

Billy Mitchell saw its great potential in 1935, and now the rest of the world has finally caught on.

Strategic Alaska

By Marc V. Schanz, Associate Editor



USAF photo by SrA. Garrett Hothan

More than ever before, the Air Force is paying close attention to its force structure in Alaska. Indeed, a major rush of events in the High North has propelled the 49th state up to the top ranks of service thinking.

A resurgent Russia has ramped up its long-range bomber flights nearby. A changing Arctic climate has uncorked a flurry of activity in the region as once inaccessible resources now seem ready for exploitation. Alaska's strategic Arctic location is viewed as useful for missile defense, air defense, and force deployments to locations ranging from Europe to East Asia and beyond. And the military training space available to USAF there is huge and varied.

For these and other reasons, the Air Force has started beefing up its forces in the state. A visitor there sees that the service has been sending its newest and most advanced equipment for Alaskan service, including brand-new F-22 fighters and C-17 transports.

"From an airman's perspective, [it's] probably the most strategic location," said Lt. Gen. Dana T. Atkins, commander of Alaskan Command and Alaskan NORAD region. The state's geographic location "makes it hugely of strategic import to the United States and really important in a global context."

From Alaskan bases, the Air Force can gain quick access both to the Pacific and European Theaters. Transiting across the Arctic, forces could arrive in Europe faster than if flying from the East Coast of the US, Atkins pointed out. This responsive location has helped to push Alaska to the forefront of USAF's investment queue.

The reinvigoration of Russian bomber patrols over Arctic waters in August 2007 was an opening push of that country's increasingly assertive power projection efforts. NORAD's US and Canadian fighters have repeatedly intercepted Russian flights skirting Alaskan airspace.

New F-22s at Elmendorf Air Force Base took center stage last fall when

C-17s are surrounded by low clouds on the runway at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska. At right, a map illustrates Alaska's strategic location.

Raptors stepped in to fill the role of the temporarily grounded F-15 fleet to intercept Russian Tu-95 Bear bombers.

The Air Sovereignty Mission

Many of the Raptor pilots leveraged their F-15 backgrounds, and the scrambles led to the development of a new training plan for the air sovereignty mission, said Lt. Col. Orlando Sanchez, director of operations for the 525th Fighter Squadron at Elmendorf. While F-22s are no longer on alert, they may perform intercepts in the future.

The commander of Russia's Air Force, Col. Gen. Alexander Zelin, said in April the country will increase its strategic patrols to as many as 30 a month.

"It's been interesting in the last few years," said Gen. Carrol H. Chandler,

chief of Pacific Air Forces, in September. “When I was ... Alaskan Command commander, we had one intercept in the time that I was there. The Russians have continued to put emphasis on long-range aviation; they’ve continued to put emphasis on presence in the Arctic. ... Those numbers have picked

continental shelves, according to senior Russian military officials. Geologists believe major oil and gas deposits could potentially become available as the polar ice cap slowly recedes with warming temperatures—a fact that is the focus of increasing attention to the nations claiming Arctic waters.

ing capability. “But you know we’re constantly testing each others’ intel ability, we’re constantly testing each others’ reaction ability, and that’s just part of it.”

A big issue in the mix is the filing of standard international flight plans by the Russians, Atkins said. If an aircraft ap-



Staff illustration by Zaur Eylanbekov

up considerably over the last three to four years.”

Chandler suspects that a “competition for resources” will continue, and perhaps intensify, in the Arctic.

Last year, Russia publicized a submarine trip to the bottom of the seabed at the North Pole—where the crew deposited a titanium Russian flag, symbolically marking territory.

The Canadians derided the expedition as a “stunt,” with Prime Minister Stephen Harper making a trip to Canada’s Arctic region to unveil several major military investments, and following with a new defense strategy, outlining new capabilities in the North.

Russia’s focus on Arctic operations is a part of the country’s push to assert its own interests over Siberia’s extended continental shelf—the largest and least explored so far of the world’s

“I don’t see that abating anytime in the near future, and the Russians certainly have the resources at this point” to continue to push into the region, said Chandler.

A Resurgent Russia

While Russia’s Arctic bellicosity has been on the rise, commanders in the region say the moves have to be kept in perspective.

“Is it Cold War games all over again? I don’t think so,” said Brig. Gen. Thomas L. Tinsley, who led the 3rd Wing at Elmendorf until his death in July. The moves are not hollow, however, and represent Russia’s “desire to bring their Air Forces back up to the speed they were.”

Tinsley noted that Russia has doubled the fuel it allots to its strategic aviation forces in order to bring back lost train-

proaches a nation’s sovereign boundary with a flight plan, things would be a lot less complicated, he said. The problem with the Russian long-range bomber missions is that “what we’ve witnessed ... is these flights occur without these flight plans.”

This is one of the goals of improved mil-to-mil relations with the Russian Far East Military District commanders, Atkins added. “It seems too simple to say that, but if they would just adhere to the protocols that we have all accepted, then I think a lot of the perceived tension will evaporate.”

The US Coast Guard cooperates closely with the Russians just across the Bering Strait on issues ranging from fishing to limiting piracy, Atkins said. This month a survival search and rescue exercise was to be conducted, and this past summer US forces participated in



a homeland defense exercise where a simulated hijacking took place—with command and control elements in both Alaska and Russia simulating the tracking and handing off of the aircraft.

Both Atkins and Gen. Victor E. Renuart Jr. at NORAD have been working to invite some of the Russian Far East Military District commanders to visit Alaska to continue building between the two militaries professional relationships—which haven't always been as close as the Coast Guard's.

"I'm the new guy. I'm going to try to keep building that professional rapport," Atkins quipped. "It would be great to get a rapport like the [Coast Guard's]. ... I'd like to achieve the same kind of professional tie."

In addition to renewed tensions with Russia, increased air and maritime traffic is a growing concern at Alaskan Command. Climate conditions have revealed a host of new Arctic transnational issues.

Navy Capt. Tom Meadows, ALCOM's director of plans and policy, has worked on the command's climate change studies in the Arctic since early 2007, when then-commander Air Force Lt. Gen. Douglas M. Fraser put together a symposium to talk about the changing climate in the region and its strategic implications. It "was a bit of an eye opener for some drastic changes that were taking place," Meadows recalled.

The driver of all the renewed activity is the size of the polar ice cap during the summer months, which, according to Meadows, reached a record low point in December 2007. This year "is

likely to be another record low point," Meadows said.

Russia, Canada, Norway, the US, and Denmark (through Greenland) are in the process of researching the polar seabed to support their respective claims for extended continental shelves. The disputes, which are being addressed in several transnational forums, have long-standing implications for access to resources ranging from petroleum to natural gas and minerals that are assessed to be under the Arctic Cap.

A Tyranny of Distance

The Arctic may become a busier maritime route. With less ice-cap restrictions, it becomes beneficial to move global commerce across the north rather than through traditional routes.

"Who's going to protect those airways and waterways?" Tinsley asked. "Those domains are very important to us."

An F-15C from the 60th Fighter Squadron takes off from Elmendorf Air Force Base on a Red Flag-Alaska mission.

The Air Force's Elmendorf and Eielson Air Force Bases have seen wholesale changes over the past year.

Until 2007, Elmendorf hosted a pair of F-15C squadrons, an F-15E squadron, and C-130s for tactical mobility.

Up at Eielson, the 354th Fighter Wing featured a squadron of F-16s and an A-10 squadron.

Most of these aircraft are now gone, replaced by state-of-the-art successors or equipment tailored to unique missions.

Atkins said the Pacific Theater's tyranny of distance makes it no accident that the only C-17 squadrons permanently stationed outside the continental



An Elmendorf-based F-22 intercepts a Russian Tu-95MS Bear bomber near Alaska.



An F-22 Raptor arrives at Eielson Air Force Base.

US are in Hawaii and Alaska. Today, eight C-17s call Elmendorf home—part of Elmendorf's mission transition to take advantage of the base's strategic operating location.

Previously, C-17s flying from the continental US would have to lay over in Alaska or Hawaii before proceeding west, to allow for crew swaps or rest time.

Due to Alaska's location, a C-17 is now a day closer to most destinations across the Pacific—and only eight hours from Germany over the North Pole.

In May, US Pacific Command used two C-17s, one flying from Elmendorf, to speed over 175,000 pounds of relief supplies to China in response to the devastating Sichuan earthquake.

"We can reach any critical point in the world in less than 10 hours," Lt. Col. Dave Almand, commander of Elmendorf's 517th Airlift Squadron, said last year.

In addition to a new strategic lift capability, Alaska is one of two locations outside the continental US that will host the Air Force's top-of-the-line combat aircraft—the F-22A Raptor. Elmendorf's 90th Fighter Squadron gained a squadron of Raptors in 2007—the first squadron outside the continental US. The 525th FS reactivated, and also received Raptors. (One F-15C squadron, the 19th FS, remains at Elmendorf.)

At Eielson, the Air Force stood up a new aggressor squadron for Red Flag-Alaska. The base brought in Block 30 F-16s for the 18th Aggressor Squadron.

"The ability for our pilots to leverage that capability is tied to the right airspace and range environments," Atkins said of the Raptor. "And Alaska affords that."

A Training Ideal

By the end of 2009, about 40 Raptors will be stationed at Elmendorf, said Sanchez, the 525th FS DO. Other than the extreme climate, Alaska is prime Raptor training space.

In Alaska, Sanchez's pilots can train with an E-3 AWACS squadron—which is just across the ramp—as well as F-15Cs, he said. Coupled with the new aggressors at Eielson and the tanker support of the Alaska Air National Guard's 168th Air Refueling Wing, the Raptor is well-supported to train for a variety of missions over Alaska's sprawling military airspaces—the Pacific Alaskan Range Complex.

"It's going to grow into another premier fighter training ground," Sanchez, a former F-15C weapons officer and USAF Weapons School instructor, said of Alaska.

"Most bases, to get that kind of training, they would have to deploy to a Red Flag or Nellis. ... We have a pretty good training setup, with Northern Edge and Red Flag-Alaska."

Alaska's capabilities are of great importance in a wide range of contingencies and war plans across the Pacific. "We're not in [war plans] as a maybe. We're in as a must," said Tinsley.

The 3rd Wing's F-22 Raptors deployed to Guam for the first time this July.

While much of Alaska's new capabilities have bedded down, the near future holds more change.

A big push will be to get appropriate hangar space for arriving aircraft. Elmendorf currently features a seven-bay hangar, used by Raptor maintainers, which formerly housed C-130s and F-4s. A new facility is due by 2011, Sanchez said.

Currently, the F-22s and F-15Cs share ramp space, but the milcon program is well under way to expand facilities. "Eventually we will have hangared space for all the aircraft," Sanchez said. "We'd prefer to have [the crew chiefs] inside, but we ... have space for major maintenance" right now.

The base is in the middle of significant infrastructure upgrades for the new fighters. A Low Observable Component Repair Facility—a climate-controlled repair structure for stealth materials—was completed this past summer, and a new operations and maintenance squadron building is anticipated by 2011.

On the mobility side, upgrades and construction on the books include a new dual-bay hangar, new operations buildings, and improvements to assault landing zones on the PARC.

In July, the 517th Airlift Squadron performed the first dirt assault landing with a C-17 in Alaska on a strip near Ft. Greely.

Alaska's range space, what commanders call some of the best in the world, will also be the focus of increased investment. The large investment being made in improving the capabilities of the PARC—upward of \$57 million over the next several fiscal years—will directly benefit Raptor training and the Red Flag-Alaska exercise. From bombing ranges to simulated integrated air defense systems, Raptor pilots will be getting a more robust experience up north as the ranges mature.

The Air National Guard's 176th Wing at Kulis Air National Guard Base will also move its HC-130s, C-130s, and HH-60s to Elmendorf—and a raft of modifications to older structures and new construction will follow the BRAC-directed move.

For all of the shifts and changes, this much is clear: The cumulative power of airpower in the state is great. It is only fitting for a place that Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell, way back in 1935, called "the most strategic place in the world." ■