

British Commonwealth Air Training Plan

Before the outbreak of the Second World War, the British Government had determined that it needed facilities outside the United Kingdom training a large number of aircrews for the Royal Air Force. Canada, with its large land areas and clear weather conditions, was considered to be an ideal location. With the outbreak of the war in September 1939, the decision was made among the Allies to make Canada the location for much of the British Commonwealth aircrew training.



The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan was signed in December 1939 with the first phase calling for the expansion of 20 existing Royal Canadian Air Force training locations and constructing of 60 new sites. Part of Canada's response required that some civilian flying training facilities be commandeered from private flying schools and municipal governments. Also, classroom facilities and residences were commandeered from universities, colleges, and other provincial institutions. These facilities provided some small but immediate relief to the massive requirement for new construction.

The task of delivering this program fell to the RCAF Construction Engineering staff. Not only was the magnitude and extreme urgency of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan a challenge, but the Royal Canadian Air Force also had to accomplish this task concurrently with setting up its own new design and construction management capability.

In short time, standard designs were prepared for hangars, barrack blocks and all other facilities. Construction was accomplished using civilian contractors supervised by Construction Engineering personnel. Following the completion of a station, contractors were responsible for the maintenance of the infrastructure.

The need was urgent and the Department of Munitions and Supply was highly supportive. With good contractors, a complete training station – including hard-surfaced runways and buildings – could be delivered within as little as eight weeks.

Schools and facilities were set up across Canada and the plan was eventually expanded to some 230 sites - including 100 new airfields and 8300 buildings. Many of the training complexes were established in undeveloped areas and the required supporting utilities included some 100 sewage treatment plants, 2000 miles of main electrical power lines, 300 miles of water lines, and 80,000 horsepower of steam generation for heat and power.

By the end of the Second World War, the BCATP had provided more than 130,000 aircrew for the Commonwealth air forces. This number included pilots, wireless operators, air gunners, and navigators. After the war, many of the sites developed under this program became permanent Royal Canadian Air Force Stations or were released to become part of the emerging network of municipal and commercial airports across Canada.