

Fairbanks Welcomes the Military

From the start, the people of Fairbanks were enthusiastic about the building of Ladd Field, not only because of the economic boost it brought to the town, but also because the townsfolk were a friendly and welcoming sort. In the early months eight officers had their families with them in Fairbanks and found themselves invited to a variety of social activities.

Gaffney opened the gates to the townspeople on April 5, 1941 in observance of Army Day. An hour-long air show featured four planes from Fairbanks and nine from Anchorage. Cameras were prohibited and members of the public were warned to stay in designated areas. About 2,500 of the town's 3,500 residents attended. Gaffney flew the B-17 as part of the exhibition.

"Visitors were amazed to see that the place that was a wood wilderness a year ago has been transformed into a magnificent establishment, not yet complete, but sufficiently along to convince the most skeptical that Uncle Sam's defensive forces are here in a mighty substantial way," the News-Miner editorialized.



In August 1941, a dance at Hangar One also drew about two out of three Fairbanks residents. The News-Miner said 1,972 people danced, making it the "greatest crowd ever assembled under one roof in Interior Alaska and probably in the entire territory." Within four months the world would change so much that there would be no more time for community dances in Hangar One.



AMERICA ENTERS THE WAR

For a time, a single B-17 was the only plane left at the field. With the expansion of what would be known after June 20, 1941 as the Army Air Forces, aircraft were hard to come by throughout the military. There was also a continuing power struggle within the Army about where Ladd Field would fit into the chain of command, stemming from conflicting opinions about the relative value of the Cold Weather Test Detachment. Gen. Arnold remained a big proponent of Ladd, however, and at various times the field commander reported directly to him in Washington, D.C. One reporter said of the underlying tension: "The CWTD became a dissident voice crying out in the wilderness which other army outfits would like to gag," William Gilman wrote.

In the fall of 1941, the field had 520 men, but only 13 pilots, and Gaffney was concerned that it might not remain a cold weather testing station. The plan for the second year of cold weather testing was that two of every type of aircraft would be put to the test at Ladd Field, but growing world tensions, the shortage of aircraft and the events of Dec. 7, 1941 disrupted everything.

On that Sunday morning, Augie Hiebert was at the transmitter of Fairbanks radio station KFAR. He was checking short wave stations when he picked up word from San Francisco that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. "I knew that the military had a very uncertain short wave system if any at all," Hiebert said. "So I called

up Col. Gaffney, who was the military commander here. He was sort of a party guy; he had been up the night before. I got him out of bed and I asked him, 'Did you know there was a war on, Dale?'"

Gaffney instantly put the base and community on alert. He advised residents of the community to stay off the phones, keep off the streets at night, obey military guards and prepare for a possible attack. He sent soldiers to temporarily guard the radio station, federal building, telegraph office and other key points before volunteers could be recruited.

Gaffney said he "had three jobs for every man" on Ladd Field and needed his men back. Later, Gaffney explained his belief that the Japanese would destroy Fairbanks if they thought it was necessary. "In such a case it is very logical that a squadron of Japanese bombing planes would be sent to destroy this area with little thought being given to the possibility of its returning," he said.

Outdoor lights were banned and plywood and drapes were placed over the windows of houses and offices. After Dec. 7 all work at Ladd Field was conducted in a blackout.



Augie Hiebert and his dog, Sparky at the transmitter of Fairbanks radio station, KFAR. University of Alaska Fairbanks, Archives, 1959-0845-01052. 11

1940

April 1940
Maj. Dale Gaffney and others arrive to begin major construction of Ladd Field. Work force grows to 1,000 by summer.

May 1940
Hitler invades Belgium and Holland. Congress approves \$12.8 million for Anchorage air base construction.

June 1940
France surrenders to Germany.

June 1940
Construction begins on Elmendorf Field. First troops arrive in Anchorage.

July 1940
Then Col. Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr. arrives in Anchorage to command Alaska Defense Force.

August 1940
Buckner promoted to Brigadier General.

September 1940
Ladd Field runway completed. Cold Weather Experiment Station begins operation, ahead of schedule.

September 1940
Selective Service adopted in U.S.

October 1940
Churchill pledges that France will be liberated one day. U.S.-Canadian committee recommends series of military landing fields in Canada and Alaska.

November 1940
Anchorage Army installations named for Brig. Gen. Wilds Richardson and Capt. Hugh Elmendorf.

December 1940
New Fairbanks airfield named for Maj. Arthur Ladd, an Army pilot who died in South Carolina.

