

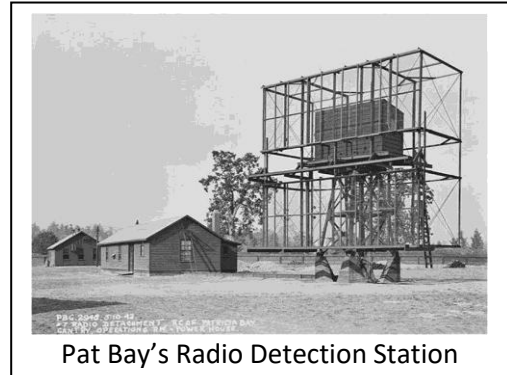
# Victoria's Secret

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BC Aviation Museum

Victoria Airport, Victoria BC .

By 1942 the RCAF was furiously trying to beef up its defenses on the West Coast to counter what it feared would be an imminent attack, and possible invasion, by the Empire of Japan. In this quest the RCAF employed the newest technology of the day; Radio Detection, or what is now commonly called RADAR. Using the latest British technology, a chain of top secret radar station was hastily put into operation along the West Coast of British Columbia to detect both approaching aircraft and ships. The stations used second-generation detection technology called Chain Home Low, which dispensed with the 100-foot towers that characterized the radar stations used successfully two years earlier in the Battle of Britain.



Pat Bay's Radio Detection Station

A key element of this defensive system was the centralized Filter Room; the point at which all information was gathered, consolidated and assessed in order to determine how to respond to the threat. Reports of aircraft operating offshore were phoned in from friendly ships, Coast



Watchers, radar stations and Air Force Bases. The Filter officer would use experience to decide when a plot would be displayed, and how to label it; friendly or enemy, number, altitude, heading, etc. Once satisfied that the information was reliable, Plotters would then place little colour-coded blocks with small labels showing heading and altitude. Based on the most current information, the blocks were shuttled along the map by the Plotters using a small 'rake', much like a croupier in a casino. The Controllers sat on a balcony overlooking the map and they would decide how to respond to the threat, and who should be notified; interceptor squadrons, Air Raid Wardens, Coast Watch Officers, Air Sea Rescue units, the

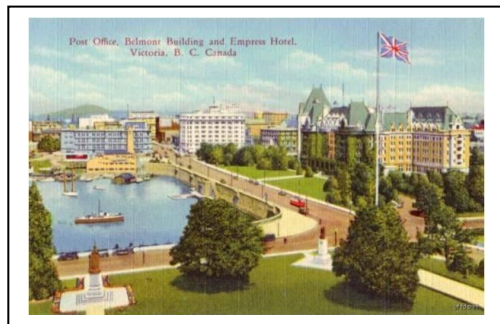
Naval Command, Anti-aircraft units, Army forces, etc.

There were two such Filter Rooms on the West Coast; one in Vancouver and another in Victoria. Naturally, the exact location of these key elements of the defense network were ultra secret. This heavy cloak of secrecy proved to be a formidable barrier to the curious historian who wondered "Where was the Victoria Filter Room located?" This puzzle took years to resolve.

Inquiry produced many plausible theories. A few years ago I was able to interview an elderly lady, Agnes Watts, who was a Plotter in the Filter Room as a member of the RCAF Women's Auxiliary Service. Unfortunately, she told me that the daily routine was to report to RCAF Station Patricia Bay where they boarded a bus with blacked-out windows. Then the driver would wander about, never taking the same route twice, before arriving at their destination about 45 minutes later. When they got off the bus the passengers entered a canvass tunnel that took them into a large building. The actual Filter Room was a basement, and while there were supporting offices on floors above, the windows were completely blacked-out. They could not leave the building until the end of their 8-hour shift, when they would once again enter the special bus through the canvass tunnel to be driven back to the base. As a result, she had no idea where the facility was located.

During my years of the quest on occasion I was told that the elusive room was located on RCAF Station Pat Bay, just south of the present-day terminal, in the midst of what today is a small wooded area. Another source told me authoritatively that the facility was on an army base where the present-day University of Victoria is located. Yet a third contender was the Naval Base in Esquimalt. All three locations were highly plausible since they offered secrecy, protection and the possibility of using existing infrastructure such as supplies, administrative staff and technicians. So, place your bet; where do you think that the elusive Filter Room was located?

The correct answer is, None Of The Above. Here is a postcard showing the building where the ultra secret Fliter Room was located in World War II. Surprisingly, it is located just off the Inner



Harbour, right in downtown Victoria. No, it was not the elegant Empress Hotel; that would have been too incredible to be believed. Actually, the Top Secret Filter Room, a key element in the defense of the entire West Coast during World War II, was located in the white building right across the street from the Empress Hotel! This is Belmont House, and there, in the

basement, was located one of the most strategically important Canadian defensive facilities of the Second World War; the elusive No. 2 Filter Room for Western Air Command.

Fortunately, the 1939 Official Secrets Act has been superseded by more modern legislation, and the war ended more than 70 years ago. So the next time you are downtown and you pass by the Inner Harbour, you are free to reveal Victoria's [Top] Secret!

