

**Did anybody tell the Soviet Air Force about Mr. Gorbachev's peace offensive?**

# ***Pressures on the Northern Frontier***

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**K**EEP an eye on Alaska. It is where the Soviets have been flaunting their air threat to North America in apparent contradiction of General Secretary Gorbachev's goodwill overtures and force-cutting plans.

Alaska is also where the US Air Force is frequently called on to fly into the teeth of that threat, represented by Soviet armed bombers aloft, just in case it ever suddenly becomes the real thing.

Important as it is now, the vast northernmost state of the US will probably be even more prominent in USAF's future scheme of things. Its strategic location and sparsely populated, wide-open spaces make it attractive for the basing and training of some USAF units now tenuously situated overseas.

These points were made by Lt. Gen. Thomas G. McInerney, Commander of Alaskan Air Command, at the Air Force Association symposium on the topic, "The US Air Force—Today and Tomorrow," late last year in Los Angeles, Calif.

There is ample evidence around Alaskan airspace that "Soviet long-range aviation hasn't got the word

yet" about Gorbachev's seemingly peaceful intentions and major moves to rein in the Soviet military, General McInerney said.

The symposium took place prior to Gorbachev's visit to the US last December, when the General Secretary said he would sharply cut Soviet troop strength and draw down numbers of tanks and other equipment.

Gorbachev did not project the Soviet Air Force as figuring in his cuts, however, and its presence across the way from Alaska is expected to remain ominous.

Alaska, said General McInerney, is "where more than fifty percent of Soviet long-range aviation would penetrate in a global war" with the US.

"Over the past few years," he continued, "we've seen an increase in the number of Soviet strategic aircraft near Alaska. The majority of flights we now intercept are long-range nuclear-strike training missions, not the reconnaissance missions that we intercepted in the past."

He noted that Alaskan Air Command fighters intercepted only ten

*In cold-weather garb, TSgt. Harry Jones of the 5th Combat Group, Robins AFB, Ga., contends with sub-zero temperatures during a 1987 Cobbler Freeze combat exercise in Alaska, where the Air Force confronts the increasingly evident Soviet strategic threat.*



to fifteen Soviet aircraft each year through the early 1980s and that most were benign electronic-intelligence and ice-reconnaissance aircraft. From 1980 through 1984, only ten strike aircraft, all Bear bombers, were headed off.

Then the activity began picking up. It jumped sharply in 1987 when fifty-six Soviet aircraft were intercepted. Fifty were Bears, and twenty-six of them were H models capable of carrying strategic-range cruise missiles.

Before 1988 was three-fourths over, AAC fighters had already intercepted forty-five Soviet aircraft, thirty-six of which were Bear G or H bombers.

"The threat is real, and it's close," General McInerney told the symposium audience.

### Severe Threats to the US

He described the Soviet AS-15 subsonic cruise missile and newer AS-19 supersonic cruise missile as standard weapons in the Soviet strategic air arm. Both pose severe threats to the US.

As to Soviet flight plans for putting such missiles into play, if it comes to that, General McInerney told his audience:

"Draw an arc around the Arctic basin, and that's where they would drop them off—and that's where they come out and train on a monthly basis."

The AAC Commander expressed confidence in the systems at his disposal for detecting and confronting the threat in both the strategic and tactical arenas. These systems include various land-based and airborne radars, KC-135 tankers, F-15C fighters with conformal fuel tanks, and A-10 aircraft for the close support of US Army units in Alaska should an invasion ever come.

In that connection, General McInerney noted that AAC and North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) "did not have to think much about Soviet conventional fighter forces in the past," but certainly do now.

The reason, he said, is that the Soviets "could do a fighter sweep over Anchorage" with modern Su-27 and MiG-31 fighters from their mainland and that such fighters "could easily reach" Aleutian islands on which the US military op-

erates missile-monitoring, space-watching, and other equipment.

General McInerney also discussed Alaska in the context of USAF's growing problems with forward-basing units and training aircrews in realistic combat regimes overseas. Environmental, political, and safety pressures on USAF have been mounting, most markedly in western Europe, Greece, and the Philippines.

If such pressures build to the point that USAF must renounce low-level fighter training in Europe or must pull out of bases there and elsewhere, Alaska may save the day, the General said.

Alaska offers the Air Force "a most strategic location nearly equidistant from Japan, Europe, and the west coast of the US." Air Force units stationed there on force-projection missions "would be much closer to the Orient and Europe" than they would be in the CONUS, he said.

General McInerney also serves as Commander of the Alaskan NORAD region and Commander of Joint Task Force Alaska, a combination of USAF fighter and close-air-support units and US Army infantry and light-armor units responsible for defending mainland Alaska.

At the AFA symposium, he took note of a plan then afoot within the

Joint Chiefs of Staff to establish what he called "a sub-unified command in Alaska under CINCPAC [Commander in Chief, Pacific]."

JCS approval of this plan, which was proposed by CINCPAC, would make the AAC Commander responsible for the Aleutians, which now fall under CINCPAC, and would make Alaska more readily available to CINCPAC for basing air units and others.

Such basing may become necessary if the US is ever pushed out of places like the Philippines and Korea.

"Alaska's strategic location for force bed-down will play an extremely important role in CINCPAC's strategies as we go into the 1990s, and that's the primary reason why we're becoming a sub-unified command," General McInerney declared.

He claimed that the Air Force and Army units in Joint Task Force Alaska exemplify the "near-perfect positioning" that all American units would enjoy in taking advantage of Alaska as a strategic staging base.

For example, he said, AAC's A-10s at Eielson AFB are 3,000 miles closer to Korea than are the A-10s at England AFB, La., the westernmost CONUS base of such aircraft, and 800 miles closer to Norway than are the A-10s at Myr-



*US infantrymen under Commander in Chief, Pacific Command, get their bearings during a combat exercise that exemplifies CINCPAC's continuing emphasis on air and ground readiness. For such training, CINCPAC and the Air Force itself are expected to rely more and more on Alaska because of its wide-open spaces and sparse population.*

tle Beach, S. C., the easternmost A-10 base in CONUS.

### Unmatched Attributes

Alaska is alluring to USAF in other ways as well, General McInerney claimed. It could accommodate many additional military people, and its existing facilities could easily be upgraded to that end.

Moreover, said the AAC Commander, Alaska offers "unmatched, outstanding" attributes for training and "has some of the best and most unrestricted airspace available in the US for training in air-combat operations. Just ask the units that have visited us to fly against our F-15s. Our air-to-air ranges equal in size the entire state of Nevada. They're vast areas in which to train and try out new tactics."

He also recommended AAC's air-to-ground, gunnery, and electronic-warfare ranges for their modernity and scope.

Alaska, he said, would be "ideal" for training attack-fighter crews to use the LANTIRN (Low-Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night) system. He noted that Strategic Air Command turned to Alaska for the "rapid-reaction training" of its B-52 crews in nonnuclear warfare.

Alaska's availability as a USAF training arena will be exploited rather soon, General McInerney predicted: "With the pressures that are on us in Europe and that we're now seeing in Japan and Korea, it is probable that, within the next six months to a year, we'll be seeing our forces coming out of central Europe to train in Alaska—and potentially out of Korea and Japan."

Isn't Alaska's weather detrimental to air training much of the time? Asked this question at the symposium, General McInerney replied:

"That's one of the big myths. We fly up there year-round and at the same rates as the rest of the TAF [tactical air forces]. Eielson gets only about twenty inches of snow a year, or somewhat less than Ramstein [AB, Germany]. It's a little colder in Alaska, but we've shown that that can be handled quite easily."

At the symposium, Lt. Gen. Jimmie V. Adams, Vice Commander of Tactical Air Command, joined Gen-



*Lt. Col. Al Guarino of the 21st Tactical Fighter Wing, Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, prepares for taxi-out in his F-15. Alaskan Air Command fighters are frequently called upon to fend off Soviet bombers probing Alaskan airspace and practicing cruise missile launches around it. Soviet activity, especially flights by Bear G and H bombers, has picked up sharply in the region since 1987.*

eral McInerney and Gen. John L. Piotrowski, Commander in Chief of US Space Command and NORAD, in emphasizing the need of the US for better air defenses against the increasingly menacing Soviet threat.

General Adams noted that the Soviet Union has deployed more than sixty Bear H cruise-missile bombers and that the Blackjack bomber, which resembles the B-1B but is somewhat larger, has reached operational capability.

"We expect to see the cruise-missile threat grow to 1,000 missiles and 150 bombers by 1995," General Adams declared. The Soviets, he added, are rapidly building up the capability to "stand outside the range of our current surveillance systems and launch these missiles. Their training programs emphasize this capability."

Around North America, US and Canadian air defense forces intercepted Soviet bombers on more than 250 occasions in 1987 and had carried out nearly 200 such interceptions in 1988 by the time of the AFA symposium in late October, General Adams said.

"We observed that some of their mission profiles were typical ALCM [air-launched cruise missile] profiles," the TAC Vice Commander added, "and we have several pro-

grams to improve our capability against this threat."

General Adams reminded the audience that strategic air defense of the CONUS is one of TAC's three main missions, the others being air superiority and attack of surface targets in support of the Army.

The key to air defense, he said, is "to be able to see the aircraft before they launch the cruise missiles" and intercept them before they do. This is why the Air Force in recent years has upgraded its Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line radars and North Warning System radars and is developing OTH-B radars for long-range circumferential coverage of the North American continent.

TAC operates those radars and is also in charge of air defense interceptors everywhere but in Alaska. Its air defense fighter force is steadily being filled out with F-16As, which will have replaced all F-4s in the force by 1991, General Adams said.

### Modernizing the Force

The F-16As "will carry us for a while, but we see continued emphasis on that part of the air defense mission, modernizing the force," the TAC Vice Commander said.

"Our primary job in air defense is to provide integrated warning and attack assessment, but we also want

to limit the damage as much as possible," he declared.

General Adams noted that the Soviet cruise-missile threat extends to submarines. Those boats "off our coasts in a rather stealthy mode" would team with Bears and Blackjacks as part of an integrated attack, described in three possible forms by General Adams as follows:

"The Soviets would lead with a ballistic missile laydown and follow with cruise missiles, or use cruise missiles as the leading edge of the attack to decapitate our National Command Authorities, or carry out a joint cruise- and ballistic-missile attack."

However it might happen, TAC "has to be sure that we would have air sovereignty against the air-breathing threat," General Adams asserted.

He noted that USAF's Air Defense Initiative (ADI) program to develop future systems for that mission has settled into a "modest research and development" mode at a funding level of about \$50 million a year. ADI should be considered "evolutionary" in its approach to bringing on new air defense systems, General Adams said, because TAC has no intention of "throwing away what we have now" in such systems.

He included space-based radars among ADI systems under study but was noncommittal about them. The SBRs were heartily endorsed at the symposium, however, by Generals McInerney and Piotrowski and then-Secretary of the Air Force Edward C. "Pete" Aldridge, Jr., who has since left the Pentagon to return to private industry.

The caveat with SBRs, as the speakers noted, is that the Air Force may not be able to afford their cost in the current budget crunch. For example, General McInerney said: "How we'd pay for them is the big question, but there's no doubt that space-based radar would be a very valuable addition to our capability to see what the Soviets are going to do with their long-range aviation."

General Piotrowski, who has led the fight for SBRs, told the symposium audience that SBRs "should clearly be part of tomorrow's Air Force."

For one thing, said the CINC of

US Space Command and NORAD, "space-based radar offsets billions of dollars invested by the Soviet Union and other countries on offensive systems that could threaten US forces."

For the US warfighting CINCs, SBRs "would essentially remove the horizon," General Piotrowski declared. "They would expand a commander's vision beyond the horizon to include his entire theater and more. His perspective could become global."

The General took note of the Navy's interest in SBRs. "Fleet operations would be more efficiently conducted if aggressor aircraft or vessels could be exactly located—within a mile or less—and tracked," he said. Keeping tabs on hostile aircraft from their points of origin "would greatly improve the survivability of Allied forces in the Norwegian Sea," for example.

General Piotrowski continued: "Imagine the impact of being able to track a small aircraft flying an unscheduled flight plan from northern Colombia to southern Texas. Drug interdiction could be done more effectively and with fewer resources by using space-based radars."

### **SBR's Role in Airlift**

Among his other proposals for SBRs, the General cited airlift: "With space-based radar it would be possible to send images of all air traffic in a contested area to the lead aircraft of an air-cargo or transport fleet flying into that area. The crew could see where the air threat was—and also see the locations of ships with surface-to-air missiles that might shoot at them [the airlifters] en route. They would be given tremendous capability to avoid those threats."

In the past, General Piotrowski has often expressed confidence that SBR technology was sufficiently mature to justify an Air Force decision to package it into systems and put it into space in the form of a cost-effective constellation of radars. He has acknowledged, however, that confirmation of his confidence would have to come from the Air Force/Navy/industry study of SBR then being undertaken.

At the AFA symposium, he indicated that the study had borne him out. He said it had concluded that

"the technology is available for radar based in space to provide near-real-time, all-weather global coverage." Such radar would be capable of "detecting and tracking fighter-size aircraft and detecting, tracking, and classifying ships," he declared.

The SBR satellites could also come equipped with infrared sensors to give them additional prowess, the General said.

Addressing the symposium, Mr. Aldridge seemed more upbeat about the possibility of deploying space-based radars than in the past.

Such deployment is "a matter of 'when' not 'if,'" he declared. "I believe the Air Force and the country need space-based radar. There is no doubt that it would provide us with a significant improvement in our capabilities. We love AWACS [Airborne Warning and Control System], and space-based radar is just AWACS at an orbital altitude."

Noting that "enthusiasm for space-based radar is growing by leaps and bounds," Mr. Aldridge told the audience that the problem remains one of finding funds for it amid austerity.

"It is clear," he said, "that the budgets we're currently facing will not permit us to make a serious start on space-based radar for the next year or so."

The Defense Acquisition Board was expected to decide near the end of 1988 or early this year whether to take the first steps toward committing the Department of Defense to a space-based radar program. Officials believed that such a program could become part of a space-based surveillance system emerging from Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) research.

Much of the emphasis at the AFA symposium was on the Air Force's role in space. Mr. Aldridge predicted that "in the Air Force, space power will become just as important as airpower" in years to come.

General Piotrowski declared: "We need many things in the way of space capabilities for tomorrow. Among the most important are an antisatellite capability to counter the ASAT capability that the Soviets already have, a ballistic missile defense, and a space-based radar."

"Space power will become as critical to future military operations as sea power and airpower are today." ■