TRUE NORTH

AT THULE AIR BASE IN GREENLAND, VIGILANCE AND COMMUNITY

BY PATRICK DICKSON
Stars and Stripes

THULE AIR BASE, Greenland

It's 8:36 on this early October morning, and the sun is starting to peek out from beyond South Mountain.

The weekly charter flight is bringing people and supplies. It, too, makes an appearance over South Mountain as it begins to bank right, approaching the only runway here at Thule Air Base, America's northernmost military base.

Inside the operations building, the command staff is joking with each other and getting ready for a weekly ritual. "Ready?" Out they go.

They form a line between the building and the parked jet, welcoming those who blearily exit. They've flown 5½ hours overnight from Baltimore Washington International Airport on the weekly contract flight. It's cramped but as well-served as any commercial flight.

Some are returning from leave. Some are family, flown in to visit their loved one in uniform. Some are above the Arctic Circle for the first time, feeling their first burst of 15-degree air and looking out at the windswept, treeless but oddly beautiful base they will call home for one year.

Capt. Ryan Crean, who handles logistics for the 821st Support Squadron, smiled when asked about the environs. "A scientist once told me, 'Greenland has some of the most beautiful forest in the world, but it's an inch tall,'" he said.

The 10,000-foot runway, a holdover from the days of the Strategic Air Command and the B-52 bombers that used it, and the base's extensive infrastructure make possible just about anything the Western world wants to accomplish in the Arctic.

TOP OF THE WORLD

The National Science Foundation rotates researchers through the base. They continue on to Summit Camp, atop 2 miles of ice in the country's interior, to measure global warming and other weather phenomena.

Allied nations also need the support of Thule's 821st Operations Wing, which handles the flights. Greenland was granted self-government in 1979 by Denmark but remains within the kingdom, so 400 Danes are here doing the support functions with the help of native Greenlanders.

One of the biggest support missions for the base is Operation Boxtop, which twice a year resupplies Canadian Forces Stations Alert and Eureka, tiny outposts 300 miles farther north on Canadian soil — or, more accurately, on Canadian permafrost — on Ellesmere Island across the Nares Strait.

For Boxtop II, from Sept. 22 to Oct. 3, 47 sorties — a mixture of Canadian C-17s and C-130s — delivered 206 tons of dry goods and more than 350,000 gallons of fuel for the winter months.

But the base's two main missions — tracking satellites and orbiting debris, and watching for ballistic missile launches from the "Russian landmass" — are the reason the base was built, and why the seemingly anachronistic base remains.

History

Thule, pronounced TOO-lee, is a Greek word that first appears in the writings of the explorer Pytheas, from roughly 330 B.C.. The term "ultima Thule" in medieval maps denotes any distant place beyond the "borders of the known world."

The part of Greenland now known as Thule was settled by Denmark in the early 20th century by explorer Knud Rasmussen, whose name graces the base community center.

The U.S. government built weather and radio stations in the area beginning in 1941 to help in the war effort against the Germans. But it was "communist aggression" in 1950 that heralded Operation Blue Jay, according to an Army documentary of the same name, when "a giant air base on top of the world" was constructed.

Thule and its surrounding bases were once host to more than 10,000 military members. Camp Century, 150 miles inland from Thule, was a self-sustaining, nuclear-powered city with 200 soldiers in the summer, occupied from 1959 to 1966 under the Army Polar Research and Development Center to study survival in Arctic climes and to do research on the ice sheet.

But this was the era of the Cuban missile crisis, and the Army also worked on plans to base newly designed "Iceman" ICBMs in a massive network of tunnels dug into the ice sheet. "Project Iceworm" was eventually deemed impractical and abandoned. No missiles were ever known to have been based at Camp Century.

By 1969, the camp was left to the shifting ice sheet, which was crushing its walls and eventually reclaimed it. Its nuclear reactor, which provided power for 33 months, was removed.

Most Army personnel were assigned to nearby Nike-Hercules missile sites. Mortars and ground-to-air missiles were part of their equipment, and they practiced with them regularly. As with any ordnance, not all of it detonated, and there are signs warning personnel.

A local population was moved to a village called Qaanaaq, 60 miles to the north. It remains the nearest village of "locals" — accessible only by sea or helicopter — though much of the old Thule village still stands, its structures being reclaimed slowly in the dry cold.

The village stands at the foot of Mount Dundas, which looms over the base in every sense. It's on the T-shirts at the small BX: "Been there, Done Dundas." A newcomer gets his bearings finding it, and it's a rite of passage for anyone stationed here. During the months when the sun appears — March to October — you are almost expected to climb it.

Community

In such austere conditions, there are limited options for ways to spend free time.

Some get lost in themselves, retreating to their room to Skype with a girlfriend or take classes on the somewhat slow "Dormnet." There is no commissary, and most visit the chow hall — the Dundas Buffet Restaurant — three times a day. As at most remote U.S. military locations, the food is excellent.

Some drink. One American contractor summed it up this way: "You either become a chunk, a drunk or a hunk."

First Lt. Matthew Smokovitz, 25, of Canton, Mich., was spending his last few days at Thule, and said the amount people drink rises when the sun goes down in October and doesn't reappear for months.

"It seemed like, this probably isn't the best thing, but people get a lot more sedentary during the dark season and they don't have a lot to do, and sometimes drinking picks up a little more because, 'What else are we doing to do today?'

"You can go to the bowling alley, go to the gym, the community center, I guess," said Smokovitz, who spent his first assignment here at the 12th Space Warning Squadron. "It's like a rinse-and-repeat thing. It's so cold and so dark; where you gonna go?"

Base leaders are careful not to let their people go down this rabbit hole.

The gym is top-notch and always has special programs, including a four-country hockey tournament while Canadian forces were deployed here for Boxtop. (The Danes won it all.)

The community center hosts visiting musicians — country singer Ash Bowers was there in early October — and shows movies in its theater. There's a vast lending library of books and videos, and talks by visiting Inuits and scientists.

"It's a very tight-knit community. Everybody looks out for each other," said Tech. Sgt. Jason Brumbaugh, 34, of Sacramento, Calif. "But with that, you do tend to make good friends, and it makes it harder to leave because of how close you get."

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Extreme conditions part of the landscape

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THULE AIR BASE, Greenland — Legend has it that Eric the Red, father of famed explorer Leif Ericson, gave Greenland its name to attract settlers.

It's a plausible theory; the island is inhabited in dots along the southern coasts, since the interior is a frozen wasteland.

The vast ice sheet, 2 miles thick at its peak, stretches for 750 miles to the east coast from Thule, and more than twice that north to south. The big empty. An ice sheet three times the size of Texas. Glaciers spill into fjords along the coast. At Thule, the land slopes down to the base, North Star Bay and Mount Dundas.

The capriciousness of the weather is fascinating and frightening, something all too familiar for base residents.

Winter was fast approaching. As the Earth tilts away from the sun, Thule becomes a land of permanent night, and permanent cold, dipping to as low as 47 below zero, according to base statistics.

"The coldest I saw, during a storm, was minus-60," 1st Lt. Matthew Smokovitz said. "It gets to a point where you can't really tell the difference. It's already cold — who cares at this point?"

High winds, created by low pressure to the west over Baffin Bay, blow in off the ice cap from the southeast. The air is channeled into the valley where Thule is located, increasing the wind speed. According to the base welcome packet, during a storm in March 1972, the anemometer on a storm shelter recorded what is now considered the third highest wind velocity ever: 207 mph.

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>
> **1st Lt. Matthew Smokovitz**