



Alaskan War Games

Naknek AFS, Alaska

KOREAN WAR
1951

By Mr. Charles Christian

Air Force people assigned to duty in Alaska during the Korean War worked a portion of the Korean Air Lift that went via Alaska, and were told to always be on alert for any threats or intrusions upon the Territory of Alaska (not a state then) by the Soviets.

One way to stay alert was to have occasional area war games. In the spring of 1951 "Operation Firestep" took place with a detachment of four F-80s from the 64th Fighter Interceptor Squadron. We were staged out of the old WWII Naknek AFS for this exercise.

The base consisted of an old Quonset hut on the flightline that was the detachment commander's office, an ops room at one end and the ready room at the other end for the pilots, a small two story FAA station, and a group of Quonset huts used for quarters, messing, etc.

The game plan was that Naknek would be a friendly base and they would be subject to attack by other (aggressor) elements of the three squadrons of F-80s of the 57th Fighter Interceptor Group at Elmendorf.

I was a 1931st Airways and Air Communications Service Squadron cryptographer and sent for two weeks TDY with my combat gear, weapon, and two M-209 crypto machines (which were soon declared obsolete, and I heard were given to the Boy Scouts). My duties were to send back encrypted mission reports to Elmendorf.

Upon my arrival, the detachment commander, Maj. Van Bebber, informed me that no such thing was going to happen. He said I could go back on the next available C-47 leaving for Elmendorf, or he was short one each Fighter Operations Clerk, and if I wished I could have the job for the next two weeks. Being a quite young (18), a corporal and ready for any new adventure, I replied quickly: "Sir, I accept your offer." After a few hours training, I started out the next day on the sun-up to noon shift. For the next few days I would prepare mission reports, go get the weather

from the FAA, do radio checks on the radio console which connected the ops room with the FAA tower aircraft radios, and other minor duties. There was a hand cranked field phone that went to the radar site and upon their sighting of any "bogeys" they would ring me up and tell me to "scramble two or four" depending upon their sightings.

I would then hit the klaxon horn for one long or two long blasts to launch one or two flights of two aircraft each. This was definitely the best part of my duties. I would also talk to the aircraft when needed during their flight, though most of their talk was between themselves and the radar site. Usually they would be able to intercept the aggressors before they got to the base, and then they would call it a game and return home.

One morning, while still pitch dark, our pilots and crews were driving on the perimeter road headed to the flightline when suddenly there was a swoosh just above our heads. Our parachute flare lighted the area above us, and immediately another swoosh came over our heads. Then we heard .50 caliber machine guns being fired and as the second jet flew over us, our truck was showered by empty hot brass coming out of the nose of the jet.

Then the jets were heard coming around again to have another pass at us. Instead of pulling a lever to drop a flare, the lead pilot pulled the lever that ejected his canopy. Not wanting to fly back home in the freezing weather, he decided to land and surrender to us. We had a further unexpected surprise when he turned out to be the famous West Point football player of the mid-1940s "Doc" Blanchard.

He had helped lead Army to three undefeated seasons, won the Heisman Trophy and the Sullivan award, and was three times All-America during his time at West Point. Taking into consideration the injustices that we had been subjected to, we all felt it was proper restitution. We also felt we won that game even if it was by default. Felix "Doc" Blanchard obviously overcame this incident and went on to fly in Korea and retired as a colonel in 1971.