

Tower has spot in Canadian history

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Countless articles have been written about the end of the world, and some say it could happen in 2012. But the world has never come as close as it did to nuclear war during the Cold War as on a historic day in 1962.

And the Fort Frances area has a footnote in the pages of the Cold War.

It stands at Sorting Gap Marina in Fort Frances, waiting for tourists to climb its newly painted stairs. Commonly known as the Fort Frances Lookout Tower, it has a history almost as long as the Cold War itself.

The tower was built at Pal Lake, near Atikokan, to serve as part of an early radar detection system of defence during the years after the Second World War.

According to an article dated 1949, Radar Defense Bill approved by Senators, the Air Force spent \$161 million in co-operation with the federal government to erect a network of radar stations around the North American continent.

Canada and the U.S. were targets for foreign invaders in the late 1940s and early 1950s. A series of towers at the Pine Tree Line was envisioned to help detect invaders. In the early 1950s, a continental early warning system was agreed upon.

There were three lines of air defence constructed in Canada during the Cold War. It is the Tree Line (latitude 50 N) that is known to our region. The Tree Line was the first to become operational in 1952 and 1953, and it was centered on the 50th parallel with a section defending southern Ontario, and another extension covering the Labrador coast and as far north as Frobisher Bay.

The Tree Line was composed of 44 long-range radar stations, and six U.S. air force manned gap filler radar stations. Some of these had a very short life while others remained operational for more than 35 years.

Following a 1952 study that showed the vulnerability of the U.S. and Canada to air attack, it was determined that the existing Tree Line could not provide the six-hour warning needed to launch air defensive forces. The recommendation was to develop the DEW Line to supplement the Tree Line, and the planned Mid-Canada Line.

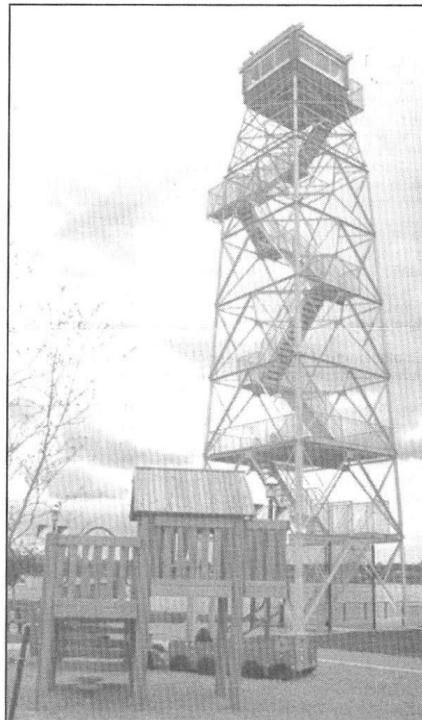
The basic Pine Tree system was comprised of 33 prime radars and six gap filler radars. It stretched from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island in three main subdivisions: Newfoundland and Labrador (64th Air Division, Newfoundland); Eastern Canada (extending west to Beausejour, Man.); and Western Canada (extending from western Alberta to the Pacific Coast). In our region, Priority No. 3 sites were established at Armstrong and Sioux Lookout.

The Royal Canadian Air Force gap filler program was initiated in 1959 to provide coverage of areas not scanned by long-range radar sites. These unmanned sites were to consist of two buildings and a single radar tower, often no more than 70 feet tall.

The RCAF gap filler program was deferred for a year in August 1962 and the program was eventually cancelled in January 1964 when the Canadian government cut the RCAF budget. It is assumed that all of the gap filler sites, both those completed and those that were still under construction, were eventually dismantled.

Although construction was 95 per cent complete, the project was cancelled before any of the filler sites became operational. In 1964, the tower at Atikokan was sold to the Province of Ontario, care of the department of lands and forests district forester in Fort Frances. It

FORT FRANCES



The majestic tower stands tall at Sorting Gap Marina.

may have experienced a short life as a fire lookout tower.

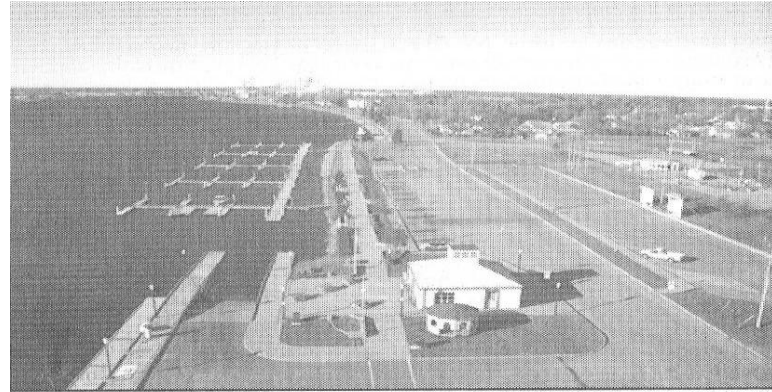
The tower also served a role with the Ministry of Transportation, providing non-directional beacons for commercial and military aviation purposes.

The Northern Electric Company was contracted to install and maintain radio equipment, but with a nearby tower at the Caland Ore site, the Pal Lake tower was decommissioned.

In 1972, the tower was moved to Fort Frances by J.W. Towse, industrial commissioner at that time. He paid a \$1 moose hide cheque for the tourist attraction. Until 2002, the site was open in the vicinity of Pither's Point Park at the foot of the Ranier Rapids, where the Rainy Lake empties into the Rainy River.

In 2009, the tower was relocated to Sorting Gap Marina on the Rainy River as part of the Fort Frances Heritage Tourism project.

The Fort Frances Lookout Tower may not have helped catch foreign invaders, but it does have historic value and a place in Canadian history.



PHOTOS BY RON WOLF

Those who venture to the top of the tower get an awesome view of Fort Frances.