

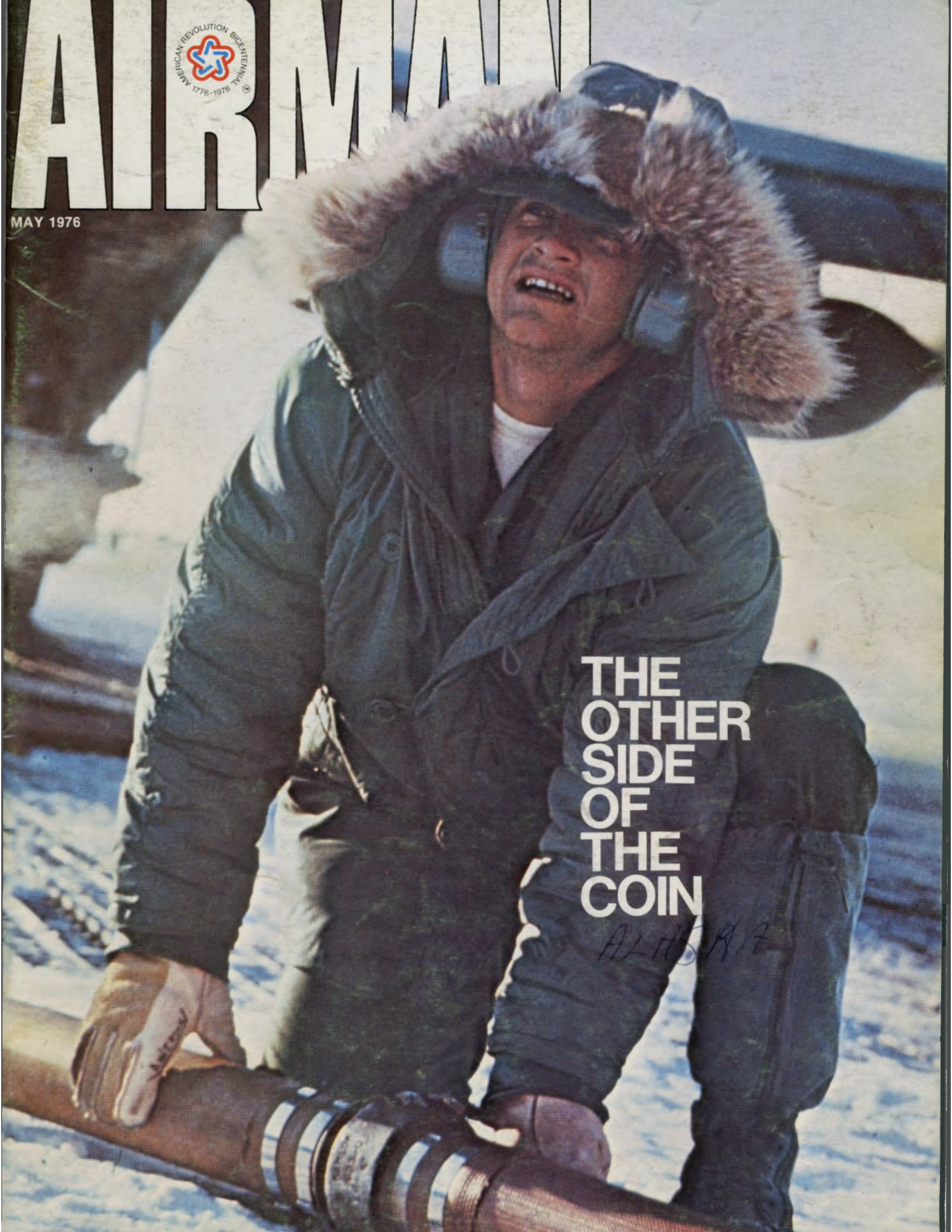
AIRMAN



MAY 1976

THE
OTHER
SIDE
OF
THE
COIN

ALASKA



There was more to the airlift than flying airplanes. Those on the ground for "Operation Coin Alaska" were . . .

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN



Some of the fuel flown to the North Slope was pumped into fuel trucks and then taken to storage areas away from the sites.

It was October 1, 1975.

For the first time since 1898, arctic ice had failed to move away from the coastline. It hugged the coast, forming an ice wedge against Alaska's northern shore. Supply barges were unable to get through.

Attempts by the largest commercial maritime sealift in history to skirt the ice pack and reach the huge oil and gas complex on the northern slope of Alaska had failed. While perhaps half the vessels got through, the remainder—including "Operation Cool Barge" tugs and barges that were transporting supplies to military communities on the North Slope—had turned back.

Three of the fleet's barges carried fuel and dry cargo destined for DEW Line (Distant Early Warning) facilities between Point Barrow, the northernmost point in the U.S., and Barter Island which lies 290 miles east. They also supplied the Navy Arctic Research Laboratory at Point Barrow, the Navy Petroleum Reserve No. 4 at Lonely, and other non-DOD agencies.

The Air Force and Navy installations were severely threatened. At Ice Station Big Bear, 390 nautical miles northeast of Point Barrow, a small Navy research community was hurriedly evacuated when Arctic Ocean ice began breaking up beneath the camp. At a defense site on Barter Island, gasoline stocks were so low that all nonemergency use of motor vehicles was on the point of being curtailed unless fuel aboard the barges could be delivered.

Ice blocked every avenue for the supply-laden barges. The continued operational readiness of the DEW

system was threatened.

"Without at least some of those supplies, we'd have been forced to shut down part of our research projects," Cmdr. Dick Shauss, Commander of the research lab at Point Barrow, said later.

Natives like Dan Levitt, a 58-year-old Eskimo and owner of a small taxi fleet at Barrow, had warned of the predicament. But no scientific data backed him up. Barges had supplied the North Slope sites since 1952.

But the ice pack didn't move offshore as it had in the past. Today, Dan Levitt can say, "I told you so," thanks to a fluke in nature. Thanks to the Air Force, there were people at the sites throughout the winter to take his ribbing.

At Headquarters, Alaskan Air Command (AAC), Elmendorf AFB, contingency plans were made for the airlift of critical supplies. AAC requested airlift help on September 15 before the first of the returning barges had unloaded its cargo at the Port of Anchorage. The arctic-wise C-130 crews of the 17th Tactical Airlift Squadron at Elmendorf would need assistance from C-130 units stationed in the south.

"About September 23," recalled Lt. Col. Emil E. Wessale, 22d Air Force Combat Operations Officer at Travis AFB, Calif., "we began to get rumblings of a possible airlift to the North Slope. But, nothing official."

By October 1, though, Wessale and 20 operations and administrative people were at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, just outside of Anchorage. It was now official. They

joined Col. James R. Olson, Alaskan Theater Airlift Manager, and his staff—with support from AAC units at Elmendorf and Eielson AFB—to put together an airlift operation more than half the size of the Mideast airlift of 1973. Its code name was “Coin Alaska.”

“By the time we got to Elmendorf, Colonel Olson’s people had the numbers,” said Wessale. The numbers roughly totaled 50 percent of the cargo aboard the three defense barges of project Cool Barge. The Elmendorf people figured at least 651 sorties by MAC C-130s would be needed to airlift the 23.3 million pounds of cargo. Eighty percent of their haul would be fuel, 20

percent dry cargo. Twenty-one more sorties would have to be contracted to commercial carriers with L-100 aircraft (a stretch C-130) to accommodate outsized cargo.

“It was a contingency operation put together while it was going on,” said Wessale. That in itself wasn’t a totally new experience for MAC people. They had done a similar thing earlier in the year for the evacuation of South Vietnam, putting it together as they went along.

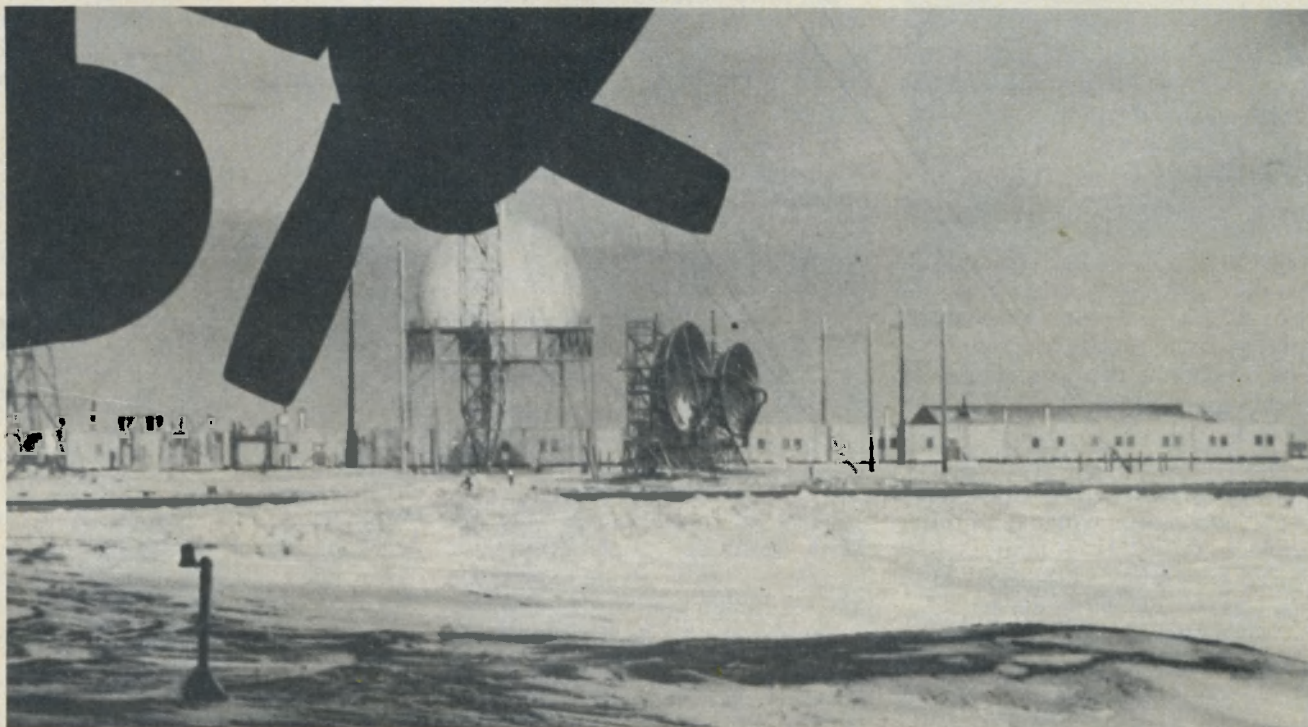
The first arctic mission was scheduled to take off from Elmendorf AFB October 6. At nearly a dozen bases in the lower 48 states, commanders asked for volunteers to man the operation.

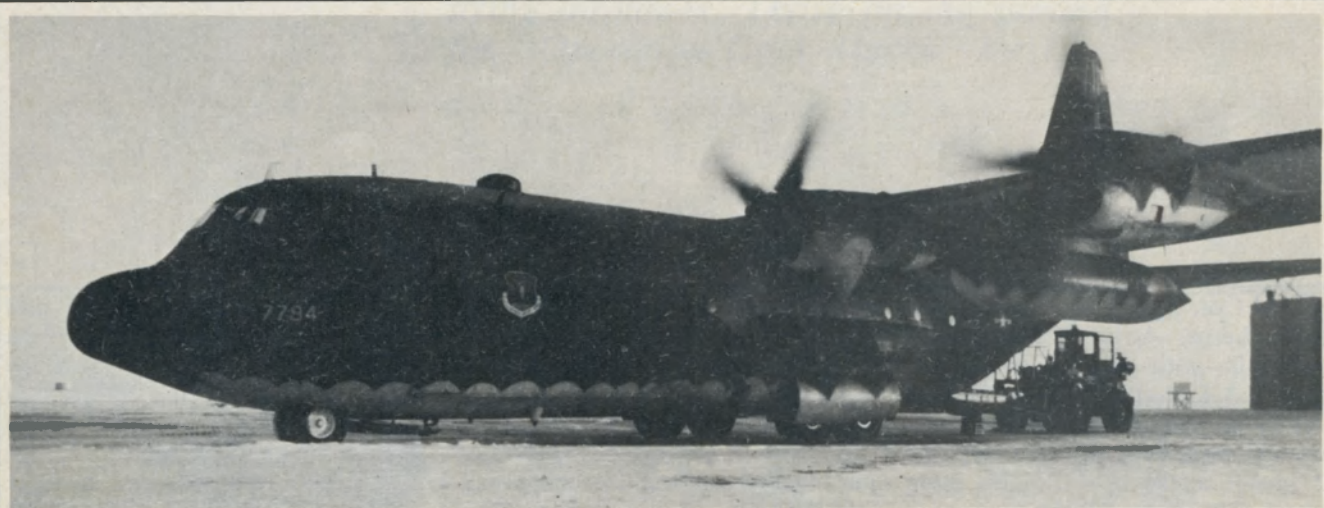
“It sounded interesting,” said Amn. Dave Richards from Pope AFB, N.C. “So when I first heard my supervisor saying volunteers would be needed Monday, September 29, I said, ‘Take me.’”

Another airman had a brother stationed in Alaska. The airlift would provide a reunion. And A1C Bill Whitten at Little Rock AFB, Ark., figured “it was either the real thing in Alaska for 45 days or an exercise in Germany for 60 days.”

Manpower from Dyess AFB, Tex.; Langley AFB, Va.; Homestead AFB, Fla., and other bases

Point Barrow lies just north of the arctic circle, unprotected from the harsh polar cold.





Trusty C-130, *Hercules* mostly from southern bases, adjusted to the polar region along with the men and women who executed Coin Alaska.

began to arrive at Elmendorf the first week of October. But there was a lot of work to be done before the first C-130 could head for the North Slope.

One of the biggest tasks was building an Airlift Control Center (ALCC), already scheduled for Elmendorf but hurried up for the airlift. ALCCs were familiar to most of the aircrews, former Tactical Air Command people. But since MAC had only taken over the tactical airlift responsibility in July, ALCC was a new concept to many. "Even the job of the ALCC wasn't readily understood," said Wessale. But the wrinkles were soon ironed out, and the ALCC—a mission control center—began to operate smoothly. The operations people manning the center soon learned it was a lot like a command post without immediate emergency action responsibilities.

The staff began plotting the airlift. How much cargo would be airlifted on each sortie? How many sorties would be flown each day? How many crews would be needed?

"We wanted to get as much cargo up to the slope as possible, as fast as possible," said Wessale. By the time the operation began, plans

called for an average of 14.5 missions a day for 45 days.

Aircrews would fly from Elmendorf to airfields on the slope, to Eielson AFB near Fairbanks in central Alaska, back to the slope, and home to Elmendorf. This way there was no need to refuel at the arctic sites, and crews could keep the engines running to eliminate any freeze-ups while offloading.

But there were some adjustments. When the first C-130 was ready to go, a loadmaster told the operations people, "The plane is too heavy to take off."

It took a little refiguring, the offloading of some fuel, and the first flight and all later flights were okay. From that point every problem seemed to come with a ready solution and the right people to take care of it. "The problems were the type typical to any contingency operation," said Wessale. "Small things that just bugged you."

A BONUS

Once the first missions were off, MAC began collecting a bonus for its effort—"arctic flying experience that we couldn't duplicate anywhere in the lower 48," said Colonel Olson. The operation also saved several million dollars by using funds already allocated for flying training.

But aircrews weren't the only ones getting "real-life experience."

Combat control teams were sent to the North Slope to receive the 23.3 million pounds of cargo. At places like Oliktok, Lonely, Barter Island, and Point Barrow, the combat controllers took care of the northern end of the airlift.

"We were glad to be on the slope," said TSgt. Ronnie Potts, team chief for the combat control team from Dyess AFB, Tex. "Here we are involved in the real thing, not some game or training exercise. Up here we're helping people."

But he still seemed a little disappointed that Coin Alaska wasn't more demanding on him and his team. "We came prepared to really rough it," said Potts, noting that they even brought sleeping bags. Instead, they lived in warm rooms with piped-in AFRS music, worked out of an office with a telephone, and ate in the dining hall with the best reputation on the slope.

They had arrived prepared to set up a control tower, observe the weather, offload aircraft, and do anything else that needed doing. "We were even prepared to TERPS the field," said Potts. That meant planning the approaches and departures.

But like other sites on the slope, Point Barrow already had approach

and departure routes published. The Barrow Flight Services facility, four miles away, gave landing and takeoff clearance.

Still, there was plenty of work for the combat controllers. They set up a Tactical Landing Approach Radar (TALAR), which is a portable Instrument Landing System (ILS), and passed weather information to the aircrews. "Weather could be totally different here from that reported four miles away," said Potts.

They were also responsible for cargo coordination, and even assisted unloading when necessary. "We passed messages from Elmendorf operations to the aircrews, completed landing gear inspections, and even learned how to direct airplanes out on the flight line," the team chief reported.

Normally, two fuels men or two aerial port men and one combat controller would meet each plane. They found themselves wrestling fuel lines, chocking airplanes, and pushing pallets off the C-130s. "We even fed the crews," said Potts, grinning at the thought.

"Those aircrews are flying a bomb," he said of these bringing in fuel. "It's no picnic for them."

In addition to the combat controllers, aircrews, refueling people, aerial port teams, and weather observers sent to the North Slope for Coin Alaska, there was also a fuel truck mechanic.

Sgt. Tom Printz had been stationed at Elmendorf before going to the 60th Transportation Squadron at Travis AFB, Calif. Now he was back for Coin Alaska.

"At Elmendorf we used our R-2 and R-5 refueling trucks to fill bladders aboard C-130s," said Printz. "At the slope, we used them to pump fuel out of the bladders." He talked about the "refuelers" like they were friends, and was obviously proud of the 600-gallon-a-minute pumpers.

Two days after the operation began, on October 8, one R-5 refueler

at Point Barrow started slowing down. Printz was good at his job, and those in the 21st Transportation Squadron at Elmendorf knew it. So when the fuel truck at Point Barrow developed the cog, "guess who got sent north?" he kidded.

"The man stationed at Barrow was right out of school," said Printz. "He just didn't have the experience to know what to do." The truck would pump only 450 gallons a minute, and that's 150 gallons a minute too slow. "When you're trying to turn planes around as fast as possible, it makes a difference," said Printz.

The rate-of-flow valve had to be adjusted. On the passenger side of the truck, in a compartment just behind the cab, Printz went to work with a 9/16-inch wrench.

It was -25 degrees in front of the hangar where he worked. Wind whipping off the ice pack brought the chill factor down to -60. The door to the compartment served as a partial shield, but Printz still had to go inside every 10 or 15 minutes to thaw out. Working in the cold, he adjusted the valve, ran around the truck to the compartment on the opposite side, and read the pump discharge pressure gauge. After 45 minutes, the gauge indicated between 75 and 80 pounds of pressure per square inch. His work was done and he could return to Elmendorf to keep the trucks pumping at that end.

HAZARDOUS DUTY

At Elmendorf, the refuelers pumped avgas, JP-4, JP-5, or diesel fuel into two rubber bladders aboard each C-130. Men like SSgt. Laddy Mawrey helped pump fuel into the bladder, and then flew to the slope to help offload the fuel.

Mawrey had never been assigned flying duties before. For Coin Alaska, he drew \$55 a month hazardous duty pay for flying what Sergeant Potts had called a "flying bomb."

Like most everyone involved in Coin Alaska, Mawrey worked long hours. The missions were usually 12 hours long and that meant 15- or 16-hour days, "with 12 hours between flights to sleep, eat, do your laundry, and relax," said the supply NCO from Homestead AFB, Fla.

He kept his B-35 bag packed most of the time. The big canvas bag held his arctic gear, including bunny boots, fat boy pants, mittens, and more. "We normally carried an extra set of civvies in case we got held over at Eielson," said Mawrey.

By the time he stuffed all his gear into the bag, he had his work cut out for him just getting it into the back



Sometimes a combat controller had to devise his own way to keep warm.

of the six-pack truck that took him to the airplane.

Mawrey said it normally took about 20 minutes to fill the rubber bladder with fuel. Then he had to tighten the straps holding the bladders on the pallets. There were 76 straps on each bladder, and 48 of them had to be manually tightened by using metal ratchets on the canvas straps.

"Once airborne, we have to watch for leaks," he said. A leak combined with the slightest spark

can spell disaster.

SSgt. Don Gilbertson was the only one to spot a leak during Coin Alaska, and that came on a flight carrying diesel fuel to Barter Island. He was sitting on the bladder closest to the front of the plane, reading, when he noticed the ominous odor.

It turned out to be motor fuel from the pumps used to offload the diesel. But the crew still had to don

brakes, gear retraction motors, nose wheel steering, and flight controls all leaked. "Sometimes all we had to do was heat the seal and it would expand and stop the leak. But other times we had to tear down the part and replace the seal," he said. They had anticipated the seal problem.

One that wasn't anticipated was a landing gear malfunction. "When the C-130s took off from Elmendorf in the early days of the airlift, it was

a tire," Whitten recalled.

Before he could get started, though, his plane (it had returned from the slope only a couple hours earlier) was back on the schedule for a return trip at 11:40 p.m. There was still time to complete the 45-minute job.

Whitten called for a jack and got to work. Another crew chief joined in to help. He found yet another cut tire.

Suddenly the hour left until the scheduled launch time seemed very short. The rain had stopped but it was cold, and wind whistling past the plane made it even colder.

Two men began working a manual pump to jack up the plane while Whitten started to remove the tire. He pulled the hub, removed the antiskid detector and the 4½-inch wheel retaining nut. About the time the plane was jacked up off the ground, A1C Linsey Britton crawled behind the tire and kicked. The 300 pounds of rubber came off and was wheeled away. Still other mechanics had a new tire ready to put on.

Once the tire was on, the jack was moved to the other side of the plane and the operation repeated. The plane rolled on schedule at 11:40.

At midnight the shift changed. Tired mechanics grabbed a quick midnight breakfast at the dining hall and hit the sack for a well-deserved rest.

Three weeks into the airlift, 362 sorties had been completed.

The operation eventually ended for the Air Force with 474 sorties flown and 16 million pounds of cargo delivered to the North Slope. The remainder of the cargo, destined for the Navy's DEP-4 project, was completed by commercial carriers.

The Coin Alaska force went home and the North Slope people stayed to work through the winter. Many felt nothing big had happened, when really, they just made it look that way. ☛



Dry cargo was offloaded by sturdy forklifts and stored for use during the ensuing winter.

oxygen masks and open the rear door to clear the bay of fumes.

COLD CAUSES PROBLEMS

From the beginning of the operation, maintenance crews were plagued with hydraulic leaks that demanded continuous effort to keep the airlift on schedule. Most of the mechanics, like SSgt. Jerry Muhs, were from the lower 48 states and warmer weather. The cold weather in Alaska took some adjustment.

"But the planes were from warmer weather, too," said Muhs, "and like us, they had to get used to the cold."

It was the frigid weather that caused the hydraulic leaks. "The cold would make the seals contract and leak," said Muhs, noting that

a relatively warm 30 to 40 degrees," Muhs recalled. But it was also raining. Mud and slush would lodge on the landing gear and then freeze when the aircraft flew into the colder northern region. Up north, the crews would get an unsafe landing gear indication."

As a temporary fix, the engineers pinned the landing gear and the crews returned to Elmendorf with the gear down. Taping the drain holes on the gear could have solved the problem but colder weather solved it first. "With the colder temperatures, we didn't have rain or slush and the problem didn't occur," said Muhs.

But the cold didn't prevent other problems. At 10:30 one night, A1C Bill Whitten, a maintenance crew chief, found a cut tire during a post-flight inspection. An hour and a half was left before the midnight shift change—"plenty of time to change

HERE'S JAKE

JAKE SCHIFFERT



"So they cancelled your PCS, eh Roscoe? Well, here's your old office back, just the way you left it!"



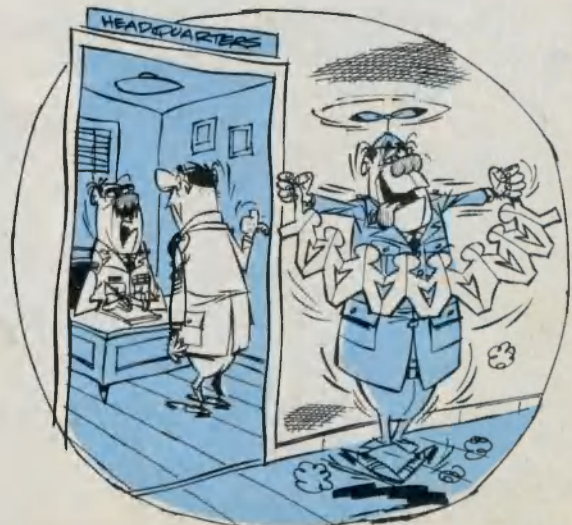
"Yeah, that's the screwdriver I lost when I worked on your engine. Where did you find it?"



"Your cigarette caused this, Sergeant Croton. Now do you believe that smoking is hazardous to your health?"



"Testing, testing . . . have that report on my desk in five minutes, fathead . . . have that report on my desk in five minutes, fathead . . . testing, testing . . ."



"What's that? He volunteered for this assignment?? Why would anybody in their right mind volunteer for this place???"