

644 Camrose Rotary Air Cadet Squadron

An air cadet squadron ran successfully in Camrose from 1941 to 1945 to train young men for duties during World War II. In 1957, there was a renewed desire to maintain a local squadron. The purpose of Air Cadets had changed to focus on citizenship, leadership, physical fitness, general aviation and stimulating an interest in the activities of the Canadian forces. The war was over, but there was still unease demonstrated by a local reserve battalion and civil defense league. Camrose was working to obtain an airstrip and wanted to have more local pilots. Rotary was interested in developing leadership and other skills in local youth. This was a time when the club membership included a number of military veterans with the training and experience to actively run the squadron.

At that time boys between the age of 14 and 19 were eligible to join Air Cadets and had the opportunity to learn all the fundamentals of Air Force training. The Squadron was attached to the Penhold Air Force Training Centre where the boys were taken periodically for flying training, gunnery practice and other special training. Their training in Camrose included the theory of flight, navigation, photography, engine maintenance, radio, drill, signals and many other subjects.

Rotary's function was mainly to help with the smooth running of the cadets. Practically all the material needed was furnished by the Air Cadets League. The Commanding Officer was Rotarian Frank McMillan who held that position previously in Grand Prairie. The volunteer instructors were Rotarians Rusty Campbell, Art MacKenzie, Dr. Ladd Parsons, Dr. Bernie Clarke, Jim Dabbs, Ken Patrige and Maurice Broadfoot.

Dennis Twomey Sr. chaired the Air Cadets Civilian committee along with secretary Einar Overn and members Al Schloss, Dr. I.W. Dunbar and W.L. Knaut. It was hoped that the organizational arrangements might also aid the local Sea Cadets, Reserve Army, and Boy Scouts.

Sixty-five enthusiastic boys joined that first year, with 39 of them attending Sea Island, B.C. camp that summer accompanied by Rotarians Jim Dabbs and Alf Kennedy. Six of the Camrose Cadets took N.C.O. training and qualified for the rank of Corporal: Ernest Carlson, Barry Schloss, Jimmy Dabbs, Dick Poole and Harry Kennedy.

From 1963 to 1971 the squadron was under the direction of Dennis Twomey, Steve Shuman, Ted Robinson and Blain Fowler, all former air cadets.

From 1972 to 1978, the Camrose squadron was under the leadership of Dr. Dennis Twerdun, Leon Lohner, Daryl Larson and Dennis Johnson.

In 1999, forty-two years later, Rotary was contributing \$12,000 annually to the Camrose Rotary 644 Air Cadet Squadron and was very active in the daily operations. Rotarian Ted Gillespie chaired the Rotary Air Cadet Committee at that time. In his words, “as a sponsor we have to be fairly active in the squadron. We approve all the officer appointments. We work with the squadron to promote the squadron.” In 1999 there were 56 members, ranging in age from 12-18 with girls enrolling since 1975. In 1976 the squadron peaked with 120 members and was named the top squadron in Canada.

As of 2022, the Rotary Club of Camrose has sponsored the Air Cadet Squadron for 65 years. The club demographics have changed. There is no longer a pool of members with military training and experience to draw on. Rotary provides financial support of \$15,000 annually and moral support by attending the ceremonial review, sponsoring a Cadet of the month, and supporting squadron fundraisers. The club continues with this support because we value the leadership, citizenship, and other skills the cadets come away with. Most participants acquire lifelong skills to better serve society. The Air Cadet motto is “to learn - to serve - to advance.”