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ORAL HISTORY

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Randy Acord
signature

July 5, 1991
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Randall "Randy" K. Acord tape-recorded Oral History
BP "On the Road" Oral History project

tape logged #339

RANDALL ACORD TAPE / Key Words

World War II enlistment, aviation cadet

Lindbergh Field

Bakersfield, California

Williams Air Force Base (pilot instructor)

Hartford, Connecticut training school

Engineering Officer, 669th School Squadron, Williams AFB

Test pilot, AT-6

AT-9, AT-10, AT-17, P-38

Given Arctic assignment

July 1943: Travel to Alaska, Seattle-Seward, aboard Kaiser FP boat

Boat: 127 feet long, 27-foot beam, towed empty

barge to Vancouver

Ran aground Wrangell Narrows

Used ropes to tie ship to trees so it wouldn't list until tide came in

Excursion Inlet, picked up 100 tons of coal

At Seward, ship ordered to drop barge at Adak

Passenger composition (learned later): Officers with Army Corps of Engineers, Infantry, Ordnance, Artillery, Army Air Corps (Acord); 22 enlisted men, each from different organizations

Secret assignment: "coal" disguised 100-ton shipment of bombs. Ship was to serve as decoy and scout for Japanese submarines (two cited and reported). The diversity of passengers was security measure in event Japanese captured ship.

Ladd Air Field

Acord arrived July 23, 1943

Construction begun in 1943

Major Arthur K. Ladd, born 1890 in Texas, died Dec. 13, 1935 on flight from Virginia to Florida; crashed in South Carolina after engine failure

Major H.H. "Hap" Arnold (later General Arnold) --- commitment to cold weather testing

Ladd Field opened in 1941: steppingstone in Aleutian campaign and military development in Alaska

Lend-Lease campaign: Ladd Field refueling; search and rescue, aircraft maintenance

Alaska Highway (Alcan) construction support

CANOL pipeline from Norman Wells, Whitehorse --- three-inch pipeline to Fairbanks

Major Dale Gaffney (later General)

Col. Robert R. Stewart*

Col. (Russell) Keillor, base commander

Ladd Field - aircraft

Heavy bomb group: comprised of two B-17s and two B-24s
(Medium bomb group was made of B-25s, B-26s, A-20s)

Cargo Section: C-47s, C-46s, C-45s (Twin Beech), and
C-54s

Fighter Section: P-39, P-40, P-47, P-38, P-51, P-61

Acord: Project Officer for P-38 for three and a half
years (began Ladd assignment as engineering officer
for the Cold Weather Test Detachment)

Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio (Materiel
Command)

Eglin Field, Florida (Proving Ground Command)

Piloting

Acord assigned to C-47, shuttling personnel and
equipment from Ladd to Watertown, South Dakota
(satellite base of operations), and having
lieutenants assigned as co-pilots to learn
Northwest staging route

Acord's crew chief, Sgt. Jacobs

Route: Ladd - Edmonton, Canada - Watertown, S.D.

Cold Weather Testing - Civilians

Private manufacturer representatives (civilian engineers
and technical personnel); ground support equipment,
aircraft, clothing, medical, rubber, lubrication,
fuel, engines, propellers, carburetors, magnetos

45 manufacturing representatives assigned to Ladd
Civilian housing for representatives: Arctic Hotel,
First Avenue (currently the parking lot at Tommy's
Elbow Room) --- two-story, log building; operated
on lease by Bobby Sematakis*

Civilian representatives called "feather merchants"

Cold Weather Testing - Army Air Corps

Winter 1943-44, about 50 pilots

6th Air Depot

7th Ferrying Group

Fairbanks-to-Moscow, USSR: 7,000-mile trip

About 350 Soviet G.I.s at Ladd, plus 17 interpreters,
19 Soviet officers

Soviet Cols. M.G. Machim and Peter Kisilev

Aircraft stopping at Ladd Field: P-39, P-63, B-25,
A-20, C-47 (earlier, P-40, AT-6)

(Lend-Lease continued until V-J Day)

Winter 1944-45: 110 pilots in Cold Weather Test
Detachment

B-29

Constellation, spring of 1944

P-80, arrived in March 1945

Cold Weather Test Detachment staffing

256 personnel; primarily officers - no privates

(Staffing continued)

Gunnery crews in bombers: ordnance assessment

Maintenance

T-hangars or nose hangars

Bush pilots: use of fire pots

Stewart water heaters, 150,000 BTUs

Herman-Nelson heaters, 400,000 BTUs

Engines

Briggs and Stratton engine

Allison engine (liquid-cooled engine)

Accessory testing

Fuel

Hydraulics

Lubrication

Electrical

Rubber

Guns (lubrication effect on recoil guns)

Airplane ski tests

Aircraft tested on retractable skis: P38, P51

Other ski testing: C-47, P-40, L5, L-1, Norseman

Summer floats: Norseman and L-5 used for summer search-and-rescue

C-47 test with amphibious floats: overload with wheels on; tested without wheels, saving 2,000 pounds, but without docks, required special pier

Airplane temperatures

Cabin heat in adequate

Electric "suits" with plug-ins (like electric blanket), but still had to carry survival gear

Fighter pilots wore heavy clothes

P-38: good cabin temperature control

Icing: no problem in Interior at colder than 10 below

Navigation: VHF, four channels, 522 Bendix transmitter and receiver; Adcock Range (200-400 kilocycle band; the "Beam" from various stations all over Alaska, used to estimate approaches to airports)

Military Life

Ladd Field, Bachelor Officers Quarters (now Murphy Hall), very comfortable; two officers to a room; two rooms shared a bathroom

Untreated water: problems with rust

Erusto Sauce, sold through Northern Commercial Co., mixed with water to form hydrochloric acid

Water treatment plant, end of WW II

Fairbanks' community support of troops

Social activities (Elks, Eagles, Moose, churches)

Invitations to homes

Restaurants

BOQ basement: dance floor, bar, slot machines, parties

Cold Weather Test Detachment duty period: September 1 through May 1.

(Military life continued)

Summer ball games, military vs. civilian
Swimming pool, off Wendell Street by park

The Line

Prostitutes' log cabins along Fourth Avenue,
approximately from Turner to Barnette Street
Windows boarded up on Fourth Avenue side; entrance
to Line cabins by way of a "blind" (behind large
fence on north side)

The Line endorsed by military and civilian authorities
Fairbanks police department a half block away

Military Duty Officer task each Saturday: accompany
medical officer, along with two MPs, in going from
cabin to cabin to get smears from each prostitute.
Slides were examined at post hospital. Girls with
positive tests were picked up later by Duty Officer
and taken to post in a staff car; kept and treated
at Bassett until tests came back negative; returned
to the Line. Service provided at no charge.

The Line closed in 1947

Military Life

Rendezvous, the Ranch Dinner House, the Wagon Wheel
Steak dinners, \$3.75 to \$4.25; white tablecloths;
fine dining

Gambling

Food supplies to remote posts: Galena, Northway, Delta

War impact

Military dependents ordered to leave Alaska after
bombing at Dutch Harbor, unless dependents were
Alaska residents

Enlisted men's family housing (NCO-12 and NCO-14)
needed for military personnel during war years

Hunting/Fishing

No bureaucratic control

Sheep hunting at Kluane Lake, Canada

Generals arriving to hunt in the summers

Helicopters

First arrival, 1943-44, Sikorsky

S-5, with Pratt & Whitney 985 engine

Helicopters used in hunting (particularly wolf hunts),
revised method of search-and-rescue

Winter transportation modes

Dog team: Ladd Field had a kennel and three dog teams
Kennel located north side of Trainor Gate Road
at railroad bridge

(Winter transportation continued)

Cars: Not used much in winter prior to headbolt and circulating heaters coming into use
Engine-warming technique: Fill skillet with charcoal, place under engine, cover engine
Paul Greimann's bus service
Jeeps (Military Police)

Military Police

Downtown patrol on Friday and Saturday nights
Shore patrol: Four personnel based in Fairbanks to monitor behavior of Seabee personnel on leave here from Point Barrow

Women

Women's Army Corp, arrived at Ladd, 1944
Nurses, special quarters next to commander's house
Spring 1945 (?), fire destroyed WACS barracks; one WAC killed. Barracks rebuilt two months later; later became part of Officers Club

Transients through Ladd Field

Special quarters
Ladd was stopover point between mainland U.S. and Aleutians

Canadians

Canadian military personnel stationed abroad; most not allowed to return until end of war
American pilots warmly received in Canada; surplus of women

Arctic training/Medical

Arctic Training School: survival techniques
Capt. Weber*: 54-day survival on snow water, camping at Pedro Dome or Cleary Summit
Monitored physical, mental, emotional reactions; kept a journal
"Frozen" lungs: Weber learned from Siberian medical professionals that lungs cannot freeze: A human strangles if inhaling cold air too quickly. Acord contracted bronchitis after breathing oxygen from emergency supply at approximately 36,000 feet; "burned" his lungs (oxidation). Weber diagnosed the condition.

Cold weather "feathering"

B-24 crash, 1942. Pilot, Maj. Baker, not familiar with fuel transfer in flight. Temperature about 51 below zero. Feathering system on propellers congealed; props would not feather. Engines were windmilling. Belly-landed at Wood River Butte

south of Ladd Field. (Wreckage remains still exist; used as target in later ground strafing and gunnery practice). Two men in bombardier nose suffered broken legs when nose wheel was pushed up upon impact.

Two weeks later: Lt. Hill, B-24 pilot, attempted to duplicate conditions to learn why Baker's plane crashed and examine feathering problem. Got engines to windmill, but extreme pressure caused the B-24 tail to break off. All seven on board killed.

Engineering conclusion: Procedure of diluting oil with gasoline at 40 below and colder initially helped feathering system; however, once propellers were feathered, the gasoline would evaporate and the viscosity wasn't maintained.

Dec. 21, 1943: Another test conducted by Lt. Crane, Master Sgt. Pompeo and three crew members. Feathered No. 1 engine at 15,000 feet; lost instruments and went into spin. Tail broke; crew ordered to bail out. Three bailed out; two in back did not. B-24 crashed near Charley River.

Lt. Crane survived 84 days in the Arctic. Acord recounts Crane's tale and eventually finding a miner who got him to Woodchopper Creek. Bush pilot Bob Rice, making the mail run, brought Crane back to Ladd Field. (Reference to KFAR's Tundra Topics broadcast)

Two bodies recovered from B-24 wreckage.
Story recounted in John McPhee's Coming Into The Country and a book (?), 100 Most Interesting Stories

Cold Weather Test Pilots

Favorite test spots:

Northway: frequently a lingering cold

Galena: high winds, "soaking" effect

Canopy "frosting": instrument glass frosted

Use of "banjos" --- two pieces of plywood attached to metal brackets and hinges below the engine, clipped over the propeller shaft (wedge-shaped), and covered --- traps heat.

High winds

Delta/Isabell Pass, 75 mph

Windy Pass, south of Mount McKinley

Anecdote about Acord being punished for taking his enlistee crewmembers to dinner at the end of the 1944 test season: showdown with acting commander.

(Anecdote continued)

Acord restricted to base. Enlistees then engaged in subterfuge of planes to prevent the acting commander from getting his required flight time. Detailed descriptions.

Tape ends.

*spellings or full name not confirmed