

# Eleventh Air Force History

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The Alaskan Air Force was activated on Elmendorf Field 15 January 1942 to manage the buildup of the Army Air Forces in Alaska. It was redesignated the Eleventh Air Force on 5 February 1942.

Following the Japanese bombing of Dutch Harbor in the eastern Aleutian Islands and the occupation of Attu and Kiska in the western Aleutians in early June 1942, the Eleventh Air Force launched an air offensive against the Japanese on the two islands.

Missions were flown initially from Cape Field on Umnak Island in the eastern Aleutians and later from fields built on Adak and Amchitka. Headquarters Eleventh Air Force was moved to Davis Field, Adak in early 1943. Attu was retaken in May 1943, and the Japanese withdrew their garrison from Kiska in late July.

The Aleutian Campaign ended with the reoccupation of Kiska on 15 August 1943. Primarily an air war, it was the only World War II campaign fought on North American soil. The Eleventh Air Force flew 297 missions and dropped 3,662.00 tons of bombs. One hundred and fourteen men were killed in action, another forty-two were reported missing in action and forty-six died as a result of accidents.

Thirty-five aircraft were lost to combat and another 150 to operational accidents. It was the highest American combat-to-operational loss ratio of the war. Weather was the prime culprit.

The Eleventh Air Force accounted for approximately 60 Japanese aircraft, one destroyer, one submarine and seven transport ships destroyed by air operations.

Following the occupation of Kiska, the Eleventh Air Force declined from peak strength of 16,526 in August 1943 to 6,849 by the end of the war. For the remainder of the war, it flew bombing and reconnaissance missions against Japanese military installations in the northern Kurile Islands from Attu and Shemya Islands. The first land based bombing mission of the World War II against the Japanese home islands was launched from Attu on 10 July 1943.

The Eleventh Air Force was redesignated the Alaskan Air Command on 18 December 1945, and its headquarters was moved from Adak to Elmendorf AFB on 1 October 1946 to better manage Alaska's emerging air defense system.

Alaska's air defenses were greatly expanded during 1945-1955 period. An extensive aircraft control and warning (AC&W) system was constructed along Alaska's coast and interior. The Alaskan segment of the DEW Line was built, and later the DEW Line was extended to the eastern Aleutian Islands. The Command was initially equipped with P-51s, which were replaced in succession by F-80s, F-94s, F-89s and F-102s.

By 1957, AAC had reached the height of its strength with over 200 fighter interceptors assigned to six squadrons. Early warning and fighter direction were provided by 18 aircraft control and warning and 12 DEW Line sites tied together by the White Alice Communications System. Its assigned strength was 20,687. The forces were organized into two air divisions providing "Top Cover for America."

The late 1950s and the 1960s saw a major reduction in AAC's forces as Air Force air defense doctrine began changing, and emphasis shifted to a defense against a mixed threat of missile and bomber attacks. The number of fighter interceptor squadrons shrunk to one, the air divisions were inactivated, and the aircraft control and warning sites reduced to 13. The assigned strength dropped to 9,987 by 1969. The Aleutian DEW Line segment was dismantled. Emphasis shifted towards supporting other commands.

The F-102s were replaced with F-4Es in 1970. The arrival of the versatile F-4E marked another turning point in AAC's history. It gave AAC a tactical air capability.

The Command's command, control, communications and surveillance system underwent a modernization during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The manpower intensive, 1950s era aircraft control and warning system radars were replaced with minimum attended AN/FPS-117 minimally attended, long range radars. The system achieved its operational capability in October 1985. The outdated, semi-automated Alaskan NORAD Control Center was replaced with the fully automated Regional Operations Control Center. It achieved an operational capability on 14 June 1983.

Further improvements were made to the force structure with the arrival of F-15As in 1982, upgraded to "C" models during 1987-86. On 1 July 1986, the 962nd Airborne Warning and Control System Squadron was activated at Elmendorf AFB to operate two E-3 Sentry aircraft on rotational duty to Alaska. (The aircraft were later assigned to the squadron.) A second F-15C squadron was added the next year. The modern radar system, the F-15s and the E-3 resulted in a greater capability to protect the air sovereignty of North America. The number of Soviet aircraft intercepts increased dramatically from an average of ten a year during the first half of the 1980s to a record of 31 in 1987, after which the numbers began to decline dramatically following the breakup of the Soviet Union. Four Russian aircraft were intercepted in 1993.

In keeping with the force modernization, significant improvements were made in data automation and the use of personal computers proliferated.

One of the most singular events affecting AAC was the disestablishment of the Alaskan Command on 1 July 1975. The Commander, AAC assumed the additional responsibility of Commander, Joint Task Force-Alaska, a provisional joint command that could be activated in the event of an emergency, such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill in March 1989.

The Alaskan Command was reestablished on 7 July 1989, as a subordinate unified command under the U.S. Pacific Command in recognition of Alaska's strategic importance to the defense of the Pacific.

With the activation of the Alaskan Command, the next logical step was to place its air component (AAC) under the Pacific Air Forces. On 9 August 1990, the Alaskan Air Command was redesignated the Eleventh Air Force.

The early 1990s marked a period of major organizational mission changes and force modernization. The Eleventh Air Force was reorganized as an objective numbered air force during 1992-1993 and its headquarters reduced to 100 authorizations. Its major units also changed. The 21st Tactical Fighter Wing was inactivated and the 3rd Wing was transferred from Clark AB to Elmendorf AFB in December 1991. The F-15E equipped 90th Fighter Squadron was added as were the 517th Airlift Squadron (C-130Hs and C-12Fs) and the 962nd Airborne Air Control Squadron (E-3B).

There were also significant changes at Eielson AFB. The A-10As assigned to the 18th Fighter Squadron were replaced with F-16Cs in 1992 and an OA-10A squadron was activated. Eielson AFB became home of the Cope Thunder training exercise series and the range complex was greatly expanded and improved to accommodate not only Cope Thunder but other joint training requirements as well. Finally, in keeping with Air Force Chief of Staff guidance to retain the most illustrious units, the 343rd Wing, a veteran of the Aleutian Campaign, was inactivated in August 1993. The 354th Fighter Wing was activated in its place.

Other changes during the period included upgrading the 11th Tactical Air Control Group to the 11th Air Control Wing in January 1992. The wing subsequently inactivated 1 July 1994 in favor of two groups organized under the 11 AF, the 611th Air Operations Group and 611th Air Logistics Group, later changed to the 611th Air Support Group.

The mission of the Eleventh Air Force shifted during the early 1990s from defending Alaska against the Soviet Union bomber threat to committing its forces to worldwide deployment and providing training opportunities for others.