

Cold War Artifacts: The Harmon Project

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Proposal for 2011 exhibition at Sir Wilfred Grenfell Art Gallery, Corner Brook, Newfoundland.



The Context

Ernest Harmon Air Force Base began its life as Stephenville Air Base, opened by the United States in 1940 after being given a 99-year lease on the site by Winston Churchill in exchange for armaments and other crucial military supplies needed by the British prior to official American involvement in WWII. In June of 1941, the name of the base was changed to honour the memory of Captain Ernest Harmon.

Harmon comprised one of three locations in Newfoundland and Labrador over which U.S. military forces exerted complete control, a situation looked upon with great suspicion by the Canadian government of the period. After Newfoundland entered Confederation, Harmon was also destined to be one of the few sites on Canadian soil to be equipped with nuclear weapons. Harmon was to have a strategic place in the Cold War.

Harmon became a vitally important Strategic Air Command (SAC) base in the 1950s. Before the advent of ballistic missiles capable of reaching into the USSR, bombers were the primary means of delivering nuclear weapons to their target. The base became home to KC-97 tankers that would provide the final in-flight refueling to nuclear-equipped bombers en route from U.S. bases to Soviet targets. Harmon was known as "the last link".



In the late 1950s, Ernest Harmon Air Force Base was selected to be equipped with defensive nuclear weapons to be flown in fighter aircraft stationed there. The newly built F-102 Delta Dagger – the first U.S. supersonic interceptor aircraft – was chosen to be the delivery vehicle for these weapons, and the USAF 59th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron was assigned to Harmon. It was the *only* American military unit assigned to Canadian soil armed with nuclear weapons.



The American military presence in Newfoundland and Labrador had a huge economic impact. By 1962, over 2500 U.S. military personnel were stationed at Harmon, and the base had become the major civilian employer in the area. It has been estimated that, at their height, the three U.S. bases at Goose Bay, Argentia, and Harmon were the third-largest employer in the province.



But on December 19, 1966, it all ended for Stephenville. The F-102 Delta Daggers had proven to be problematic aircraft, and the issues surrounding American-controlled nuclear weapons placed on Canadian soil had become a liability for a country politically and geographically squeezed between two superpowers. The U.S. military, their attentions now focused on a proxy war in southeast Asia, shut down Harmon as a cost-cutting measure.

The effect upon the regional economy was, needless to say, devastating.



The Project

Cold War Artifacts: The Harmon Project is part of an on-going series of works investigating the impact of the Cold War upon contemporary culture in Canada. Each specific project is organized around a particular shape that has come to be powerfully identified with that period in modern history. For *The Bomarc Project* done in North Bay, Ontario, it was the shape of the nuclear-tipped Bomarc missiles stationed there. For *The Harmon Project*, it is a shape of the geometry found on the far side of the sound barrier. It is one of the two shapes that have come to represent the Cold War American military presence in Newfoundland, a shape still found at on-site at what was Ernest Harmon Air Force Base.

It is that of an aircraft.



The installation at Sir Wilfred Grenfell Art Gallery will be primarily comprised of a floor- and wall-mounted 1:1 scale silhouette of the F-102 Delta Dagger once stationed at Harmon. The silhouette will be constructed of materials – artefacts, detritus, building supplies, commonly found tools and utensils – we will acquire on-site in Stephenville. Based on our research, these materials will be employed in the construction of the silhouette in the specific ratios that represent and reflect the impact and importance of various sectors of the regional economy as of December 15, 1966, the day prior to the official closing of Ernest Harmon Air Force Base.

Accompanying the silhouette will be a large, wall-mounted time line – a kind of frieze, if you will – of signage vinyl that will trace out relevant contextualizing dates and historical information pertaining to the 26-year period between the U.S. acquisition of the Stephenville Air Base in 1940 and the official closing of Ernest Harmon Air Force Base.

Our research is (and will be) ongoing, and will involve contacting residents of the region who worked at the base, as well as former military personnel stationed at Harmon, in order to acquire additional information and artefacts connected to this place and time in Canadian and world history. Our final installation will therefore also incorporate period images in the form of personal photographic material (examples of which are reproduced in this proposal) that depict life at the “last link” that was Stephenville at the very height of the Cold War.