

THE WAR REMEMBERED: LIFE AT LADD FIELD DURING WORLD WAR II



From 2002 to 2003, Fort Wainwright's Cultural Resources Management Program organized a research project focused on the personal recollections of the men and women at Ladd Field during the World War II years. The team reached out to veterans and civilians who worked and lived at Ladd Field between 1939 and 1946 and accumulated a variety of resources, including handwritten letters, in-person and phone interviews, emails, and articles. These richly descriptive personal stories provide a glimpse into the experiences of these individuals and depict the more personal side of daily life at Ladd during its early dynamic years.

Many of the memories in this publication are in the form of long quotations, taken from either letters or interviews. Historic context is given to frame the interviewees' recollections and to provide a fuller understanding of their experiences. In an attempt to retain historic accuracy, stories are told in the interviewees' own words and record their thoughts, impressions, and experiences as accurately as memory can supply.

CONSTRUCTING LADD FIELD

Construction began on Ladd Field in 1939 with the heavy work of land clearing, grading, and cement pouring. Despite the difficult labor in an unforgiving climate, many men were drawn to the work, particularly in the waning years of the Great Depression.

Robert DeBolt was born and raised in Fairbanks and, after working in the mining industry for several years, he began work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers running a heavy dozer to the site of the new field outside of Fairbanks. On his first day dozing, he was told to go past Bob Buzby's place, "hang a left" and follow the line of rags the engineers tied to the trees. DeBolt and the other dozer operators mucked out a trail to the new airfield and then laid a bed of gravel over the route. They also mucked out a slough over which the field's runway was eventually built. DeBolt recalled "everyone" trying to tell the engineers that there was permafrost all over the site of the runway, but that they refused to listen and poured the concrete anyway. Consequently, the following spring, a 22-foot heave appeared in the middle of the runway and the engineers had to reconstruct the entire runway.

According to DeBolt, the construction work at Ladd Field started out slow the first year, with only about 200 people involved. Labor forces grew in 1940 with over 1,200 men working on the site, the majority pouring concrete for the runways, utilidors, and buildings. Pouring concrete was very labor intensive as men moved the wet concrete manually using wheelbarrows, or "cement buggies" as DeBolt called them, in pairs because a single man could barely move a full wheelbarrow. Most of the men working the cement were locals who had formerly worked in the mines but were lured to the higher pay offered for constructing the field.



Utilidor construction



Ladd Field site
before construction

Edmund A. Hinke submitted a letter for the Ladd Field Oral History Project and recounted his involvement in the field's construction. He wrote that he "was working in Juneau, Alaska in June of 1940 when a call went out for workers needed in Fairbanks... [He] took the Alaska Steamship Co.'s Baranof to Valdez, then a small bus to Fairbanks [and] was installed in 'Buzby's Camp' for food and lodging."

Hinke continued,

[The] following day I reported for work at Ladd Field, and met my new boss, Bill Stark. I landed the hardest and dirtiest job on the base. I was a cement dumper, one of a crew of 2. We had to dump 7 sacks of cement into the hopper every few minutes. [I] had to wear tin clothes, goggles, and respirator all the time in the hot Fairbanks summer. The dust was terrible and most persons assigned to the job quit immediately. This gave me the opportunity to keep asking, and getting raises till I was up to \$1.42 ½ [per] hour.

By September 1940, the installation officially opened as a cold weather experiment station despite only the runway being completed. Bruce I. Staser began working on the construction of Ladd Field after the fall of 1940. Staser recounted,

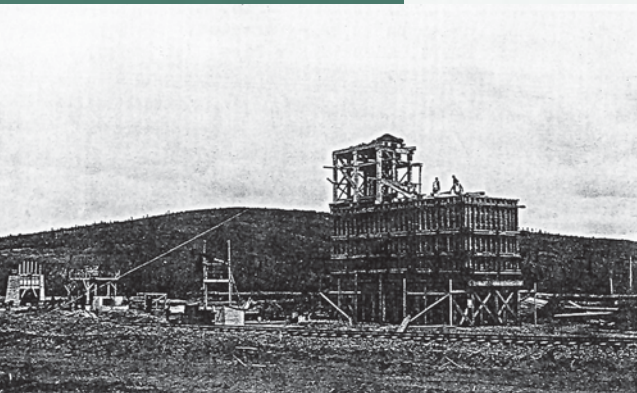
I was notified that I had an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy. At the time, I was attending the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. I finished the semester in December and left the University seeking employment to pay off my debts. I found work at Ladd Field, which was under construction. My job was chipping ice out of recesses in the basement wall of the hospital-to-be. It was located southwest of the one and only huge hangar that was also under construction.

Staser provided personal stories about his girlfriend and her father, further shedding light on the more intimate side of the lives of construction workers at Ladd Field. Staser recalled,

[The] father of my girlfriend, Geraldine Holm, was Arnold Holm, a large, quiet Swede who had rented a newly constructed log cabin on the rear end of the Red Light District (one block long) somewhere near 6th and Cushman Streets. The floor was dirt and had one wood stove and two bunks. The logs had not been cured. During the night, the sap in the logs would freeze and go off like rifle shots. It was around -50F in January. Arnold offered me a bunk. He had a prime job at Ladd: riveter on the hangar. He would hold the rivet gun under one arm and hang onto the steel with the other, barehanded. He was one tough man. He had been a prospector outside of Fairbanks accompanied by his



Dump truck on Ladd Field



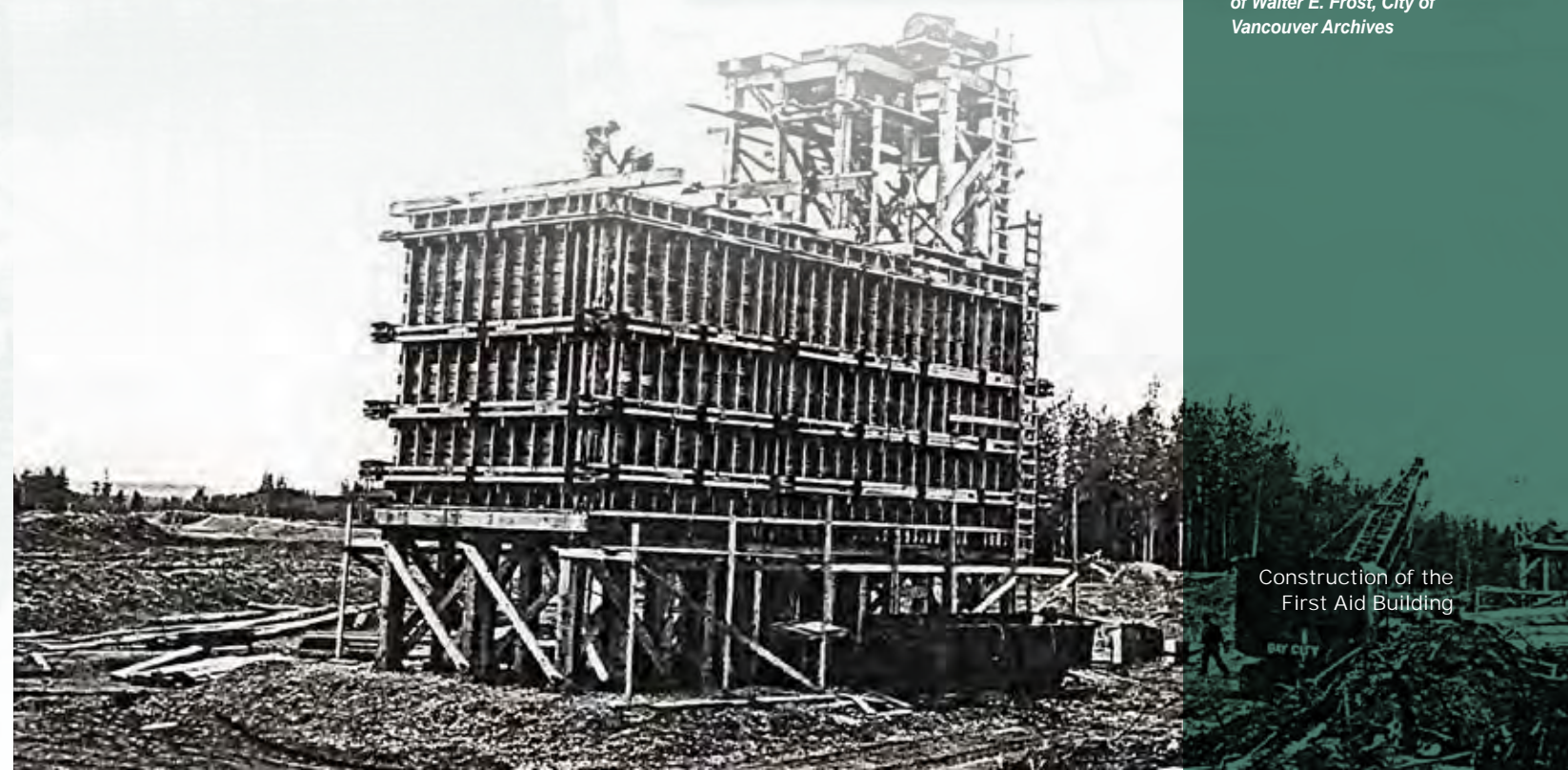
Construction of Commissary and First Aid Building



Hangar 1 under construction, January 1941. Army Air Force photo. *Courtesy of Eielson Air Force Base and Steve Dennis*



S.S. Baranof. *Courtesy of Walter E. Frost, City of Vancouver Archives*



Construction of the First Aid Building



Junior officers' cabin,
c. 1940-1941. *Courtesy
of Richard F. Dennison*



Lieutenant Fred Dunphy (left) with
Richard Dennison (right) three miles
east of Ladd Field, winter 1940-1941.
Courtesy of Richard F. Dennison

daughter, Gerry. Gerry's mother had left Arnold for points south. Arnold was sending his daughter through college when I met her. Arnold didn't like any of Gerry's boyfriends until I came along. He beat up a few of them until Gerry had him put under a Peace Bond (he wasn't supposed to fight). He invited me to stay with him in his cabin. Maybe he wanted to keep an eye on me.

After working on the construction at Ladd Field, Staser moved on to Fort Richardson. He remembered,

[I worked for] about two months at Ladd and then found out that they were building Fort Richardson down at my hometown of Anchorage. I got a job on the steel gang that was erecting the first hangar at Fort Richardson. It was a higher paying job. I worked at Fort Richardson until the middle of June 1941 when my brother and I had to leave for the East Coast. The journey took us 8 days, steerage passage, on the Alaska Steamship Line and 4 days by train, cross-country to Philadelphia, where we split. We both graduated in 1944. I joined the paratroopers (infantry) and he was assigned as a gunnery officer on the heavy cruiser Portland in the Pacific.

Richard F. Dennison served in the L Company of the 4th Infantry Regiment at Ladd Field from October 1940 to June 1943. He was involved primarily in airfield security, but also worked as a platoon leader, mess officer, exchange officer, and performed field-testing for the Cold Weather Test Detachment when available.

Dennison recalled Ladd Field's early days and said, "The field was very small with a very small complement. There were no buildings south of the runway and the housing around the old post had not been built yet." He recounted that the temporary housing was located near modern day Trainer Road and that "[t]he barracks (including officer quarters) were wooden temporary buildings heated by coal stoves but well insulated... [T]he Infantry was proud of roughing it."

Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii in December 1941, the U.S. entered World War II. Like other military installations around the country, Ladd Field grew exponentially. What began as a small cold weather experimental test station with a single runway, rail spur, and compact building campus, grew, seemingly overnight, as masses of Quonset huts and other temporary buildings sprang up across the installation.



4th Street, Red Light
District, Fairbanks.
Courtesy of John X. Jamrich



Construction of Ladd
Field, winter 1940-
1941. *Army Air Force photo*

COLD WEATHER TESTING AT LADD FIELD

Colonel (at the time) Gaffney was personally involved in the development and refinement of an appropriate parka for the Cold Weather Test Detachment. Many of the soldiers working in the detachment spent a lot of time standing or sitting in planes in stationary positions, and, with only their standard issue coats to protect them, they struggled to stay warm. Gaffney became involved once he learned of the situation and worked with the Cold Weather Test Detachment to create workable clothing for soldiers in an arctic environment. Over time, many different parkas and coats were developed and tested for various uses, but Gaffney's signature parka achieved local notoriety and became closely identified with the charismatic Gaffney.

As William Stroecker, a former Ladd Field personnel sergeant shared during the Ladd Field Oral History Project,

All of the original Ladd Fielders, before the 6th Air Depot got here, when there were just a few of us, wore what was called the DVG, it was a beautiful sheep-lined coat, parky, and it was called the DVG after Dale V. Gaffney, the colonel. Everybody was issued one of those DVGs plus the foot gear was a knee length boot made of the same material, sheepskin, it had sheepskin outside. It was a common thing; I wish I had saved mine, it's a collector's item these days! But after [the] 6th ADG came, why then, all of that, that individuality of the old Ladd Field base just disappeared.

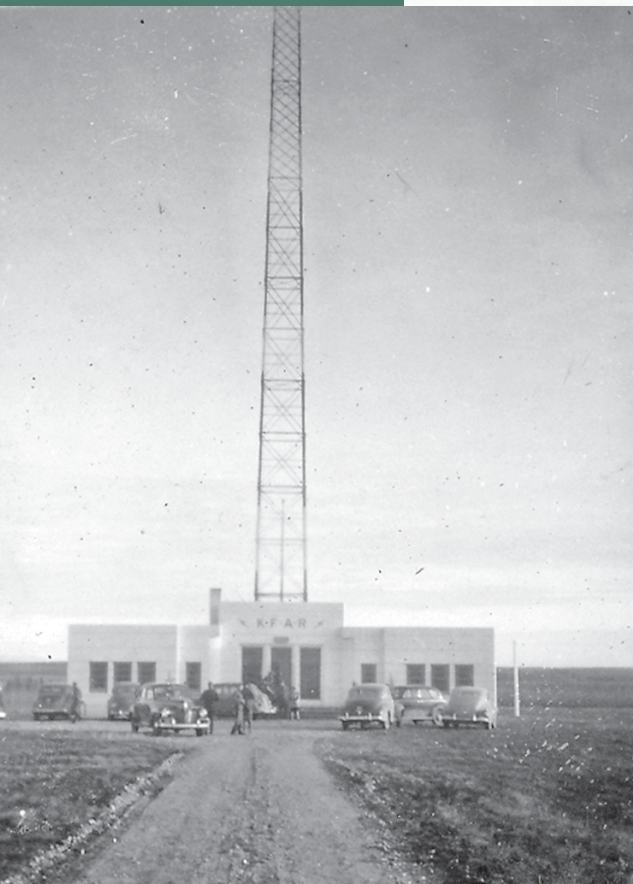
WAR COMES TO ALASKA

With the U.S. entrance into the war, Alaska was brought out of its isolation and into the forefront of the military buildup. August "Augie" Hiebert was a radio engineer who operated the broadcast facilities of KFAR, which were located about two miles from what is now the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Prior to U.S. involvement in the war, KFAR was a commercial radio station. After 1941, it operated as the Armed Forces Radio Service outlet, serving Ladd Field and Alaska's distant outposts.

Through the Armed Forces Radio Service, KFAR received national programming that was previously inaccessible to the Fairbanks audience. Hiebert explained,

We had these big sixteen-inch transcriptions that were flown up here with NBC's best programs, Red Skelton, Jack Benny... CBS stuff, Mutual stuff, and ABC stuff. And we had a marvelous program service that, of course, the townspeople enjoyed too. Now these programs didn't have any commercials in them. All the commercials were deleted

“[T]HE INFANTRY WAS PROUD
OF ROUGHING IT.”



KFAR Radio Station



Cold Weather Test Detachment
parachutist



Cold Weather Test Detachment
soldier in the DVG coat, 1941

“DID YOU KNOW THERE WAS A WAR ON, DALE?”



KFAR Radio Station

because they didn't want to figure that the government was subsidizing advertising. But it was wonderful programming for both civilians and the military. We did that through the whole war.

The Commander's Quarters was originally constructed as the home of the commander of the Cold Weather Test Detachment and was one of the first buildings completed at Ladd Field. For the first two years of operation, the field was strictly a cold weather test facility, but after 1941, the field's mission changed. Then Lieutenant Colonel Gaffney was living in the Commander's Quarters on the day he received word of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Radio engineer Hiebert picked up the news on shortwave radio earlier in the morning and called Lieutenant Colonel Gaffney at Ladd Field and asked, "Did you know there was a war on, Dale?" Gaffney replied, "No, you've got to be kidding." Hiebert responded, "Come on out, I've got a recording of it." Gaffney drove out to the KFAR station, listened to the radio report, and immediately put Fairbanks on military alert. Hiebert concluded, "We went black that same night. [Gaffney] got on the air then and told people what to do or what not to do, and that's the way it got started."

GETTING INTO THE ARMY

Robert H. Redding submitted "Getting into the Army" to the Fort Wainwright Cultural Resources Management Program as part of the Ladd Field History Project. Redding served as an enlisted man early in the war. He worked in the ration section distributing food supplies to the mess halls, a job he recalled leaving him, "bloody and torn, but unbowed, from the tirades of mess sergeants who swore I was starving people." In Redding's opinion though, "everybody was fat and sassy."

Redding faced an uphill battle in his attempt to join the Army as he recounted:

My draft board classified me as 4-F, because of an ailment. That meant I couldn't be drafted. I was safe from the war. However, I wasn't happy about this. Most of my friends had enlisted, or were drafted, but I was on the outside looking in. We were a patriotic bunch of young men and women, and I wanted to serve.

By December 1942, I was determined to become a dogface. I went to my draft board, and asked for a physical re-evaluation. This time, I passed, and my 4-F status was changed to 1-A.

Next, I tried to enlist, but enlistments were for some reason discouraged. So then I became a voluntary draftee. That is I asked to be drafted, and that was allowed.

A group of us went to Ladd Field about December 9th or 10th, but the military wasn't ready for us yet. We were housed in the 439th Barracks in what I called the attic, and we were there for over a week without



Post Commander's Quarters, 1948.
Courtesy of Candace Waugaman Collection

Post Commander's Quarters. *Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration*

being sworn in. Some of the guys objected, and were allowed to leave for town, under orders to return on December 16th. I did not go in. Hell, I liked the food, which was free, and the PX where we got 10¢ beer, and the free movies.

On December 16th, my group were all present, and there was a mass swearing in – except for me. I was sent to a doctor, and he gave me a physical. Perhaps that was because of my original 4-F classification. At the close of the exam, he whispered, ‘Do you really want to get into the Air Corps?’

I said, ‘You bet,’ and that was that. I passed the physical.

Next, I was sworn in. The event took place in the 439th Headquarters personnel office. [Captain] Pugh conducted the event, and I was the only one. The office consisted not only of GIs, but civilian women as well, and they all watched. I knew many of the soldiers, who were local men, and all of the women.

After I became a GI, there were grins all around, and I was sent back to the barracks.

Army life had begun.

WORKING AT THE FIELD

Men and women went to work at Ladd Field for various reasons. In addition to those being drafted, many men came to Ladd Field for the opportunity to earn money. Kenneth E. Bailey worked several jobs at Ladd Field when he was a high school student and recounted that “after December ’41 my father (Virgil Bailey) could no longer get material for his and my grandfather’s (Phillip DeWree) plumbing, electrical and sheet metal shop on First Street so he went to work for Ladd Field. I don’t remember his title or duties.”

Bailey continued,

When I was in high school in 1943 and 1944, my dad got me a summer job at Ladd Field. I still have my metal badge. The first year I started out moving full 55-gallon drums from the railroad dock onto a flatbed truck then to a storage area. Since I didn’t have the strength to move them, they let me drive the truck. The second year I worked as an electrician’s helper. One experience I remember [was] when I was on a low ladder in a hangar getting tangled up with 220 volts and winding up on the deck.

“WE WERE A PATRIOTIC BUNCH OF YOUNG MEN
AND WOMEN, AND I WANTED TO SERVE.”



Chow line. Courtesy of U.S. Air Force
Kay Kennedy Aviation Collection, 1991



UFX-G officers’ mess,
1944. Courtesy of John X.
Jamrich



Mess hall
at Ladd Field

“BUT IT WAS WORK, AND IT WAS SOMETHING THAT
I FELT THAT I WAS MAKING A CONTRIBUTION.”

The original plan for Ladd Field included a large four-story power plant, which was located next to what is now Building 1562. The coal-fired plant generated heat and power for the post and initially relied heavily on civilian staffing for its operations and maintenance. Richard Frank, a young man who came from the village of Rampart to work at Ladd in early 1945, remembered working long days at the Ladd power plant. Frank’s job was to help fire the boilers and he recollected, “It was busy shift work, [we]’d work eight hour shifts...I enjoyed it. I didn’t mind the pay, I don’t remember how much I made. But it was work, and it was something that I felt that I was making a contribution.”

Frank also recalled his general impressions of Ladd Field. Frank commented,

[T]here were a lot of people from the lower 48 [states]. Most of the guys in Fairbanks was pretty much in the service. So there was some local employment, but I think the majority of them was from the lower 48 [states]. Right where that new hospital is going to be built [note: what is now Building 4076, Bassett Army Community Hospital], was full of Quonset huts. That was where the civilians stayed. That’s where I stayed. Had a mess hall there, and everything. There was individual Quonset huts for living quarters, and then there was a whole bunch of Quonset huts put together for the kitchen, and what they called reading room and all that, laundry facilities, and shower and bathroom facilities. You had to walk from one place to another, just like to the laundry rooms, shower facilities, and then the bathrooms.

Women also worked at Ladd Field during the war. Helen Baker Bowles was the first female engineering aide at Ladd Field, and she recounted her groundbreaking “entry into the job force at Ladd was a day in August 1942.” She recalled,

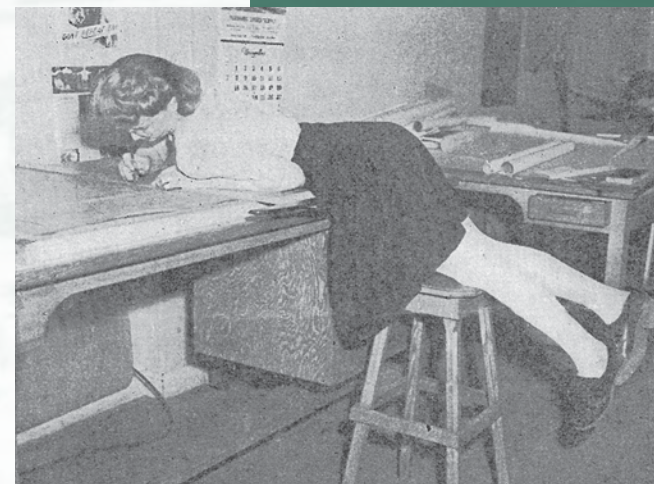
I was hired on as a junior engineering aide with the Corps of Engineers. My supervisor was Richard Downing (district engineer) and Lee S. Linck was also on the staff. On first entering the office (one of the old one-story buildings down from the main area) was ‘can you make coffee?’ I was the first female on the engineering side of the office!!! [I am] enclosing a copy of a clipping from the Western Construction News April 1944 issue of myself draped over my drafting board to reach the top of a drawing I was working on!!! The engineer’s office by that time had moved into the main cantonment area into several apartments of the BOQ. This was located on the north side of the main road across from the commissary.

Bowles performed a myriad of duties at Ladd Field and explained,

[A]nother one of my jobs (as low man on the totem pole) was to run the Ozalid machine (on which we copied maps and drawings for making revisions or the finished ones). It was a long process and I spent time sitting on a stool watching the material go through the machine. I also was trusted with a vehicle once in a while [sic] and ended up



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers badge.
Courtesy of Kenneth E. Bailey



Helen Baker working
at the Office of
the U.S. Engineer
Department in
Fairbanks. *Courtesy*
of Western Construction
News

Power plant on Ladd
Field, 1942. *Courtesy*
of National Archives and
Records Administration



Hank truck used by
Ladd Field engineers



Tinker the dog with
the Ladd Parachute
Group, 1942

learning how to shift a 5-speed truck!!! Another plus was the field trips, sometimes up on the ridge road of Birch Hill where I was near the intersection of Fairbanks meridian and base line (map reference point). I had become interested in the surveying process early in the mid-'30s when the U.S. Coast and Geodetic survey crew had mapped the Harding Lake area one summer.

Despite the hard work at the field, Irene Noyes warmly recalled pleasant memories during the war, particularly in regard to Tinker, a Scottish terrier who served as a kind of mascot for the installation. Tinker was owned by Sergeant Eglehardt (correct spelling unknown) and Noyes recalled the dog having the run of the place. Noyes explained that the sergeant was “an old parachute jumper from way back” and was brought in to teach the parachute group how to pack parachutes, adjust harnesses, and make repairs. Both Eglehardt and Tinker were experienced jumpers, and Noyes recounted,

[W]hen Eglehardt would jump...He'd take Tinker, jump with Tinker, and then after he'd got airborne, pull Tinker's thing. He had a little parachute; we made him a little parachute. He wore out the first three or four of them, so we made him a little parachute. He made eleven jumps, when we had him, when I was still working there. God knows how many he made afterward, when I quit and started my own fur shop, so. But Tinker had quite a past, he was quite a dog. [He was] spoiled rotten. Absolutely spoiled rotten. But he was cute. He even came in the mess hall. He sat with Eglehardt, they let him. The Air Force let him, cause he was the show of the whole Air Force, I think. He'd pee on all them new planes that came in every morning! We'd come to work, and he would be [out there] for heaven's sake that's a new airplane. He wouldn't have a drop left and he'd still hold his leg.

LEND-LEASE OPERATIONS

In 1942, Ladd Field was chosen as the transfer point for the Lend-Lease aircraft along the Alaska-Siberia route. Over 7,900 aircraft were transferred to and ferried by Soviet pilots, which were then sent to the Eastern Front in Europe. Due to the new mission, more Soviet pilots and U.S. personnel were stationed at Ladd Field, leading to an influx of new construction.

The increased Soviet presence made an impression at Ladd Field. Frank worked at the field in early 1945 and recalled that there were

[A] lot of foreign pilots here, mainly Russians that was involved in ferrying airplanes from Alaska to Russia, so it was really interesting. Their uniform was different, and listen[ing] to them speak was very much different. It was interesting because [it] seemed like the Russian pilots would come in bunches, and there were many of them and their



Soviet and U.S. soldiers at the E.M.
party at the second anniversary of
the Soviet Mission at Ladd Field, 1944



Soviet pilot Lend-Lease Reunion, 1985



First Russian military
mission arrives in
Nome, 1942



Soviet airmen

Helen Makarova, 1944.
Courtesy of John X. Jamrich

clothing, I remember on warm days they'd had these long leather jackets. And then there was women pilots also, that was something new to me.

On September 24, 1942, five Soviet transport planes, accompanied by an American B-25 bomber arrived at Ladd Field. Among the male-dominated ferrying crews, engineers, and mechanics were two women, Lieutenant Elena A. Makarova and Lieutenant Natasha Fenelonova. Both women attended the Military Faculty of the Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow and graduated as lieutenants in the Soviet's Army Administrative Service. Arriving at Ladd Field after a stint on the Lend-Lease "South Route" in Tehran, Iran, Makarova and Fenelonova were fluent in the inner workings of American planes. Makarova said that, "from being technically ignorant about airplanes in the beginning, Natasha and I progressed to the point of being able, based on our experience of translating and interpreting technical data for the engineers, to become technicians in our own right."

As interpreters of important technical information, Makarova and Fenelonova were considered essential staff officers to the Soviet mission, and, although Russian-speaking American interpreters were available, Soviet officers preferred their own interpreters for the remainder of their time at the field. Both Makarova and Fenelonova served at Ladd Field as interpreters for the duration of Lend-Lease operations and afterward returned to the Soviet Union.

Frank Nigro worked as a bartender in the American Officers' Club and frequently interacted with Soviet pilots at Ladd Field. Nigro remembered,

[T]he Russian pilots, they didn't have a club, so they used the American officers' club, they loved to play the slot machines...[the club] had pool tables, ping pong tables, and tables where they could play chess. They loved to play chess...I was the bartender. I tell you those guys, they went crazy. They played those [slot] machines constantly. And the money that was drawn from there was taken in to operate the clubs, you see. My job was to see that I had enough cigarettes, I had enough beer, had enough candy bars, had enough change to supply the boys, when they came. When I was through working, you know, I would open up possibly around five o'clock, and then would close the club around maybe eleven o'clock at night. Beer in those days, mostly Olympia beer that we got, came in cases, packed in sawdust...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, they rationed me out, you know. That was OK. I got to learn...quite a bit of Russian. I tried to converse with those boys. A lot of them were young, like me, young pilots. They were good guys, you know.



Russian pilots learn about U.S. aircrafts



Soviet pilots playing billiards at Alaska military site

Russian interpreter
Natalie Fenelova
assists mechanics.
Courtesy of the Kay
Kennedy Collection



Soviet and U.S. airmen playing billiards



Marvin and Phyllis Walseth feeding a bear cub at Ladd Field, 1940

John Jamrich served as a weather forecaster in the 16th Weather Detachment at Ladd Field from 1943 to 1945. He discussed some of the challenges in determining whether it was a good day to fly Lend-Lease planes or if it was better to let the mechanics sleep in a few hours. According to Jamrich,

In winter, there were two main factors to consider. First, there were the extremely low temperatures first thing in the morning and for most of the day, really. Second, there was the short period of daylight for flying, usually about 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. The extreme cold morning (40-60 [degrees] below zero) required at least one or two hours of individual heaters placed on the engine of each aircraft. That necessitated alerting the commanding officer early enough whether my forecast was for a flight or not. If there was to be a flight, the Russian enlisted men (mechanics) were awakened in order to get the heaters going. And the pilots had to be alerted for a flight. You can understand the challenge here. If my forecast was for a flight and I would be wrong, all that effort of heaters and awakened personnel would not be very welcome.

Jamrich continued,

In addition to the low temperature and the need for heaters, Ladd Field frequently manufactured its own ice fog with the smoke from the heating plant. On a still, cold morning, that ice fog could spread over the runways like a blanket. Add to this the fact that daylight hours for flying were limited. So, if they took off from Fairbanks and Nome should turn sour, on the short days, they would have to land at Galena, provided Galena remained clear. But, as the facts show, we were able to meet these challenges successfully during the three winters of flying.

LIFE AT LADD FIELD

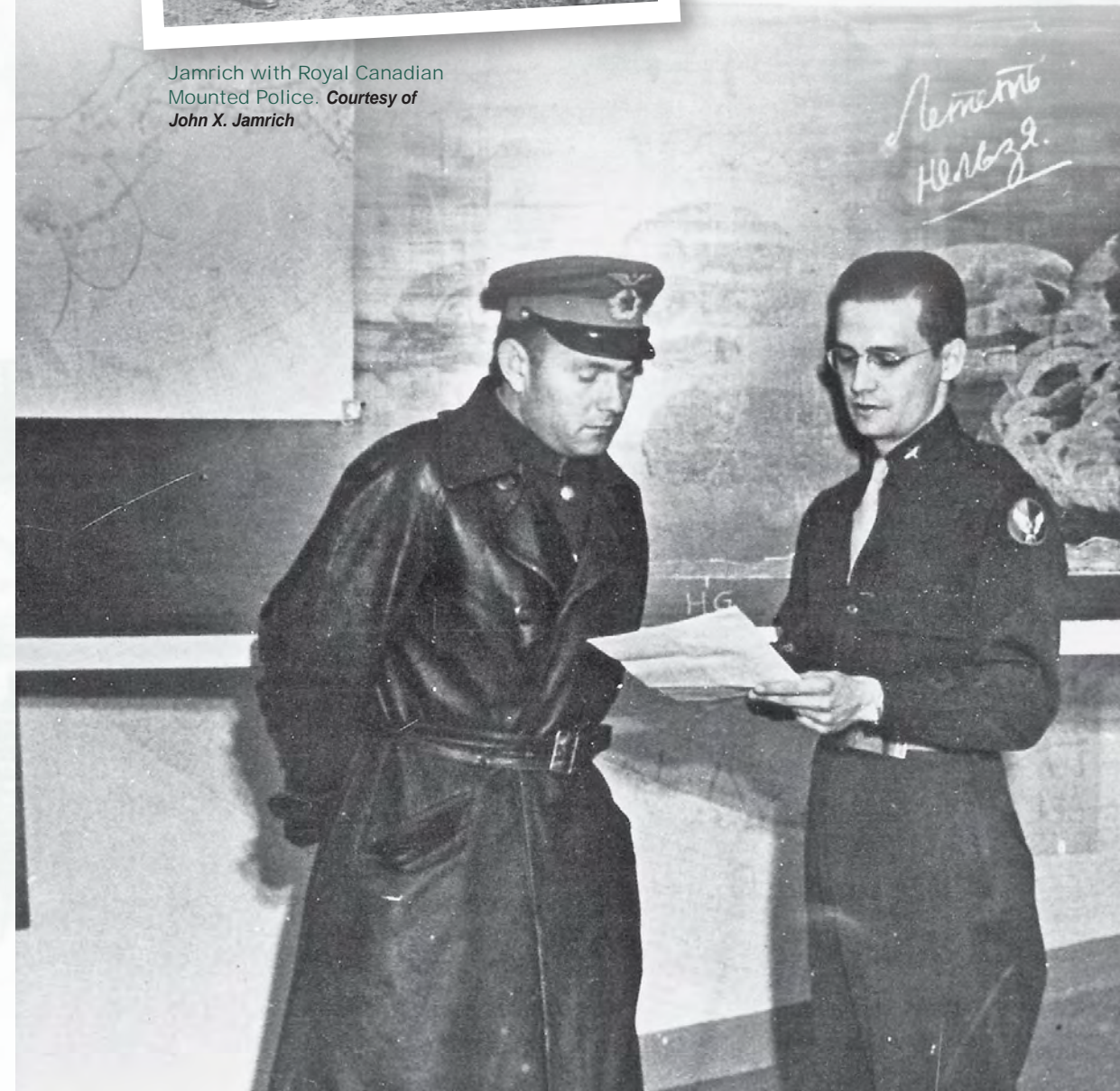
Before the war, life at Ladd Field was fairly quiet. In a letter to her family, Phyllis Walseth, wife of Ladd Field's Post Adjutant, gushed about her new apartment, "Nothing I can say can possibly tell you how nice [these apartments] are for Alaska." The Walseths were one of seven lucky families who were able to move into officers accommodations within the bounds of Ladd Field shortly after the buildings were completed in the spring of 1941. In her letter home, Mrs. Walseth went on to describe the apartment's beautiful hardwood floors, new electrical appliances, spacious arrangement of rooms, and a shiny stainless steel kitchen sink. Although Mrs. Walseth loved her new apartment, her stay in it was short. Once the U.S. entered World War II, all military dependents were ordered to leave the Alaska Territory for their own safety.



Jamrich with Royal Canadian Mounted Police. *Courtesy of John X. Jamrich*



John Jamrich in Alaska. *Courtesy of John X. Jamrich*

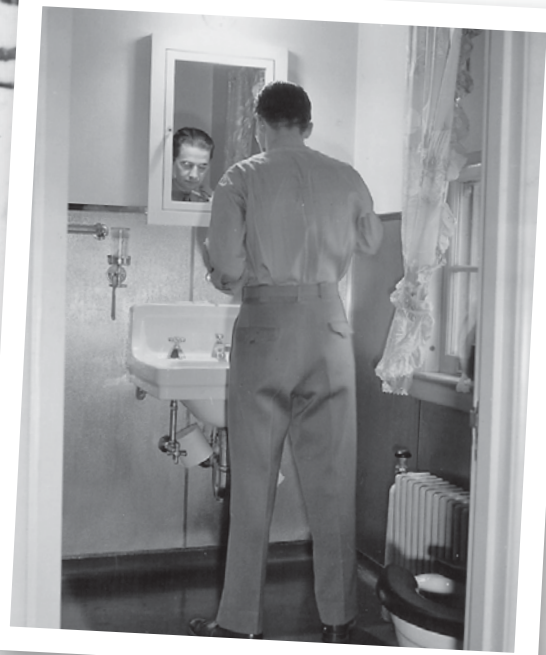


John Jamrich with Gamov. *Courtesy of John X. Jamrich*

“I DIDN’T EVEN FIND ANYTHING TO COMPLAIN ABOUT, CAUSE I ALWAYS FELT IT COULD BE WORSE. I COULD BE OVER FIGHTING IN A TRENCH.”



Marvin and Phyllis Walseth with a dogsled team near Fairbanks



UFX-E officers' quarters, 1944.
Courtesy of John X. Jamrich

Officer Family
Housing at Ladd Field, 1942. *Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration*



After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, military activity significantly picked up at Ladd Field as more soldiers arrived for training. Stroecker described his experiences in the mess halls at Ladd Field. He recalled,

[O]ne time Colonel Gaffney came up and confronted all of us. There were a few hundred men out there, and he was on a good will tour, you know, and it was well received. And the sergeant in command of our squadron [was] a tech sergeant by the name of Rose, from New York City. So the Colonel asked are there any complaints? Well, Sergeant Rose got up and he said, yes! The food is piss poor! I think it kind of shocked Colonel Gaffney, cause he interviewed him later and our food improved! We were supposed to all get the same food, the officers and the men, but it was real bad. Well, I think probably the mess sergeant was probably selling a lot of it out the back end of the mess hall...for money. Well, it had to have been going someplace. And fortunately Sergeant Rose had the backbone to get up and say it like it was, and when they investigated they found out, sure we weren't getting the food. So as a result of that one remark, why, the food did improve.

Stroecker continued to discuss how the war required soldiers to give up little luxuries. He asserted,

[Y]ou had to, you were in the spirit of the war, you know, and you know what all the boys are going through all over the world, so things like the food and things like that weren't as important as they would be to some civilian who was missing the better things in life. Because there was a war going on, everybody was aware of it. Most of the guys, most of them, understood all of that. In my case, it didn't mean much to me. I didn't even find anything to complain about, cause I always felt it could be worse. I could be over fighting in a trench.

A LITTLE FUN IN FAIRBANKS

To alleviate the stress of military duties, leisure activities were an important part of life at Ladd, and both the installation and the Fairbanks community made great efforts to entertain soldiers and civilians alike. In addition to the United Service Organizations club built in downtown Fairbanks, other local civic organizations sponsored dances, socials, and tea parties. As Josephine Johnson recalled, “Just about all the young girls in Fairbanks were recruited to come to the United Service Organizations to dance and talk with the young men. The older women in Fairbanks would preside over that and they would see that there was food and everything was on the up and up!”

On Ladd Field itself, the Non-Commissioned Officer Club hosted monthly dances with buffet food, dancing, and live music. Other organizations on the installation sponsored team sports, movie screenings, performances



Marvin Walseth performing his duties as Post Adjutant



Russians in chow line at Ladd Field



Non-Commissioned
Officer Club Party for
Hostess Volunteers



Dance at the Service
Club, 1948.
Courtesy of the Candace
Waugaman Collection

of various kinds, and well-loved annual events such as the Halloween Carnival, an event where “the spirit of Halloween and Mardi Gras will reign for a night.”

The Junior Women’s Club in Fairbanks hosted masquerade parties and spring dances and was known as the place where “Everybody that was anybody belonged.” Thelma Walker recounted a humorous experience when helping out at a spring dance. She was trying to locate the previous year’s spring decorations, but the past coordinator had already moved south to Washington State. Walker sent a telegram asking where the spring flowers were and received the response, “last spring’s flowers were destroyed.” To her surprise, Military Intelligence shortly arrived “on her doorstep” wanting to find out about the allegedly coded messages. Fortunately, she got it straightened out.

WOMEN’S ARMY CORPS (WAC)

On April 13, 1945, Ladd Field saw the arrival of its first and only unit of Women’s Army Corps soldiers. One hundred and fifty women were sent up from Great Falls, Montana, under the command of 1st Lieutenant Betty Etten Wiker. Like their male counterparts, they experienced challenges in their introduction to Ladd Field. Prior to their flight to Alaska, the Women’s Army Corps were ordered to change into their cold weather uniforms. Many women found these woolen items to be far too hot and a few were sick on the plane, overcome by the heat. Upon arrival at Ladd Field, where the temperature was warmer than it had been in Great Falls, former Women’s Army Corps Audrey Virden recalled, “we kept taking off our clothes as fast as we could!”

From their plane, the Women’s Army Corps were bussed to their barracks and then treated to a special welcome dinner in the mess hall. Virden, as well as several other Women’s Army Corps interviewed by the Cultural Resources Management Program in 2003, recalled the first dinner at Ladd Field, “coming from meat rationing, when we got up here, the first night they took us to the mess hall, and we each had a steak!” Virden went on to say, “I know how hard that cook had to [work to] get those steaks on hand, cause they didn’t come easily.”

Having arrived with her unit that April, Lieutenant Etten Wiker’s primary responsibility was to oversee the general well-being of her female charges and she described her role as a “mother hen” taking care of her children. While Lieutenant Etten Wiker retained no control over individual duty assignments, which were given by the Personnel Office, she took great pride in the smooth running of her company. Lieutenant Etten Wiker’s letter home (dated April 29, 1945) stated,

As for the company. On the whole, they are a pretty good group of women, and after I get to know their names and histories, I should feel better about them. You see they all come from different companies

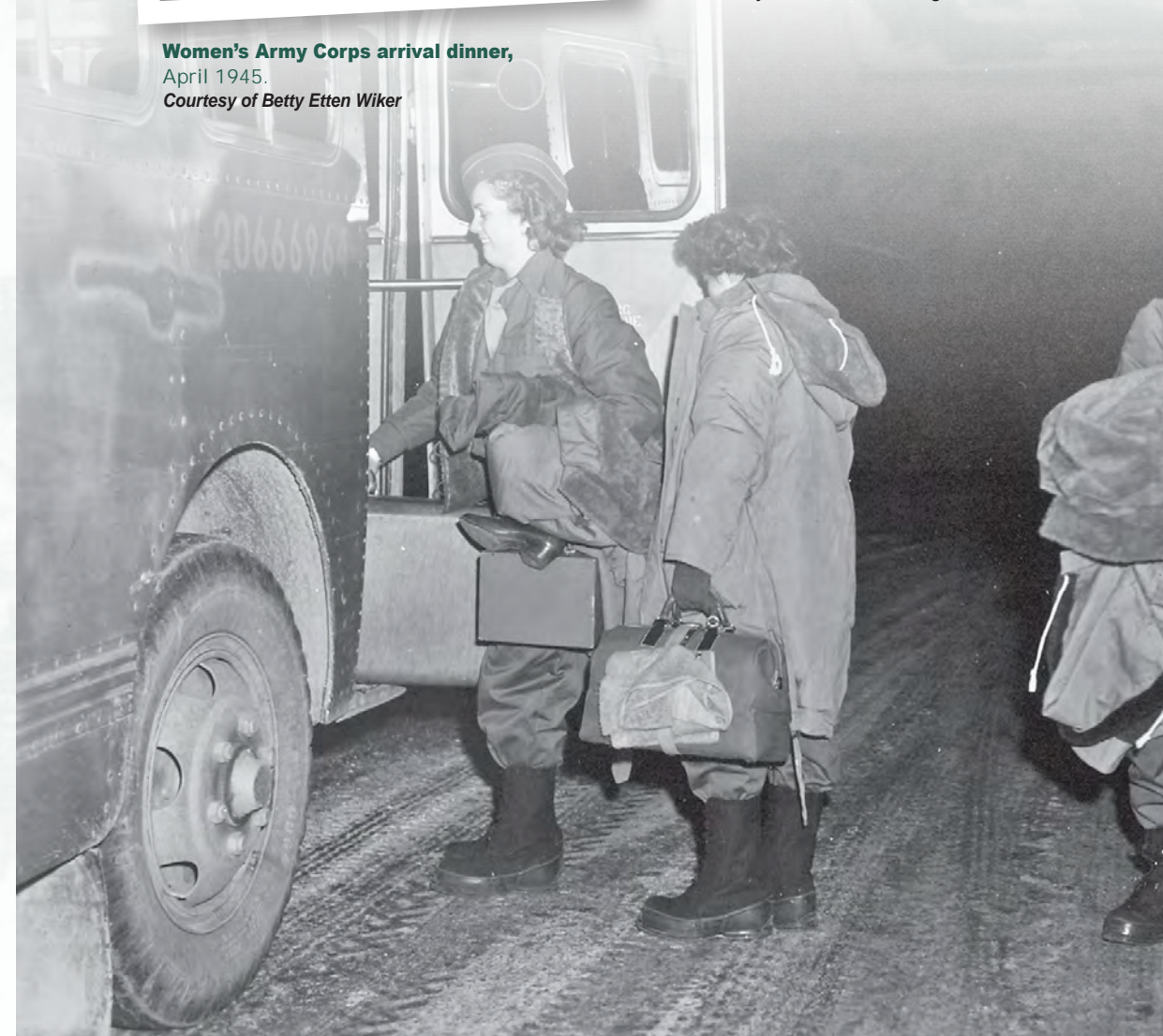
“EVERYBODY THAT WAS
ANYBODY BELONGED.”



Women's Army Corps arrival dinner,
April 1945.
Courtesy of Betty Etten Wiker



Captain Peters arrives with girls from
Anchorage to dance with soldiers, 1948.
Courtesy of the Candace Waugaman Collection



Women's Army Corps
arrive at Ladd Field,
April 13, 1945. *Courtesy*
of Betty Etten Wiker



Women's Army Corps barracks fire, June 25, 1945.
Courtesy of Betty Etten Wiker



1st Lieutenant Betty Etten Wiker serving as commanding officer of the Women's Army Corps Squadron, April 28, 1945.
Courtesy of Betty Etten Wiker



Women's Army Corps barracks fire, June 25, 1945. *Courtesy of Betty Etten Wiker*

throughout the States, they were administered under various and sundry policies and they are all new to one another and to their assignments. Some have been in the Army longer than I, and others have been in only 8 or 9 months.

Lieutenant Etten Wiker served 10 years in the military and retired from it in 1952, having achieved the rank of major.

Virden also shared her memories of when the Women's Army Corps barracks burned down. She recalled,

We were working in the headquarters building, because, it's where the hangar is now, but we could look out, we had windows facing... the WAC barracks. And one of the guys that was working in there looked up, and he said, 'Hey, the WAC shack's on fire!' And we didn't believe him, but then pretty soon somebody else looked, and they said, 'It is on fire!' And so then we just watched it burn. And then... they had to have a place to put us to sleep that night. So they put us in, I think, part of the cold weather testing barracks that was empty.

Virden explained that after the barracks burned down,

[I]t was interesting...the Red Cross came and gave us a little bag that I guess had toothpaste, and soap, and everything. But we had nothing, except the clothes that we had on. And they could issue a few things, but it was interesting how the men responded. One man had been given a pair of pajamas. And of course, the men didn't wear pajamas in those days, whether they do now or not... So he gave me that pair of pajamas that he had... They were kind of a knit. You wouldn't find any man wearing them, I don't think! Another man gave me one of these soap on a bar that I suppose somebody had given him... And then as I said, temporarily we were put in this cold weather testing barracks. It was located over the PX, I remember that much. Then they set us up in an old BOQ area that was miles from this base.

According to Virden, after the barracks fire, Women's Army Corps members

[L]eft this nice, modern building, with modern facilities, [and] we went to this other place which was very rugged. The toilet facilities...it was a great big long line of holes, and it would automatically flush every once in a while. But you weren't separated from the person next to you. Some of the older women complained. They said they couldn't go to the bathroom that way. So then they put some little barriers, just a little barrier, up... [We lived in a] big room with beds. Course it had been in the other facility, too. We had a bed and then we had a little shelf with hangars underneath it and a footlocker.

When asked if the lack of privacy was difficult for her, Virden responded, "No. Because when you went in the Army, you didn't have privacy."



Women's Army Corps barracks fire, June 25, 1945. *Courtesy of Betty Etten Wiker*



Women's Army Corps barracks fire, June 25, 1945. *Courtesy of Betty Etten Wiker*



Women's Army Corps squadron passing in review, August 10, 1945. *Courtesy of Betty Etten Wiker*

As Commanding Officer of the Women's Army Corps Squadron, Lieutenant Etten Wiker described her time at Ladd Field as a period

[F]illed with many joys, and some sorrows. The fire that destroyed our barracks and where we lost one of our women happened while I was on a trip to the Aleutians with a small group of enlisted women. Our return was a heartbreaking shock as we landed and were greeted by a devastated group of women.

Lieutenant Etten Wiker concluded, "However, they proved to be of sturdy stock and did their jobs and continued their mission despite the heartache that this experience brought them."

AFTER THE WAR

After World War II ended in 1945, Ladd Field continued to serve as a significant military site. In 1947, the U.S. Army Air Corps developed into the U.S. Air Force and the field became an important Air Force site during the Cold War years, particularly between 1947 and 1960. In 1961, Ladd Air Force Base was transferred to the U.S. Army and renamed Fort Wainwright.

In 1985, the original Ladd Field was designated a National Historic Landmark in recognition of its role in World War II. This status was bestowed in acknowledgment of Ladd Field's contributions to cold weather testing, its role as an air depot, and its use as a transfer point for Alaska-Siberia Lend-Lease aircraft to the Soviet Union. The National Historic Landmark includes the core permanent buildings around the North Post, the airfield, the Butler warehouses, utilidors, and several roads.

Ladd Field also supports a state-recognized Cold War era historic district that is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Aerial view of Ladd Field looking east, June 1945

“HOWEVER, THEY PROVED TO BE OF STURDY STOCK AND DID THEIR JOBS AND CONTINUED THEIR MISSION DESPITE THE HEARTACHE THAT THIS EXPERIENCE BROUGHT THEM.”

The personal recollections of the men and women, both soldiers and civilians, provide a colorful and rich understanding of the experiences at Ladd Field during World War II. These interviews, letters, and emails serve as the foundation for this document and depict the personal side of life at the field that simply cannot be gathered from general histories and reports.

This project would not have been possible without the willingness of the men and women who shared their stories and recounted their lives at Ladd Field. Fort Wainwright's Cultural Resources Management Program graciously thanks all of the contributors who provided their stories:

<i>Kenneth E. Bailey</i>	<i>John X. Jamrich</i>	<i>William Stroecker</i>
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CULTURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT AT FORT WAINWRIGHT

The Cultural Resources Management Program supports the Army’s mission by inventorying and managing cultural resources in a manner that complies with federal law, minimizes impacts on the mission, supports sustainability of resources and infrastructure, and provides sound stewardship of properties eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

The Cultural Resources Management Office is located within the Environmental Division, Building 3023. Copies of publications and additional information on the history of Fort Wainwright are available upon request. Business hours are Monday through Friday 7:30 am to 4:30 pm.

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