

Anxieties of the Past? Edmonton and the Cold War

“History”, Stephen said, “is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.”  
– James Joyce, *Ulysses*

A trip to the Alberta Aviation Museum in Edmonton might lead one to believe that Edmonton has virtually no Cold War or nuclear heritage; the only artifact that makes direct reference to the Nuclear Age is an air raid siren, dutifully labeled with a taped paper sign that reads “Cold War air raid siren”. However, upon closer inspection, the museum is home to other artifacts from the Cold War period which are not labeled as such: a Hughes AIM-4D Falcon, a missile which was used in the Vietnam War; a CF-101 McDonnell Voodoo plane, which served as an all-weather interceptor for the Royal Canadian Air Forces; an Avro Canada CF-100 Canuck, a jet interceptor which served during the Cold War in NATO bases and as part of NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command). CFB Edmonton (later known as RCAF Station Edmonton), a Canadian Forces Base, was first established in Blatchford Field (currently Edmonton’s City Centre Airport). The station was later transferred to RCAF Station Namao, just north of Edmonton; Station Namao served the United States Strategic Air Command during the Cold War, mainly for servicing of jet bombers.

Edmonton is also home to a bomb shelter that was to be used as Edmonton’s civil defense headquarters in case of Soviet nuclear attack. The shelter was built during the Korean War era to protect important government officials if a bomb was dropped; in addition, a local civil defense team (which included members of the police and fire department) held occasional exercises in preparation for a possible bombing. It is now being developed into the Edmonton Civil Defense Museum by Edmonton-based photographer Fred Armbruster.

Despite Edmonton’s rich heritage in the Cold War period, its significance is conspicuously downplayed in the Alberta Aviation Museum and after the threat of Soviet attack

subsidized, the bomb shelter was abandoned until 2006. Moreover, both the Alberta Aviation Museum and the in-development Edmonton Civil Defense Museum are privately-owned. The lack of government involvement in remembering this important part of Edmonton's history suggests that the subject is still largely ignored and potentially considered taboo. However, the importance of the Cold War is clear: many of the issues that arose during that time are still concerns today, and only by remembering and building awareness can we understand our current problems and seek solutions.

Though the Cold War officially ended more than twenty years ago, large stockpiles of nuclear weapons still exist in countries such as the United States and Russia. Together, they own ninety-four percent of the world's nuclear weapons, while Israel, India, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and France own the majority of the remainder. According to the Federation of American Scientists, the estimated total number of nuclear weapons in the world is 17 300. Of these, more than a quarter are considered operational. Stalled disarmament has led to increased nuclear threat on a global level – though the threat of war between the United States and Russia has decreased significantly, the continued development and stockpiling of these weapons has encouraged other countries to seek weapons. Nuclear proliferation and continued stockpiles increases the risk of accidental or miscalculated attacks. While many steps have been taken towards disarmament, the underlying issue remains – when some countries still have these weapons on high alert status, it is impossible to convince other countries that these weapons are useless. Ironically, overall anxiety over nuclear weapons is much lower than it was during the Cold War; the lack of public outcry about the continued threat makes it difficult for real preparations and action in terms of disarmament to take place.

Perhaps part of the reason for the apathy regarding nuclear weapons is that they are seen as unusable. After all, the deterrence theory of the Cold War is still very much in play; their use against rival nuclear-armed countries would lead to mutual assured destruction. However, limited nuclear warfare is certainly possible – the ongoing nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan has been highly publicized, and many fear a nuclear exchange between the two states. In addition, the stockpiles of nuclear weapons have also increased the likelihood of hijacked attacks, especially by terrorist groups. The Aum Shinrikyo terrorist group, which bombed several lines of the Tokyo subway lines in 1995, had attempted to acquire a nuclear bomb, and in Pakistan, terrorists have attacked three military nuclear facilities. There have been widespread fears about al-Qaeda's competence in creating dirty bombs, which were planned to be used against British troops in Afghanistan and which would result in large casualties and contaminate the area for many years.

For many people, the issue of nuclear weapons belongs to the past – to the end of World War 2 and the Cold War – but it is far from being simply part of history. The threat of nuclear weapons is still present, yet we have chosen, largely, to ignore it. Have we grown complacent to the idea of nuclear weapons? They are no longer the constant source of anxiety that they were during the Cold War but, in fact, the prospects of nuclear war are very real, as can be seen in the volatile situations in India and Pakistan: nuclear stockpiles are not diminishing, and new issues which could involve nuclear weapons are arising. Choosing to bury the subject of the Cold War is dangerous; we have chosen to ignore the nuclear threat that exists and we are unprepared for what may come. For example, the survival measures to be taken in the event of radioactive fallout are not common knowledge and are not taught in schools. Remembering the history of the Cold War and its implications today are key in raising public awareness of the risks we face in

the world today. However, steps towards remembering the Cold War are being taken in Edmonton: the Alberta Aviation Museum is adding several displays that will feature artifacts from the Cold War era and the Edmonton Civil Defense Museum is set to open in 2015.

Works Cited

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