

## “An awful lot to learn”



Lt. Col. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold accepts the key to the city of Fairbanks, Alaska. University of Alaska Fairbanks, Archives, 1987-0149-00044

For most of the 1930s Alaska’s nonvoting delegate to Congress, Anthony Dimond, had argued without success in Congress that spending money to fortify Pearl Harbor in Hawaii without taking any precautions to defend Alaska was like locking one door of a house and leaving another wide open. He said the territory could be taken “almost overnight by a hostile force” and any effort to recapture Alaska would come at a cost of millions of dollars and thousands of lives.

But isolationism remained a formidable political force in America and the nation was slow to recognize the threat from Germany and Japan or how aviation had redefined notions of national security. This was not for lack of trying by men like Dimond and Lt. Col. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, the officer who led a groundbreaking flight of 10 Army bombers to Alaska in 1934 on which he mapped airways to Alaska and scouted locations for bases.



Constructing Quartermaster’s party arriving in Fairbanks. Left to right: Cadet John Lee, Jr., Maj. Newton Longfellow, Maj. Dale Gaffney, Col. John Lee, Maj. E. M. George, Capt. C.W. Gibson. Kay Kennedy Aviation collection, 1991-0098-00837, Archives and Manuscripts, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

The future five-star general and commander of the Army Air Forces in World War II became one of the most outspoken proponents of the need to defend Alaska. After the 1934 flight, Arnold recommended that an air base be built at Fairbanks, as a supply point and for cold weather testing. Congress authorized a cold weather testing station, but provided no money to build it.

In the meantime, the Army sent an official site selection party north in 1936 to pick a spot just to the east of Fairbanks along the Chena River. “We have no knowledge, of course, as to when the funds will be voted,” the head of the delegation told the Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed papers in March 1937 to withdraw nearly six square miles for the base, but Congress was still in no hurry to act.

In testimony to Congress in 1939, Arnold was characteristically blunt about the danger of continued delay. By then he was chief of the Army Air Corps and worried about holes in U.S. defenses. “We do not know anything about Alaska,” he said. “Our people must be trained how to fly up there, about the weather and the kind of clothing they must have. How to start an engine when it’s 40 degrees below zero. How to keep oil from congealing before you get it into the engine. What happens to a metal airplane when you bring it from this 40 below temperature and suddenly put it in a warm hangar. We have indications and every reason to believe that the rivets will pop right out. All these things we must go through and there is going to be an awful lot to learn.”



Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed his approval for a military base based in Alaska in March 1937.

The news in early 1939 that Congress approved \$4 million to start building a cold weather testing facility was hailed by the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner as the “first definite step by the United States for the establishment of an Army air unit and training of its personnel in the frigid zone. That it constitutes a departure and a very necessary one goes without saying.”

That summer, a 17-man party arrived in Fairbanks in two military aircraft to start the survey work on the cold weather test station. At the Weeks Field airport, located near where Lathrop High School and the Noel Wien Library are found today, about 100 of the town’s nearly 3,000 residents turned out to welcome the new arrivals. It was Aug. 21, 1939, eleven days before Adolph Hitler invaded Poland and began World War II.



Hangar One under construction, ca winter 1940-41. AAF photo, courtesy Eielson AFB and Steve Dennis.



In the fall of 1939 the Army acquired the land needed to build a four-mile spur of the Alaska Railroad to get heavy equipment to the site of what was soon to be named Ladd Field. Before the cold weather arrived, a construction crew poured a six-inch thick test slab of concrete for the airfield runway, measuring 60 feet by 120 feet. Since the same company also had the contract to pave the first street in Fairbanks the next year, it also did a test section of pavement downtown at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Cushman Street.

The Ladd Field ground work continued through the winter, an unusual step in a region where it was traditional for most outdoor work to cease during the coldest months. In April, 1940 a shipload of construction materials made its way north, along with 15 enlisted men, an O-38 airplane and Maj. Dale Gaffney, the first commander of Ladd Field. By the summer, up to 1,200 men were employed on the runway and the associated buildings. Gold mining had been the biggest source of employment in Fairbanks, but many workers left the big gold dredges to try their hand at construction work on Ladd Field. By July foundations had been poured for 12 buildings and the 5,000-foot runway was more than half finished. The concrete slab for the runway was six inches thick, atop two feet of gravel. A lot of the work had to be done by hand in heavily loaded wheelbarrows called “cement buggies.”

Ed Hinke was working in Juneau when the call went out across Alaska that Ladd Field needed workers in 1940. “I landed the hardest and the dirtiest job on the base,” he said. “I was a cement dumper, one of a crew of two. We had to dump seven sacks of cement into the hopper every few minutes. Had to wear ‘tin clothes,’ goggles and respirator all the time in the hot Fairbanks summer.”

The construction on the air field created so many jobs that an observer wrote of Fairbanks that unemployed men gathered in herds on the street corners, but not for long: “Most of them will have jobs within a week or so and then another flock will flood into the city to be in their turn

## The Building of Ladd Field



absorbed by the almost incredible activity of Fairbanks and the Fairbanks area.”

With Hitler overrunning Europe, Arnold returned to Alaska in July 1940 to check on the status of the hurry-up military work in Anchorage and Fairbanks. In Anchorage, the major project was the construction of Elmendorf airfield within what became Fort Richardson, envisioned as the center of Alaska’s defenses.

Speaking to the Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce just down the street from the new Lacey Street Theatre, which was showing “Gone With The Wind,” Arnold shared his views on preparing the nation. “If we have an adequate defense in the air, there is less likelihood that we will be attacked. Air defense is national insurance. The recent wars have taught us one lesson which our people should never forget. That is, that the flying machine, one of the finest vessels of air commerce, can be turned into the deadliest weapon of war,” Arnold said.

Arnold was impressed with the pace of work at Ladd and decided to move up the schedule by a year, figuring that the runway would be finished and the troops could be housed in temporary quarters that fall. The runway, dubbed the “largest slab in the Territory of Alaska” by a reporter, was completed in September about three months before the runway at Elmendorf Field in Anchorage was ready. Gaffney “christened” the Ladd runway on Sept. 5, when he landed the O-38, the first Army Air Corps plane assigned to Alaska, on the runway that would see thousands of aircraft within a few years.



An aerial view of the Headquarters area in 1940. Hangar No. One is under construction in the foreground, while the foundation was being laid for the Air Corps Barracks, and the BOQ was receiving finishing touches. AAF photo.