

## Chapter 5

# ELLISTON AND THE MILITARY

## World War I: Beaumont Hamel

For Newfoundland, the Great War or World War I was an event that had a widespread impact. It was a global conflict that pitted Britain and her allies against Germany and her allies. With the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, Britain welcomed the support of its former colonies. The Dominion of Newfoundland answered the call and volunteers were forthcoming from all parts of the small nation including Elliston.

The Newfoundland Regiment's best known exploit was its participation in the disastrous Battle of the Somme on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1916. Specifically the Newfoundland force was to reinforce other British battalions once they breached the German positions at Beaumont Hamel. The engagement did not go as planned and these battalions failed to break the enemy lines. Their leaders believed these units had not suffered a complete failure, and through a series of misunderstandings, including the misinterpretation of a German flare for a British signal, the Newfoundland Regiment was ordered over the top. Before the Regiment could advance, they had to move over British ground and file through gaps in their own barbed wire that unfortunately provided excellent aiming points for German machine gunners. Those who made it through and reached the completely unsheltered zone known as no man's land were stopped by further machine gunfire as they attempted to penetrate the German defenses. At Beaumont Hamel the Regiment was virtually annihilated, however, it would be rebuilt and continue to fight.

Then new weapons such as the machine gun and fast firing artillery effectively neutralized the old tactic of throwing waves of men to overwhelm enemy positions. Despite this fact such costly battles were fought again and again. Nevertheless, it does demonstrate the courage of those Newfoundlanders who served.

## World War II: Mark's Path Radio Detachment



Personnel of the first American Base at Mark's Path in 1943. The man in the center with the white handkerchief is Edgar Bergen, the father of Candice Bergen (the star of the TV series “Murphy Brown”).

Unlike World War I, the Second World War had a physical presence at Elliston. In fact, the community has been home to two military installations, both initiated by the United States Military. The first site was at Mark's Path during World War II. Its purpose was to monitor the area for signs of a possible German invasion that many believed was an immediate threat. The threat was so real that military personnel were seen at Sandy Cove beach filling sand bags for use at the station. Newfoundlanders, Americans, and Canadians were concerned that the Germans were going to get a foothold in North America. The island of Newfoundland would have made an excellent base to launch such an invasion, and there is at least one case of a U-boat (Submarine) that put ashore an automated weather unit to relay information on the coast of Labrador. To counter this threat, Newfoundland and Labrador became the home to several U.S. Military stations. Some details of the Elliston site include:<sup>1</sup>

In the fall of 1942 the installation of four other radar units was begun by the 685th Air Warning Company. The locations were at Elliston Ridge, Torbay, St. Bride's and Allan's Island, close to Lamalaine. By early winter of 1943, all were completed. The US Army supply boats, the Captain Mitchell and T-4, brought all the supplies to remote areas and continued to supply all stations, except Torbay. Again, fifty-two members of the 685th AWC were assigned. All of these personnel were fully trained radar technicians selected from Maine to Florida. S/Sgt. Joe Santomas, from Hammonton, New Jersey was the technician who installed and supervised all the maintenance on the radar units. Santomas, now retired from the US Army continually traveled by the US Army supply boats to each location. He maintains that in 1943 all the radar antennae were changed and these gave each station a range of 300 miles. All radar stations were in constant contact with one another by a separate radar network. All transmissions to St. John's were directed to the Top Secret receiver/transmitter at Snelgrove, near Windsor Lake. The secret code names for all the radar sites were: Torbay - Prime; Elliston Ridge - Second; St. Bride's - Trio; Fogo Island . . . - Quad; and Allan's Island - Cinco. All radar information was sent to a plotting centre at headquarters, Fort Pepperrell, to track the aircraft coming and going. The plotting centre also sent messages to the radar units concerning lost aircraft or those needing navigational assistance. Both American and Canadian personnel manned the plotting centre.

Despite the reason for their presence, the military personnel were welcomed in the community, and, in turn, they welcomed residents to their base for special events. One such event was a free movie offered on a weekly basis. An article concerning this site appeared in the July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1945-edition of the *Fisherman's Advocate*:<sup>2</sup>

This base has been in our town since 1942. The quarters, stores, administration, etc., are situated on the road to Bonavista in the almost secluded grove being [sic] reached by a way known as "Mark's Path." Since

the first arrival of its personnel to date the most cordial relationship has been maintained with the townsfolk. . . . We are especially grateful to the Commanding officers for their placing at the disposal of the community a free movie show weekly for adults and a special night for the children. What a source of pleasure this has proven to be for the kiddies. They eagerly look forward to Saturday night when you can see them marching off toward the base.

Initially, this radar site was under the control of American personnel however, in November 1944, they were relieved by Canadian forces. The site was closed on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1945.

### **Postwar Snapshot: 1952 Elliston**

The Elliston of today is quite different from what it had been when the fishery was thriving, and a new defense project was about to begin. In 1952, a community profile describing conditions that existed was completed by the Newfoundland Fisheries Development Committee. This profile provides a snapshot into what the community was like between the time the first military installation, at Mark's Path, was closed, and the second, at the top of the Ridge, began. Although root cellars are not specifically mentioned, this report does refer to garden-type agriculture and the type of crops that would be stored in them. The report is as follows:<sup>3</sup>

#### Harbor Facilities

The public wharf was 160 feet long by 20 feet wide and had an extension of 28 feet. There were two haul-out slips for small boats. The wharf was used only by fisherman. There was no breakwater. The approach from the sea was very bad with many rocks and shoals. The approach should "only be attempted by smallvessels with local knowledge." There was no shelter from storm conditions and the northeast storms were the worst.

Fishing Settlement Profile

The [1951] population was 574 residents with 32 families engaged in fishing. There were a total of 53 fishermen, all engaged in the shore fishery. There were 13 crews consisting of 13 skippers and 40 sons and partners in the crews. There were 10 cod traps and 20 trawls in the community and the fisherman used both hand lines and jiggers for fishing. There were 7 trap boats, 6 motor boats, 7 punts and 1 schooner. In August 1952 the annual catch for Elliston was 3,500 quintals of light salted cod (as compared to 4,000 quintals in 1951).

Settlement Notes

The quality of the housing was good. The fish sheds were 50 to 60 years old and were in a poor state of repair. The stages were also old. There was an adequate amount of flake space. Many fish flakes were not being used in 1952.

Fishermen in the community sold their fish to the FUTCo, James Ryan, J.T. Swyers, and C. Tilley Ltd. In the past few years, there was little personal or family credit being given, with credit being limited to fishing crew's company accounts.

About 20 years ago there were about 500 men fishing along the coast in Elliston area. Elliston's population is in decline; in 1935 it was 863 residents, in 1951 it was 574. Four years ago, C. Tilley had six schooners going to Labrador to fish; in 1952 only one schooner went to Labrador and the crew was not from Elliston.

The cod trap fishery lasts from June 25 to July 31. Cod was the mainstay there but it was all dried. Elliston fisherman were not able to sell their fish to the plant at Bonavista. In August 1952 the settlement catch was 3,500 quintals and they were having an exceptionally good year. After September the harbor is too rough to risk fishing but most fishermen have all the fish they can make by that time. There were from 10 to 15 more men fishing here in 1951 than there was in 1952. There were two men 65 and 70 years of age who have a crew of five men and two cod traps. This year the crew caught 400 quintals of cod, or an average of 80 quintals per man. This was the last year these two old men planned on fishing. The salmon catch was sold locally. The price to

fishermen for 1952 was all the way from 40 cents down to 22 cents. Lobster and herring were available but were not fished to any extent.

#### Agriculture

There was a garden-type agriculture with potato production sufficient for local needs. Small quantities of potatoes disposed of in local markets. Potatoes were the principal crop, with moderate production of cabbage, turnip, carrot and other root crops. There were a moderate (over 20 but less than 100) number of cattle, sheep, hens goats and horses maintained.

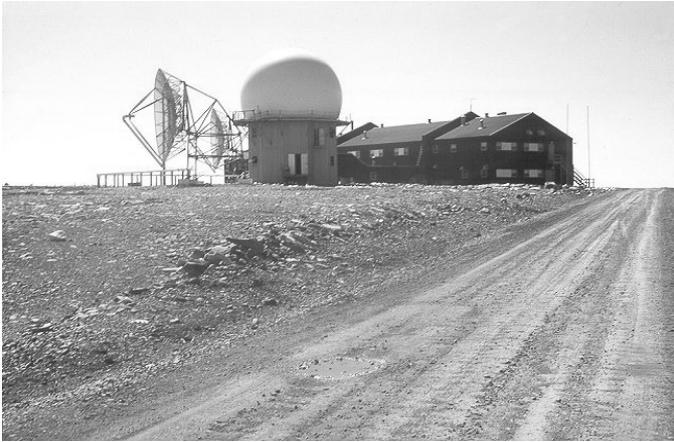
#### General

With the exception of a few small stands of timber which still remain because of being fenced, the Elliston area is completely heath and rock barren. All timber and fuel wood must be brought by truck or boat. There is one small lake about a mile north of the settlement which might be suitable for a gravity water system and a small stream paralleling the road to Bonavista. It is not probable that Elliston will depend upon dug wells for many years to come. There is only one gravel road to Bonavista and another to Catalina. About sixty to seventy men were reported as casual woods laborers.



The fishery in its prime at Coles' Gulch

## Cold War: Elliston Ridge Base



Elliston Ridge Gap Filler Site with parabolic communications antennas, search radar tower and radome, and associated buildings in June 1961.

In the mid 1950's, Elliston was a component in NORAD's (North American Air Defense Command) continental defense system. Specifically, the Pinetree Line was composed of radar bases linked together to sound the alarm if invading Soviet forces were detected. These aircraft control and warning stations were strategically positioned, however, there were still areas where radar coverage was less than one-hundred percent. Gap fillers were constructed to eliminate this problem. Although most people simply refer to this site on the top of Elliston Ridge as *The Base* that term is usually reserved for a much larger installation than a gap filler.

In the summer of 1954, a Boston engineering company conducted a survey of Elliston Ridge for the United States Army. In October of the following year machinery and supplies were landed at Bonavista for transportation to the site. Heavy equipment arrived by rail at the Elliston Train Station at Paradise in preparation of the defense project.<sup>4</sup>

Details surrounding this installation and others in the Newfoundland portion of the network include:<sup>5</sup>

There were six heavy radars between Hopedale and St. Johns located at Hopedale, Cartwright, St. Anthony, Stephenville, Gander and Red Cliff (St. Johns). To increase low altitude coverage along this line and provide some back-up for these radars, a small, light-weight radar (the AN/FPS-14), called a gap-filler, was to be placed between these heavy radars. The AN/FPS-14 was a medium-range search radar which was designed and built by Bendix as a gap-filler radar to provide low altitude coverage. It operated in the S-band at a frequency between 2700 and 2900 MHz and could detect traffic at a range of 65 miles. The system was deployed to locations within the Pinetree Line in Newfoundland and Labrador. There were six gap filler sites (approved in March 1955).

The sites on the island of Newfoundland were situated at Elliston Ridge and La Scie. The Labrador sites were at Fox Harbour, Cut Throat Island, Spotted Island, and Cape Makkovik. The following information concerns Elliston Ridge:<sup>6</sup>

**1 October 1956 to 31 December 1956**

Civilian employees are authorized at Red Cliff and also at Detachment #1, our Gap Filler site at Elliston Ridge, Newfoundland. However, negotiations to authorize a forty-eight plus eight hour work week for diesel operators at Elliston Ridge ground to a halt shortly after the men were hired. RCA technical representative have been setting up an FM radio link between the 642nd AC&W Squadron at Red Cliff and Detachment #1 at Elliston Ridge. Work is now in the final stages. This high frequency net uses BC-610H equipment and it was put into operation by the end of this period.

**1 January 1959 to 31 March 1959**

A Medical Technician, AFSC 90250, reported for duty in March at Detachment #1, Elliston Ridge.

**1 April 1959 to 30 June 1959**

This month saw the installation of an OA-947 and the GPX-6A (Gap Filler Monitor and SIFF (Selective IFF). (This implies that the 642<sup>nd</sup> AC&W Squadron at Red

Cliff would now have the ability to monitor the traffic which originated at the Elliston Ridge Gap Filler site).

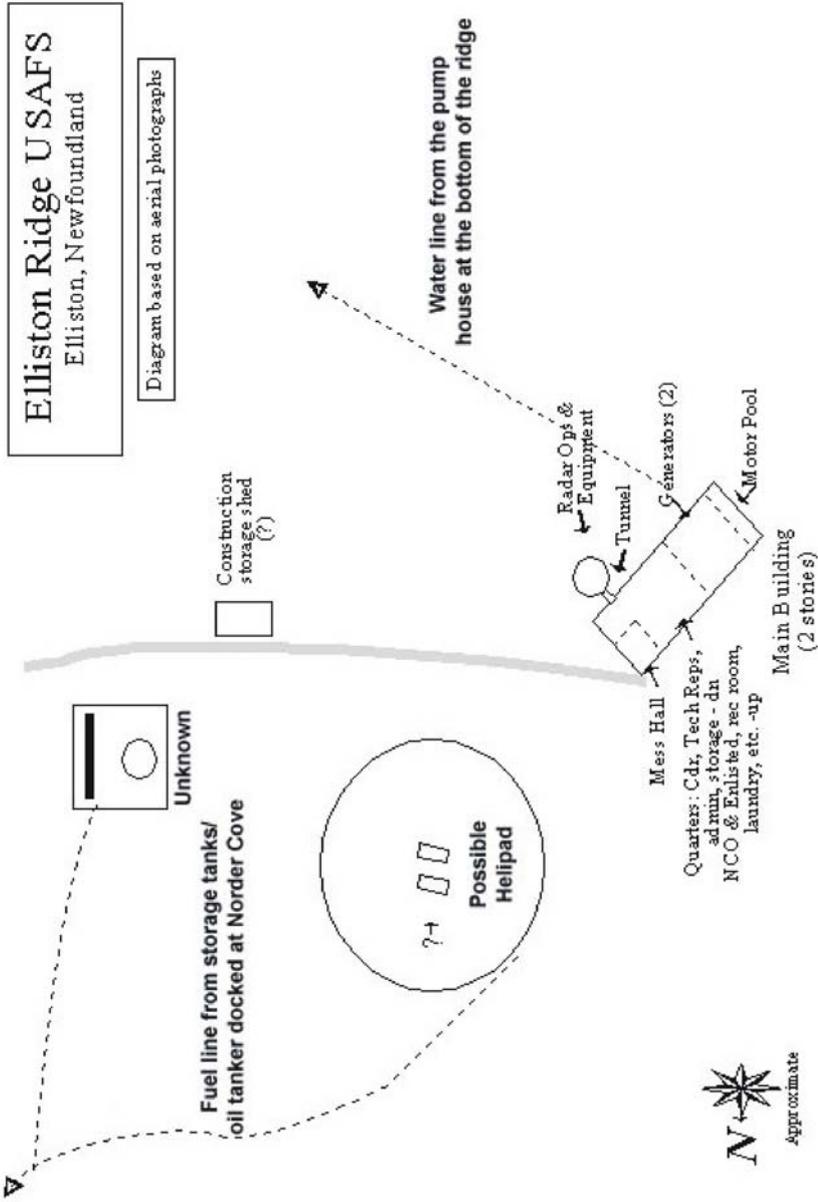
**1 October 1959 to 31 December 1959**

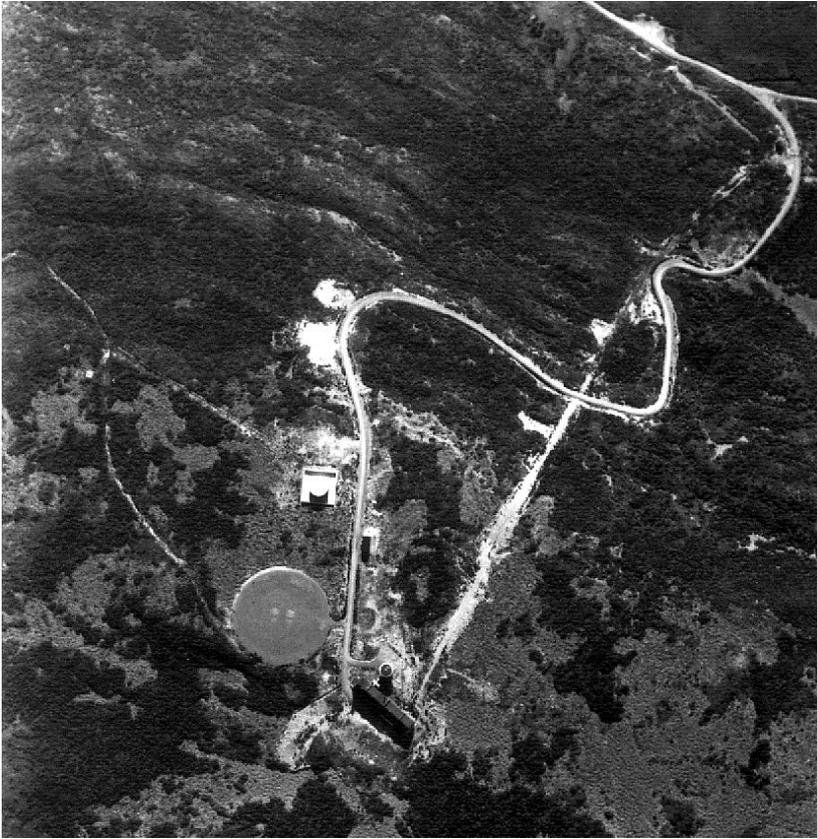
The teletype portion of the Tropo Radio circuit to Elliston Ridge was installed and is now in operation. (This implies that the 642<sup>nd</sup> AC&W Squadron at Red Cliff was making use of a circuit on the Tropospheric Scatter communications system for teletype transmissions).  
Equipment Performance: 0A-947/FST-1 — Gap Filler Monitor was moved from the Operations Room to the right-hand room under the dias. Maintenance and Supply Problems: One 64173, T/Sgt. John S Gardner, was assigned for duty. Sgt. Gardner will proceed to Detachment 1 at Elliston Ridge in March 1960 to fill the vacancy which will exist due to the March rotation of A/2C David R Rowe, presently of Detachment 1. No forecast of personnel assignment to fill the vacancy of Sgt. Gardner has been received.

**1 April 1961 to 30 June 1961**

Operations — Losses: Detachment #1, 642 AC&W Squadron, Elliston Ridge, Newfoundland, became inactive at 2050Z, 28 June 1961. Equipment Performance - The Canadian Marconi Company installed a depot level modification in the MTI system on the AN/FPS-14 at Elliston Ridge on 14 April 1961. Contractor assistance was given by Canadian Marconi Company to Elliston Ridge on 23 April 1961, to correct troubles inherent in the modification to the MTI System on the AN/FPS-14 Radar. C-22B, Elliston Ridge Gap Filler Radar, was directed by Goose Air Defense Sector to cease operation, 28 June 1961.







An aerial view of the Elliston Ridge Gap Filler Complex

When the base was in operation, it was supplied with fuel from a tanker that, twice a year, docked at Norder Cove. The ship hooked up to a pipeline, constructed by the Atlantic Bridge Company, that ran right up to the top of Elliston Ridge.<sup>7</sup> Large moorings were installed to secure the tankers and one is still visible at Norder Cove. All of this activity had a positive economic impact on the surrounding communities. Many locals found employment in the initial construction phase, and the economy benefitted from servicemen with money to spend. Men who would have normally been employed in the fishery, for a time, had an alternative.



**Above:** A mooring located at Norder Cove

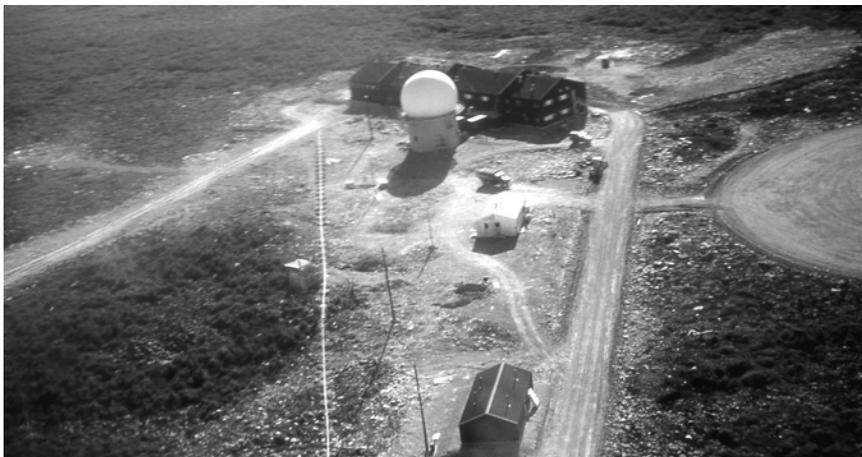
**Below:** US Naval Ship "Nooaway" at Norder Cove that supplied the American Ridge Base with fuel in August 1957. Tankers came twice a year to resupply the Base.





**Above:** Local workers at the site of the Elliston Ridge Base in the late 1950's. Bob Diamond, Peter Tucker and Stanley Gullage.

**Below:** Another view of the Elliston Ridge Gap Filler Site



The Americans of the 1940's were welcomed by the locals and the situation was no different during the late 1950's. Here is an account of an unusual New Year's party that shows the connection between the community and the military presence.<sup>8</sup>

On new year's of 1958 several area residents were invited to a party at the base. This happened to Gordon and Marjorie Bradley of Bonavista. They were two of the 27 guests at New Year's party held in the United States Radar Station near Elliston. The party began on December 31, 1958, but it was January 5, 1959, before the guests were able to leave the radar site. Now, almost 40 years later, Gordon Bradley recalls the occasion as clearly as when it happened.

"I don't know if I've ever seen, before or since, a bigger snowstorm. We left by car to go up to the radar station on New Year's Eve about 9:30 PM. There hadn't been any snow down worthwhile. The road was quite clear and there was just the slightest amount of snow falling gently as we went up over Elliston Ridge, through American snake road to the top of the hill. It wasn't cold, just barely freezing and no wind at all."

In those days, Bradley recalls, there were no clubs in Bonavista. So if you wanted to ring in the New Year you had the choice of going to the Masonic Hall New Year's dance, or going to a house party. Then there was the New Year's dance at the Radar Station, which was by invitation only.

The Radar Station was part of the Early Warning System and was operated by the 642nd A.C & W. Squadron of US Air Force. It was only a small station with a complement of one officer, 15-16 GI's and six civilian employees. It was then under the command of Captain Bob Hampson.

"By the time we arrived, the party was in full swing. There was music playing, people dancing, people drinking and people talking and nobody was paying any attention to the weather outside. About one o'clock in the morning, one of the Civilians (Rufus Baker from Elliston) who was on duty, came in and said in a loud voice, "If anyone thinks they're going home tonight, forget it. When asked why, he said to go outside and look." said Bradley.

The outside doors opened inward rather than outward and when they were hauled open, the partygoers were facing a wall of snow. They were other exits to the building but these doors faced windward and by this time were dwarfed by a bank of snow.

Because the building was solid and with the music playing, nobody had heard the wind or realized there was a viscous snowstorm going on outside.

"I don't know how hard the wind blew or how much snow fell because there was no weather station to report this locally at the time. But it snowed through the rest of that night, all New Year's Day, and New Year's night, all day and night of January 2 and all day and into the night of January 3. It was a howling blizzard pretty much the whole time and when it broke on the morning of January 4, the wind had dropped, the sun came out, and it was a beautiful day."

With the storm raging, one of the problems facing the Base personnel was the possibility of a food shortage. With the party guests, the number of people at the base had doubled. Sleeping accommodations for the extra 27 people also had to be arranged.

"They were running out of food as their food supplies came in once a week by train. They ran out of milk and then they ran out of drinks and this was getting to be a bit of a problem. Some people were getting a bit nervous after being on a three-day binge. There's no more beer so let's get out of here-that sort of attitude." Bradley recalled with a chuckle.

"Quite a few of the civilian guests were couples, my wife and I among them. So they gave us a room and somebody had to move out and double up with another GI and they worked the accommodations out alright. The cooks had a hard time of it-you add 27 people to your menu every day and that makes a big difference." The Party lasted 5 days!

Nobody got unduly upset during the five days, Bradley said. Some people played pool, others card and although a few did keep going from window to window looking to see if the storm would break, everyone managed to keep occupied. The one good thing was that no one had left early to return to Elliston or Bonavista or they would have likely been lost in the

storm, he pointed out.

Bradley recalls one person who was fortunate in that he managed to reach shelter before the storm became too bad.

“Bill Doody had come home to Bonavista for Christmas and he left Bonavista that night to come to the party. He was in car and he got stuck in Elliston and spent the next three days in Gerald Tilley’s in Elliston where he had gone for refuge from the storm. And when the storm was over he came up to the party.”

By that time, Bradley said, there were mountains of snow everywhere.

“To give an idea of how much snow was around, the highroad system had a garage here in Bonavista and as soon as they went to work on the morning of the fourth, a D7 Dozer and a big Caterpillar grader left Bonavista that morning and arrived at Elliston Northside, the evening of the fifth. It took them two days and two machines to reach Elliston; that gives an idea of how much snow fell during the storm,” said Bradley.

A television repeater was later placed near the location of the installation, and the road leading to the site is still in quite good condition today. Only the concrete foundations of the buildings and other structures remain. Nevertheless, once you visit the site and take in the view, it is easy to see why the Americans chose this specific location to keep an strategic eye on the area.



The remains of the Gap Filler Site at the top of the Ridge

**Chapter Five Notes**

1. Information obtained from Pinetree Line Researcher Renynald L'Ecuyer.
2. "Elliston Notes and Comments," Fisherman's Advocate 3 Aug. 1945.
3. Ray Troke and Associates, The Elliston Adventure (Summer/Fall 2000) 30-32.
4. "Defence Project Started at Elliston Ridge," Newfoundland Journal of Commerce 22.11 (1955): 19.
5. Renynald L'Ecuyer.
6. Renynald L'Ecuyer.
7. Troke 35.
8. Gordan Bradley's account of the 1958 New Year's Party obtained from Tourism Elliston.