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Apr 02, 2026

Department of War
OFFICE OF PREPUBLICATION AND SECURITY REVIEW

Sovereignty and Solidarity: The Legacy of Canadian American Security

Cooperation in Alaska

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14 January 2026



In 1942, on the eve of the Japanese occupation in Alaska, and despite security concerns in Western Canada, four Royal Canadian Air Force squadrons began operations in Alaska. Availability of military air assets in Alaska was so dire that the four squadrons immediately made up twenty five percent of them. By the end of the Aleutian Campaign, 500 RCAF personnel, 5,000 Canadian Army soldiers, 700 Canadians in the binational First Special Service Force, and crews of Canadian armed merchant vessels and corvettes all served in defense of Alaska.¹ Thus began a longstanding and unique security cooperation partnership. Its evolution through Cold War Arctic exigencies in Alaska resonates with contemporary Arctic security conundrums. Constructed on mutual respect and shared values, a desire to optimize defense and deterrence capabilities for the homeland, and genuine comradery, the legacy of Canadian American security cooperation in Alaska demonstrated a deep level of trust and collaboration to achieve mutual defense goals.

Prior to World War II, Canadian American military cooperation remained elusive. It seemed the War of 1812 still haunted military relations. Both countries continued to staff plans for potential conflict with each other.² However, with the grim realities of war in Europe and the rising threat in the Pacific, the US and Canada faced common threats. Setting aside lingering distrust, the 1939 Ogdensburg agreement between President Roosevelt and Prime Minister

¹ F. J. Hatch, "The Aleutian Campaign," First of Two Parts, *Roundel Magazine*, May 1963, 18, F. J. Hatch, "Allies in the Aleutians," *Aerospace Historian* 21 (June 1974): 77.

² J.L. Granatstein, "The American Influence on the Canadian Military, 1939-1963," in *Canada's Defense: Perspectives on Policy in the Twentieth Century*, edited by B.D. Hunt and R.G. Haycock, 129-139. Toronto: Copp, Clark, Pitman Ltd., 1993, 130.



Mackenzie King established a foundation for a closely coordinated approach to North American security cooperation. Creating the Permanent Joint Board on Defense (PJBD), these two leaders underscored the transcendence of the security relationship beyond a single contingency.³

Alaska became a centerpiece for US-Canada security cooperation due to the direct threat posed by the Japanese and the need to support European defenses. Although not without friction, rapid construction of wartime critical infrastructure included the Alaska Highway (ALCAN), the Northwest Staging Route (NWSR) and the Canada Oil (CANOL) projects. Facilitating the defense of Alaska and fortifying Russia's fight against Nazi Germany, these projects required both defense cooperation and political compromise. As the threat in the Pacific intensified, Canadian military forces bolstered the meager Alaskan based US forces. Canadian aircraft served throughout Alaska, deploying to Annette Island, Nome, and Kodiak and eventually to Umnak in the Aleutians. They later forward deployed to Adak and Amchitka and quickly formed a cohesive unit with the Americans of 11th Fighter Squadron. Canadian Army personnel similarly integrated with their American counterparts during Operation Cottage to retake Kiska.⁴ Underscoring the commonality of the security threat, BGen Foster, commanding general for the Canadian land forces in the Kiska Campaign, pointed out that even though Japanese occupied Kiska was, "far removed from Canadian shores," it represented, "a threat to our homes."⁵

The end of World War II brought a brief respite, but anxiety about Alaska's vulnerability grew as Soviet military capabilities expanded. Although Alaska itself represented a target, it was

³ Stanley W. Dziuban, *Military Relations Between the US and Canada 1939-1945*, United States Army in World War II Special Studies, CMH Pub 11-5 (Washington D. C.: Center of Military History United States Army, 1990), 21, 24.

⁴ F. J. Hatch, "Allies in the Aleutians," *Aerospace Historian* 21 (June 1974): 73-77.

⁵ Howard Handleman, "Kiska Story." *Alaska Life*, November 1943. Military in Alaska Collection, ca. 1917-, ACC#: 87-073, 2003-042. Various material relating to the military in Alaska from World War I through the Cold War era C11 C7.



also a transit corridor and first line of defense protecting non-Arctic industrial and urban targets.⁶ In 1946, Lyndon Johnson, then chair of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, emphasized Alaska's critical role, "the security of every American home begins in the snows of Alaska."⁷ *US News and World Report* highlighted Alaska's position as the "most important defense frontier" given the proximity to the USSR.⁸ Military planners assessed the polar approach through Alaska and Canada as the most likely corridor for Soviet nuclear attack.

Given these concerns, the US and Canada embarked on initiatives meant to bolster northern capabilities. By the early 1950s, the USAF and RCAF increasingly coordinated airborne air defenses, and the two nations began construction of joint air defense radars and early warning systems. This included the Distant Early Warning or DEW Line, a monumental project spanning the US, Canada and Greenland. The completion of the DEW Line coincided with the 1957 formation of the North American Air Defense Command. NORAD was largely a military initiative aimed at formalizing a security cooperation relationship that considered how to best defend the North American approaches. The command itself was up and running before formal diplomatic and political agreement in 1958. While NORAD's Cold War mission encompassed a scope beyond the Arctic, both the Canadian NORAD Region and the Alaska NORAD Region (ANR) conducted Arctic operations.⁹

In constructing this partnership, the US and Canada forged a remarkable organization despite Canadian concerns over sovereignty and political reticence to fully commit to military

⁶ Commanding General of the Army Air Forces Hap Arnold told the National Press Club in a 1945 address that the countries capable of waging major war are north of 30 degrees latitude and the shortest route between them lay over the North Pole. See Lyman Woodman, *Duty Station Northwest The U.S. Army in Alaska and Western Canada, 1867-1987*. Vol 3 1945-1987. Anchorage: The Alaska Historical Society, 1999, 69-70.

⁷ Galen Roger Perras. *Stepping Stones to Nowhere* (Vancouver: UBS Press, 2003), 185.

⁸ "Alaska: Our Next State? Bolstering Arctic Frontier." *US News and World Report*. Sept 13, 1946, 19-20.

⁹ CANR and ANR are national geographic areas, but NORAD's remit is aerospace domain awareness and operational control regardless of borders.



integration. Air defense integration, marked by a close military working relationship, accelerated due to the military exigency of responding to Soviet nuclear weapon acquisition, the concurrent increased threat to North America, and the subsequent practical binational coordination required to implement the most effective air defense response to the Soviets. However, it was only possible as military leaders on both sides of the border recognized political, diplomatic, and social sensitivities. Underlying all these factors, the increasingly close connection between the US Air Force (USAF) and the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) facilitated shared solutions to air defense conundrums.

Due to threat concerns, the paucity of forces and infrastructure, and the geopolitics of Soviet Arctic military force projections, US and Canadian military leaders viewed military training maneuvers and simulated combat exercises in the Arctic as a military necessity.¹⁰ Furthermore, as pointed out by Alaskan Army Commander Maj Gen Michaelis in 1962, Alaska provided a wide range and expanse of environments for training, testing, research and exercises.¹¹ Manifesting the importance of Alaska to the defense of both nations, Canada dispatched troops to take part in military maneuvers there beginning with Exercise Sweetbriar in 1950. Consistent Canadian military inclusion became routine practice during increasingly large scale combined military maneuvers in Alaska from the 1950s through the 1980s. Recognizing the need for expeditionary forces to supplement Alaska's defenses in a crisis, Canada regularly dispatched ground and air units to serve as both aggressor and friendly forces. Over the years

¹⁰ Lyman Woodman, *Duty Station Northwest The U.S. Army in Alaska and Western Canada, 1867-1987*. Vol 3 1945-1987. Anchorage: The Alaska Historical Society, 1999, 79-81.

¹¹ J.H. Michaelis, "Alaska: The Best Place to Solve Problems of Future Wars," *Journal and Register*, 31 March 1962, 34. Military in Alaska Collection, ca. 1917 – ACC#87-073 2003-042. Box 1 of 1. Rasmuson Library Alaska and Polar Regions Collections and Archives. University of Alaska Fairbanks.



exercise locations varied from Nome to King Salmon.¹² Canadian participation required trust, effective integration and interoperability, tailored responses to Arctic operational exigencies, and adaptation to an evolving threat to Alaska. Canadian units were integrated in the same manner as other forces from the lower 48. They shared equipment, training, supplies and a common view of the Soviet threat.

Starting in 1982, a permanent thirty person Canadian Detachment assigned to Alaska began regular participation in ANR exercises and operations. Canadian experience proved invaluable in establishing a new Regional Operations Control Center and Canadian personnel remain fully integrated into ANR daily operations, training and exercises. This successful security cooperation enterprise benefitted from the collegial atmosphere that already existed in NORAD. As Joseph Jockel, author of *Canada in NORAD* states, “USAF officers at NORAD trusted and liked the Canadians right from the moment Slemon [the first Canadian Deputy Commander of NORAD] and other RCAF officers arrived.” The Canadians provided, “a stabilizing influence in the operation of the system.”¹³

The system of security in the Arctic provided deterrence and presence as a bulwark against Cold War threat concerns, but the end of the Cold War appeared to usher in a new, more cooperative approach to the Arctic. However, this did not obviate the need for US-Canada security cooperation in Alaska. Exercises and operations continued, but with a nod to seeking possible cooperative security endeavors involving Russia.

¹² Final Report Polar Strike Joint Combined Strategic Mobility Exercise, 673rd Air Base Wing History Office, Joint Base Elmendorf Richardson, 1-10. Alaskan Air Command Frontier Assault AAC OPOD 66-18, 15 December 1966. 673rd Air Base Wing History Office, Joint Base Elmendorf Richardson, 1,5.

¹³ Joseph Jockel, *Canada in NORAD, 1957-2007: A History* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 189.



More recently, rising strategic competition in the Arctic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have revitalized security and defense concerns. In 2024, the first ever joint Russian Chinese bomber patrol in the Alaskan Air Defense Identification Zone (AZIZ) was intercepted by US and Canadian aircraft in an operation planned and executed by integrated US Canadian staff and operators. This demonstrates the continuing evolution of a security cooperation enterprise focused on homeland defense and deterrence and built on mutual respect, shared values, and dependent on the continued cultivation of trust amongst US and Canadian military members. The Canadian American military relationship offers an example of an integrated, practical partnership addressing shared concerns and implementing agreed security measures to counter them. Today the North American Arctic faces unique challenges that the lessons from the longstanding security cooperation relationship between the US and Canada can address.



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