Chapter 5.0 ALSIB Lend-Lease and the Air Transport Command

From 1942 to 1945, Ladd Field had a special mission. The airfield served as the official transfer point where American aircraft were turned over to the Soviet military on a back-door air route to the Russian war front known as the Alaska-Siberia (ALSIB) route. This complex transfer operation soon transformed Ladd Field into a busy bilingual air traffic hub with new personnel, facilities, and command structure. The Air Transport Command eventually took command of the field to support the Lend-Lease deliveries and other ATC responsibilities in the Alaska Theater.

Figure 21. 5,000th aircraft delivery at Ladd Field, Sept. 1944.

Lend-Lease Overview

Lend-Lease was originally established as a strategy to allow the United States to provide material assistance to Great Britain while preserving its official neutrality. In March 1941, the United States began providing war supplies to Great Britain under the new program. Lend-Lease aid was loosely defined to encompass virtually any commodity useful to the defense of friendly nations. Over the course of the war, aid was extended to other nations as well as Great Britain, and a vast array of items were shipped overseas using a variety of routes and methods. Aid ranged from heavy war materiel and munitions to industrial equipment, raw material, agricultural products, and many other commodities.

In June of 1941, Germany suddenly attacked the Soviet Union, taking the Soviet Air Force by surprise and, among other things, destroying thousands of warplanes in the first week of fighting. In October 1941 the U.S. government formally extended Lend-Lease aid to the Soviets in an agreement known as the First Protocol. Under this agreement, heavy war materiel was shipped to the U.S.S.R. by various sea routes. Aircraft were either crated and shipped by sea across the North Atlantic or flown via an air-sea link from Miami to South America, Africa, and Iran.

The idea of flying aircraft via the northwest route through Alaska was raised in the earliest Lend-Lease negotiations with the Soviet Union, but was not implemented until the Second Protocol the following year. An Alaska-Siberia air route offered several advantages. The North Atlantic sea route was subject to the constant threat of German U-boat attack, while the southern air route had its own disadvantages. It featured long over-water legs that limited its usefulness for short-range aircraft. Planes flying that route also sometimes sustained damage from sand and grit at the African and Middle Eastern airfields. A northwest route through Alaska and Siberia would be the most direct, and would allow for intermediate refueling and repair stops. However, the proposal raised diplomatic

Map 4. ALSIB route, North American side.

and strategic issues. Moving warplanes and materiel across this northern route, relatively close to Japan, could have provoked the Japanese into declaring war on the U.S.S.R., which was already occupied with its deadly struggle against Germany. Furthermore, the U.S.S.R. was adamant about not allowing any American presence in Siberia. American military planners hoped for access to Siberian airbases after war broke out with Japan but were not successful in negotiating this point.

By the summer of 1942, though, the two sides had agreed to a plan for the Alaska-Siberia (ALSIB) route. American pilots would ferry the newly manufactured planes from the factories to Gore Field and later to East Base at Great Falls, Montana. With Canadian cooperation, they would bring the aircraft to Alaska along the Northwest Staging Route, the pioneer inland air route through western Canada and into interior Alaska.[49] At Ladd Field, Soviets would take delivery of the planes, fly them to Galena, Nome, and then on to the Siberian portion of the route and westward to the front lines. Ladd Field was selected over Nome as the transfer point in part because it was inland and more protected from potential Japanese attack.

Preparations for the aircraft transfers began at Ladd in August 1942 with the arrival of personnel from both nations. Deliveries began the next month and continued throughout the remainder of the war. Eventually, more U.S. Lend-Lease aircraft transited the ALSIB route through Ladd Field than by all the other routes combined. By the time Lend-Lease officially concluded in September 1945, 7,926 aircraft and many tons of cargo had been transferred to Russian control at Ladd.[50]

[49] The route began in Great Falls, and had landing fields in Alberta at Lethbridge, Calgary, Edmonton, and Grande Prairie; in British Columbia at Dawson Creek, Ft. St. John, and Ft. Nelson; in the Yukon Territory at Watson Lake and Whitehorse; and in Alaska at Northway, Tanacross, Big Delta, and Fairbanks. The ALSIB route combined the Northwest Staging Route, flown by U.S. pilots, with western Alaskan and Siberian segments flown by Soviet pilots. Soviet flyers took the route from Fairbanks, Galena, Moses Point, and Nome on to Uel'kal, Markovo, Siemchan, Yakutsk, Kirensk, Krasnoyarsk, and Novosibirsk.

[50] Precise figures of aircraft vary slightly according to source. Figures given at Ladd Field were 7,926 total ferried aircraft departures, broken down as: 2,618 P-39; 48 P-40; 3 P-47; 2,397 P-63; 1,363 A-20; 732 B-25; 710 C-47; 54 AT-6; 1 C-46. Monthly Historical Report, 1466th AAF Base Unit, September 1945. Microfilm AO177, Elmendorf AFB History Office. Also see Daniel L. Haulman, "The Northwest Ferry Route," in Fern Chandonnet, ed. *Alaska at War, 1941-1945: The Forgotten War Remembered* (Anchorage: Alaska at War Committee, 1995), 324.

Lend-Lease aid to the Soviet Union, a wartime ally but potential future enemy, was controversial at the time and remained so for many years afterward. Disagreements over how much aid was appropriate to provide, how much the U.S.S.R. should have paid for it, and how much espionage occurred, may never be settled by historians and participants. However, as a strategy to defeat Germany, Lend-Lease had support at the highest levels. The flow of planes and materiel along the ALSIB route was given a very high priority. The wartime alliance with the Soviet Union served its purpose of defeating the Axis, and ALSIB Lend-Lease contributed in some measure to the victory.

Lend-Lease Operations at Ladd

Ladd Field was the location where the actual transfer of aircraft between the two nations took place. While other airfields were part of the staging route, only Ladd Field was designated as the official transfer point. The transfer operation was complex and required large numbers of people. It depended upon coordination of pilots, aircraft, and support personnel on each side of the ALSIB corridor.

The Air Transport Command (ATC) was responsible for the operational details of ALSIB Lend-Lease on the North American side of the route. It was in charge of delivering planes from the factories to the departure point at Gore Field in Montana and on to Ladd Field. The ATC operated the staging fields along the route, coordinated the deliveries at Ladd, and saw that the ferry pilots were returned to Gore Field for their next trip.[51] The 7th Ferry Group, a separate command within ATC, provided the pilots who actually flew the Lend-Lease planes to Ladd. These pilots were based at the southern end of the route.

At Ladd, the ATC oversaw the American side of the transfer operation, as well as other air transport duties in the Alaskan theater of war. However, at first the ATC was not in command of the field.[52] When Lend-Lease operations began, Ladd was under the Cold Weather Test Detachment and its commander reported directly to the Headquarters of the Army Air Forces. Other support units at the base served under the Alaska Defense Command. The arrival of the ATC with its high priority mission of delivering planes to the Russians put a strain on that arrangement. Consequently, after considerable internal maneuvering, the ATC gained command of Ladd Field and many of its support units on October 1, 1943, and remained in charge of the field for the rest of the war.[53] The brigadier general in charge of the ATC's Alaskan Wing during those years was none other than Dale Gaffney, who exercised command of the wing from Edmonton.

On the other side of the operation, a Soviet military detachment and representatives of the Soviet Purchasing Commission oversaw the transfers. Their personnel included translators, mechanics and engineers. It is not clear from the

[51] The ATC was originally known as the Ferry Command. Women pilots in the WASP corps did not ferry aircraft along the northwest route during the war but did participate in ferrying aircraft from the factories to the departure point at Great Falls.

[52] The 384th Air Base Squadron under Major R.F. Kitchingman was the first ATC unit headquartered at Ladd. It was subordinate to the Alaskan Wing (later the Alaskan Division) of the ATC, headquartered at Edmonton, Alberta. By October of 1942, the 384th had 303 personnel, including 88 men at the outlying stations of Galena, Big Delta, Tanacross, and Northway. The 384th was one of three original squadrons that supported the operation of the entire Northwest Staging Route; the others were the 385th, headquartered at Great Falls, and the 383rd at Edmonton, Alberta. Carr, 74-80, 88, 91-93.

[53] According to Carr, this was only accomplished after personal consultation with Gen. Arnold. Carr, 92. These units became part of the ATC: the 439th Air Base Squadron, 6th Air Depot Group, and 83rd Depot Supply.

Figure 22. Russian pilots' briefing room, Hangar One. AAF photo, courtesy Pioneer Air Museum/Randy Acord.

records exactly how many Russians were present at Ladd, but at the program's peak, as many as 300 were reportedly stationed at the airfield. Transient pilots and flight crews also rotated through from front-line duty.

The Soviets were provided with facilities such as hangar space and quarters, and the extent of the Russian presence on the installation was striking. Capt. Richard Neuberger recalled visiting Ladd Field and passing a sentry standing duty by the hangar. "Suddenly I turned and looked at the sentry again. He was not an American soldier, as we had presumed. He was a soldier of the Red Army, and he was guarding a hangar where Soviet mechanics…were swarming over planes which soon would be winging across Siberia on their way to the battlefront in Europe."[54] Maj. Gen. John R. Deane, commanding the U.S. Military Mission to Moscow, passed through Ladd Field and was astonished by the access the Russians had to Ladd facilities, in contrast to the restrictions placed on the American military in Moscow.[55]

The Russians had the exclusive use of the west half of the first floor of Hangar One. This area included hangar bay space as well as several maintenance shops and a pilots' briefing room. They also used a Butler building adjacent to the west side of the hangar to store equipment such as Herman-Nelson heaters, battery carts, and cletracks for towing aircraft. Russian and American personnel even jointly manned an Army Airways Communications Systems (AACS) station in Hangar One. In the control tower itself, one of the two positions was designated for the Russians, although it was operated on their behalf by Russian-speaking American personnel.[56] Russian personnel could patronize the base exchange, and officers had access to an officer's club with slot machines and pool tables in one of the NCO buildings. Officers could also arrange for the use of motor vehicles with American drivers. They shared the officers' mess with their American counterparts.[57]

CWTD pilot Randy Acord recalled that "(w)hen it came to flying, (the Russians) always led the field" and were given priority for takeoff. However, the Russians' priority at Ladd Field ended at the doorstep of the officers' mess. "We took the first time that was most convenient to us," Acord recalled, "and then the Russians would have to fit into that. Now that was the only place that we had an override on the Russians!"

[54] Captain Richard L. Neuberger, "Airway to Russia," *Alaska Life,* October 1944, 5.

[55] Otis Hayes, Jr., *The Alaska-Siberian Connection: The World War II Air Route,* (College Station TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1996) 80.

[56] The radio station had 5 Army radio positions, 3 teletype positions, and one "Russian operated position." The control tower had two positions, one Army operated and one Russian. The Russian position was manned by American Army interpreters under the supervision of the Army operator. Monthly Historical Report, 1466th AAF Base Unit, January 1945, p.11. Microfilm AO177, Elmendorf AFB History Office.

[57] Otis Hayes, Jr., *The Alaska-Siberian Connection: The World War II Air Route,* (College Station TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1996), 80.

Transition Training

At the beginning of the Lend-Lease program, U.S. instructors operated a Transition School to familiarize Russian pilots with the American aircraft until the Russians had enough experience with U.S. planes to take over this duty themselves. The language barrier made the instruction awkward, since only one instructor spoke Russian. The others had to rely on interpreters who were not yet familiar with aeronautical terms.

The single seat fighters were the most challenging, since all checkouts had to be done on the ground. One captain reported, "A young fighter pilot with a girl interpreter came over to my P-40 for a check. The Russian climbed into the cockpit, the girl got on one wing, and I got on the other. He asked me only four questions and then took off. The first thing he wanted to know was, 'How do you start it?" I told the girl, she told him and he said, 'Da,' Russian for 'yes.' Then he asked for the maximum pressure and the RPM for the takeoff. His next question, 'How do you keep the oil temperature and the coolant temperature up?' Finally he wanted to know how to operate the radio. Then he took the plane up for its test run, and he knew how to fly it too."[59]

The first Russian pilots to arrive at Ladd received training on the American planes from American pilots working with interpreters. Later, the Russians trained their own incoming ferry pilots and crews. At first, deliveries were slow. The winter of 1942-43 was one of the coldest in memory. Facilities on the Northwest Staging Route were still incomplete, pilots were inexperienced with the route, and the Air Transport Command was still building up a coordinated delivery system. By spring, though, the number of deliveries had grown, and for the next two and a half years, deliveries averaged more than 250 per month.[58]

When aircraft arrived at Ladd, mechanics from Ladd's 6th Air Depot Group checked each one carefully before turning them over to the Russians. Soviet mechanics then checked the aircraft against their own specifications. They could, and did, refuse to accept planes until the aircraft met strict standards. This process caused frustration on both sides, but that eventually diminished over time. The Americans came to understand that repairs could not be made very easily once the aircraft had reached the Siberian side and that Russian mechanics who signed for the planes at Ladd did not want to be held responsible for failures along the route. For their part, the Russians were initially suspicious that deliveries were being intentionally delayed at a point in the war when they were most urgently needed. This concern was also put to rest as the Russians observed the efforts being made by the ATC. A 1944 military report summed up the relations with these words: "In general, it can be said that there were few difficulties which were not ironed out after some discussion, spirited though it might be at times, and no friction that did not disappear as if by magic when plane deliveries started to come through on schedule."[60]

Figure 23. Early in the program, the Soviet red star was painted on the aircraft at Ladd. Later this task was done at Gore Field or at the factory. AAF photo, September 1942.

After the aircraft were accepted by the Russian mechanics and the purchasing commission representatives processed their paperwork, the planes became the property of the Soviet government. Then, when the aircraft and crews were ready, they departed in groups for the journey on to Galena, Nome and the Siberian airfields.

[58] Figure derived from table in Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate, eds, *The Army Air Forces in World War II,* vol. 7. (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983 edition.), 165.

[59] *History of the Alaskan Department June 1940-June 1944,* 364. University of Alaska Anchorage Archives, Walter Blue collection.

[60] OHLF, 87.

Figure 24. A B-17 taxis between two rows of Lend-Lease aircraft, ca 1944. P-39s are on the left and B-25s on the right. Photo taken from the weather office, Hangar One, looking east. Rex and Lillian Wood collection, #2002-164-52, Archives and Manuscripts, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

When a typical departing flight was ready to go, it often consisted of a B-25 bomber, accompanied by several A-20 light bombers and by P-39 fighters equipped with extra fuel tanks to extend their flying range. Later in the war the P-39s were replaced by P-63s. Other aircraft sent in smaller numbers included P-40s, P-47s, C-47s, AT-6s, and one C-46. One visitor described the departure scene like this: "There was feverish activity on the field, a tremendous roaring of motors as a large convoy was getting ready to take off. … The medium bombers, one after another, with a final racing of the motors…taxied down to the end of the runway and took off, the first ones circling the field until the last ones should join them. Then the half dozen P-39s…took off, one after another. And all together they moved into a tight formation and disappeared over the western hills."[61]

Descriptions of the Russians' flying habits varied, but commentators agreed that the Russian pilots performed with a combat-hardened perspective. One journalist described the Russians as "older men, harder, and all veteran killers of Nazis. They flew combat style, taking all the airplanes had to give, bending everything forward to the firewall and racking the P-39s around in screaming verticals. They had to fly to Nome…and on…and they were in hell's own hurry."[62] Official reports avoided such sensationalism, but did recognize the Russians' sense of urgency. Timely deliveries were, as one report stated, "a matter of life and death to them."[63]

International Cooperation…

Coordinating an international operation of the magnitude and technical complexity of ALSIB Lend-Lease was a challenge. Although high level issues were handled elsewhere, Russian and American officials at Ladd had to work out the day-to-day issues of running what amounted to a bilingual airfield.

The language barrier at Ladd was overcome in formal and informal ways. Several women interpreters translated for the Russians, and, because of the nature of the work, they became adept at translating technical manuals and aeronautical terms. The Americans had their own interpreters and military liaison officers as well.

Most of the American personnel at Ladd had only limited contact with their Russian counterparts, but sometimes they did encounter them on the job. Stan Jurek was assigned to the supply room over at Hangar Two. "[H]angar [Two] was the one they'd bring the C-47s into for checkup, after their flights," he said.

[61] Henry Varnum Poor, "The Russians at Fairbanks," *Harper's Magazine,* September 1945, 255.
[62] Wesley Price, "Ice in the Moscow Pipe Line," *Saturday Evening Post,* January 13, 1945, 87.
[63] HAD, 366.

Figure 25. Russian interpreter Natalie Fenelova assists two mechanics. Kay Kennedy Aviation collection, 91-098-865, Archives and Manuscripts, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

"And the Russians would be in there occasionally, around there….[W]henever they came up to the supply room, they couldn't talk English, of course, all they'd (want) to do was get a piece of wire, or pair of pliers, that's the only thing they ever wanted….[O]ur mechanics would laugh, they didn't know what they were going to do with it, but they'd just wire up something, you know…." He remembered talking to the mechanics through interpreters. "It was really interesting…. They were nice, really enjoyable talking to them."

Irene Noyes, who worked for the Cold Weather Test Detachment in the Hangar One parachute shop, recalled that her shop offered to help out the Russians. "We felt sorry for 'em, and we aired their chutes out at the parachute shop. They'd have a big room [where] the parachutes are tied to the ceiling, hooked to the ceiling, and the fans air the things out, keep the silk from getting static-bound…." However, she recalled that the Russian chutes had a distinctly unpleasant odor. "Lord it was so pungent that I got sick to my stomach!…It was a sweet, icky smell. I don't know what it was, and they wouldn't tell us. But their chutes stunk to the high heaven."

Informal socializing was reportedly discouraged by the Russian commanders, but on some occasions Russians and Americans managed to get by with the help of phrase books. At one point, Ladd Field offered conversational Russian classes and published useful Russian phrases in the base newspaper, the *Midnight Sun*.[64] In addition to hello, goodbye, please and thank you, servicemen were armed with terms such as, "I am an American," "Come in! Have a seat!" "I am your friend," "Comrade Captain," and "Speak slowly." One of the Russian officers even offered a Russian language class in town, open to any interested Fairbanks residents.[65]

Marie Haggard, who worked in Priorities and Traffic, remembered inviting two Russians to dinner. "I liked to play chess. I thought I was pretty good. And of course chess is a game that the Russians enjoy. So I invited these two Russian fellows to dinner; Mother had a real wonderful dinner for them. After dinner we played chess, and, of course, I was off the board before many seconds went by." The Russians were reticent about speaking freely, but she found them extremely polite. "It was a nice rapport, as far as I was concerned," she recalled.

Sometimes, Russians who knew English concealed this fact. Irene Noyes remembered one incident in particular. One afternoon, one of the Russians brought a parachute into the shop. "He brought a chute in, and I was trying to fix out the records for it, and he couldn't talk English, kept looking in the [phrase] book. And I had him most of the afternoon to explain about the parachute shop and everything that he wanted to know." The exasperating exchange tried her patience. On the way home from work that day, she found herself traveling back

[64] "Russian Lesson Follows USAFI," *Ladd Field Midnight Sun,* 29 September 1944, 1. "How Is Your Russian?" *Ladd Field Midnight Sun,* 27 October 1944, 2. "Words Given For Russian Speech Class," *Ladd Field Midnight Sun,* 6 October 1944, 8.

[65] Personal communication, Thelma Walker, 19 August 2003.

into town on the same bus with the Russian. "Before we got to town, he asked me in plain English, would I like to go with him to the Cottage Bar for a scotch and soda? ….He offered to take me to the Cottage Bar," she recalled with annoyance.

Private Frank Nigro worked a second job as a bartender at the Russian officers' club after his regular duty day ended. He purchased a small English-Russian dictionary and set to work, soon gathering enough phrases to get by. "I got to learn…quite a bit of Russian. I tried to converse with those boys.… Some of them spoke a little English, very little. I was always out with that dictionary…that worked fine…" Club refreshments included beer and candy bars. "Beer in those days…came in cases, packed in sawdust," Nigro said. "I sold the beer there for ten cents a bottle on the bar, see. Hershey and the candy bars I sold for a nickel, and cigarettes I sold for a nickel also, five cents a pack. But my orders were not to give them more than two packages of cigarettes a day, and two candy bars a day. [Quartermasters] rationed me out, you know." Working as the bartender, Nigro had closer social contact with the Russians than many people did at Ladd. He remembered that "A lot of them were young, like me, young pilots. They were good guys, you know."[66]

…And International Intrigue

At first, the existence of the ALSIB route was an official secret. Northern residents were well aware that warplanes displaying the Soviet red star were crossing the skies in large numbers, but military censorship in the Territory prevented most news of Alaska's wartime events from being published. The War Department did not publicly confirm the existence of ALSIB Lend-Lease for more than a year, until November 1943. Even then, the details were restricted.[67] When ALSIB secrecy was finally lifted in the summer of 1944, the story of Russian-American cooperation and Ladd Field's role received coverage in national publications, including the *Saturday Evening Post, Harper's Magazine,* and *Alaska Life* magazine. Most of these stories focused on the cooperation of the two sides and the human-interest aspect of the Russians' exposure to American customs.

Many of the accounts in the press and in contemporary military reports described the Russians at Ladd as polite and disciplined, though extremely particular and demanding with regard to the condition of the aircraft. Descriptions of the language barrier were a favorite topic in the press and on the grapevine. In one instance, a writer reported that the Russians' favorite expressions were, "Okeh," "Okey dokey," and "Coca Cola." That story was misquoted so often that the ATC had to correct the record and point out quite reasonably that "Soviet airmen do not go around muttering 'okey dokie Coca Cola.'"[68]

However, the interaction of the two groups consisted of more than the Russians' exposure to American slang and commercial products. Intelligence officers on both sides quietly monitored the proceedings at Ladd and along the Lend-Lease pipeline. Diplomatic pouches, which originated at points south, were processed

[66] Interview, Frank Nigro with Margaret Van Cleve, 17 August 1993, UAF Oral History Recording, UAF Alaska and Polar Regions Archives, Rasmuson Library.

[67] Hayes 93, 99, 108.

[68] "Alsib," *North Star Magazine,* November 1944, 5.

through on Russia-bound flights, protected from searches by diplomatic immunity. In later years, reports surfaced that extremely sensitive secret material made its way into Soviet hands in this manner. The extent of espionage that took place on the route was the subject of intense controversy after the war, when the Soviet Union was no longer an ally, but a dangerous adversary.[69]

Because of its proximity to the Soviet Union, Alaska may have had its own secrets during the war as well, secrets that might have provoked Soviet curiosity. The 11th Weather Squadron reportedly had personnel stationed in Fairbanks at the University of Alaska who intercepted and decoded Russian weather reports from Siberia. They recoded the information for transmission to U.S. military authorities in San Francisco, using a newly invented tape fax technology. Augie Hiebert was a radio engineer who operated the broadcast facilities of KFAR about two miles from the university. Because the owner of KFAR was related to the inventor of tape facsimile, Hiebert had access to short wave equipment for transmitting the faxes. The weather station was connected to KFAR by a durable field wire, strung across the ground between the two points. Hiebert recalled how the process worked:

> We had a field phone on each end. They would just ring me on the field phone and say, we're ready to transmit so I'd go turn on the transmitter. I told them when the transmitter was up and I'd made contact with San Francisco. Then they'd feed it out. Down in San Francisco then it would be recorded off this fax tape and then done over on radio teletype and sent to the Pentagon. And this was for the strategic bombing of the Kuriles. We had to get the weather from Siberia, which told about what the weather was going to be like in the Kuriles. And that went on for quite a few months, until, I guess when the war started running down, then they quit it because then they didn't need it any more…. I didn't know at the time exactly what they were using it for, but I found out later.

He pointed out that there was no way to tell what the fax said without the right equipment, and there were only two units operating, one in a private back room at KFAR and the other in San Francisco. "The only way you could get this stuff is you had something that could receive [it]," he explained.

Some believe that Russian curiosity about the transmissions and the field wire led to a tragedy that maintains its mysterious elements to the present day. In July 1943, John White, a Fairbanks resident serving as a private at Ladd Field, disappeared while escorting two Russian officers who were believed to be Soviet NKVD intelligence agents.[70] White was assigned to a supply squadron that provided drivers for Russian military personnel. On July 15, he drove the officers to Ballaine Lake, in a quiet area northwest of town that lay between

[69] Lend-Lease espionage is a complex and lengthy topic beyond the scope of this publication. See, for example, George Racey Jordan, *Major Jordan's Diaries,* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1952) and Otis Hayes, Jr., *The Alaska-Siberian Connection: The World War II Air Route* (College Station TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1996).

[70] For more details on this case, see E.J. Fortier, "The Death of Pvt. John White," *Fairbanks Daily New-Miner,* 17 July 1988, H8-H10 and 24 July 1988, H4-H5, and Hays, 80-84. Retired U.S. Army Col. George G. Kisevalter was cited as the source for Fortier's statement that the Soviet officers were NKVD. Kisevalter, then a captain, was the Soviet liaison officer at Ladd and participated in one of the investigating interviews.

the University of Alaska and the transmitter building for radio station KFAR. Before stopping by the lake, the group had visited KFAR as local people often did, although visitors were never shown the backroom equipment. After that, the officers claimed that they had gone into the woods by the lake to pick wildflowers and had also burned some documents. They reported that when they returned, White had vanished. The young man's clothes were discovered by the lake, neatly folded, as though he had decided to go swimming. Those who knew him did not believe this scenario. The lake was not used for swimming, they pointed out, and furthermore, White was afraid of water and did not swim. The military began ground and air searches. Army engineers slowly pumped the water out of Ballaine Lake, discovering White's body on the lake bottom. The cause of his death was determined to be drowning.

Over the years, as parts of the story came to light, some people believed White may have witnessed something the officers had done, possibly involving the burned documents, a wire tap or some other scenario, but this could never be proven. At the time, Ladd Field officers conducted an investigation but no action was ever taken against the Russians. The reasons for this are unclear, but the event highlighted the distrust that could arise between the two temporary allies.

Other intelligence aspects of Lend-Lease surfaced after the war and continue to be controversial even now. In 1952, George R. Jordan published an account of Soviet espionage within the Lend-Lease program. His book, *Major Jordan's Diaries,* remained in print for decades. Allegations surfaced that atomic secrets, among others, were passed under diplomatic cover to the Soviet Union across the ALSIB route and through Ladd Field. Discussions about the exact nature of this activity are likely to continue for many years to come.

Beyond the high-level intrigues, there are also accounts which focus on the cooperation of the ordinary people on both sides who accomplished the hazardous flying mission over the ALSIB route. Otis Hays, Jr., a staff officer with the Alaska Defense Command who supervised the liaison program with the Russians in Alaska, summed it up this way: "[T]he real story of the Alaska-Siberia route's success was a genuine tribute to Russians and Americans alike. They shared sub-Arctic flying hazards, surmounted most of the language and cultural barriers, and refused to let mutual suspicion overwhelm them."[71]

Russians in Fairbanks

> "It is no strange sight to see a stoic Soviet pilot, who has downed his share of Nazis over Rostov or Smolensk, lapping up a marshmallow sundae with chocolate ice cream and chopped nuts in a Fairbanks drug-store."
>
> -Capt. Richard L. Neuberger[72]

The Russian presence was also widely noticed in the community beyond the gates of Ladd Field, and has become part of a unique folklore and heritage of World War II in Fairbanks.

The distinctive Soviet uniforms caught the eye of people on and

[71] Otis E. Hays, Jr., "White Star, Red Star," *Alaska Journal,* Summer 1982, 17.
[72] Capt. Richard L. Neuberger, "Airway to Russia," *Alaska Life,* October 1944, 10.

Figure 26. Russian airmen shop in Fairbanks. Rex and Lillian Wood collection, #2002-164-44, Archives and Manuscripts, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

off the airbase. "The Russian pilots are dressy," wrote visiting artist Henry Varnum Poor, "…and wear all the hardware they can; pistols on their hips, and some wore the Red Star of Lenin on their breasts. They are a leather loving people. They wore high boots and wide leather belts and shoulder straps, and I wondered at the abundance of leather in a country so stripped down to essentials."[73] Former engineering aide Helen Bowles recalled that the Russians had such squeaky boots that she could hear them coming down the halls of Ladd's utilidors. Josephine Johnson remembered, "They had these kind of baggy pants, and these boots up to their knees." She remarked that an interest in appearance went both ways. "[T]here [were] some Russian women that came," she said. "And when they came into the office they would stare at us women. And they'd look at our shoes, and our clothes. Because we dressed different, I guess, from them. … I don't remember much about them except that they stared at us all the time."

People also noticed the Russians' shopping habits in town. Several remembered that the Russians frequented a local department store, Gordon's Store. Josephine Johnson described what they would do: "And these military guys would go down to Gordon's Store and other stores in town, and they would buy a lot of stuff; clothes for their wives and girlfriends, and shoes and dresses and nylons, because Alaska had no rationing, like they did in the lower 48. We had everything that they didn't have." She added, "You could get anything, and the Russians used to buy it like crazy." Evolyn Melville also observed the Russians making a shopping trip to Gordon's. "[T]here were all these military people in there, and they were buying up shoes like crazy. And a lot of them were the Russian people, and they'd buy dozens of pairs of shoes to send back to their folks, their families in Russia." Irene Noyes remembered that the Russians "bought all the silk stockings, all the yard goods, all the women's clothes, right off. The NC Company was bare. They bought all the shoes. I went down to get a pair of shoes and the woman, the saleslady, looked at me and said, 'Are you kidding? We've sold everything!' The shoes, yard goods, stockings… .they'd take it back to Russia."

Many people remembered seeing the Russian aircraft flying overhead. Augie Hiebert recalled, "Oh, yeah, they'd fly right over….Every day a little group of…P-39s led by a B-25, a navigation bomber, would take off, head out there…. There were a lot of planes." Stan Jurek recalled that the departing flights looked like geese in the sky. "They'd put [the leading aircraft] in front and lead them, then "V" out, fly just like a bunch of geese." He remarked that the Russian flyers weren't exactly reckless but it was entertaining to watch them. "When they'd practice, sometimes, they'd be flying around, seems like they'd shut their engines off on their way up in the air, and they'd come *rump, thump, thump,* and then they'd goose 'em just before they hit the runway…One tore a wing up one time, but other than that, they landed without any problem. Bounce 'em in one way or the other." Fairbanks resident Fred Hupprich told an interviewer, "I can remember sitting on the end of the runway at Ladd Field, and watching those planes come and go. …Why, they'd come racing down the runway and they wouldn't bother

[73] Poor, 258.

Figure 27. Russian airmen, American servicemen and townspeople at Second and Cushman, downtown Fairbanks. Rex and Lillian Wood collection, #2002-164-50, Archives and Manuscripts, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

pulling back on the stick, they'd just lift their wheels up and start flying…."[74]

Richard Frank recalled seeing Russian aircrews in Galena when he was working on the riverboat *Nenana* in 1942, and observed that the influence of the Russian presence in Alaska a century earlier could still be felt there. "And it was interesting to learn, and I witnessed this," he said, "that some of those pilots spoke to some of the Native people in that area in their Russian language, and the people understood it, because at Nulato, Alaska, which is downstream from Galena, there was a fort that the Russians controlled, so it was very interesting to see those old Native people speaking with those Russians."[75]

The Russian presence at Ladd Field added an international flavor to wartime Fairbanks, and stories of the Russians in Fairbanks continue to be passed down by those who took part in this unusual chapter in history.

Other Air Transport Command Activities

The Air Transport Command (ATC) was responsible for operating the airfields along the Northwest Staging Route. In addition to supporting Lend-Lease deliveries, the ATC had other responsibilities affecting Ladd Field. These included ferrying tactical aircraft for the Alaska Theater, operating cargo flights, and supervising commercial contract airlines that provided additional air transport services.

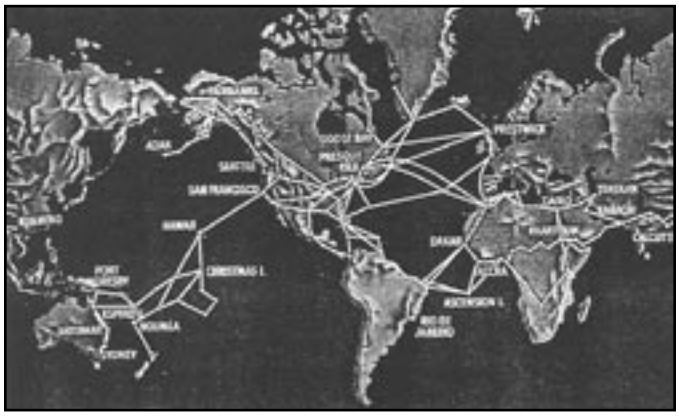

Figure 28. Published portrayal of ATC routes, 1944. Note the Fairbanks (Ladd Field) element. Advertising supplement, *Harper's Magazine,* September 1944.

A Priorities and Traffic (P&T) department coordinated the movement of ATC's cargo and passengers at Ladd Field. P&T was divided into three sections: Priorities, Traffic, and Air Freight/Cargo. The priorities officer allocated passenger, cargo, and commercial priorities. The traffic office kept track of available aircraft and their capacities, coordinated the arrival and departure of passengers, and ensured that aircraft were properly loaded for weight and balance. Air Freight handled cargo duties including manifesting, warehousing and loading.

Air cargo was a very important part of Alaska's wartime supply chain. When the Japanese attacked the Aleutians, military

[74] Interview, Fred Hupprich with Margaret Van Cleve, 7 June 1994, UAF Oral History Recording, UAF Alaska and Polar Regions Archives, Rasmuson Library.

[75] Russian traders had established a post at Nulato as early as 1839.

Figure 29. Loading a C-47 Skytrain. Kay Kennedy Aviation collection, 91-098-839, Archives and Manuscripts, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

air cargo suddenly became a priority, but no system was in place to handle it. Immediately following the attack, the need for transporting supplies was so great that commercial aircraft were commandeered into service during the emergency to get men and materiel into critical areas. Gradually the ATC developed its own air freight system that worked in tandem with the commercial carriers. Among these were Northwest Airlines and Western Airlines.

The ATC and its contract operators moved supplies for the Alaska theater on several routes and to numerous destinations and transfer points, including Ladd Field. A significant amount of total traffic moved through Ladd because of its central location. The cargo operation served ground and air forces, engineering and construction, and moved a considerable number of personnel as well as tons of mail. Lend-Lease freight destined for the Soviet Union also passed through Ladd as cargo in the Lend-Lease aircraft.[76]

During the first year of the war, air cargo operations on the Northwest Staging Route were overwhelmed with problems. Shipments were frequently mis-routed. For security, destinations had code names such as Ocean Blue, Avarice, Flotsam, Charity, and Endzone, but this only compounded the challenge of ensuring that supplies ended up in the right place. When they did arrive, shipments could not always be properly accounted for because there was not enough warehouse space. Historian Edwin R. Carr complained about the supply situation on the staging route as a whole: "Supplies of all kinds, though not always the right kinds, had been ordered by several agencies in the summer. At best they were stored in sheds or small warehouses; at worst they were dumped on the ground, sometimes damaged, and left where they were dropped for the snow to cover."[77]

Figure 30. Warehouse operation. Kay Kennedy Aviation collection, 91-098-860, Archives and Manuscripts, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

A similar situation appears to have existed at Ladd. Stan Jurek, in 6th ADG supply, remembered that at first, "[t]he only thing we had for parts was some tents out in the woods. We'd get a shipment of parts, and we'd have to drag these things into tents, and later move them to another tent, and finally we got warehousing and moved them

[76] In 1944, the ATC described Lend-Lease freight as the forgotten story of the ALSIB operation. "[T]he press of the nation has overlooked one of the genuine news stories of the Division," stated an article in an Alaska Division publication. "Lend-Lease cargo, not for the destruction of Germany but for the rehabilitation of Europe, is carried in these aircraft." The article featured the delivery of medical supplies, artificial limbs, seeds and agricultural implements. "More Than Planes," The North Star Magazine, November 1944, 11.

[77] Carr, 143, 49

into warehouses." His specialty was automotive supply, and he recalled that, "Oh, it was a mess. We'd get rear end assemblies and transmissions for these big trucks, and drag 'em in the snow and pull 'em in the tent. It was really a mess. We didn't have any way of categorizing anything or separating, putting in shelves, so we'd know what we did have. We just piled 'em up one on top of another." As time went by and warehouse construction got caught up, the chaos diminished.

At the same time it was handling cargo operations, the ATC was also busy carrying passengers. About half the ATC's Alaska Wing air traffic was reportedly passenger traffic, and over three thousand passengers a month could pass through the airfield.[78] In addition to military personnel, passengers included civilian entertainers, diplomats, and government officials. In 1944, a passenger terminal was located on the north side of Hangar Two.[79] By 1945, a separate passenger terminal had been completed to the east of Hangar Three.

American ferry pilots from the 7th Ferrying Group were an important part of this passenger traffic. After they delivered their Lend-Lease airplanes, these pilots needed transportation back to Great Falls. ATC personnel at Ladd Field coordinated their return travel and provided temporary accommodations for them in the NCO quarters (Bldg 1049). Northwest Airlines operated most of the transport flights on contract.[80]

Private Frank Nigro had been a clerk at the Nordale Hotel in Fairbanks before enlisting at Ladd late in 1942. He was given duty very similar to his civilian work, assigning the arriving ferry pilots to their overnight quarters. "They used mostly non-commissioned officers' quarters for these pilots that came in," he told an interviewer. "My job was to see that they got a bed, and then if the weather was clear the next day, they would ferry all these pilots back into Great Falls…."[81]

Bill Stroecker was assigned to Priorities and Traffic in the later years of the war, and worked out of the terminal in one of the Birchwood hangars. "It was the main terminal for passengers coming and going and all of the transport pilots, the pilots who brought the planes up as far as Ladd Field to turn over to the Russians….My job was to ticket the pilots back to the mainland, back to the U.S….we ticketed the officers, kept track of them and sent them on their way." He remembered that the process was usually routine, but that it could be tumultuous when there was more than one flight departing. "I often thought, because it was nerve-wracking to get them all ticketed and get them on board at the expected time of departure, ETD, I often thought how tough it really would have been if we'd had to have been handling the money, too, charging for the fares! Every time I step to an

[78] Carr, 171. For passenger figures, MHR Station #3 ATC, August 1944.

[79] Engineer drawing, "Modified Birchwood Hangar #2," 6808-691, 2 May 1944, NARA Anchorage, RG 77, box 3.

[80] There was often pressure from the command to speed up the deliveries by returning the ferry pilots quickly. Some pilots reported that the turn-arounds were too fast and that they did not have the opportunity to rest before enduring the lengthy transport flight back to Great Falls. Other pilots recalled that the C-47s in particular were poorly heated and uncomfortable. Craven and Cate, 168-169. Smith, 130-131. The story of the ferry route and the American pilots who flew it is presented in Smith's 1998 history, *Warplanes To Alaska*.

[81] Interview, Frank Nigro with Margaret Van Cleve, 17 August 1993, UAF Oral History recording, UAF Alaska and Polar Regions Archives, Rasmuson Library.

airline counter now I know what those girls are going through in trying to get everybody on there on time."

Marie Haggard was a civilian working with Priorities and Traffic. She remembered screening passengers. Everyone traveled on orders. "Well, the passengers all had orders. And they were such that I had to be careful that they were legitimate orders. There was no problem except I knew what to look for. And when there was a flight being prepared for loading, I noticed so many [passengers]…they'd kind of feel for their orders, *What did I do with it?* And then they'd open some luggage, and I thought, Why'd they have to do that? I would think they would have it in their hands. But they would find their orders and I never found anything that was out of place or questionable. But I had to be careful that they were screened properly."

Figure 31. Vice President Henry A. Wallace dines at Ladd Field, July 1944. He is flanked by the commanding officer of Ladd Field, Col. Russell Keillor on the right and the commanding officer of the Soviet military mission, Col. N. S. Vasin on the left. Wallace passed through Ladd on his way to and from a 1944 trip to the Far East. Courtesy Elmendorf AFB History Office.

Diplomats and statesmen also traveled through Ladd on journeys to and from the Soviet Union and the Far East. These included U.S. officials such as Vice President Henry Wallace and Maj. Gen. John R. Dean, head of the U.S. mission in Moscow. Notable Soviet officials passing through included Foreign Minister V. Molotov and Andrei Gromyko, Soviet ambassador to the United States. Marie Haggard recalled that the staff in her section received training on "security, decorum and bearing" in order to deal with the special visitors.

Mrs. Haggard also remembered the celebrities who traveled through Ladd. "With the war on, there was a terrific amount of travel, under orders of course, and I enjoyed talking with some of the passengers. I met many famous people, actresses and statesmen, and enjoyed visiting with them now and then when I had a chance. I remember talking to Ingrid Bergman, and also Bob Hope….Of course we all were anxious to meet with them and enjoy their company for be it only a minute or two." Bill Stroecker met heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis when he visited Ladd in 1945. "I remember weighing Joe Louis in when I was on duty," Stroecker remarked. "He came up with Special Services to visit all of the posts on a goodwill basis. So he checked in as a passenger. I weighed him in but I forgot the weight!"

Ladd Field was an important support airfield and air traffic hub for the ATC and its civilian airline partners, handling everything from Lend-Lease deliveries to celebrity and diplomatic passengers to critical wartime supplies. After the war, the airfield took on other missions, but air transport support duties never disappeared entirely. In 1986, this function was reinvigorated when the Army's 6th Infantry Division (Light) was activated with a capability for rapid worldwide deployment. This mission is being re-emphasized today as U.S. Army Alaska transforms to a Stryker Brigade capable of rapid air deployment from the very same airfield that successfully supported the Air Transport Command in World War II.