

Tragedy and hauntings at ghost base CFB Rivers

Half a century ago the Manitoba military base was considered one of the finest in Canada but today it is derelict and the site of a tragic death three months ago as well as a lingering ghost

BY JOHNNIE BACHUSKY
Red Deer Express

From a distance CFB Rivers does not look any different than it did in its heyday a half century ago.

The towering steam plant that provided heat for the entire base still shimmers under a hot summer sun. Visitors can make out the old hangers from several kilometres away. Sometimes small commercial planes can be seen taking off from the runways.

But when visitors arrive at the base gate they are faced with dereliction and despair. Sadly, this once vibrant Canadian Armed Forces base on the Manitoba prairie, which sprawls out more than 3,200 acres, is now a crumbling locale recovering from a recent tragedy, and the scene of a mysterious haunting that occurred six years ago at the ancient arched hanger.

In the meantime, while scores and scores of former CFB Rivers residents marvel at the wonderful memories they retain, many choose never to return. It is simply too sad, too heartbreaking to see the incredible state of dereliction of this once proud military community 5 kms southwest of the Town of Rivers.

"It was such a popular base. Everyone who



HAUNTED – Gary Ringland, in front of the CFB Rivers' crumbling steam plant, has worked at the ghost base for the past 15 years. He also grew up there. Six years ago he swears he encountered a ghost inside the old arch hanger.

Johnnie Bachusky/Red Deer Express.

trained there loved it. It was a tremendous loss to the surrounding communities when it was taken away. It was like losing a favourite uncle," said Bill Hillman, a 67-year-old career educator and musician from Brandon. Before the base officially closed in 1971 Bill and his wife Sue-On performed at numerous shows on the base. Bill also worked countless hours there as a summer student.

"I had an uncle who trained on helicopters there. It meant so much. But there is not much remaining there now. It is so sad to see."

CFB Rivers first opened in 1942 as part of the country's Second World War commitment to the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

The base later became the country's main para-

training centre for army, navy and air force personnel. In 1953, the Basic Helicopter Training Unit (BHTU) was established and it became the first tri-service flying training unit in Canada.

In the meantime, more than 450 homes were constructed at CFB Rivers for more than 2,000 military citizens. The community boasted first-class amenities, including a full hospital, dentist, two churches, a 24-room school, bowling alley, movie theatre, a full grocery store, butcher shop, auto club, gas station and a recreation centre.

But with the Canadian military unifying in 1968 and Ottawa making budget cuts, CFB Rivers was declared surplus to defence needs, as were several other bases across the country in subsequent



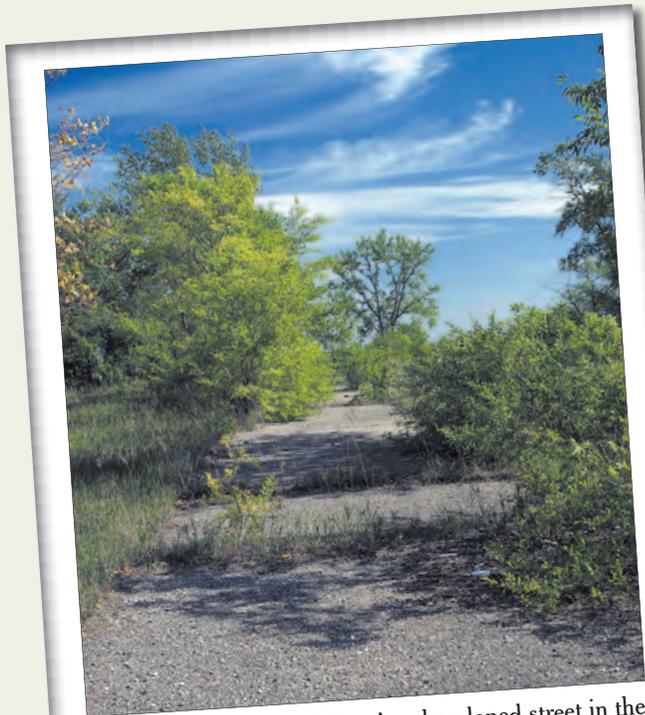
GHOST WATCH – Six years ago Gary Ringland and others say a ghost appeared in the old arch military hanger.

Johnnie Bachusky/Red Deer Express



DECAY - While many old military buildings still stand at CFB Rivers many others are just piles of ruins.

Johnnie Bachusky/Red Deer Express



FORGOTTEN ROAD - An abandoned street in the residential area of CFB Rivers is now being overtaken by nature.
Johnnie Bachusky/Red Deer Express



BETTER TIMES - An aerial photograph of CFB Rivers during its vibrant day in the early 1960s.
Photo courtesy of Bill Hillman.

years - including CFB Penhold, and it closed in September 1971. After the base was abandoned the land and its buildings were turned over to various community uses until 1988 when it was purchased by Larry Friesen who opened Hangar Farms Ltd., a hog farm operation.

Sadly, however, it was in the late 1980s when the deterioration of the old base accelerated. Fires destroyed two old military hangers, and the condition of many abandoned buildings rapidly declined.

Meanwhile, former residents regularly come back to visit and Friesen was always happy to chat and give a tour.

But on April 28 tragedy struck the base.

Friesen fell about seven metres to his death while working on a hanger roof. His death, officially ruled as an accident, shocked and saddened many in the surrounding area.

"He shouldn't have even been up there. It (accident) was right in my building, right out my door," said Gary Ringland, 59, a fertilizer company supervisor at the base. "Larry was an interesting person. He had stories for everything."

Ringland, who has worked on the base for the past 15 years, has many stories of his own.

He was raised at CFB Rivers from 1951 to 1968. His father was a military cook, raising an astounding 15 children in a three-bedroom home on the

base. His family was in fact the first and largest on the base.

"It was good. You knew everybody. But if you did anything wrong your dad knew before you got home. The military police kept tabs on everybody," said Ringland, chuckling. "But there was lots to do for kids, just like a regular town."

"AND THE DRIVER'S WIFE WHO WAS OUTSIDE HAD THE HAIR ON HER ARM STAND UP AT THE SAME TIME"

- GARY RINGLAND

When the base closed Ringland moved with his family for a few years to nearby Rapid City. He then went to Calgary where he worked many years for a fibre glass company.

But home kept calling and he returned to work at CFB Rivers in the mid 1990s.

"It felt funny because I lived here so long and when I came back there was nothing left and nothing maintained," said Ringland. "It was eerie because what used to be there were mess halls and stuff but they were ripped down."

The eeriness took a dramatic turn six years ago when he was in the old arch hanger. It was an inci-

dent Ringland has never forgotten.

In the evening while loading fertilizer he heard something move above on a catwalk near an abandoned office.

"It looked like someone was walking across - watching us. I looked at the guy on the ground and he didn't see anything. And the driver's wife who was outside had the hair on her arm stand up at the same time. She never saw but she just had bad vibes," said Ringland, adding there was no reason for anybody to be up on the catwalk. "And to this day she still won't get out of her truck. Her husband does but he doesn't like to get out either. It is kind of eerie."

Ringland said when he now enters the arch hanger he still looks up to see if anything is walking along the catwalk. He also admits to making sure the loader lights are always on.

These days, however, Ringland has become the ghost base's unofficial tour guide.

But there is some uncertainty with the future now due to Friesen's tragic passing. In the meantime the old Second World War site is crumbling fast.

But at least for a little while anyway, and maybe for sometime beyond, there are plenty of memories to hold on to at CFB Rivers - and a mysterious and eerie ghost to wonder about.

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HOUSING RELICS - The green abandoned single men's barracks at the base, painted this colour for a 1996 movie, *For The Moment*, a film starring Hollywood superstar Russell Crowe.
Johnnie Bachusky/Red Deer Express



GHOST HOUSE - An abandoned home from the former officer's residential area that missed the wrecker's ball when the base closed almost 40 years ago.
Johnnie Bachusky/Red Deer Express