

## FEATURES

### AIRCRAFT DET OFFICIAL OBSERVER REPORT

CODE NAME OF YOUR OBSERVATION POST	SEEN OR HEARD	AIRCRAFT HEADING 	DISTANCE OF PLANES FROM OBS. POST (in miles)	LOCATION OF OBS. POST N, NE, E, SE, etc.	No. OF PLANES Number FEW MANY	TYPE 1 engine 2 engines 3 engines 4 engines monoplane or biplane	TIME OF OBSERVATION A.M. (Local time)
Delta 86	seen by W	1 mile	circle to west			1 engine monoplane	4:43 P
Delta 86	seen South	1/2 mile	west			medium monoplane	4:26 P
Delta 86	seen West	1 mile	north			large monoplane	4:44
Delta 86	seen south	1/2 mile	overhead			large monoplane	4:51
Delta 86	seen north	1/2 mile	overhead			high monoplane	4
Delta 86	seen east	1/2 mile	overhead			medium monoplane	4
Delta 86	seen west	1/2 mile	overhead			high monoplane	4
Delta 86	seen west	1/2 mile	overhead			medium monoplane	4
Delta 86	seen south	2 miles	west			high monoplane	4
Delta 86	seen North	3 miles	west			high monoplane	4
Delta 86	seen North	1 mile	East			medium monoplane	4:01 P

**INSTRUCTIONS**  
Report all sightings or wireless in order shown (A) (B) (C) etc.  
Report to your local Aircraft Detection Corps; then pass your report to the Royal Canadian Air Force.

## THE HOME FRONT

# The Plane

by Graham Chandler

"I hereby declare my willingness to act without remuneration as an Official Observer in the Aircraft Detection Corps of the Royal Canadian Air Force."

Thus began the agreement for civilian volunteers who wanted to do their part by becoming the eyes and ears of Canada's home front during the Second World War. Among those signing the call were lighthouse keepers, housewives, high school students, fishermen and Hudson's Bay Company fur traders.

Doug Betts was just 13 years old and in school at Wentworth, N.S., when he heard about the Aircraft Detection Corps (ADC) from a friend who had been appointed Chief Observer for his area. "He called me up and said, 'Guess what, we are organizing a post in our area here? Will you be an observer?' Of course I was ecstatic," recalls the wartime observer, now 84. "We were as keen as mustard to do anything like that."

Typical of this patriotic enthusiasm, by war's end, 30,000 had been recruited as unpaid observers to

scan Canada's skies, ground and seas and report aircraft, ships, submarines and suspicious activity anywhere. They also reported and assisted Allied ships and aircraft in distress. Many even rescued downed aircrew. Some were supplied with radio equipment but most called in sightings via normal telephone lines on which they were given priority routing. All were civilian, however, the corps was administered by the RCAF who pulled together observations to compose live grid maps of activity and potential threats for both coasts and in between.

Under ADC's motto Watch And Warn, these unsung heroes played a critical role in Canada's wartime defences. Few Canadians are aware how close German and Japanese forces came to Canada during that war: U-boats just 15 miles off Halifax; a German submarine landed on Sable Island; 23 ships sunk in the Gulf of St Lawrence; Estevan Point on Vancouver Island shelled by a Japanese submarine; a German spy put ashore along the Gaspe.

"We didn't realize how important our job was," says Fern Falardeau, who as an AC2 (Aircraftman Second Class) worked in a "filter centre" in 1943 taking calls from observers and passing the information to operations staff at RCAF Station Chatham, N.B., for analysis.

The idea for the corps was hatched under Air Commodore George Croil in late 1938 as war loomed

ILLUSTRATIONS: COURTESY OF DOUG BETTS; FLT. LIE. ROBERT STEWART HYNDMAN, CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM — 19710261-3159



# Spotters

and Canada's coasts would be vulnerable. In October that year, after a committee meeting on the proposed scheme, he requested Air Officers Commanding east and west coasts to form Air Detection Corps in their areas. A year later, Croil was Air Vice-Marshal and worked with the two commands in organizing publicity, recruiting, training and communication networks.

The formidable task of volunteer recruiting got underway in May 1940. "Of Canada's 3.9 million square miles, an astonishing 528,000 were organized by ADC to be monitored," wrote Allan Coggon in his 2004 book, *Watch And Warn: A Wartime Story Of Canada's Homefront Aircraft Detection Corps*. "Divided into 91 sectors, they were subdivided into Chief Observer areas of 48 square miles." Each sector was further divided into number-coded observer post names approved by the Chief Observer.

Advance advertising was through posters, local newspaper stories and letters to prominent community members such as postmasters, clergy, police chiefs and school principals—many of whom became regional directors. These were followed up by visits to communities by ADC officers to interview and sign up potential observers and chief observers.

At first there was no handbook; instead a series of notices were provided. Observers were, for example, to "report all aircraft seen or heard, unless notified to the

PHOTOS: CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM — 19740034-004; CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM — 1974004-001

From far left: Official observer reports kept by Doug Betts, a.k.a. Delta 86; Air Vice-Marshal George Croil; aircraft spotter cards contained in Sweet Caporal cigarette packages.

contrary. Local flying within 15 miles of an airport or seaplane base positively identified as friendly need not be reported." Other instructions included "planes that are lost or in trouble while still in the air" as shown by "rockets being fired or flares dropped; engine misfiring or not sounding right." With regard to marine vessels, "all submarines, strange trawlers, coasters and other suspicious marine craft," with the proviso "never mention the name of Allied ships in reports."

Furthermore, "strangers that you think may be about to do damage to planes, boats, barracks, railways, power plants, telephone or telegraph lines, wireless stations, water supplies, factories" are to be reported, as well as "strange signaling or flashing lights, things thrown from vessels, caches of supplies, unusual camping grounds."

Observers were to get to a telephone or telegraph fast. "Tell the operator you have a report for the Aircraft Detection Corps. The operator will know how



and where to send your report," the notices went.

An aircraft direction finder and some instruction on aircraft and vessel recognition were provided. "They sent us out a little package of profiles—three views of Blenheims, Hudsons, etc.," says Betts. But he recalls a better guide: "Where most of us got our aircraft identification statistics was from Sweet Caporal cigarette packages," he says. "During the war on the back of the Sweet Caps they would have an aircraft, like a Hurricane or a Spitfire or a Mustang with their general characteristics and a small three-view." Occasional further assistance was given in the ADC's journal, *The Observer*, published monthly by Air Force Headquarters.

Betts remembers having regular assigned shifts each day, which had a bonus. "I was going to school at the time and this was my greatest forte because the Chief Observer went to the teacher and said 'it would be nice if you wouldn't keep Doug in after school because he has to spot between three and five [o'clock].'" So I was king of the hill.

"My call sign was Delta 86 and my direct connection was I called the operator at Wallace [N.S.]. And I just said, 'This is Delta 86 and I wish to report an aircraft movement,' and it was all on her switchboard where she was supposed to route the call." He says on a typical shift he would report up to 15 airplanes, which he would summarize on official forms at shift's end.

Where the telephone was on a rural party line, reports took immediate priority. Coggon wrote that in some country areas without phones, "Children at home and also those in school were runners for their observer parents, rushing their written sighting report to the filter centre on foot or by bicycle to the nearest telephone."

Ears soon became attuned. "It was surprising, you could tell a radial [engine] from a Merlin [V-12] for instance," says Betts. "In those days there were a lot of Mosquitoes flying out of Debert [N.S.]. Us young guys, we could pick off a Merlin engine just like anything. And the same thing with Hudsons, which had radials. You could tell a Hudson 10 miles away. And we would say 'seen' or 'heard'—that was part of the report." Betts tells of a time he impressed the centre with a report of three USAAF B-17s flying eastbound to Newfoundland.

Fern Falardeau was one of the airmen who fielded the observers' calls. He had been rejected for aircrew training in 1943, "so they sent me to Rockcliffe [in Ottawa] for a four-day course on the Aircraft Detection Corps," he recalls. The training was for operating a filter centre "where people have sticks and they plot on the map where the airplanes are. But when we got to Chatham we didn't have to do that at all. All we had to do was answer the telephone."

Because Chatham was a navigation school, Falardeau received a lot of calls from nearby areas, mostly reporting Avro Ansons on regular navigator training flights. They generally wouldn't pass these routine sightings on to operations staff. "We knew when our airplanes were around," he says. "But if we saw something that wasn't right, our sergeant would send a message down to Halifax [Eastern Air Command Headquarters] and they would take it from there," he says.

Fishermen on both coasts were particularly valued observers. Generally considered ready-trained, the skippers provided reports with detailed identification and accurate distance estimates. On the west coast,

# The Observer



numerous incidents involving Japanese ships and aircraft beginning in 1942 resulted in stepped-up observer posts: 192 fishing vessels were in use as observers that year—together with former fishermen, they became known as the Fishermen's Reserve of the Royal Canadian Navy. Other B.C. co-operation came from the Pacific Coast Militia Rangers, made up of loggers, miners and woodsmen who knew the coastal rain forests well and were sometimes described as a “guerilla group.” They were especially important before radar installations in 1943.

Similarly, lighthouse keepers and their families played their expert role in reporting; although some had no telephones, so reports were mailed to the filter centres—anything more urgent demanded sending a boat with the observer’s report. Some upgrading was prioritized by the government: in 1943, \$1 million was spent for new radiotelephones and telephone lines on both coasts.

In the north, the Hudson’s Bay Company’s 101 fur trading posts were already connected by a vast radio network, and Coggon reported that by fall 1940 with the support of the RCAF they had all been updated and properly organized into an efficient Aircraft Detection Corps that could report on airplanes and ships in the Far North. Most also became crucial weather reporting stations.

Observers were kept busy. According to Coggon’s book, reports for the year 1943 totalled 223,336 of which 221,359 were aircraft movements and 142 were submarines. German submarine crews had intensified their offensive early in 1942 when the area west of Newfoundland, south of Labrador and north of

From far left: A Certificate of Appreciation from the RCAF; Doug Betts (right) and a friend in 1943; The Observer newsletter; illustrations show an ADC observer phoning in a report, the message going by telegraph and being received at a filter centre.

Nova Scotia became popular U-boat hunting grounds. Convoys were routinely attacked and dozens of Allied ships torpedoed.

Falardeau reckons the ADC was a critical part of Canada’s wartime defence. “All of it—the east coast, the west coast, Sault Ste. Marie [important for protection of the locks on the Great Lakes] and the Hudson Bay portion,” he says. “At one time there were rumours that the Germans had landed in the Arctic and were assembling a bomber up there. And they had weather stations there, too.”

Late in 1944 as the Allies gained the upper hand in Europe, the bomber threat to Canada was considerably less and it was decided to disband the ADC that November. Individual letters of thanks on RCAF letterhead were sent out in December.

The ADC had its postwar legacy: the corps’ organizational experiences were used as the basis for Canada’s Ground Observer Corps to watch Cold War skies before Distant Early Warning Line and Pinetree Line radars were operational. For Betts, it was full circle: joining the RCAF in 1949, he served on the Pinetree Line in heavy radar.

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