

# Coronet

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## *Skyway to Russia*

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**THREE-QUARTERS** of a century after Secretary of State William H. Seward bought Alaska from Czar Alexander II, the Russians came back. Today, along the frontier streets of Fairbanks and Nome stride Soviet flyers and mechanics in clumping leather boots. Since 1942 these Russian airmen, picking up planes like baton sticks from pilots of the U. S. Army Air Forces, have flown more than five thousand combat aircraft across the Arctic wastes to strike against the Luftwaffe on the distant Eastern front.

When Stalingrad quivered to shellfire and the German army was within sight of the Volga, help that turned the tide came over the reef of the world—from Alaska.

Mankind watched the icy seas off Murmansk, where Nazi bombers and submarines preyed on British and American cargo vessels bringing weapons of war to their hard-pressed Russian allies. Each ship sunk put the Germans nearer victory. But there was a back door to the fighting front, a door which Nazi explosives could not reach.

The trail to this portal began on the other side of the planet, in a town on the upper windings of the Missouri River—Great Falls, Montana. It stretched northward into Canada through Calgary and Edmonton, Alberta. Then it struck off via wilderness airfields at Fort St. John and Fort Nelson, in the British Columbia uplands, and at Whitehorse on the headwaters of the



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Yukon River. From Whitehorse the planes flew to Fairbanks, using lonely airports at Tanana Crossing and Big Delta in the frigid Tanana Valley, coldest part of Alaska.

At Fairbanks and Nome, Russian flyers waited like riders of the old Pony Express. In the days when Stalingrad hung in the balance, the propellers had hardly stopped spinning before the U.S.S.R. aviators had moved into the leather seats just vacated by their brother pilots from the U.S.A. One bomber more or less at a critical hour might determine whether or not the invaders crossed Mother Volga. And this was the one route to the battlefield secure from the enemy's missiles. Blizzards and temperatures of 75 below zero might prey on these winged products of American factories but Hitler's legions could not.

The air-ferry route across the Polar fastnesses is still in rushing and urgent use today. In the early months of 1944 alone, more than 2,200 planes were flown to our Russian allies via the Canadian Arctic and Alaska. The traffic continues through the long Northern night, which muffles the icy regions in darkness for nearly half a year.

I remember the cold morning in the autumn of 1942 that we of the American Army in the Alaskan theatre of war first were introduced to this airway which extended to Europe's back door. Three of us, officers in Brigadier General James A. O'Connor's engineers, were standing on the edge of the wilderness airport at Watson Lake, directly along the mountainous border between British Columbia and the Yukon Territory. We were talking to a half-breed trapper in mukluks and a Royal Mountie constable in gold-striped breeches. Overhead, a two-engined bomber circled the field for a landing. We watched it come down on the snowy runway and taxi to the big tents which



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served as makeshift hangars.

Then the sharp-eyed Mountie pointed to the plane's insignia. "Look!" he shouted. "A red star!"

Sure enough, where ordinarily would have been the emblem of our U. S. Army Air Forces there was painted the vivid red star of the Soviet Union.

As the American lieutenant piloting the bomber came down the ladder from the plane's nose, I asked him why the strange insignia.

"This plane goes to Russia," he said laconically. "A Russian crew is waiting at Fairbanks now to take it over."

Today, Indians and Mounties look into the heavens and see a parade of bombers and fighters with the red star winging across the Northern sky. In the flickering glow of the aurora-borealis our Lend-Lease planes, with Russian pilots at the controls, take off from Nome for the short hop across the Bering Strait to Siberia.

**THE BULK** of the Russians operating this Polar route—a route long kept secret—are congregated in Fairbanks, the main community of the Alaskan interior. Russian flyers and women mechanics eat American meals in Fairbanks' hotels and restaurants. In drugstores they sit at the counters buying milkshakes made from Fairbanks' limited supply of fresh milk.

Their baggy blouses, balloon-like blue pants and visored caps are conspicuous in the summer. They wear furs in the biting Alaskan winters. Their wallets are well supplied with the old large-sized America currency which our Treasury recalled in 1929; it was left over in Russia by American troops of the Archangel expedition more than two decades ago.

The Russians use their money to buy just about the same thing the American G. I.'s and Army nurses



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prefer—perfume, tobacco, lingerie, leather goods, trinkets and cigarette lighters.

Russian and American airmen speak a different language, but basically they are not so dissimilar. They share a love of rollicking songs, a zest for adventure and an enthusiasm for such delights as pretty girls and vividly-decorated Arctic clothing. Between the pilots of the two countries there is much mutual admiration.

I have seen American pilots indignant when a Soviet airman, taking over a P-39 at Ladd Field in Fairbanks, would not leave the runway until a hamper of sandwiches was put in the cockpit at his feet.

"He gets 60 thousand dollars' worth of airplane and growls about 30 cents' worth of grub," they would say angrily. Then, a few moments later, their faces would break into admiring grins as the Soviet flyer performed a brilliant take-off.

"That Russian boy sure can zoom 'em," murmured an American fighter pilot from San Antonio.

This mingling of Russian and American air skills at the top of the world has been an important factor in the gradual defeat of the Nazis. Congressman Warren G. Magnuson of the State of Washington, who was on duty in the North Pacific as a Naval officer, has stated that the planes transferred at Fairbanks saved the Russians in the decisive battle of Stalingrad.

Ladd Field, one of Alaska's main air bases, is manned by both American and Russian staffs. The Russian mission is under the command of a full colonel in the Red Air Force. This mission includes pilots, mechanics, aerographers,



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navigators and air engineers. Americans fly the planes to Fairbanks, but first the ships are armed and painted with the red star at Great Falls or Edmonton. When Dave Bolger, the Mounted Police constable at Carcross on Lake Bennett, looks up and sees a plane flying overhead with white-rimmed U. S. insignia, he knows it will be used by American forces in the Aleutian Islands. But a red emblem means that a Soviet crew waits at Fairbanks or Nome to ferry the ship on across Siberia.

Most of the Russian pilots in Alaska wear one-star and two-star decorations on their tunics. This means they are veterans of the Eastern front who have shot down 10 or 20 Nazi planes. The ferrying job across the Bering Sea and into Siberia virtually amounts to a furlough for these men. Alaska to them is a great experience, almost a lark. During the 1943 Christmas season they bought all the toys in Fairbanks' handful of shops. Alaskans like the Russians and have tried to learn their language. Mrs. Ernest Gruening, the wife of Alaska's governor, has a tea in Government House once a week at which Father Baranof, a priest of the old Greek Orthodox Church, teaches Russian to the women of Juneau.

**THE SOVIET FLYERS** speak a smattering of English and this enables them to get by with their American friends. One evening at Fairbanks





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some of them began asking us questions about America. They had heard of six Americans—Mark Twain, Jack London, Abraham Lincoln, Upton Sinclair, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Wendell Willkie—and wanted to know about them. The Russians had read Jack London's tales of the Far North and they thought he was still in Alaska. They hoped to visit him. Their favorite American books appeared to be London's *The Call of the Wild*, Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, and *Oil* and *The Jungle* by Sinclair.

In American planes, the P-39 seems to be the Russian aviator's favorite. They also like the B-25 medium bomber. En route east across Siberia, they have their own ferry route which brings the pilots in bunches of a dozen at a time. For this purpose, the Soviet aviators fly American C-47 cargo ships. At Ladd Field the ubiquitousness of the C-47 is instantly evident. I have seen the big transport plane on the icy runways marked with the emblems of three famous air forces—the white-rimmed star of the U.S.A.A.F., the red star of the Soviet flying corps and the red, white and blue target insignia of the Royal Canadian Air Force, which also flies the Polar route.

Two American brigadier generals are the men who developed this unique route over the Arctic roof of the world. One is Dale V. Gaffney, a 49-year-old aviator who heads the Alaskan Wing of the Air Transport Command, which delivers the planes to the Russians. He is this country's leading expert on cold-weather flying. He pioneered a testing laboratory at Ladd Field which has enabled pilots to know how their ships will perform when the thermometer reads 70 degrees below zero on the ground. Gaffney and his men functioned in tents during the worst Arctic winter in a generation. It was so cold that Scotch whisky froze and a man's spit crackled in the air. Even in these conditions Gaffney's mechanics worked on naked runways servicing the Lend-Lease ships transferred at Fairbanks, Alaska.

The other general is 59-year-old James A. (Patsy) O'Connor, the U. S. Army engineer officer who



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constructed the Alaska Highway and the airfields along its 1,630 miles. These are the airfields which the Lend-Lease planes fly on their route from the United States to the transfer point at Fairbanks. Russia fascinates O'Connor and books about Siberia lie beside his cot on a packing box. I once saw him reading Tolstoi by the glow of a flashlight in a wilderness camp at Cathedral Bluffs. Without charts, without river surveys or altitude data, forced at times to live off moose meat and grayling, General O'Connor and his seven engineer regiments thrust the Alaska Highway across the Rocky Mountains and then developed the paralleling air route. Canadian bush pilots had begun this route as a means of flying to Whitehorse and Dawson, and O'Connor received the D.S.M. for turning it into one of the great airways of the continent.

Airplane factories on both the Atlantic and Pacific sea coasts send their ships to Great Falls now. Here they are made ready for the long flight north across the icy gables of the world where this continent's lowest temperatures have been recorded. Yet our Russian allies insist that we of the U. S. Army do not know what low temperatures really mean.

I remember telling my Russian friend Alex at Fairbanks how cold we had been in our winter headquarters up the Yukon at Whitehorse. "For three weeks in a row it never got above 50 below," I bragged. "We had it 61 below for five days straight. One morning it was 65 below. We in the engineers really know what cold weather is."

I waited for praise.

"Ho, ho," said Alex. "Dat is nodding. I am at Verkhoyansk in Siberia. It is 92 below. I am at Yakutsk. It is 83 below. Am I cold at 65 below? No, no, no! Dat is nodding. Dat is what you call it—de banana belt."

But our Russian friends *can* be impressed, despite their skepticism. Twenty-four-year old Lieutenant Leon Crane of the U. S. Army Air Forces did it. He was forced down while piloting a plane to Fairbanks for transfer to the Soviets. For nearly three months in the dead of



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winter he wandered in the Alaskan fastnesses. He lived on what he found—berries, the residue of a trapper's cache, a few fish, a bottle of vitamin pills. After 84 days he was found, still alive and capable of survival. And survive he did, recovering complete health.

"Dat is one tough American," said a tall U. S. S. R. pilot. And then he added admiringly: "No, no—he is tough in any countree, plenty tough, I tell you, ya, ya."



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