Airfields For Canada's North

Pangnurtung Airfield

The vast area of Northern Canada presented major problems for the provision of administrative and health services to the many isolated communities. Traditional transportation by dog team and the occasional bush plane no longer met the needs of the population in the current age. National Defence required suitable airstrips to meet its increasing responsibilities for surveillance and defence of Canada's Arctic as well as for search and rescue operations. In 1970 National Defence, the Department of Transportation, and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development implemented a program to develop a series of airstrips at isolated communities that would be capable of handling C130 Hercules aircraft.

No 1 Construction Engineering Unit was tasked to oversee the planning and construction of these airstrips. 1 CEU established an Airfield Operations Centre at CFB Winnipeg to control construction and provide technical and logistic support and personnel administration. Each project would normally involve a two-year program. In the first year, the design work was completed, equipment was deployed to the site, and a source for local materials was located. A typical site needed about 160,000 cubic yards of granular fill to complete a 4400-foot runway and parking aprons. Gravel supply was a major problem in the arctic and involved finding a suitable esker or blasting out rock from a quarry. The workforce for this ambitious project was primarily provided from the Combat Engineering units of the Canadian Military Engineers and the local Inuit population. The locals were involved in increasing numbers as the program developed.

Northern airfield construction

Between 1970 and 1979, when the program was terminated airstrips, were built at Pangnurtung, Whale Cove, Cape Dorset, Eskimo Point, Pond Inlet, and Spence Bay. These airstrips have served to relieve much of the isolation at these locations and greatly improved the quality of life for the inhabitants. The dedicated efforts and skills of the Canadian Military Engineers was a major factor in the successful completion of this program.