the Department of Transport's *JAWS* station to house "High Arctic Long Range Communications" research, or signals intelligence operations.

Alert is crucial to the Five Eyes intelligence gathering agreement (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, USA.)

In 1957, *The Alert Wireless Station* became an intercept facility jointly staffed by personnel from the RCN and the RCAF. A mess, a powerhouse, a vehicle maintenance building, three accommodation buildings, and an operations centre were built. The operations building housed the radio intercept and cryptographic equipment. Up to 24 men were posted to *Alert* at any one time. It was considered (and remains to this day) a hardship assignment, with no spouses being permitted. Until 1980, only men were deployed to *Alert*.

In February 1968, with unification of the RCN, RCAF, and Canadian Army, the Station name changed to *Canadian Forces Station Alert (CFS Alert)*. Its personnel were primarily from the Canadian Forces Communications Command. At its peak, *CFS Alert* had upwards of 215 personnel posted at any one time. The station became a key asset in the global ECHELON network of the *Five Eyes* intelligence sharing alliance, with *Alert* privy to many secret Soviet communications regarding land-based and sea-based ICBM test launches, and many operational military deployments.

Budget cuts to the DND and Canadian Forces in 1994, and modernization of communications equipment, saw CFS Alert downsized from 200 personnel to 69 by 1998. Primarily, the remaining staff were responsible for food service, airfield operations, logistical/admin support, and construction/engineering. On the heels of this modernization, (and under the office of the Canadian Forces Information Operations Group), in April 2009, *CFS Alert* became a part of *Air Force 8 Wing Trenton* (Ontario), thus,returning it to its RCAF heritage.

With Canada's commitment to the global war on terrorism following *9/11*, *CFS Alert* received renewed and increased funding to expand its SIGINT capabilities. Today, *CFS Alert* conducts RCAF Search and Rescue Operations and critical environmental research, while playing a key role in protecting Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic.

Vice-President's Message

by Greg Devenish

Fighter Ace Joe Fall took this photo in Baghdad in 1924. It is just one of hundreds of photos donated to VIMM by his son Mike Fall.

Through the course of any week, the museum receives many phone calls about donating items to the museum. Some, such as pilot log books, military medals, photos and diaries, are very personal and in all cases, we would advise anyone that they consider passing these items to children or grandchildren and keep them in the family. As time has passed since WWII, it is fair to say that most donors today ask us to take ownership of the items. The museum cannot promise that these items would be automatically put on public display, but they would be looked after. In many cases such as diaries or log books, they do become important in completing research for the museum displays and newsletter.

As I sit here in my museum work space, I am surrounded by various medal donations including a set belonging to a William Hollister (1870-1962) who enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps and served in the Sudan (1899), (Khartoum (1896), and the Boer War (1899-02). There are also the framed medals for Sgt. Clement Lane who served with the 2169 Canadian Cycle Battalion in WWI. Recently, the son of Joseph Stewart Fall, Michael Fall, presented to the museum hundreds of photos that Joe Fall took during WWI, the interwar years, and WWII, while he served with the RNAS, RAF, and RCAF.

Joe Fall was born in the Cowichan Valley in 1895. He enlisted in the RNAS and later served in the RAF. In WWI he is credited with 36 aerial victories and was awarded the DSO three times. He stayed in the RAF and in WWII was wing commander in Malta. These photos provide an important visual historical record of life in the RAF in war and peace. There are numerous photos of Joe with his friends, aircraft, and aircrew. These photos are a welcome addition to the museum, and we would like to acknowledge the Fall family for their donation. High resolution scanning is our next job with this unique and valuable acquisition.

The museum has many log books from air crews. A recent addition belonged to Sgt. Lance Stephens, who was a wireless operator who served on Halifaxes with 433 RCAF Bomber Squadron (Porcupine) at Skipton-On-Swale, Yorkshire. The log book is well documented with aircraft flown, training runs, bomber attacks on Caen and the Ruhr, and mine laying off Kiel. There were photos of the nose art of his bomber, the crew, and a menu for a Christmas dinner.

From its early days, the museum has always relied on the generous donations of people to complete the displays and tell the story of Canada's military history.

Medal Mounting

The VIMM will gladly mount your medals in court mounting or in a frame.

Contact us for further information and prices.

250-753-3814 • oic@militarymuseum.ca

Women at War – Fern Blodgett Sunde, Norwegian War Medal

by Heather Neil

Fern Blodgett Sunde, radio operator on North Atlantic convoys and the first woman to receive the Norwegian War Medal.

Fern Alberta Blodgett was born in July 1918 in Regina, Saskatchewan, and was raised in Cobourg, Ontario. Growing up on the shores of Lake Ontario, and fascinated by the passing steamers, she dreamed of a career at sea. But, for a girl born at the end of the Great War, such adventures were for boys only. So, Fern completed business school in 1939 and took work as a stenographer in Toronto.

However, when Canada entered the war in 1939, Fern was determined to find a seafaring way to serve her country. Learning that there was a shortage of seagoing wireless operators, Fern decided to take evening classes and earn a *Professional Radio Operators Certificate*. She was refused admittance to the first two training schools she applied to but was accepted by the third. Eighteen months later she became the first Canadian woman to earn a *Second Class Wireless Operator's Certificate*. Now, Fern needed a ship.

Fern Blodgett Sunde and Captain Gerner Sunde.

In 1941, answering an urgent call for an operator, a 22-year-old Fern made her way to Montreal. Gerner Sunde, the young Norwegian captain of the 3000-ton merchant ship *M/S Mosdale* – and Fern's future husband - was not expecting a female applicant. At the time, neither Canada nor Britain permitted women to work aboard naval and merchant ships at sea. Fortunately, Norway had no such restriction. So that was how Fern Blodgett became a 'kriegsseiler' – a war sailor.

As well as being the first woman to serve with the merchant navy, Fern would also initially be the only woman, and the only wireless personnel, or "spark," as operators were called, aboard the *M/S Mosdale*. Once on board, Fern received a few hours of orientation, and then was left alone in the radio room, with instructions written in languages she didn't understand. Her home (until her marriage to Captain Sunde in 1942) was a tiny cabin. Her travelling companions were a crew of 35 men and, from time to time, up to 12 passengers. (Eventually two more radio operators were added.) Fern would go on to sail with the *Mosdale* for 78 voyages.

The statue honouring Fern Blodgett Sunde in Coburg, Ontario.

During the early years of the Battle of the Atlantic, ships were going down faster than they could be replaced. Norway's ships, such as the *Mosdale*, were special targets. In service of the Allied cause, Norway's tankers and merchant ships made a significant contribution, but paid a high price.

Along with thousands of Canadians and Allies, Fern Blodgett Sunde did her part during the Battle of the Atlantic to keep Allied forces provisioned. In 1943, King Haakon VII of Norway visited Fern and Captain Sunde presenting them with awards for their wartime service. Fern was the first Canadian woman to receive the *Norwegian War Medal*.

Fern and her Captain braved the North Atlantic until the end of the war, and for a brief time during the aftermath. In 1952, she retired and settled in her husband's home town of Farsund, Norway, where the couple raised their two daughters. When Captain Gerner died suddenly in1962, Fern stayed in Norway. She never remarried and died in 1991.

In 2020, The Town of Coburg unveiled a bronze statue paying tribute to Fern, and, on May 8, 2025, a duplicate was erected in remembrance in Farsund, Norway.

Although there is little mention in history books, Fern Alberta Blodgett Sunde blazed a bright path for future generations of women to follow. She was Canada's very own *Kriegsseiler*.

Battle of the Atlantic – German Weather Station "Kurt"

by Brian McFadden

The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest battle of the Second World War, and one of the most crucial. British Prime Minister Churchill said of it, *"The battle will determine the outcome of all other battles."* The Royal Canadian Navy played a significant role in guarding the Atlantic Convoys that crossed the ocean taking vital supplies to Britain. While accurate weather forecasting was critical to both sides, the Allied network of weather stations in Canada, Greenland, and Iceland, allowed the Allies more accurate forecasts than the Germans.

U-537 photographed from the shore of labrador by her crew.

German meteorologists gathered weather reports from U-Boats (submarines) operating in the North Atlantic. These reports were sent by radio transmission which put a U-Boat at risk of detection when it broke radio silence. The Allied warships could locate and track the U-Boat's movements and alert the convoys to the danger. To gather more accurate weather information, the Germans developed remote automatic weather stations. This equipment had an array of measuring instruments which could work up to six months on a wind turbine and battery power. Several German remote weather stations were deployed in the Arctic and the Barents Sea. One such station was destined for North America. In September 1943, *U-537* departed Kiel, Germany, under the command of Kapitanleutnant Schrewe. Also on board were two meteorologists and a remote weather reporting station code named *Kurt*. The mission was to install *Kurt* at a remote location in the Canadian north. The voyage almost ended in disaster when the U-Boat was caught in a storm and sustained considerable damage, including leaks in the hull and the loss of the submarine's anti-aircraft weapons, leaving it unable to dive or defend itself against air attack.

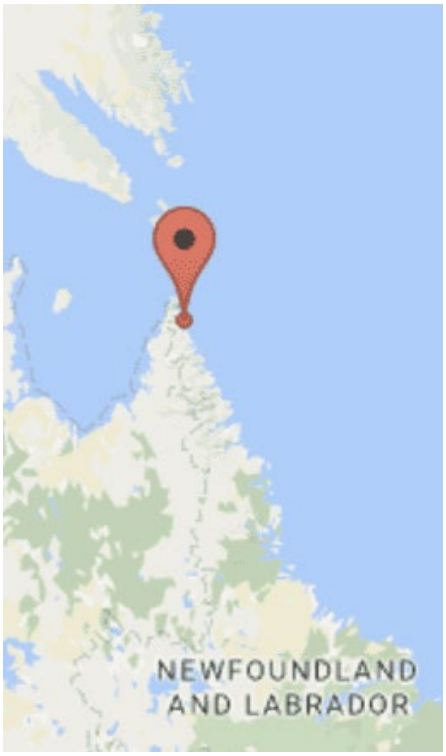
U-537 crew on deck

U-537's task was to establish the weather station at the north-eastern tip of the Labrador Peninsula. The U-Boat dropped anchor in Martin Bay and immediately a scouting party landed to search for a suitable site to install *Kurt.* Soon after choosing a location, the meteorologists and several crew members began to assemble the transmitting station. Armed lookouts were posted on higher ground and the ship's crew set about repairing the submarines' storm damage. In an attempt to confuse anyone who discovered the weather station, American cigarette packets were scattered around the area to simulate an Allied radio transmitting installation.

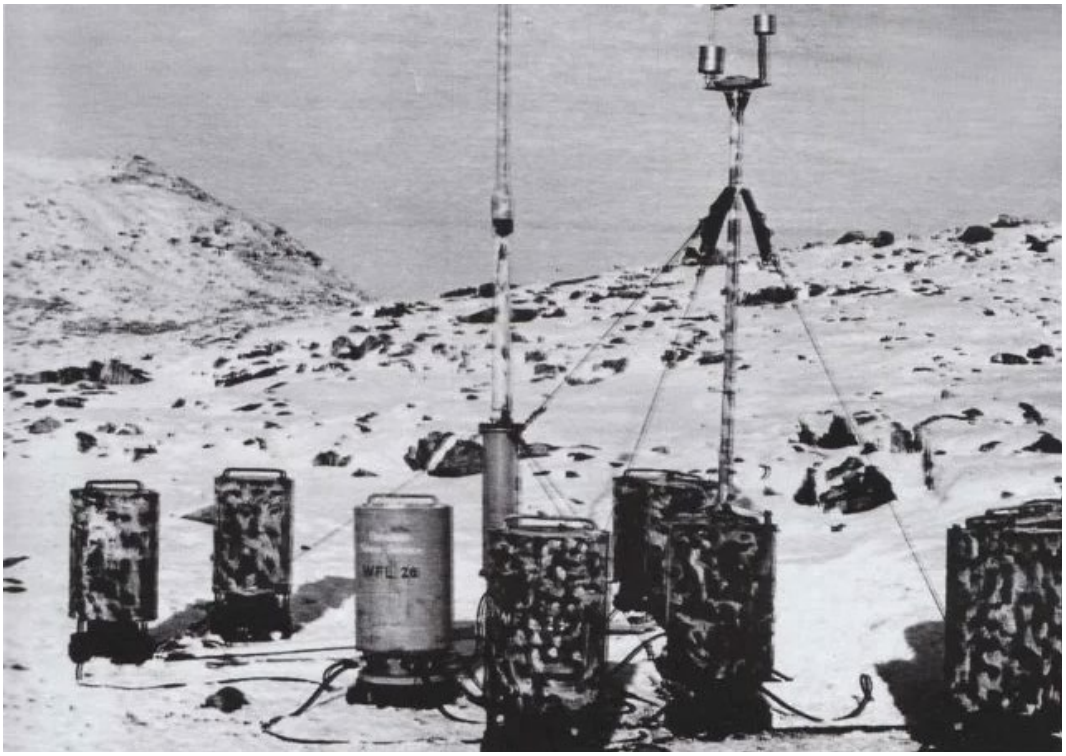
U-537 crew on guard on the shores of Canada.

The crew worked through the night to install and test the station, finishing in just 28 hours and, after confirming the station was operating, *U-537* silently slipped away from the Canadian coast to join other U-Boats prowling the North Atlantic in search of Allied convoys.

They needn't have worried about *Kurt* being discovered as the station remained unknown and undiscovered until a geographer doing research in the area stumbled upon it in 1977. Even then, the fact that it was a Nazi installation wasn't verified until a few years later following a tip from a German researcher. The Canadian government visited and dismantled the site and Kurt now sits as a permanent exhibit at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. This was the only known Nazi military operation on Canadian Soil.



The site of the German weather station.



The Nazi weather station set and operating on the northern tip of Labrador.

Arctic Defender, Arctic Explorer
HMCS Labrador

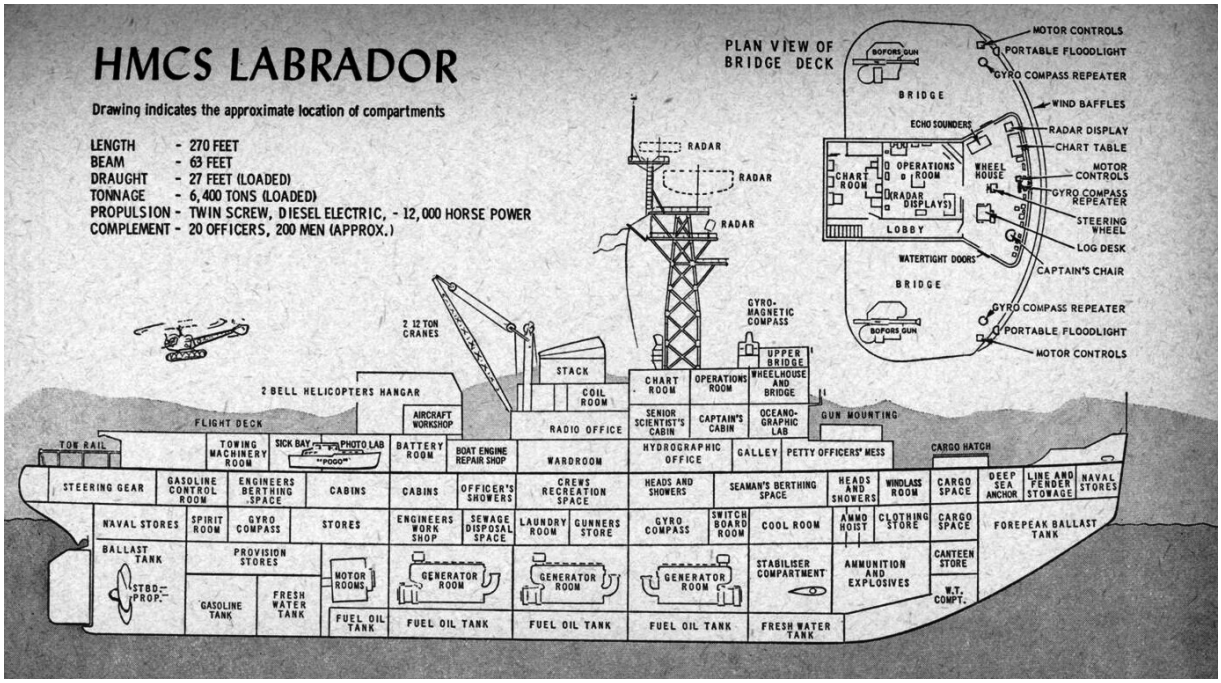
by Greg Devenish

HMCS Labrador in her element cruising in icy waters.

The icebreaker/patrol ship *HMCS Labrador* had a brief, but storied, career in the RCN, operating in Canadian Arctic waters. The vessel never ran aground and much of its success was due to the crew and its commanding officers "Long Robbie" Robertson and T.C. Pullen. Labrador's role was more than just clearing ice and showing the flag. One could argue that, in four years' service with the RCN, *Labrador* unlocked many of the secrets in the Canadian Arctic.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Canada had little naval presence in the Arctic. With the advent of the Cold War in 1946, US icebreakers and naval ships were active in the Canadian Arctic. Canada simply lacked the capacity to exert a strong presence. Then in 1948, Defense Minister Brooke Claxton announced construction of a heavy icebreaker for the RCN. *HMCS Labrador* was built by Marine Industries in Sorel, Quebec, and entered service in 1954. *HMCS Labrador* (AW 50) displaced 6,490 tons, had a speed of 16 knots. Her compliment was 228. The Labrador carried three helicopters - 2 Bell HTL-4 single rotor helicopters and a larger Piasecki HUP II twin rotor helicopter.

On her first mission in 1954, she sailed north from Halifax to Melville Island, and west across the North West Passage before sailing south around Alaska to BC, and returning to Halifax via the Panama Canal. *Labrador* was the first naval ship to circumnavigate North America. Captain Robinson wrote about the importance of that first mission:



A cut-a-way drawing of *HMCS Labrador*.

The Arctic, the Canadian Arctic is our business - ours to exploit, ours to defend. I believe it was the hope of far-seeing men who conceived HMCS Labrador that her maiden voyage might set the pattern for the work that must be done if Canada is truly to govern the northern domains… but [also provide] an immediate defense against possible aggression.

HMCS Labrador in Esquimalt BC with the RCMP's famous vessel *St. Roch* alongside. The *St. Roch* was the first vessel to traverse the Northwest Passage from west to east, the first to complete the passage in one season, and the first to circumnavigate North America. The *St. Roch* is preserved in Vancouver.

In 1955, she steamed 18,606 miles, and 12,000 were in uncharted waters. *Labrador's* crew set up 200 oceanographic stations, and completed hundreds of tests on salinity, oxygen analysis and bottom samples. In 1956, under the command of Captain Pullen, the *Labrador* helped in construction of the DEW Line. In1957, *Labrador* completed her only sailing to Norway, Denmark, England and Greenland. In 1958, she was transferred to the Department of Transport and became C*anadian Coast Guard Ship Labrador*, serving until 1987.

Piasecki helicopter aboard *HMCS Labrador.*

In four short years *HMCS Labrador* played a significant role in asserting Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic. Until recently she was the only Canadian Government ship to reach 81 degrees and 45 minutes north latitude above Ellesmere Island. Since 2021, with the introduction of the Arctic Offshore Patrol Vessels (The Harry DeWolfe Class), the RCN is once again patrolling regularly in Canadian Arctic waters. These ships are ice capable and continue to show the flag, and support scientific research studies, just as *HMCS Labrador* did. For a detailed history of *HMCS Labrador*. See: https://www.academia.edu/38416189/HMCS_Labrador_An_Operational_History

DISPATCHES
from VIMM

AWARDS

Brian McFadden's dedicated volunteer service with VIMM has been recognized by the City of Nanaimo with the 2026 *Honour in Heritage Award.* See: https://www.nanaimo.ca/NewsReleases/NR260209AnnouncingThe2026CultureAwardWinners.html

The *Sovereign's Medal for Volunteers* has been awarded to Bruce Davison, Jim Dickinson, and Angus Scully, members of the Board of Directors. Full details and photos will be in the Summer Newsletter.

New Aquisitions

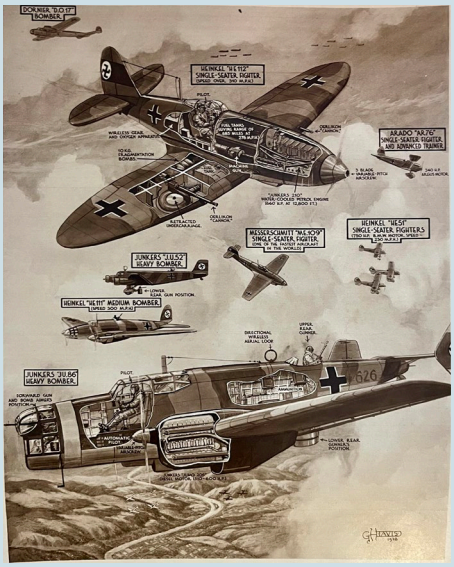
Mike Fall has donated to VIMM a collection of 570 photos taken by his renowned father Joseph Fall, who was a fighter ace in WW1 and had a long career in the RAF and RCAF. More information will follow once they have been scanned and catalogued.

Mike Fall delivering some of Joseph Fall's amazing photos to Angus Scully.

A collection of 170 cut-a-way drawings published in the Illustrated London News by British artist G.H. Davis was donated by Angus Scully. Thumbnail photos and a data base have been created, and scanning is planned.

A Japanese Army Officer's cap from the Philippines campaign in WW2 was donated by VIMM volunteer Richard McGladrey.

A leather German Army coat from WW2 has been donated.



This G.H. Davis cut-a-way was published in the Illustrated London News in 1938.

Welcome New Volunteers

Welcome Mic Stasyk and students James Griffin and Nathan Cajolet.

In Memoriam

Pat Patterson died on Remembrance Day. Pat served in Korea and following a 30-year career in the Canadian Armoured Corps with the Royal Canadian Dragoons and Lord Strathcona's Horse Guards, Pat served the Museum faithfully and with dedication for 25 years as a member of the Board of Directors and museum armourer.

Museum Directors and Staff

Brian McFadden	President
Greg Devenish	Vice President
Roger Bird	Past President/Secretary Treasurer
Carina Nilsson	General Manager

Bruce Davison **Jim Dickinson**
Angus Scully **Bill Brayshaw**

100 Cameron Avenue, Nanaimo, BC V9R 0C8 250-753-3814 | oic@militarymuseum.ca | www.militarymuseum.ca

Back issues of the VIMM Newsletter are available on our web site www.militarymuseum.ca/newsletters/