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Northway and Tanacross: Airports for the War Effort

By Lavell Wilson

Editor's note: *Many Alaskans have experienced the frustration of seeing the Aleutian Campaign and Alaska's efforts during World War II get overlooked in the big picture of the European and Pacific theaters. But if the Aleutian Campaign gets short shrift, then events in Northway, Tanacross, Big Delta and many other communities seem to merit barely a dot in popular histories of the war. However, these widespread efforts accomplished two things: They supported the victorious military campaign, and they left behind an expanding web of infrastructure that would underpin modern Alaska.*

A resident of Tok and recently retired pilot with 40-Mile Air, Lavell Wilson lived in Northway from 1949 to about 1960 when his family moved to Tok. He became intrigued with the airlift from the Nabesna bar to Northway and began to research the World War II history of the Northway and Tanacross areas. His father, Dale, was one of the first permanent white settlers of the upper Tanana Valley. Dale trapped for many years with a Native partner, Oscar Albert, from Northway. Prior to being drafted during the war, Dale worked on the Alcan for a civilian contractor and at a sawmill during the Northway construction.

A note on Morrison-Knudsen: One of the world's largest construction companies, M-K played an important role in construction projects in Alaska during the war, including the runway construction at Cordova and runway expansion at Juneau.

Military planners had realized the strategic importance of Alaska well before the advent of World War II and had made plans for its defense. However, the Army had done nothing until a survey was undertaken by Gen. "Hap" Arnold in 1940 to locate key sites for airfields and supply

depots. Among the sites selected for a runway was Northway because it was half way between Whitehorse and Fairbanks. Planes had already been lost because of the long distance between these two points with no intermediate fueling or navigational facilities.

The Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA) gave Morrison-Knudsen Co. (M-K) the contract for construction of the Northway airport and in the spring of 1941, months before United States entry into the war, well-known bush pilot Bob Reeve flew M-K construction foreman Pat Walker and some tools into Tetlin, the closest landing strip. From there the men went upriver by boat to Northway and, using a Native crew of 20, they built a 100-foot by 800-foot airstrip in six days. Reeve immediately began hauling men and supplies into this tiny airfield. As the closest road ended at the Nabesna Mine, about 50 miles upriver from Northway, supplies were trucked to the end of that road and then flown to the construction site. Bob Reeve flew in most of the supplies in his Fairchild 71 and later in a Boeing 80A, dubbed the "Yellow Peril," that M-K ordered from Seattle. Everything was flown in except the large, 17-ton tractors that pulled 12-ton scrapers.

The "Cats and cans," as they were called, were driven overland to reach the site. It was a hazardous undertaking because they had to cross the Nabesna River several times and on at least one occasion the men had to build a crude barge to ferry the Cats across the river. As soon as the large earth-moving equipment arrived, the runway was lengthened and improved so larger aircraft could bring in men and supplies. The Cats had already enlarged the airfield at the end of the road near the Nabesna Mine, an airfield named appropriately Reeve Field. Every available aircraft in the region that could be found was put on the job.

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Pilots worked in shifts so the planes could fly around the clock during the long, darkless, summer days. This was the largest airlift of its time; 1,100 tons of supplies and 300 construction workers were flown into the Northway site in less than five months. The supplies included 2,800 barrels of asphalt for the paving of the completed runway. In the spring of 1942, the Army began to greatly expand the facilities and construction continued at a frantic pace. New facilities included a theater, church, aircraft hangar, barracks and many more buildings. The Army gave contracts to several local traders for the lumber needed for the added buildings and soon sawmills were operating in several nearby areas in an all-out effort to supply the Army with as much lumber as necessary. The larger timbers and specialty items had to be hauled in by aircraft, boat, or by road after the winter of 1942 when the



TOP:
*Cooks, kitchen help and waitresses gather at Northway in 1944.
 (Courtesy of Lavell Wilson)*



LEFT:
*This photo shows beginning construction of the first permanent building at the Tanacross airport. The Stout prefab houses and other buildings were used for worker housing. The truck parked at extreme left indicates that at least a winter road to Tanacross was open at this time, which Lavell Wilson estimates to be 1942.
 (Courtesy of Lavell Wilson)*

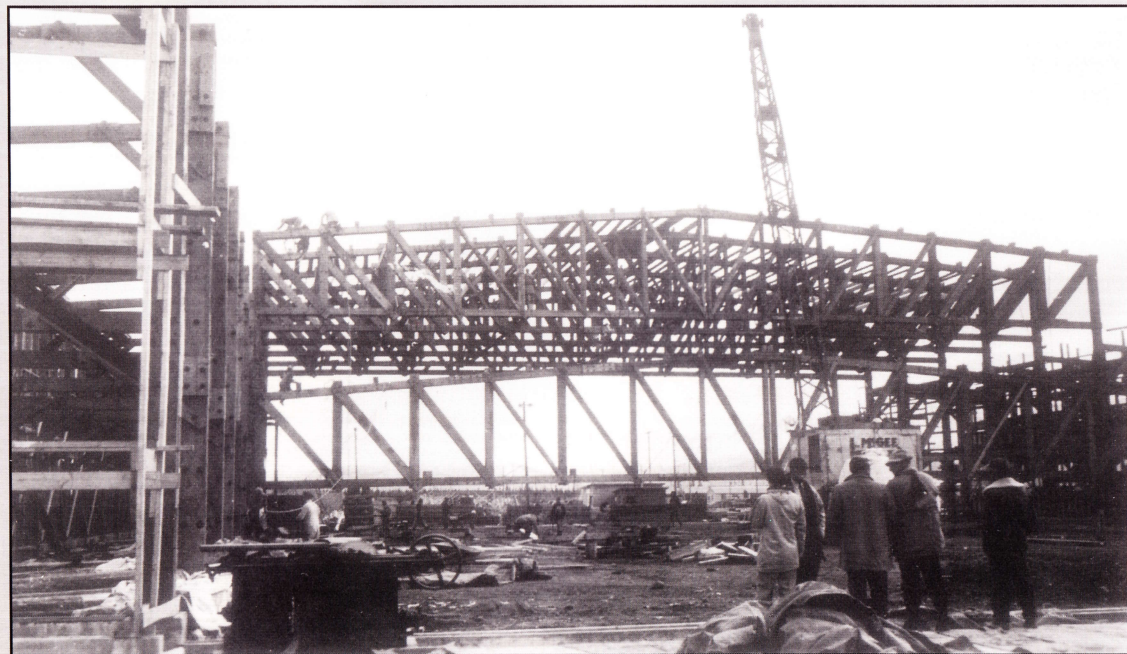
TOP RIGHT:

The construction camp for the Northway Airport spreads out on a slight rise overlooking the river. The sign says: "Northway M.H.K.C.B. Co. Camp 45." (Courtesy of Lavell Wilson)



RIGHT:

Airports along the Northwest Staging Route proved vital to planes and crews bringing supplies and Lend-Lease aircraft from the Lower 48 through Canada to Fairbanks and on to Siberia. This hangar under construction was part of the facility at Tanacross. Large wings on each side of the hangar were used, among other things, for offices and storage of aircraft parts and tools. In the late 1960s this building was dismantled and transported to Fairbanks, where it was rebuilt as the Big Dipper ice arena. (Courtesy of Lavell Wilson)



first truck convoys made it through on the Alcan.

Following the Pearl Harbor attack, which occurred several months after the Northway airport was begun, the military realized how important these facilities were in the overall defense of Alaska and the rest of the country. They

learned also that the Northway site did have some problems. Northway had no highway link as yet for supplies brought to Alaska by ship or truck. Officials were not sure when, or if, the Alcan would be usable. Soil conditions were poor for any expansion of the existing runway. Construction of any cross-wind or additional runways was not feasible. So, within a few weeks of the Pearl Harbor disaster, a plan was in place to construct another airport near Northway that could be reached overland in the event the Alcan project was not completed or usable.

This airport would be located about 60 miles northwest of Northway near the village of Tanacross. Situated at the Tanana River crossing of the old Valdez-Eagle Trail, Tanacross had a small existing airport with plenty of dry, flat ground for expansion. Cat crews started widening and

improving the old trail. The first Cats arrived at Tanacross in February 1942. The old trail had been for horses only, but the Cats quickly improved it enough that one-lane traffic could begin hauling supplies from Valdez to Tanacross. Construction began in earnest in summer 1942.

Building at both airports continued through the winter months as crews battled temperatures as low as minus 68. All available local men were put to work on the airports. Because there was a shortage of skilled labor, carpenters, cooks, plumbers, electricians, welders and other craftsmen were imported from all over the country. Most of the workers lived in tents for the first winter, and many for two winters, before enough permanent buildings were completed to house everyone. The men worked long hours, seven days a week, with time off to attend church services, when they were

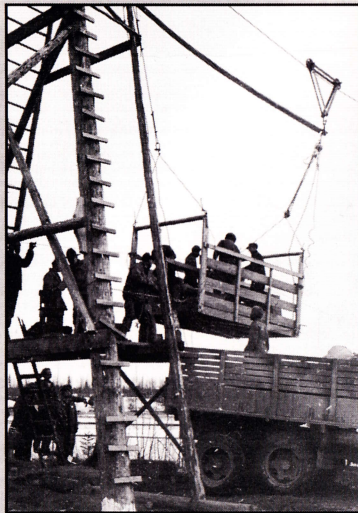


ABOVE:

The soft, sandy-looking soil in this early view of the Northway airport required the large tires on Bob Reeve's Fairchild 71. Reeve purchased this plane from Coastal Airways in Juneau in 1939. Frank Barr flew this plane after Reeve bought his Boeing 80A in 1941. (Courtesy of Reeve Aleutian Airways)

LEFT:

This scene at the Tanacross airport shows the shop and warehouse area. The framework for some large structures, yet to be built, is visible in center back. The air raid sirens mounted on tripods were to warn of Japanese air attacks. (Courtesy of Lavell Wilson)



ABOVE:
Army personnel operate a cable ferry used at Big Delta when the bridge was out over the Tanana River. (Courtesy of Lavell Wilson)

ABOVE:
When the military moved into the Northway-Tanacross area, they required a prodigious amount of lumber for wartime construction. This photo shows the skidways at the Tok River sawmill. Behind the man at far left is the "donkey" that winched the logs out of the water and up the skidway; cables used to pull the logs can be seen at the man's feet. At least three of these men are Natives, probably from either Tanacross or Tetlin. Large piles of rotting slabs from the mill can still be seen in the area. (Courtesy of Lavell Wilson)

available. The Army authorized almost any expense as long as it sped completion of the airports. As soon as the Alcan reached the Northway area, a seven-mile spur was pushed through linking the airport to the highway. The Alcan now connected the airports at Northway, Tanacross and Big Delta. Large maintenance shops were built at the Northway junction for maintenance and repair of all types of military vehicles that were using the Alcan. Some housing was also constructed in the area.

While the Alcan was under construction and after the Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor in June 1942, workers began building an oil pipeline between Whitehorse and Fairbanks, known as CANOL 4. Pipeline camps and related facilities were built adjacent to both the Northway and Tanacross airports so fuel for aircraft, equipment and heating was readily available.

This was a real boon for the Northway airport, because prior to the completion of the Alcan, the

airport's fuel had been delivered by air, or by boat in the summer. As soon as the runways were leveled and compacted, they were paved so that they could withstand the weight of the heavy military aircraft that would be landing on their way to Alaska bases, or to Russia under the Lend-Lease Program.

As construction was completed, the Army shipped in hundreds of military personnel to operate and maintain the airports. Aviation support staff, mechanics, tower operators, runway maintenance crews, powerhouse operators and all types of support personnel were assigned to the airports as they became large towns in the remote region. For most of the G.I.s, this was their first exposure to the extremes of Alaska's climate, summer highs of 90 degrees, winter temperatures as low as minus 72. Some loved it, some hated it; many could not wait to leave, while many others came back after the war to make their homes in Alaska and become permanent residents. ■

