

Testing more than airplanes



UAF Lulu Fairbanks collection, 1968-0069-00604.

On his first visit to Ladd in July 1940, Col., later Gen., Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr., the commander of all Army tactical forces in Alaska, talked about the various types of cold weather testing he'd like to see at the new station. He said that 40 dogs would be moved from Chilkoot Barracks to Fairbanks, adding that dog teams were important to help aviators stranded in out of the way places.

He had other exercises in mind as well, as 6,000 pairs of snowshoes had been requisitioned for the Alaska bases. "This seems to be a good snowshoe country and we will



10th Rescue Squadron, Dog Team Air Drop flying in a C-47. University of Alaska Fairbanks, Archives, 1987-0149-00023.

use them extensively. Skis are harder to learn and will probably only have limited use," said Buckner, who was once described in print as being "hard as a hunk of pig iron and built like stone lighthouse."

"Men will be sent out in the hills to camp in the snow," he said. "They will learn how to live in the cold and the snow. It is likely that they will bivouac in the mountains and perhaps it will be arranged for two battalions to meet in the wilderness for maneuvers on snowshoes," said Buckner.

Finding the right clothing was an early challenge.

The coats the mechanics were first given to wear at 40 below were bulky and inadequate, leaving the men to alternately sweat and freeze. They needed mobility and they needed to keep warm while moving, a difficult combination that took time to achieve.

"Whenever we could, we went to the field and tested cold weather gear—from clothing to sleeping to cooking," said Ret. Col. Richard Dennison, a second lieutenant at the time. In the search for the right cold-weather clothes, one reporter wrote, the Army wanted garments that wouldn't stifle a pilot in the cockpit or give him instantaneous pneumonia if he found himself in nine inches of fresh snow with a northwest wind

One of the early coats worn by many of the early Ladd Field soldiers was known as the "DVG," which stood for Dale V. Gaffney. "Everybody was issued one of those



Emergency rations. AAF photo, CWTD Report 1942-43. An important component to the emergency kit was the "can opener" (shown on the right) still in use today.

DVGs," said Bill Stroecker, a Fairbanksan who went into the Army in 1942. The sheepskin coats didn't work for air crews in cramped quarters, however, and Gaffney got involved in the development of down coats, which were more comfortable.

Test pilot Randy Acord said that one innovation that helped mechanics and pilots was a thin rayon glove, the only item he knew of that served its purpose in cold or hot weather. In Arizona, soldiers wore the gloves to keep from burning their fingers on hot metal. At Ladd Field, the soldiers wore them inside of big mittens and could take their hands out of the mittens, tighten a nut and put them back in the mittens without having their fingers freeze to the metal.

None of the airplanes had good heaters for severe weather. One of the creative solutions devised to try to make flying a little more comfortable was a garment dubbed "electric underwear" by the newspapers that could be plugged in while in flight. There were small coils woven into garment,



Lt. Marvin Walseth with C64 Norseman and wearing a fur parka and mukluks, 1941.

which was plugged in, as a reporter put it, like an "electric bottle warmer at home." Gaffney flew one of the B-17s for seven-and-a-half hours in the hot suit.



K-12 camera man testing his 75lb camera from an aircraft. University of Alaska Fairbanks, Archives, 1987-0149-00021.

The transfer of the dogs that Buckner had talked about the previous summer took place, but with

a strange twist. The 43 dogs and ten men left Haines on Jan. 24, 1941 for a 600-mile trip to Fairbanks. They carried radios and had food and other supplies dropped by air. The expedition got hung up in deep snow near Burwash Landing after a month on the trail and a B-17 from Ladd made an emergency flight to rescue the inexperienced dog drivers and their teams, many of which were reported to be sick. The plane landed on the ice of Kluane Lake on wheels and retrieved the dogs and military mushers, said to be a first in the history of aviation.



In 1942, Sir Hubert Wilkins, celebrated Arctic explorer (wearing the black tie), visited Ladd Field, Fairbanks, Alaska, to help solve some of the problems that arose in pushing Lend-Lease planes through to Russia during one of the bitterest winters ever recorded in the sub-arctic Alaska. To this left stands Gen. Dale V. Gaffney wearing the sheep-lined coat that was named after him – the "DVG." Kay Kennedy Aviation collection, 1991-0098-00854, Archives and Manuscripts, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

fairbanks and the military

1920 through 1945

1920

Gen. Billy Mitchell sends the "Black Wolf Squadron" from New York to Nome, a 9,000-mile roundtrip that establishes aviation in Alaska.

1922

Alaska Agricultural College & School of Mines opens in Fairbanks.

1923

Alaska Railroad completed. President Harding visits Alaska to drive golden spike. Harding dies while on return to Washington.

1924

Carl "Ben" Eielson flies first air mail flights in Alaska.

Noel Wien makes the first flight from Anchorage to Fairbanks.

Douglas World Cruisers stop in Alaska on first flight around the world.

1925

Emergency dog team relay from Nenana to Nome carries diphtheria serum to Nome to combat health crisis.