

# ALASKA'S ROLE IN PROTECTING THE UNITED STATES DURING THE COLD WAR FROM THE LATE 1940S - LATE 1980S

- The United States took strong and decisive action to ensure that Alaska would play a vital role in efforts to counter and defeat Soviet aggression.
- In the 1950s alone, the United States spent \$1.2B (\$10.4B in 2015) on military construction in Alaska; by the mid-1950s, there were over 150 military installations and a Cold War peak of 50,000 active duty personnel in Alaska.
- Fighter aircraft in Alaska intercepted over 300 Soviet bombers off the Alaska coast -- over half were intercepted in the 1980s, with a high of 33 in 1987.
- Cold War military activity in Alaska was cited as the largest generator of economic activity in Alaska until Prudhoe Bay development began in the late 1970s. It was also a major contributor to communications and civilian air transportation improvements and Arctic engineering advances.
- Evolving military tactics and strategies, technological improvements, and budget decisions led to operational changes and force drawdowns at times. However, beginning in 1946 with U.S. General Carl Spaatz's directive to commanders to make development of an Arctic front their primary operational objective, history clearly reflects the United States' recognition of Alaska's importance to the country's national security during the Cold War.
- A focus on a strong military presence in Alaska during the Cold War brought significant investment to the state. A reduced presence in Alaska following the end of the Cold War raises questions regarding our ability to effectively protect American interests in the region.

## HIGHLIGHTS OF INVESTMENT AND PRESENCE IN ALASKA FROM THE LATE 1940S - LATE 1980S

**1947-48:** Big Delta (later renamed Fort Greely) was designated as an Army post in 1947 and became the Army's Arctic Training Center in 1948.

**1948:** "Mile 26" was renamed Eielson AFB and its runway was extended to >14,500 ft., making it North America's longest runway at the time.

**1949:** Two months after Soviets detonated their first atomic bomb, which was detected by Eielson AFB-stationed aircraft, Congress authorized funding for an Aircraft Control and Warning (AC&W) System in an effort to better detect Soviet aircraft activity and help guide U.S. interceptor fighter jets.

**Late 1940s:** Reconnaissance missions (up to 30 hours) started launching from Ladd and Eielson AFBs.

**1950s:** The Navy's Adak/Kodiak facilities were expanded to counter submarine threats.

**Early 1950s:** Forward Operating Bases established at King Salmon and Galena in western Alaska, providing protection for Elmendorf and Ladd AFBs.

**1950-53:** A new Fort Richardson was constructed and named as U.S. Army Alaska headquarters (responsibilities included ground/air defense, Nat'l. Guard/Army Reserve training, Air Force/Navy logistical support, and internal security).

**1951-58:** 18 AC&W sites were built across Alaska.

**1954:** Construction commenced on Fort Greely facility improvements, including the military's first nuclear power plant.

**1954-1959:** AC&W System expanded with construction of Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, which spanned from the Aleutians to Greenland and included 24 sites in northern Alaska and the Aleutians.

**1957:** 200 fighter aircraft and 8 squadrons were stationed in Alaska (a Cold War peak).

**1958:** White Alice Communications System linking air defense systems together became operational; consisting of 33 sites, White Alice covered 3,000 route miles, cost \$150 million to build, and involved ~3,500 workers.

**1958-60:** U.S. responded to Soviet emphasis on missile forces by constructing three Ballistic Missile Early Warning System sites, including one in Clear, Alaska in 1958-60, and by building Missile Identification, Detection, and Alarm System at Fort Greely in 1959-60.

**1959-60:** To replace older Anti-Aircraft Artillery batteries and protect major military bases and population hubs, Nike Hercules batteries were installed at 3 sites near Anchorage and 5 sites near Fairbanks.

**1960s:** With increasing missile threats, early warning radar sites were placed in interior Alaska.

**Mid-1960s:** Alaska became a significant re-fueling stop for Southeast Asia missions; by 1969 1,000 to 1,200 monthly C-141 cargo landings occurred at Elmendorf AFB.

**1973:** Construction began on the \$68 million Cobra Dane radar station at Shemya Island; starts operating in 1977, with ability to track up to 100 objects simultaneously with 3-D data on up to 20 targets.

**1980s:** Computer systems linking Alaska's defense network to the Elmendorf AFB command center are modernized.

**1981:** BRIM FROST training exercises with every branch of military began at Fort Greely (occurred every other year).

**1982:** Alaska received its first F-15s, the most modern fighter in the fleet at the time.

**1982:** The military established a rail-based alternate command center.

**1983:** NORAD Region Operations Control Center at Elmendorf AFB became operational.

**1984-85:** Site radar was replaced by new, state-of-the-art minimally-attended radar.

**1986:** AK Air Command received 2 Boeing E-3 airborne warning & control aircraft, bolstering US air defense capabilities.

**1986:** 6th Infantry Div. (Light) activated at Ft. Richardson, with a mission to be prepared to deploy rapidly and defend AK.