

Jim Thomas's Introduction of John Draper at the "Tales of the 55th", Offutt AFB, NE, 30 March 2007

As the Cold War intensified in the late 1940s, General LeMay had recognized the need for emergency landing locations for US aircraft in the Arctic. Hence was born the idea of establishing an 8000-foot gravel strip at Nord in extreme northeastern Greenland at a Danish weather station. Periodic storms would close Thule for all air operations for several days. General LeMay wanted a more northerly alternate to be available for his crews in extremis.

Our next speaker, John Draper, copilot on a 55th SRW RB-47, faced those extreme conditions. His crew had launched from Thule in January 1957 for a mission into the Kara Sea in Soviet Arctic waters. The Soviets were unreceptive to prying American reconnaissance in this sensitive area and launched fighters to chase away the RB-47. So John and his crew high-tailed it out of the area to take up a heading back to Thule. And then they were confronted by some really bad news. Their intended destination, Thule, was closed due to a phase storm. Not even their planned KC-97 tankers could launch from Thule. Due to adverse winds RB-47 fuel consumption had been greater than planned. Their alternate Sondrestrom, Greenland was too far to reach. Their airborne condition in the midst of Winter Arctic darkness could be accurately described as in extremis.

To tell us the story of landing that 55th jet on Top of the World, here is JOHN DRAPER.

Top of the World Landing

First Northernmost Jet Landing Ever Made!
OUR LANDING AT STATION NORD, GREENLAND

First Northernmost Jet Landing ever made: a RB-47H at Nord, Greenland 510 miles from the North Pole in January 1957 with an aircraft and crew from the 38th SRS, 55th SRW, Forbes AFB, KS.

Recollections of the mission from Thule AB, Greenland (Jan 1957.)

I was told the AC tail # was 281 (RB-47H – the same aircraft that was later shot down by a Russian fighter on July 1, 1960 north of Murmansk in the Barents Sea.)

The crew:

A/C - Kenneth L. Addison (Capt)

C/P - John P. Draper (1st LT)

NAV - Robert Bihn (Capt)

ECM#1 - Milford E. Seabaugh (Capt)

ECM#2 - Richard E. Brubaker (1st LT)

ECM#3 - Peter G. Kleck (Capt)



RB-47H - Same model as we flew out of Thule AB

In the winter of 1956-57 one RB-47H aircraft supported by KC-97 tankers made Top Secret polar flights out of Thule AB Greenland (as depicted below) to inspect Russian defenses. Five KC-97s prepared for flight with engines running in weather 50°F below zero in order to ensure three got airborne. After a two-hour head start for the KC-97s, our RB-47 would catch up with them at the northeast coastline of Greenland where two would offload fuel to top off our tanks (The third was an air spare). We would then fly about seven hours of reconnaissance, while the tankers would return to Thule, refuel, and three would again fly to rendezvous with us upon returning at NE Greenland. We averaged about ten hours and 4500 nm in the air, unless unpredictable weather closed Thule as it did on this mission.

Thule, Greenland, is the home where the fastest sea level surface wind speed in the world was measured when a peak speed of 333 km/h (207 mph) was recorded on March 8, 1972. Interestingly, Thule is the only Air Force Base with an assigned tugboat. The tugboat is used to move icebergs that appear off the coast that may interfere with the flight path of incoming and outgoing flights.



<<< Thule AB, Greenland

Mission out of Thule AB

We were a newly formed, barely combat-ready, 38th SRS 6-man RB-47H crew deployed to Thule, Greenland in January 1957. On the day of our eventful mission, which ended with an emergency landing at Nord, we departed

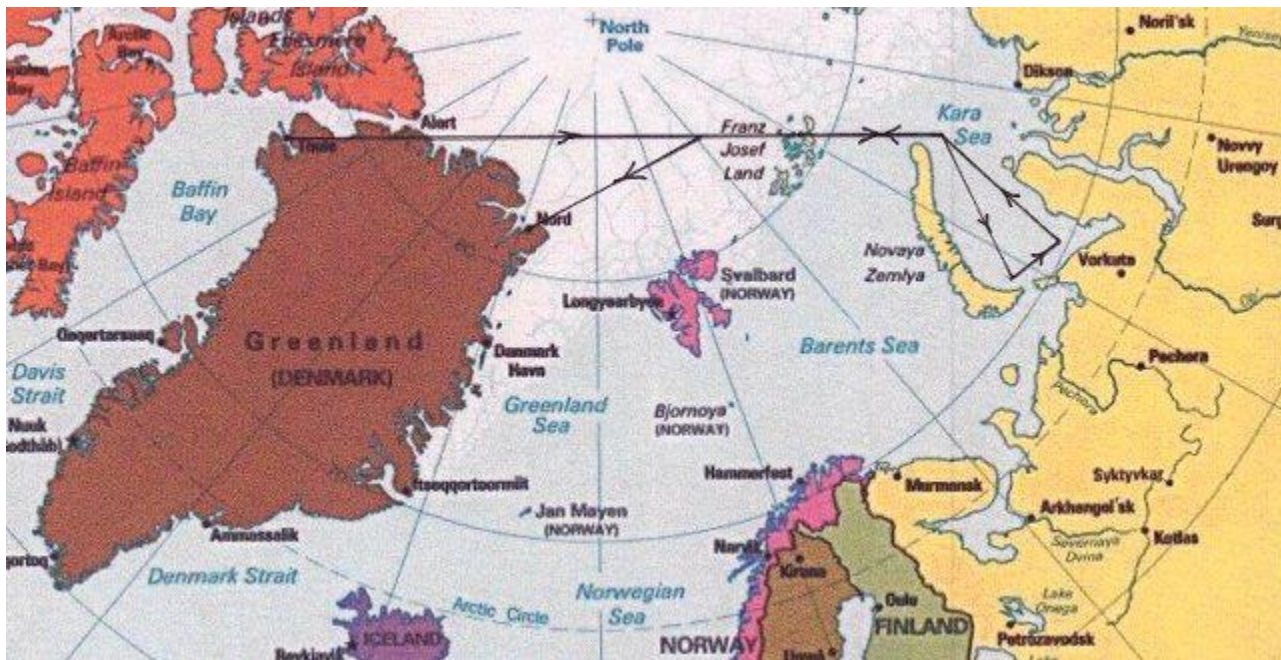
Thule on an ice-covered runway that provided little, if any, nose wheel steering capability.

A typical mission for us:



Our area of reconnaissance interest was in the Novaya Zemlya (New Land) area of the Soviet Union (we called it banana island.). I think Pete was the most recently assigned Crow on the crew; therefore, he was assigned the lowliest Raven position of "Raven 3" (ECM #3.) This was advantageous to us as it turned out (since Pete was a Russian linguist) because that position provided access to the Soviet voice communications spectrum.

Barely into the start of the Crow's "on watch" mission, Pete heard a short, barely audible Russian communication. Part of the short Russian phrase included the Russian word for aircraft. Pete immediately informed his Chief Crow (Mel Seabaugh) and the aircraft commander (Ken Addison.) We immediately aborted the mission and reversed course to a northerly heading. I was directed to turn on my gun radar to check behind us but saw nothing. We proceeded out the way we had planned and started on our way back to Thule AB.



At some time during the flight back, I was finally able to contact Thule radio on HF and they informed us that Thule AB was in a Phase 3 alert status for wind (Phase 1 was the least intense and Phase 3 the highest) and for us to proceed to our alternate, Sondrestrom AB in southern Greenland. By the time we had made HF radio contact with Thule radio we were pretty well committed and didn't have enough fuel to fly to Sondrestrom. Thule radio informed us that Nord was the only landing site available to us with our fuel state so we diverted to Nord. I remember I couldn't find the let-down/approach plate for Nord for a few minutes (causing some anxiety!!). There was only an ADF approach to the field. I remember there was an overcast but I think it was well above minimums. It was an 8,000-foot gravel runway (thankfully the surface was snow covered and packed so the gravel was not a problem). The runway lights were smudge pots (and we found out later that they had attempted to contact us not to come because the high winds kept blowing out the smudge pots - I'm glad we didn't get that message). The A/C and I figured we had only about 20 more minutes of fuel and that he would try one approach and if he couldn't get in, he would execute a missed approach and we would all bail out (eject) over the field. Well, we made it in. I swear he deployed the brake chute when we were still about 8 to 10 feet in the air but we WERE going to land the first try.

I think there were only about 13 or so Danish civilians (weather people) at Nord at the time and we were sure glad to see them. When they found out that we would have to have a KC-97 fly in from Thule for support, they were very glad to see us. They had not yet received their Christmas mail and would we make sure the KC-97 brought it.

The plane was refueled over the wings from 55 gallon barrels of fuel they stored since they had no single-point refueling capability (which was no mean feat in itself!)

A relief KC-97 flew in the next day or two with maintenance personnel, a starting unit and a new brake chute for us and we flew back to Thule AB. We then heard that a KC-97 crew attempted to taxi out and takeoff in the Phase Alert winds when they found out that we didn't have enough fuel to make it to our alternate, Sondrestrom AB, for an in-flight refueling but the Base Commander ordered them not to attempt it. We sure bought them many, many rounds of drinks at the club when we returned and heard about this.

Some questions Pete was recently asked:

“Were you able to get a Direction Finding fix on the source of the Russian conversation?”

Answer: “No. The transmission was short and weak. Had I been in DF antenna mode, I would not have heard an intelligible conversation. I assumed the Russian transmission was an air-to-ground transmission. Even if the Russian conversation had been in English, I would have had to replay it several times to determine the exact words. I was denied the privilege of replaying my recording of the Russian transmission after returning to Thule. Too bad! It would be nice to determine the exact conversation for History's sake. Perhaps, somewhere the words on the recording still exist, but I doubt it.”

As it worked out, had we not cut the mission short we would not have had the fuel to land at Nord. And as Pete Kleck later said, "Luck was with us! Spacibo, moi Sovetski Russki Drug!. Translation - Thank you my Soviet Russian friend."

In the late 1990s we got to wondering if these landings would have been the northernmost by a jet aircraft EVER? The Russians had an airbase at Ostrov Greem Bell on Franz Josef Land but that was several miles south of Nord's latitude. And the Canadians had a base at Alert on northern Ellesmere Island. Alert was a few miles more northerly than Nord. But Alert was a 5000 + foot runway suitable for C-130 operations, not for jets. Cargill Hall from Air Staff formally queried the Canadians for us. They confirmed the following in a letter:

**REQUEST FOR INFORMATION
LANDING OF JET-POWERED AIRCRAFT IN CFS ALERT**

Ref.: Your fax dated 21 November 1997.

1. A thorough review of all Annual Historical Reports and questions asked to personnel familiar with operations at CFS Alert has revealed that no jet-powered aircraft has ever landed on the packed-gravel runway there.
2. We therefore congratulate you in having landed further up near the North Pole than the Canadians themselves. (We have even confirmed that Santa Claus has not yet converted to jet power.)

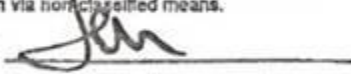
Jean Morin rmc CD MA
Historien, DHP
QGDN, Ottawa ON
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(613) 998-8345 / Fx 590-8579

Merry Christmas!

I certify that the attached documents are not classified and are suitable for transmission via non-classified means.

Je certifie que les documents ci-joints ne sont pas classifiés et peuvent être transmis par des moyens non-classifiés.

Signature: _____



If problems with transmission call
En cas de problèmes de transmission, communiquez au
898-7058

Canada

"No jet-powered aircraft has ever landed at ALERT on the gravel-packed runway there. We therefore congratulate you in having landed further up near the North Pole than the Canadians themselves. We have even confirmed that Santa Claus has not yet converted to jet power. Merry Christmas."



<<<< Tales of the 55th - 2007

[Return to Memory Lane](#)