

## **History – Bella Coola Airport**

**(This portion courtesy of John Morton, Past Chair of the Central Coast Regional District)**

Prior to 1966, a number of unsuccessful attempts had been made to locate and develop a suitable parcel of land for a community airport in the Bella Coola valley.

In 1966, Milt Sheppard and Gideon Schuetze promoted the Bella Coola Valley Flying Club, creating a nucleus of interested persons and an organization to co-ordinate the efforts for an airstrip.

Property was located parallel to the Bella Coola River near Hagensborg, and three private owners – Olaf Odegaard (48.8 acres), Melvin Nygaard (10.3 acres), and Ken Stranaghan (38.5 acres) agreed to the use of their land for a one dollar a year lease. In addition, 38.4 acres of Crown land was obtained.

Work began on August 7, 1966 and in the three weeks 3,168 feet had been cleared and was ready for use. In that time 320 equipment hours, 429 man hours, and hundreds of gallons of fuel had been donated. The first plane landed on August 28, 1966.

Additional clearing and improvement continued on a volunteer and donated basis, and the first commercial plane (Harrison Airways) landed on September 14, 1966.

During the next six months a great deal of work was done in lengthening the cleared area and improving the surface. Again, many hours of donated equipment time and volunteer labour were involved.

For the next five years maintenance and upgrading continued to be done on a volunteer basis by interested persons. B.C. Airlines began using the strip on a regular commercial basis, as did their successor, P.W.A.

In 1972, it became apparent that protection from river erosion and flooding would be required, and application was made to the Provincial Government Water Resources Service for assistance. In order to facilitate the granting of funds, it was agreed that the Airport should come under public jurisdiction and the Ocean Falls Regional District (now the Central Coast Regional District) took over the property leases and signed a five-year option to purchase the land from the private owners.

A grant of \$48,000 was received for river protection, being the first government money which had come to the Bella Coola Airport. With the usual donations of time and equipment at least equal to the cash received, about \$100,000 worth of rip-rapping was done in 1972.

In 1973 the Regional District, with the support of local businesses and individuals made the first overtures to the Federal Ministry of Transport to have the airstrip paved. While unsuccessful at the time and in several subsequent attempts, the basis was laid for the approval of \$380,000 finally received in 1977.

During the winter of 1976-1977 a Local Initiative Programme grant assisted in additional land clearing, in an area to be used for an apron, hangars, and a terminal at some time in the future.

By August of 1977 the strip had been gravelled and compacted in preparation for paving, although no paving contract had been let.

In eleven years, through the efforts of dedicated individuals, and community-minded businesses, an airport had been constructed at Bella Coola. The airport at that point was used by three to five commercial planes daily, and numerous private aircraft.

The obstacles, both physical and governmental, which have been overcome are too numerous to detail, and the list of contributors to the end result would be lengthy. However, there is no doubt that without the donations of equipment by Crown Zellerbach and other logging firms and the unfailing physical efforts of Don Duncan and Ken Stranaghan, the present facility would exist only in the imagination.

In September of 1977 the paved surface was completed, comprising a 100' and 4,000' runway and a 192' x 290' parking apron. Plans for a terminal and private hangar lease area were progressing for 1978, and the Ministry of Highways had constructed a new access road.

In October 1977, the B.C. Aviation Council announced that Bella Coola had been selected to receive the Bill Templeton Award for outstanding initiative and effort toward the successful development of a community airport.

In 1978, a \$124,000 grant was received from the Provincial Small Airport Assistance fund, and with the continuing co-operation of local volunteers, the Department of Highways, and the Bella Coola Band Council, further accomplishments resulted:

- The property purchase was completed;
- A new 1,410 square foot terminal building was constructed with two airline offices;
- A vehicle parking lot was created;
- The access road was paved;
- A 1,450' x 6" water line was installed from the water main on Mackenzie Highway; and
- Security fencing was installed around the aircraft parking apron.

At a ceremony on February 26, 1979, the terminal was officially opened and public recognition made of the achievements of the participants in the project.