

Life at Ladd Field

The original quarters constructed at the field drew rave reviews. "Nothing I can say can possibly tell you how nice they are for Alaska," the wife of a lieutenant wrote home in early 1941. Later that year, an Army inspector said the barracks for the men "are the best I have ever seen. There is little doubt that morale of troops will be materially improved." After the United States entered the war, the demands on Ladd Field intensified, and the base blossomed with Quonset huts, Pacific huts, prefabricated wood frame barracks, and other rapidly built structures. "You started out with a new fine set of buildings, and then they got in a rush, why they just threw up whatever they could," veteran Bill Stroecker said.



An unidentified soldier at the corner of Cushman Street and 2nd Avenue, a popular site for souvenir photos taken for friends and family "back home." Photo courtesy of June Edwards Collection, TYHS.



WACS and their dates at NCO club, 1945. Courtesy Audrey Viriden, fourth from left.



A soldier sits on the Six Mile fire truck Engine No. 9. UAF Archives, Cecil H. Kornegay Photograph Collection. 1999-204-106.



Left and right below: Baseball was a favorite pastime played under the Alaskan midnight sun. Photo courtesy of June Edwards collection, TYHS.



There were 184 Pacific huts that served as barracks, which contained bunks and were a place to pass the time, as Stroecker put it. Stan Jurek said the barracks he lived in provided him with a bunk, a place to store his rifle, and a shelf for clothes. "Ours was named Pneumonia Gulch, next one was Snake Pit, and they were all pretty cold living quarters in the wintertime." The men would chip in and pay someone to keep the fire in the coal stove going at night so they wouldn't freeze.

For entertainment, the men would go to the bars in Fairbanks or just outside the city, drop by the USO Club on the Chena River, play basketball, baseball, and ski on Birch Hill. At times, there were shows put on by the likes of Bob Hope and a boxing demonstration at which heavy-weight champion Joe Louis acted as the referee.



WACs pose for a summer sleigh ride, 1945. Courtesy Betty Wiker.

1942

January 1942
Construction begins on Otter Point Airfield on Umnak Island 70 miles south of Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians.

February 1942
Cold Weather Experiment Station renamed Cold Weather Testing Detachment (CWTD). Sixth Air Depot organized.

President Roosevelt authorizes construction of Alaska Highway.

March 1942
Construction begins on Alaska Highway.

Gen. MacArthur leaves Philippines, says, "I shall return."

April 1942
Col. James Doolittle, who grew up in Nome, leads raid on Tokyo and other Japanese cities.

People of Japanese ancestry ordered interned. Many from Alaska sent to Washington and then to Idaho.

Memorial Day 1942
USO dedicated in downtown Fairbanks.

June 1942
Japanese land on Attu and Kiska islands, bomb Dutch Harbor. Nearly 900 Aleuts evacuated from their homes to Southeast Alaska.

Cold Weather Test Detachment deactivated.

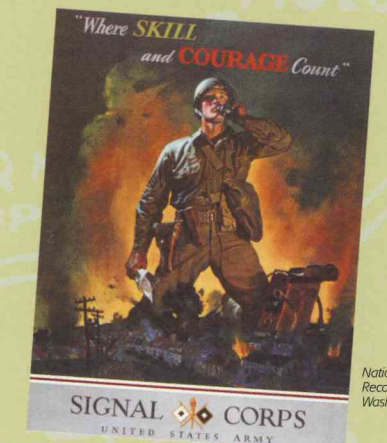
July 1942
Cold Weather Test Detachment reactivated.

August 1942
Ladd Field prepares to deliver airplanes to Russians. Advance crews arrive. At peak, up to 300 Russians were stationed in Fairbanks.

September 1942
Lend-Lease deliveries of aircraft through Ladd Field begins.

Ladd hospital opens.

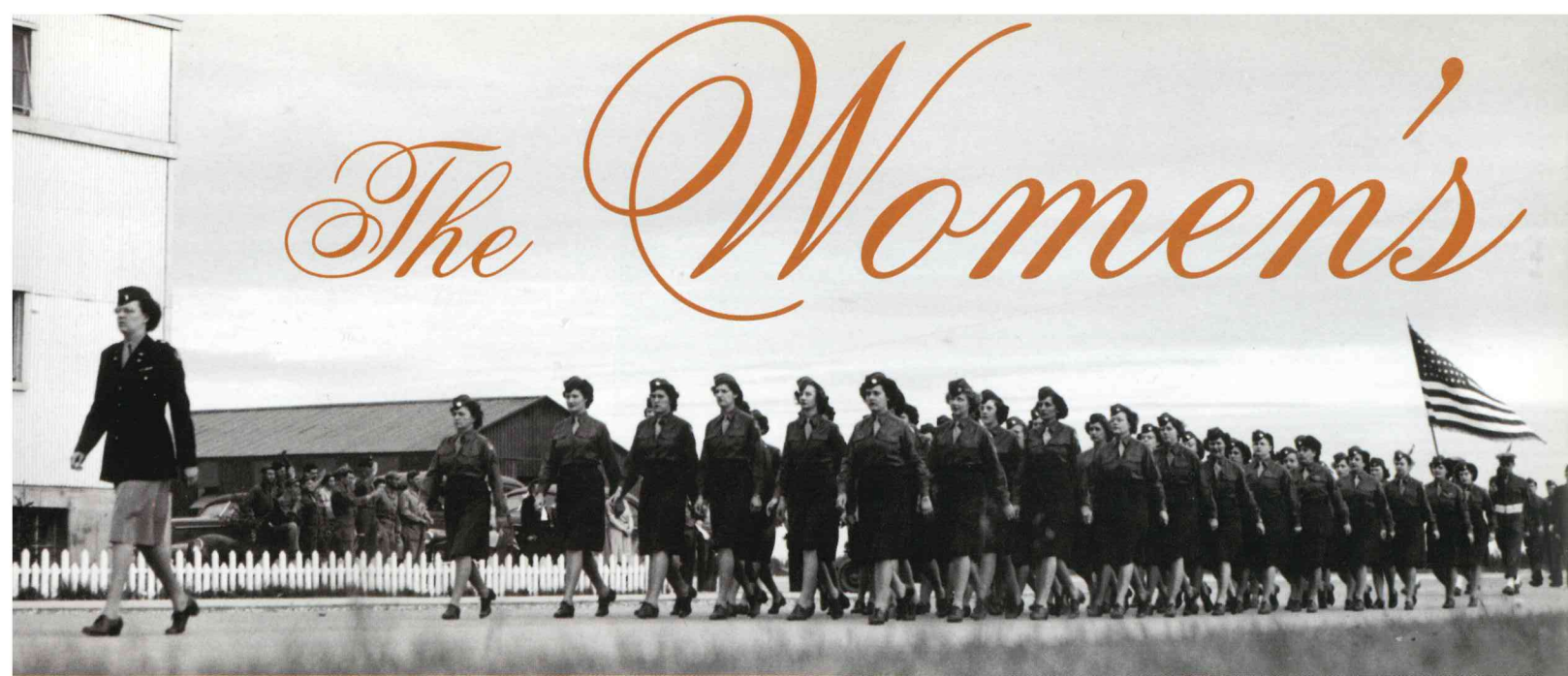
November 1942
Alaska Highway opens, 1,000 trucks dispatched north.



National Archives and Records Administration Washington DC

The Women's

Army Corps



During the last months of the war, Ladd Field was home to the first Women's Army Corps unit assigned to Alaska, the 1466th AAF Base Unit, Squadron W. The unit arrived in April 1945, occupying a brand new barracks that was destroyed by a fire that killed one of the soldiers that June.

The WACs arrived from Great Falls, Montana; 153 soldiers strong, in 13 ATC planes. They were wearing the five layers of clothes assigned to them for winter protection, which weren't needed in the spring. "When we got to Fairbanks, the temperature was warmer than it had been in Great Falls," said Audrey Virden. They worked in office jobs, on kitchen duty, as warehouse clerks, dispatchers, medics, mechanics, and in public relations during their stay at Ladd, which lasted until December, when they returned south to be discharged. Lt. Betty Etten, the

WAC squadron passes in review in front of Hangar One, August 10, 1945. UAF Archives, Betty Wiker Collection, 2003-0175-00029.

commanding officer of the squadron, said the WACs handled many jobs at Ladd. The WACs also traveled to other installations in Alaska on morale-building missions. About 40 of them went with the 577th AAF dance band to attend a dance with the GIs at Galena along the Yukon River.

During their off-duty hours at Ladd, some of the WACs played softball, grew flowers and vegetables, tried gold panning, and stopped by the USO Club downtown.



Above; Commemorative souvenir pillow cases were popular gifts to family and friends back home. Photo by Brian Allen.

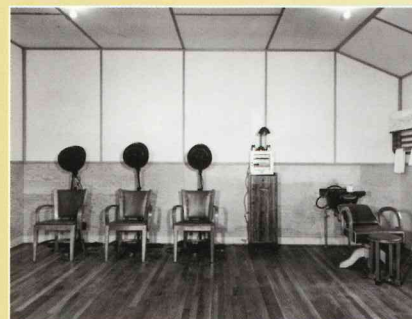
Left; June Edwards and unidentified woman on the front steps of the USO Building on First Avenue. The USO building was torn down some years ago to make way for the Golden Heart Plaza. Photo courtesy of June Edwards collection, TYHS.



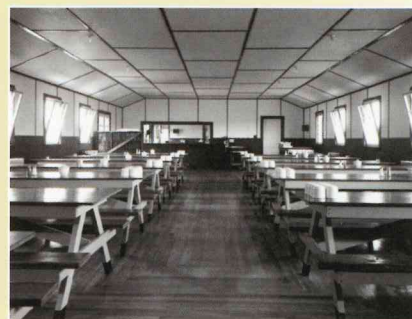
Bob Hope rides a dog sled during one of his many visits to Alaska as a USO entertainer. UAF Archives, 1987-0149-00091.



Interior shot of the lounge in the Fairbanks USO (United Service Organizations) building. World War II Photographer Album, 1941-1945, UAA, Zenas Richards Collection, HMC-0548



WAC barracks interior; beauty parlor. UAF, Betty Wiker Collection, 2003-0175-00035.



WAC barracks interior; mess hall. UAF, Betty Wiker Collection, 2003-0175-00034.



WAC barracks interior; enlisted bay. UAF, Betty Wiker Collection, 2003-0175-00031.

January 1943
Aleutian campaign escalates.

February 1943
Naval facility opens on Amchitka.

Japanese abandon Guadalcanal after costly battle with Americans.

March 1943
Japanese supply line to Aleutians broken.

April 1943
Attu invasion force moves into place. U.S. aircraft bomb Attu.

May 1943
U.S. forces land on Attu, meeting determined resistance. Battle of Attu ends with American victory. Americans lose 549 men, while 2,350 Japanese bodies found. Twenty-nine Japanese survive and are taken prisoner. U.S. also had 1,148 wounded and 2,100 troops lost to accidents, sickness, exhaustion, or frostbite.

May 31, 1943
U.S. completes the capture of Attu.

June 8, 1943
Naval Air Facility, Attu, Aleutian Islands, is established.

June 29, 1943
Naval Auxiliary Air Facility, Shemya, Aleutian Islands, is established.

July 1943
Drowning death of Pvt. John White strains relations with Soviets in Fairbanks. White was a driver from Fairbanks who was known to fear water and could not swim, but while serving as a driver for high-ranking Soviets he took them to an isolated lake a few miles from Fairbanks. The Soviets said they separated, but when they returned to the lake, they found his clothes neatly folded on the shore as if he had decided to go swimming. Speculation about what happened continues to this day.

July 1943
U.S. bombards Kiska with air attack.

July 14, 1943
U.S. Destroyers bombard Kiska. Naval Operating Base, Adak, is established.

July 22, 1943
Naval task force consisting of 2 battleships, 5 cruisers, and 9 destroyers bombard Kiska area.

July 28, 1943
Japanese evacuate Kiska undetected by Allies.

August 1, 1943
Daily bombings of Kiska start.

August 2, 1943
Naval task groups consisting of 2 battleships, 5 cruisers, and 9 destroyers bombard Kiska, Aleutian Islands. Kiska is bombarded 10 times between this date and 15 August.

One of the most important aspects of the history of Ladd Field is how this remote outpost played a pivotal role in a campaign by the United States to help the Soviet Union battle Hitler. Serving as a bridge to the Soviet Union became its most sensitive mission, although one that was officially cloaked in secrecy for the first two years.

The Alaska ★ Siberia Route



The 5,000th aircraft delivered at Ladd Field, September 1944. Courtesy Randy Accord

Early in the war, Germany collaborated with the Soviet Union, but that collaboration ended in 1941 when Hitler double-crossed Stalin and sent 250 divisions toward key Russian cities across a 2,000 mile front. Hitler believed that defeating the Soviet Union was the key to conquering England. "If Russia is beaten, England's last hope is gone. Germany is then master of Europe and the Balkans," Hitler had written a year earlier.

As the Germans battered the unprepared Red Army in 1941 and wiped out many of its aircraft, the Roosevelt administration declared that helping the Russians was essential to the defense of the United States. Recognizing that the Russians were taking some pressure off England, Roosevelt pledged to help.

Nearly \$50 billion worth of war material flowed to a total of 32 Soviet Union allies under the Lend-Lease Act. About \$11 billion of that went to the Russians, with most of the 15 million tons delivered by ship. The supplies included 427,000 trucks, 13,000 combat vehicles and everything else from shoes to diesel engines and nearly 15,000 combat planes.

In the fall of 1942, U.S. and Soviet leaders had worked out a plan under which airplanes would be delivered from the United States to the Soviet Union via Alaska. Other routes by sea and air were used to supply Lend-Lease equipment, but going through Alaska was a way to get planes to the front within days, instead of weeks or months.

The leaders of the two nations agreed, after months of haggling, that Ladd Field, would be the point where the planes would be handed over to the Russian pilots. The Soviets demanded no Americans fly beyond Alaska.



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1943

August 15, 1943
Naval task force under Commander North Pacific Force lands United States Army and Canadian troops at Kiska, Aleutian Islands.

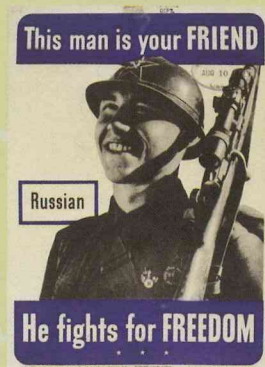
August 22, 1943
Allied forces launch assault on Kiska. They discover the Japanese had abandoned the island the previous month. Mines, booby traps, and friendly fire accidents add to casualties. A total of about 1,000 U.S. forces die during Aleutian campaign from June 1942 to August 1943.

October 1943
Ladd Field transferred to Air Transport Command.

November 1943
150,000 military personnel in Alaska. War Department publicly confirms Lend-Lease program.

December 1943
Lt. Leon Crane survives B-24 crash by parachuting to safety. He wanders in the wilderness for nine days before stumbling across a trapper's cabin where he recovers his strength. After the weather improves, he makes his way 120 miles down the Charley River and is rescued 84 days after the crash.

December 21, 1943
Naval aircraft from Attu, bomb Kurile Islands.



National Archives and Records Administration Washington DC

1944

February 1944
Two P-39s collide about 60 miles southeast of Fairbanks. Pilots survive, but a search plane can not land nearby. Two Ladd men set off from Birch Lake with sled dog teams and rescue the pilots.

May 1944
Vice President Henry Wallace stops at Ladd.

June 1944
D-Day invasion begins on the Normandy Coast.

July 1944
Commercial use allowed on the Army's Seattle-Ketchikan communications line.

August 1944
War Department cuts back Alaska forces. Ladd Field has 1,700 civilians on payroll.

October 1944
Japanese Navy suffers heavy losses in Battle of Leyte Gulf.

November 1944
FDR elected to fourth term.

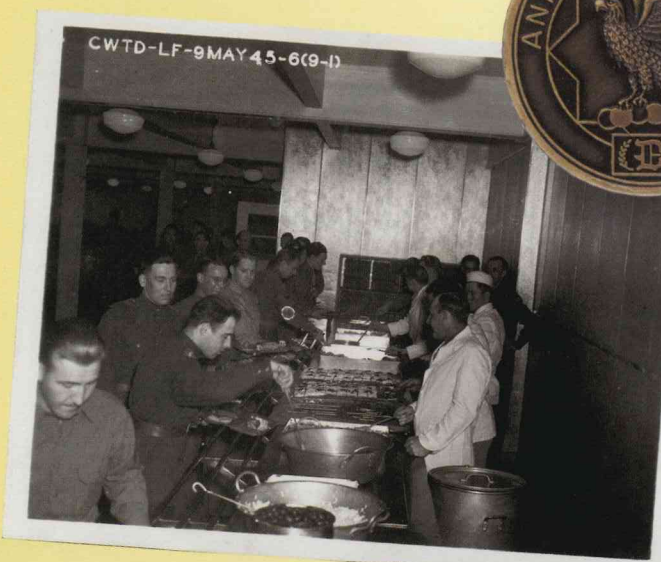
December 1944
Air assaults increase on Japanese capital.



Back and forth negotiations with Stalin took place while the Japanese were invading the Aleutians. For the meantime, the Air Transport Command (ATC) delivered airplanes, cargo, and people along the Northwest Route from Montana to Fairbanks via Edmonton and Whitehorse. There were landing fields at Northway, Tanacross, and Big Delta in Alaska and nine others in Alberta, British Columbia, and the Yukon.

The first Lend-Lease planes flown along the 2,000-mile route from Great Falls, Montana, to Fairbanks arrived on September 3, 1942. It was a two-day flight for the five A-20 bombers, which arrived with a white star on the fuselage that had to be replaced with Russian red star, the insignia of the USSR.

There was a language barrier, a cultural barrier and a political barrier, but the operation was held together by the mutual understanding that the two sides were fighting a common enemy that threatened their survival. Ultimately the Americans transferred 7,926 planes at Ladd Field to Soviet crews, more than half of the nearly 15,000 built for the Russians.



Russians at mess hall. AAF photograph.



Soviet Pilots' Briefing Room, Hangar One. AAF photograph.

Hangar One was divided into two halves, with the Cold Weather Test Detachment on the east side and the Soviets on the west. One of the two positions in the control tower was taken by a Russian-speaking American to communicate with the pilots, most of whom were combat veterans. "The Russians were well acquainted with the horrors of war," enlisted man Paul Solka once wrote. "Few had not had members of their family killed or mutilated in the struggle."

The Ladd Field newspaper included helpful Russian phrases and the base offered classes in Russian, but the language barrier was such that sign language often came into play when interpreters were not handy. Frank



Russian and American non-commissioned officers at the party celebrate the Second Anniversary of the Soviet Military Mission in Alaska, Sept. 1944. UAF Archives, 1987-0149-00034.

Nigro, a private, worked a second job as a bartender at the Russian officers club. "A lot of them were young, like me, young pilots," he said. "They were good guys, you know."

The size of the Russian contingent sometimes took visitors by surprise. Writing about his stop in Fairbanks, Maj. Gen. Deane, the head of the U.S. military mission in Moscow, said it was a "memorable experience."

"In the first place, we found that our air base at Fairbanks was at least half under Soviet control. Officer's quarters, office space, hangars and shops had been turned over to the Red Air Force. Russian and American officers ate at a central mess. There were no restrictions whatsoever on Soviet personnel. They were free to use all the facilities of the station and to travel at will," Deane wrote. About 300 Russians served at Ladd during the peak of operations, with many more transient flight crews arriving on a regular basis from the west to pick up airplanes. The red star became a familiar sight in the skies over Fairbanks as the Russians would leave in groups. "There was feverish activity on the field, a tremendous roaring of motors as a large convoy was getting ready to take off," wrote Henry Varnum Poor, a soldier and artist. The bombers and pursuit planes would take off one after another, circling the field until all were ready to go. "And all together they moved into a tight formation and disappeared over the western hills," Poor wrote.

Cold Weather Test Detachment pilot Randy Acord said the normal procedure was for a flight of thirteen airplanes to leave as a group of one B-25, A-20s, and nine P-39s or P-63s later on. The Russians always had priority on the airfield, but not in the mess. "We took the first time that was convenient to us, and then the Russians would have to fit into that," Acord said.



Inside Russian NCO quarters Sr. Sgt. Karnaoukh takes time out to show M/Sgt. Kostin his collection of "pin-ups." UAF Archives, Kay Kennedy Aviation Collection, 1991-0098-00868



Early in the program, the Soviet Red Star was painted on the aircraft at Ladd Field. September 1942. UAF Archives, 1987-0149-00033.

Jan-April 1945

Of the thousands of bomb-carrying balloons launched by the Japanese to float across the Pacific, a couple of hundred reached the Aleutians and mainland Alaska, but did no real damage.

January 1945

Germans lose Battle of the Bulge.

March 1945

Military personnel in Alaska reduced to 50,000.

April 1945

Roosevelt dies. Truman sworn in as president.

Women's Army Corps unit arrives at Ladd Field.

May 1945

Victory in Europe Day celebrated May 8

U.S. Heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis visits Ladd Field.

June 1945

Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner, who commanded all troops in Alaska early in the war, was killed by artillery fire on Okinawa. He was one of two three-star generals killed during the war.

August 1945

Japan surrenders after atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

September 1945

Lend-Lease ends.

November 1945

Ladd Field transferred to 11th Air Force.



National Archives and Records Administration Washington DC

The relationship with the Russians was strained at times, with the Americans complaining that the Russians were too picky about accepting planes with minor mechanical problems. David Chavchavadze, an American translator, said there was a good reason for this attitude. The North American part of the Lend-Lease route was difficult, but the Russian segments were worse because landing fields were farther apart and more primitive. "The Americans were irritated because the Soviets were so sticky in signing for and taking over this largess." Chavchavadze wrote, "They did not realize that if a plane developed mechanical trouble on its way to the front, the Soviet mechanic who had signed for it was held responsible, and if it crashed, the consequence for him could be very serious." He said many American pilots regarded the Russians "as being somewhat arrogant and cavalier about their flying ability, even to the point of being reckless."

With wartime censorship, the presence of Russians in Fairbanks and the existence of the Alaska Siberia (ALSIB) route was not talked about much until the summer of 1944, although in towns along the way, the operation had been common knowledge.

The Russians became famous in Fairbanks for buying large quantities of consumer goods that were hard to come by in their homeland. One American officer told of the time he was in a Fairbanks store, and a Russian asked to buy shoes. "What kind?" the clerk asked. "All kinds," the Russian said. "What size?" the clerk asked. "All sizes," the Russian said. The clerk sold him the old lines of shoes the store held in stock. Fairbanks, where there was no rationing, was in the words of one historian, a "buyer's paradise" for the Russians.

The Russian presence at Ladd continued until the end of the war. In a span of about three years, the U.S. delivered 7,926 planes at the Fairbanks post. Historian Otis Hays Jr. summed up this unique episode of the war by writing that the Soviet and American pilots shared the hazards of flying in the far north, conquered most of the language and cultural barriers, and refused to allow mutual mistrust to overwhelm them.



Russian soldiers out and about in front of Lavery's Grocery on 2nd Avenue and Cushman Street. UAF Archives, Rex and Lillian Wood Collection, 2002-0164-00046,



Visiting Russians go shopping in Fairbanks, 1944. The photographer reported that "these women spoke English and appeared to function as interpreters." UAF Archives, Rex and Lillian Wood Collection, 2002-0164-00048



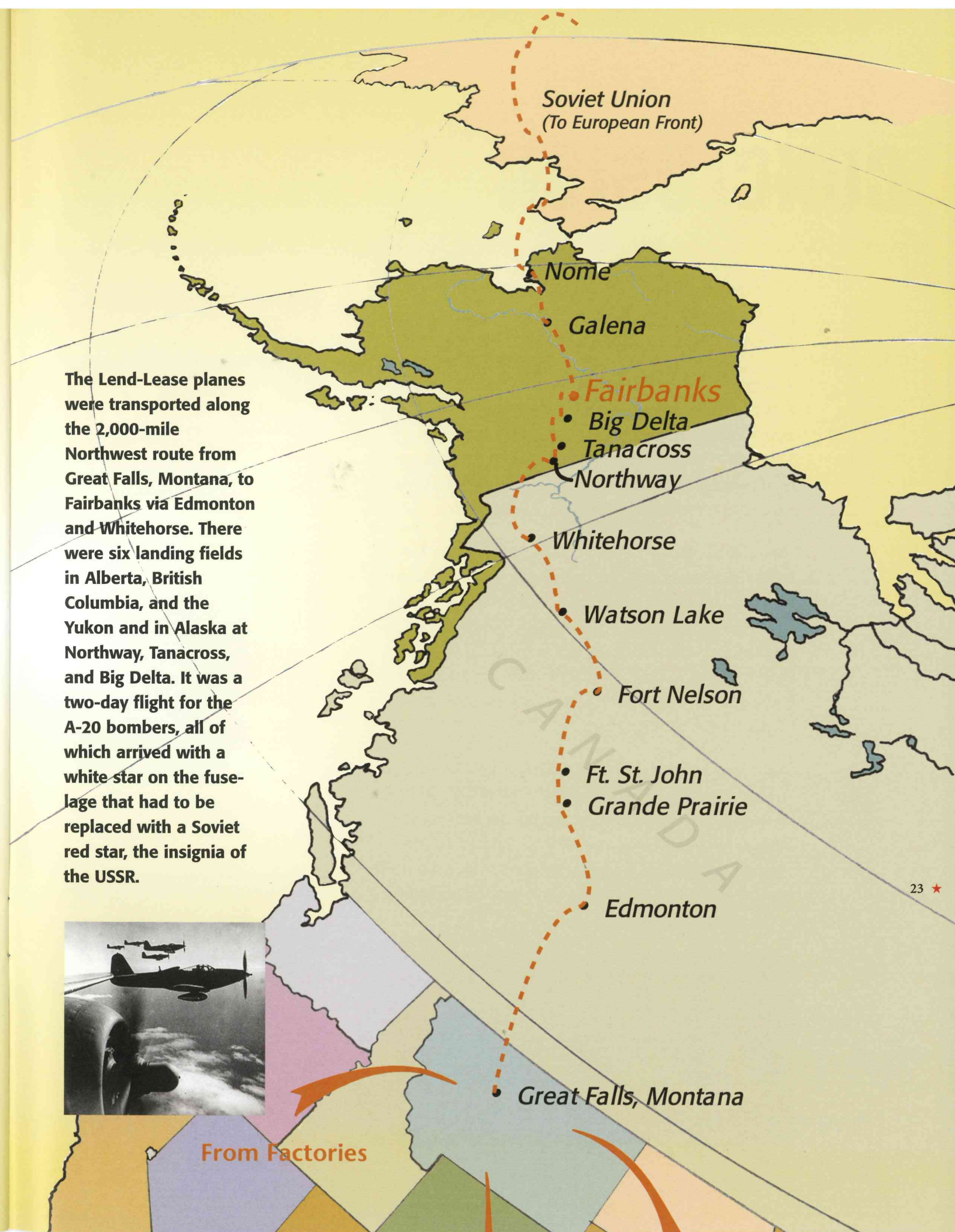
Two Russian officers return a salute from American GI's on 2nd Avenue, Fairbanks, 1944. UAF Archives, Rex and Lillian Wood Collection, 2002-0164-00049



The Lend-Lease planes were transported along the 2,000-mile Northwest route from Great Falls, Montana, to Fairbanks via Edmonton and Whitehorse. There were six landing fields in Alberta, British Columbia, and the Yukon and in Alaska at Northway, Tanacross, and Big Delta. It was a two-day flight for the A-20 bombers, all of which arrived with a white star on the fuselage that had to be replaced with a Soviet red star, the insignia of the USSR.



From Factories



CONCLUSION

The World War II heritage of Ladd Field is visible today on Fort Wainwright through the buildings and facilities that survive from that tumultuous era in American history.

Recognizing the contributions made at Ladd Field in cold weather testing, its role as an air depot, and its position as the transfer point for Lend-Lease aircraft, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior approved creation of the Ladd Field National Historic Landmark in 1985. This designation reflects its national importance as a historic site.

The original runway and North Post buildings, as well as the Birchwood hangars, Butler warehouses, and other buildings are part of the landmark. What happened here during World War II was important in improving the operation of aircraft and bolstering the Soviet fight against Hitler's Germany. Ladd Field also served as an important transportation hub, both for cargo and passengers in the Alaska theater of operations.

The mission of Fort Wainwright differs from that of Ladd Field, but it still is a place where the Army tests its ability to operate in the cold and retains the advantages of mobility, able to deploy around the world quickly. Its strategic position on the world aviation map, confirms the predictions of Gen. Billy Mitchell of Alaska's importance to the United States.



Hangar 3, a Birchwood-style hangar used by Air Transport Command. USAG-AK cultural resources program. All of these buildings are contributing elements to the Ladd Field National Historic Landmark.



Building 1024, formerly the radio transmitter building. USAG-AK cultural resources program



Murphy Hall, originally BOQ, bachelor officers' quarters. USAG-AK cultural resources program.



North Post Chapel. USAG-AK cultural resources program.

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