

Argentia Naval Air Station, 1940-45

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Protection of territory in the Western Hemisphere from European intrusion was of paramount concern to the United States of America. Recognizing the need for Atlantic bases, the U.S. negotiated the Destroyers-for-bases deal with the United Kingdom early in September 1940 and was granted the lease, "freely and without consideration," of base sites in Newfoundland and Bermuda.

In mid-September 1940, the USS *St. Louis* arrived in Placentia Bay with a Board of Experts headed by Rear Admiral John W. Greenslade. The board selected the Argentia Peninsula and adjacent waters for aerial operations and to accommodate facilities for naval light forces. In addition, the board recommended the neighbouring community of Marquise as a site for basing and training some 16,000 army troops. The following month, Army Corps engineers surveyed the harbour and land and by year's end temporary buildings were in place and field work underway. Contractors began construction of the air and naval base in January 1941. Work on the army base, or Marquise Military Reservation as it was initially called (renamed Fort McAndrew early in 1942), began in March 1941.

The army's primary role was to protect the Naval Operating Base, Naval Air Station, and surrounding area. The initial recommendation that Fort McAndrew accommodate 16,000 troops was never realized. Instead, a garrison of 2,000 was considered; in 1942 this figure was revised to 7,500 men. Infantry guarded roads and beaches and patrolled as far north as Arnold's Cove. They manned searchlight, artillery, and antiaircraft posts, and protected the rail line, which was used to transport cargo and fuel (via Argentia) to army posts and air bases throughout Newfoundland.

Prior to the American's arrival, some 750 people inhabited the area selected for military occupation. In December 1940, the Newfoundland government took power to requisition (for defense purposes) any land within the island. Almost immediately, householders began receiving notices to vacate their homes. In response, residents formed a Citizens Committee to defend their interests and retained St. John's Lawyer Philip J. Lewis as legal counsel. Expropriation procedures were underway when in March 1941 the Newfoundland government appointed an official Board of Arbitration to settle

compensation claims. The process took months. Not until early 1942 was the last family removed, their household goods placed aboard an army truck, and the premises passed over to base authorities. To allow for further development, three Argentia cemeteries were relocated in the summer of 1942 and some 625 bodies disinterred and re-interred in a new site at nearby Freshwater.

In March 1941, the U.S. Navy organized Patrol Wing, Support Force, comprising Patrol Squadrons 51, 52, 55 and 56 and Seaplane Tenders *Albemarle*, *Belknap* and *Geo. E. Badger*. Issued on 5 May 1941, Operation Plan No. 1-41 provided that the wing “proceed on advance base exercises [and] maintain at least one squadron based on tender(s) at Argentia.” In accordance with this plan, *Albemarle* established wing headquarters at Argentia and on 18 May, PBY-5A seaplanes of Patrol Squadron 52 commenced operations. The following week, American neutrality notwithstanding, they searched unsuccessfully for the German battleship *Bismarck*.

In July 1941, the wing’s name was changed from Patrol Wing, Support Force, to Patrol Wing Seven (re-designated Fleet Air Wing Seven the following year). This adjustment included the renumbering of squadrons. Beginning in August, Patrol Wing Seven, in addition to convoy coverage, established a daily harbour patrol of the approaches to Argentia. It soon became evident, however, that Newfoundland’s harsh winter weather would make tender-based aerial operations extremely hazardous. Consequently, the navy began efforts to re-equip the wing with land planes. Meanwhile, runway construction on the Argentia Peninsula had progressed such that by late 1941, three were available for emergency use.

The new year brought change and success to wing operations at Naval Air Station Argentia as facilities improved, new squadrons arrived, and aerial reconnaissance intensified. On 1 March 1942, U-656 became the first German submarine sunk by American forces during World War Two. Ensign William Tepuni carried out the attack, piloting a Hudson bomber with Patrol Squadron 82 (VP-82). Two weeks later, VP-82 pilot Chief Aviation Machinist’s Mate Donald Mason, sank U-503 southeast of the Virgin Rocks.

Throughout 1942 and much of 1943, the principal activity of Argentia-based aircraft continued to be search and rescue, convoy escort, and antisubmarine patrol. A significant change came in April 1943 when U.S., British, and Canadian authorities agreed that Canada assume responsibility for the protection of shipping in the Northwest Atlantic. Now, operational

direction of aircraft came from the combined Royal Canadian Air Force-Royal Canadian Navy headquarters at St. John's, Newfoundland. Fleet Air Wing Seven functioned under this system until its transfer overseas in August 1943.

In July 1943, Coast Guard Patrol Bombing Squadron Six (VPB-6) began training and indoctrination at Argentia preparatory to North Atlantic operations. After its commissioning in October 1943, VPB-6 reported to its main operating base at Narsarssuak, Greenland. A detachment of two VPB-6 aircraft (PBY-5A) was, however, assigned to Argentia and placed under the administrative control of Commander Fleet Air Wing Nine (Fleet Air Wing Seven's successor). Duties included antisubmarine patrol, convoy coverage, and search and rescue. Lighter Than Air Blimp Squadrons provided additional support during the summer and fall of 1944. When war ended in 1945, VPB-6's duties changed to ice observation, medical evacuation, and utility missions; it continued air-sea rescue operations.