

# EIELSON *In the Beginning*

## How important is Alaska?

Gen. Billy Mitchell testified before the House Committee on Military Affairs in early 1935 of Eielson's importance. During hearings regarding the strategic needs of the fledgling U.S. Army Air Corps and the establishment of new bases for frontier defense, he made the following statement:

*"Alaska is the most central place in the world for aircraft, and that is true of Europe, Asia or North America. I believe in the future, he who holds Alaska will hold the world, and I think it is the most strategic place in the world."*

In 1943, surveyors first staked out the land that eventually became Eielson Air Force Base. These were the war years — Japanese forces had invaded the Aleutian Islands, the Soviets needed American aircraft to help them defend their homeland, and the Allies had yet to get the upper hand in Europe or the Pacific. But if one looks back, it becomes apparent that Mother Nature, more than Uncle Sam, prompted the opening of Eielson and its expansion to become the premier Air Force installation in Interior Alaska.

During the years prior to World War II, the Interior had already welcomed an Army Air Forces installation, Ladd Field, known today as Fort Wainwright. In 1939, Congress authorized a base in Fairbanks, primarily as a site for the cold-weather testing of aircraft and equipment, since Interior Alaska offered the consistently cold temperatures needed to test new technology.

But the Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor forced a temporary halt to testing at Ladd Field, since the military needed all its aircraft to defend Alaska. Testing resumed less than a year later, but by 1943 it had once again become a second priority. Ladd Field found itself a busy hub for fighters and bombers destined for the "Forgotten" or "1,000 Mile War" in the Aleutians, or en route to the Soviet Union as part of the Lend-Lease program.

Ladd Field was the turnover point for large numbers of U.S. aircraft, which flew the arduous route that stretched from Great Falls, Mont., through the Northwest Territories, and into the interior of Alaska. From Ladd Field, Soviet pilots would take possession of the aircraft, ranging from P-39s to B-25 Mitchell bombers, and fly them to Moscow through Siberia and eastern Russia.

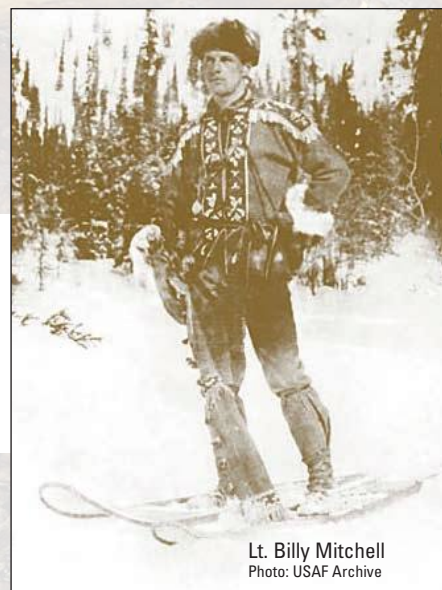
The first Lend-Lease flight took place Sept. 3, 1942, and they continued through



Two 28 Composite Group B-24 Liberators land after a mission in the Aleutian Islands. Photo: USAF Archive



Ladd Field. Photo: USAF Archive



Lt. Billy Mitchell  
Photo: USAF Archive

August 1945. In all, nearly 8,000 aircraft were turned over to the Russians and ferried over the "air bridge" through Siberia. These aircraft were stripped of everything except basic instrumentation and armament. With no navigational aids, pilots would take off from Ladd Field and fly the first leg to Galena on the Yukon River. After refueling, the pilots would fly to Nome. From there it was only a short hop across to Russia. Still, dozens of planes were lost due to bad weather.

The weather also proved to be a danger to the aircraft arriving in Fairbanks. The winter of 1942 was one of the coldest on record, with temperatures dropping to minus 67 degrees and ice fog hindering landing operations at Ladd Field. Sometimes the planes arriving from Montana were unable to make it all the way to Fairbanks and did not have enough fuel to return to the alternative landing strip in Big Delta, known today as Delta Junction.

Officials decided to build an auxiliary field somewhere close to, but south of, Ladd Field as a weather alternative landing field. Military planners chose the site where Eielson sits today. The government had already withdrawn the acreage in 1939 for use in a flood control project. Also, the terrain around the proposed site was free of approach hazards for arriving aircraft.

The nearest hills, low ones at that, were about six miles from the site. Part of the acreage was eventually set aside for flood control, and the remainder was transferred to the War Department in 1943.





The Army completed construction of the original base in October 1944. It was composed of about 600 acres, with housing for 108 officers and 330 enlisted men. It eventually featured a 10-bed dispensary, two parallel runways 6,625 feet long by 150 feet wide, and many wooden structures, none of which remain today. The base was dubbed "Satellite" or "Mile 26" by the workers and "26-Mile Strip" by the brass. One story said the base was named 26-Mile Strip because of its proximity to one of the 13 Army telegraph stations that linked Fairbanks with Valdez as part of the Army's WAMCAT, or Washington-Alaska Military Communications and Telegraph, system.

Another story had a simpler explanation. The original base facilities and the only gate were constructed at the south end of the runway, so people traveling from Fairbanks would have to go around the south end to reach the base. The drive measured out to be exactly 26 miles, so the base was then known as 26-Mile Strip. However it received the name, it stuck, even though the north end of the base is only about 23 miles from Fairbanks.

At war's end, the number of military personnel in Alaska dropped, and many of the small airfields used along the Lend-Lease route were shut down. The airstrip was mothballed, and no decision was made regarding its future use. But in 1946, with the Cold War looming, military planners decided a strategic bomber base was needed in Interior Alaska. They chose to build a new base 29 miles south of Nenana. As construction began at the new site, a series of earthquakes revealed that a major fault ran across the middle of the runway.

It would be very costly to repair a runway of sufficient size and makeup to handle Strategic Air Command (SAC) bombers, so planners looked at other options. A long runway was still needed to accommodate the planned deployment of SAC's intercontinental bombers. Ladd Field was ruled out because its main runway had already been extended to the limit allowed due to a bend in the Chena River. Any extension of Ladd's runway would have to cross the river toward town, increasing noise and traffic over Fairbanks. Planners were left with only one suitable option: 26-Mile Strip. Resources from the aborted site were transferred to 26-Mile Strip, and work began on the upgrade immediately. The west runway was extended to 14,500 feet, and 26-Mile Strip was finally a full-fledged Air Force installation.

This was not the end of the site south of Nenana, though. A year later the military began awarding contracts for the construction of early warning defense radar and communications installations throughout the state. Since acreage had already been withdrawn for military use, plans were made to go ahead with the construction of Clear Air Force Station, which is still in operation today.

On Sept. 18, 1947, the Air Force gained its independence as a separate branch from the Army when President Harry Truman signed the National Security Act of 1947. The newly created Air Force now had two bases near Fairbanks: Ladd Field, which was home to fighter interceptors providing air defense in the Interior, and 26-Mile Strip. The first Strategic Air Command bombers arrived at 26-Mile in November with the deployment of the 97th Bomber Group from Smokey Hill Air Force Base, Kan.

On Jan. 13, 1948, the Air Force changed the name of 26-Mile Field to Eielson Air Force Base in honor of famed Arctic aviation pioneer Carl Ben Eielson. Eielson was a renowned bush pilot in the 1920s who was killed in a 1929 crash while attempting to rescue stranded passengers and a cargo of furs aboard the freighter Nanuk, caught in the ice off the Siberian coast.

The 97th Bomber Group departed Eielson in March 1948, but other SAC units followed.

Eielson played host to B-29s, B-36s and finally B-47s. In fact, the largest hangar on Eielson today, now used for the Air Force's RED FLAG-Alaska exercises, was originally built to house three B-36 "Peacekeeper" bombers, the largest bomber in the Air Force inventory.

Following the Korean War, the Air Force began to look at ways to cut costs. The Air Force had mixed emotions about having two air bases so close together. Because Ladd AFB had reached its limits of runway expansion, they decided to transfer Ladd to the Army and move its Air Force operations to Eielson. On Jan.

1, 1961, Ladd AFB was returned to the Army and renamed Fort Wainwright. Since

then, the Air Force has seen many changes at Eielson, and many missions and aircraft have come and gone. Since its early days, Eielson has been home to weather reconnaissance aircraft, tactical units from Alaskan Air Command, aerial tankers, A/OA-10s, and most recently F-16s as part of the 354th Fighter Wing, flying as aggressors for RED FLAG-Alaska.

Strategically, Eielson's location allows units based here to respond to hot spots in Europe faster than units at bases on the East Coast. The same is true for Korea and the Far East. Eielson units can even respond more quickly than many units based in California. A 1940 census reported that 1,000 military people lived in Alaska that year. Today, Eielson alone is home to more than twice that number. The large military presence in Alaska, combined with the large amount of defense spending in the state, ranking second only to the oil industry, ensures a significant military impact for decades to come. With Alaska's strategic location, recognized in the 1920s and 1930s by Air Force pioneers like Gens. Henry "Hap" Arnold and Billy Mitchell, the vision of Eielson's future certainly outshines its humble beginnings, and may someday outshine its historic past.





# CARL BEN EIELSON

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Today, Eielson AFB stands as an example of the achievements made possible through his pioneering accomplishments. On Jan. 13, 1948, the Air Force officially dedicated the installation and named it in honor of Carl Ben Eielson, Alaska's pioneer bush pilot. Mr. Eielson came to Alaska in 1922 to teach general science, English and physical education to Fairbanks high school students, but he simply could not stay away from aviation. He equated aviation to pioneering, and he believed the years to come would establish the airplane as one of mankind's most important means of transportation.

Eielson was born in Hatton, N.D., on June 26, 1897. He enrolled at the University of North Dakota and later the University of Wisconsin. Following America's entry into World War I, Eielson got his chance to become an aviator in January 1918 by enlisting in the newly formed aviation section of the U.S. Army Signal Corps. Upon the completion of flight school, one month before he was to depart for France, Eielson received his commission as a second lieutenant. The war in Europe ended, and he was discharged from the Army in March 1919 on the same day he was commissioned. While much knowledge of Eielson's full military career is unclear, he did return to active duty for a brief period in the mid-1920s and received a commission as a full colonel in the North Dakota National Guard in 1929.





Eielson worked at many things during the course of his life. He went into business with his brother selling bonds for a firm in Minnesota, helped develop more suitable skis for use on airplanes after returning to the Army Air Service, attended Georgetown University Law School, was an airplane inspector for the Department of Commerce, and flew airmail in Florida – becoming the first man to fly mail between Jacksonville, Fla., and Atlanta, Ga.

Eielson's heart always returned to Alaska and flying. Intrigued by the vastness of Alaska and the potential for aviation, he found himself drawn away from the Fairbanks High School classroom. He convinced several Fairbanks businessmen that commercial aviation was a feasible business venture in Interior Alaska. He became the sole pilot for the Farthest North Aviation Company, formed in 1922. After obtaining a surplus Army aircraft in the Lower 48, Eielson soon made the first regular commercial flights from Fairbanks to Interior mining camps and communities. He delivered supplies, mail and passengers in hours over distances that previously had taken days by train or weeks by dogsled. Successful and popular among its growing number of customers, the commercial operations of the company led toward regular airmail deliveries in the Interior.

In 1924, the U.S. Post Office Department asked Eielson to fly an experimental 320-mile airmail route between Fairbanks and McGrath, Alaska. The trip took 18 days by dogsled — one way. Eielson made the trip in three hours. With the help of the territorial congressional representative, a postal contract came later that year. The Post Office Department unexpectedly withdrew the contract after six months of operations, but Eielson remained in Alaska as a bush pilot. His dream of crisscrossing the vast Alaska Territory by air became a reality in 1925 when Australian explorer Sir Hubert Wilkins enlisted Eielson for an exploratory expedition to the North Pole and a possible trans-polar flight from the northern coast of Alaska to Greenland. The expedition, which started in 1926, was unsuccessful,

although Eielson became the first aviator to cross the Arctic Circle and land an airplane on the North Slope. He joined Wilkins again in 1927 on another unsuccessful Arctic-North Pole expedition. Eielson made history on the expedition's third effort in 1928. He and Wilkins flew the 2,200-mile route over the polar ice cap from the North Slope of Alaska to Spitsbergen Island, Norway. This was the first flight from North America over the Arctic Ocean to Europe. Upon his return to the states, Eielson was called to Washington, D.C., where he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Later, at the request of President Herbert Hoover, he returned to Washington to receive the Harmon Trophy for the most outstanding feat in aviation in 1928.

He returned to Alaska in the summer of 1929 as a local, national and international hero. Later that year, Eielson accompanied Wilkins to the Antarctic, becoming the first pilot to fly over both polar regions in the same year. He used his fame to good advantage, securing financial backing in the Lower 48 for the establishment of a large commercial aviation company in Alaska. As an active participant in the company's flying operations, he joined company pilots in the winter of 1929 on a flight to rescue stranded passengers and a cargo of furs aboard the freight ship Nanuk, caught in the ice off the Siberian coast. It was during this rescue attempt that Eielson and his mechanic, Earl Borland, lost their lives.

Alaska later memorialized Eielson by naming a mountain peak near Mount McKinley after him. In 1948, the U.S. Air Force renamed "26-Mile Strip," located 23 miles southeast of Fairbanks, after him. In July 1985, Eielson was inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame for bringing aviation to the sparsely populated regions of the world to better serve the needs of his fellow man.

*Information in this story was gathered from articles and reports on Carl Ben Eielson's life found in the 354th Fighter Wing History Office repository.*



Modern aviation in Alaska, whether for business, sport or hobby, is a thriving industry built on the pioneering foundation of pilots such as Carl Ben Eielson.

Photo: AlaskaExpress