

GENERAL HAP ARNOLD AND THE 1934 FLIGHT OF B-10 BOMBERS TO ALASKA: LEGACY FOR US AIRPOWER EFFICACY AND FAR NORTH OPERATIONS

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General Henry “Hap” Arnold’s enthusiasm, vision and organizational skills helped guide and realize a transformation of airpower from a supporting function for infantry to an essential component of modern warfare. His leadership drove aircraft modernization and US mastery of strategic bombing and led to the era of US dominance in air superiority. **The flight of 10 Martin B-10 Bombers that he led to Alaska in 1934 represented an inflection point in US military aviation. It would result in important consequences for US airpower in the Arctic and for the wider role and mission of airpower and the Arctic in US military strategy.**

CONTEXT

Beginning with his training at Wright Field in 1911, Arnold’s military experience navigating a nascent and evolving military aviation capability led him to internalized key concepts:

- **The scaffolding of a successful aviation enterprise consisted of effective training and logistics.** Through his experience of directing airpower through two world wars and in establishing the doctrine of strategic bombing, Arnold understood that operations would fail without optimizing training and logistics infrastructure.¹
- As he sought out like minded aviators, scientists and engineers, Arnold vigorously advocated for close collaboration. From the beginning of his aviation career, he “never neglected to talk to scientists and get their views on what could be done in the air.” Through these early contacts, Arnold developed an unshakable belief in the **essential connectivity between science, technology and airpower.**²
- Arnold’s **ability to surround himself with capable, innovative and forward leaning colleagues and subordinates**, helped further both Arnold’s goal of advancing air power capabilities as well as providing for the future development of a robust and independent US Air Force with the capability to ensure US air superiority.

¹ Dik Alan Dako, *Hap Arnold and the Evolution of American Airpower* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 87, 121.

² Dako, 65.



In 1934, Air Corps Chief Maj Gen Benjamin Foulois authorized a **Flight of ten B-10 Bombers to fly a roundtrip mission to Alaska from Bolling Field in Washington D.C.** After preparations began, he assigned Lt Col Hap Arnold to lead the flight.³

The Flight departed Bolling Field on 19 July 1934 with an aircrew contingent of 14 officers and 16 enlisted. Flying across the US and Canada, the Flight reached Fairbanks on 24 July. Once in Alaska, **the crews contended with challenging environmental conditions including inclement weather, limited infrastructure and services, an earthquake, long logistics lines, and extreme tides** (when one of the aircraft went down in Cook Inlet).

Relying on local aviation and weather expertise and the enthusiastic support of local communities, the Flight **succeeded in its mission: aerial photography of over 20,000 square feet of Alaskan territory, surveying possible locations for future bases, consulting with local experts, promoting goodwill with the public, and demonstrating the efficacy of airpower in the defense of US territory in Alaska.** Flying part of the mission over Canada necessitated **Canadian governmental and military support and generated military to military cooperation and comradery.**⁴

RESULTS

The 1934 Alaska Flight tested new ground for the Army Air Corps' new B-10 airframes operating in the Far North. **The Flight set records for the scope, speed and militarily actionable quality of its aerial photography, for conducting the first mass flight to remain in constant radio contact with the ground, and in the return leg from Juneau to Seattle, the Flight became the first to fly non-stop from Alaska to the continental US entirely over water.** Returning to Bolling Field on 20 August, the Flight arrived to an ebullient crowd which included the Secretary and Assistant Secretaries of War, the president's son (President Roosevelt was returning from his own mission in transiting through the Panama Canal to reach Hawaii) along with the Air Corps Chief and Deputy and other distinguished guests.⁵

Under Arnold's inspired leadership, the Flight succeeded in burnishing the Air Corps reputation and **showcasing the efficacy of bombers for long range missions.** In addition, the Flight **seamlessly implemented new equipment such as improved radios and aerial mounted cameras helping to advance airpower warfighting efficacy.** Moreover, the Flight **highlighted the strategic position of Alaska and identified future locations for military bases in Alaska.** Arnold's careful selection of his crews ensured he maximized the expertise available. In particular, he included Capt Ross Hoyt and Capt Edwin Bobzien as his advance team. Capt Hoyt had previously set an aviation record with a flight to Nome and Capt Bobzien had worked with Martin Aircraft so had deep knowledge of the B-10s used for the mission.⁶ **Utilizing his skilled crewmembers, local experts and community support, Arnold's Flight overcame challenges of operations in the Far North and successfully executed their mission.** The importance of **Canadian support** for the success of the mission, in particular RCAF expertise in selecting the optimal route on the most challenging leg through Yukon Territory, **foreshadowed the deepening defense relationship with Canada.** **This would develop through World War II and the Cold War as an existential component of defense of the US homeland.**

³ Dave Kindy, "North To Alaska," *Aviation History* 33, no. 4 (October 1, 2023): 26–35.

<https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=89f0a103-41da-3361-8e47-ce900766b7a0>, 29.

⁴ *The Army Alaskan Flight, 673rd Air Base Wing History Office, JBER, Alaska, 1-7.*

⁵ *The Army Alaskan Flight, 673rd Air Base Wing History Office, JBER, Alaska, 7.*

⁶ Ray A. Dunn, Oral Interview, 27 February 1970. Oral History Transcripts 748-774. File No 750. Clark Special Collections. USAFA McDermott Library, 25, *The Army Alaskan Flight, 673rd Air Base Wing History Office, JBER, Alaska, 4.*



CONCLUSION

Arnold's experience leading this Flight cemented his developing views on the **critical role that strategic bombers would play in US success in deterrence, defense of the homeland, and future conflict**. Airpower could be rapidly mobilized and deployed to Alaska and to the wider Arctic. A supporter and acolyte of Billy Mitchell, Arnold advanced Mitchell's advocacy of **Alaska's strategic importance to US defense**. Following the 1934 Flight his indefatigable efforts to establish military airfields in Alaska would eventually come to fruition on the eve of World War II. Arnold's World War II leadership proved critical in airpower development, the US strategic bombing capability critical to implementing the Combined Bomber Offensive in Europe, and US airpower strategy in the Pacific Theater. **The 1934 Flight highlighted both the strategic advantage of operations in the Arctic as well as the increased vulnerabilities that adversaries could exploit in the Arctic. It made clear that bombers could threaten previously isolated territorial boundaries.**⁷ During World War II, Arnold would dispatch newly commissioned and accomplished Arctic aviator Bernt Balchen to Greenland stating, "No greater challenge to the pioneering spirit of Americans has ever been presented than the present vital necessity for the United States Army Air Forces to prepare themselves for operations in the Far North."⁸ Looking ahead after World War II, **Arnold identified the need for US aviation power projection in Arctic spaces to effectively defend the US**. In a 1946 article in *National Geographic*, Arnold explained, "no longer can our northern approaches be considered as guarded by ice, snow and bad-weather barriers. Modern aircraft are becoming increasingly independent of such conditions...A surprise attack could readily come from across the roof of the world unless we were in possession of adequate airbases outflanking such a route of approach."⁹

Arnold's 1934 Flight to Alaska thus had multifaceted consequences, provided lessons learned for operating in the Arctic, and provided further impetus to Arnold's efforts to promote a holistic approach that propelled the US to airpower dominance. These are important lessons to consider for both the future pre-eminence and lethality of US airpower.

Author's Disclaimer: The views expressed in this Brief are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of Defense or of the U.S. Government.

⁷ Dako, 139.

⁸ Chief of the Army Air Forces Major General H. H. Arnold Sept 12, 1941 Letter to Capt Bernt Balchen, Donor Box ARH-BAL, Clark Special Collections, USAFA McDermott Library.

⁹ H.H. Arnold, "Air Power for Peace," *The National Geographic Magazine*, February 1946, 170.



