



## EIELSON

### Polar Pilot Extraordinaire

Carl Benjamin Eielson—“Ben” to all who knew him—became a world-famous pilot at age 30. Two years later, in 1929, he made his final flight, vanishing into a howling Siberian storm. He had in his short life established himself as the “Father of Alaskan Aviation.” The US Air Force, by naming an Alaskan outpost Eielson Air Force Base, honored this pioneer, explorer, and hero.

Eielson, of Norwegian descent, grew up in Hatton, N.D. An honor student in high school, he completed two years of college but left in January 1917 as the US was about to enter World War I. He joined the Air Service, earned wings at Mather Field, Calif., and was ordered to Europe, but the war ended before he could leave. Discharged in March 1919, he returned to Hatton where he worked in his father’s store, attended college, and barnstormed the Midwest in a beat-up biplane.

Eielson arrived in Alaska in 1922, having taken a job as a high school teacher in Fairbanks. When local businessmen learned of his flying background, they bought a war-surplus Jenny and formed Farthest North Aviation Co., with Eielson the sole pilot. He delivered machinery, transported engineers and doctors to remote camps, flew out miners, and carried mail. In short, he demonstrated the economic advantages of the airplane in the Arctic.

Eielson’s reputation as a tough “bush pilot” attracted Sir George Hubert Wilkins, an Australian explorer. In 1926 he enlisted Eielson in an Arctic venture and Eielson became the

first aviator to land on Alaska’s north slope, to fly over the Arctic Ocean, and to land on Arctic drift ice. Another expedition came in 1927, but Eielson’s greatest success came on his third venture.

On April 15, 1928, Eielson and Wilkins, as his navigator, took off from Point Barrow in a Lockheed Vega and flew 2,200 miles over the Arctic cap to Spitsbergen, an island off Norway, completing the world’s first transarctic journey. Eielson was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross (then available to civilians) and the Harmon Trophy for aviator of the year. Later in 1928, Eielson and Wilkins went to Antarctica, where Eielson became the first man to fly over both of the world’s polar regions.

In summer 1929, Eielson returned to Alaska to set up Alaskan Airways, but he perished in an ill-fated rescue effort. He and his mechanic, Earl Borland, took off Nov. 9 in a blizzard, trying to reach a ship caught in ice off Siberia, but they crashed on a small Siberian island. It took searchers 79 days to find the wreckage, and the bodies were retrieved in February 1930. Eielson was buried in Hatton.

In 1948, the Air Force bestowed Eielson’s name on its former “Mile 26 Field,” south of Fairbanks. First used by Strategic Air Command’s B-29, B-36, and B-47 bombers, Eielson Air Force Base has undergone many mission changes. Today, it is the center of Red Flag-Alaska, a premier operational training exercise.

### CARL BENJAMIN EIELSON

**Born:** July 20, 1897, Hatton, N.D.  
**Died:** Nov. 9, 1929, North Cape, Siberia, USSR  
**Colleges:** University of North Dakota, University of Wisconsin, Georgetown University  
**Occupation:** Aviator, bush pilot, polar explorer  
**Services:** US Air Service, N.D. National Guard  
**Era:** World War I  
**Years Active:** 1917-19  
**Combat:** None  
**Final Grade:** 2nd Lieutenant (Air Service); Colonel (NDNG)  
**Honors:** Distinguished Flying Cross, Harmon Trophy, Alaska Aviation Hall of Fame, National Aviation Hall of Fame  
**Famous Friends:** Sir George Hubert Wilkins, Billy Mitchell, H. H. Arnold

### EIELSON AIR FORCE BASE

**State:** Alaska  
**Nearest City:** Fairbanks  
**Area:** 30.9 sq mi / 19,790 acres  
**Status:** Open, active  
**Opened:** (by Air Corps) 1943  
**Original Name:** Mile 26 Strip (Dec. 15, 1943)  
**Closed:** (by Air Corps) 1945  
**Reopened:** (by Air Corps) September 1946  
**Renamed:** Mile 26 Field (Oct. 1, 1947)  
**Renamed:** Eielson AFB (Jan. 13, 1948)  
**Home Of:** 354th Fighter Wing

1. Ben Eielson circa 1927. 2. Eielson before the 1926 expedition. 3. A moose trots across the ramp at Eielson AFB, Alaska. 4. Specially painted F-16 from Eielson in 2015. 5. Sled dogs and an F-102 at Eielson.