

ARCTIC DAYS

In the years 1951 and 1952 I, James L. Blilie, while on duty with the United States Air Force, spent about 13 months on assignment in Greenland and in northern Labrador, six months in Thule Greenland, six months in Goose Bay Labrador, and a month or so for a few days at a time in various places in those regions.

During these times I took quite a number of photographs - some in black and white and some as color slides, from a selected few of which I had color prints made.

I also include color prints made from slides given me by my friend Stan Olson, who was also a navigator. Stan (Stanton R.) was from Rockford, Illinois, and was recalled to active duty about the same time I was. Most of the pictures taken from the air, especially those with icebergs, were by Stan. Most of the pictures in which I appear were taken by John C. Kasper, who was northern Indiana, and also recalled to active duty in mid-1950. My intention is to put these pictures together so as to tell a few stories so as to form a somewhat larger story.

I had been recalled from the USAF reserve wing in Minnesota two weeks after the Korean War broke out on June 25th 1950. My first assignment was as a navigator in the Military Air Transport Command (MATS) stationed at Westover Air Force Base (AFB), by Springfield, Massachusetts. Westover was my "permanent" base from the time I arrived in August 1950. This was nice duty navigating to various places in Europe and occasionally northern Africa in a variety of aircraft: Lockheed C-107 Constellations, Boeing c-97 Stratocruisers, and occasionally Douglas c-54s (DC-6 in the civilian version), Venerable Douglas C-47s (DC-3 in the civilian version, and occasionally something like Fairchild C-82s and C-109s.

However, I was occasionally sent to other locations on temporary duty (TDY) as a MATS Liaison Officer to help take care of MATS crews, flight planning, cargo weight-and-balance arranging or verifying, etc.

The first of these locations was Thule Greenland, where I spent about six months starting in March 1951 and lasting through August.

Then back to Westover for a very short time before spending about six weeks at the Rhein-Main Flughafen, an airport which MATS' primary port of call in Europe.

Only a few weeks after returning to Westover I found myself on the way to Goose Bay, Labrador for another assignment as Liaison Officer. I spent October 1951 through to the end of March, 1952 there, except for a two-week period in Sondrestrom, Greenland during February 1952.

During my time in Westover, as well as in early 1954, I was occasionally in Narsarssuak in south Greenland when we landed there to refuel on a variety of kinds of flights, usually for ferrying an aircraft to European locations such as Munich and Wiesbaden.

The pictures in this album are arranged in the order of these assignments: Thule, Goose Bay, Sondrestrom, Narsarssuak and the waters of Davis Strait and Baffin Bay

(which did not and does not look like a bay to me.) (Plus miscellaneous such as Baffin Island)

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Perhaps most flights went via Lages, one of the Azores Islands, there to refuel for the remainder of the flight, often to Frankfort am Main, Germany. But for many flights, refueling at Goose Bay, Labrador was more convenient and faster. For example, the route from Goose Bay to Keflavik at the northwest corner of Iceland and then on to England or Germany approximates a great circle path.

Goose bay was in fact the refueling point when we (the Doug Patch crew) flew a brand new B-24 bomber to England in 1944 to begin our combat tour of 35 missions in the U.S. 8th Air Force. From Bangor Maine to Goose Bay and just south of Cape Farwell, the southern tip of Greenland, to Keflavik was our path. We spent a several days, including the 4th of July, in Keflavik before flying on to England.

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By 1950 the cold war with communism, the USSR in particular, was well in effect. Intercontinental ballistic missiles were emerging in the USSR as well as in the USA. Thule, in northwest Greenland about 700 miles north of the Arctic Circle became a strategic location for both observation/tracking and active defense measures. In late 1950 or early 1951, the US Air Force began building a base in Thule.

Even though most of Greenland rises quickly to altitudes of around 10,000 feet with very little lowland along the shore, at Thule land slopes gradually from the waterline and provides enough flat country to hold an airfield big enough to handle many large aircraft with space leftover. The Navy had been there before 1950 and roughed in a gravel runway which served well as supply base for future construction.

The Air Force and MATS sent me to Thule in March 1950 to help Thule airfield operate in handling many cargo aircraft that would be bringing in supplies and a few more people who would build temporary shelters until a flotilla of ships got there with the construction people (civilians) to build the permanent base.

Greenland is owned by Denmark, and a Danish weather station was already in operation. Much, if not most, of the weather that comes to northwestern Europe comes in on the prevailing westerly passing over or originating over Greenland. This has been known for a long time, and it gave the British and Americans an advantage over the Germans in World War Two. In fact, the Germans built, secretly they hoped, a small weather station on the west coast of Greenland, but it was soon found out and "removed." And, though it is of no relevance to this album, the weather was to come west from Siberia just before they struck westward in December 1944 initiating the Battle of the Bulge.

But most of the time, the weather foreknowledge laid with the Allies.

But enough of that side note. This album pictures the early 1950s - not WW2.

I spent six months in Thule, March through August 1950, and later flew into there several times.

One American airfield was set up in southern Greenland during WW2. It is at the eastern end of a long fjord terminating in the ocean about 60 or so miles north of Cape Farwell on the west side of Greenland. It's name is Narsarssuak, but is/was usually designated BW1. Aircraft, especially those of only medium range capability, would refuel there. A number of flights for which I was the navigator, stopped there.

Narsassuak was said to be the place where Eric the Red set up a colony nearly about 900 years ago, and from which place Leif Ericsson sailed for his explorations of North America. What are said to be ruins of the colony can be seen at Narsassuak.

About one-third of the way up the west coast of Greenland to Thule another long fjord enters the ocean. It is named Sondrestrom Fjord (south river fjord). The head of the fjord is about 60 or so miles from the coast, and there on the north side of the fjord another airfield was built. It was/is labeled BW8. I visited there a few times when we had to refuel, and spent an especially cold two weeks there in February 1952.

I was a bachelor in those days, and much preferred to be based somewhere where members of the opposite sex dwelled. When I was to be sent to remote places such as the above, with no such social life, the first thing I would hear is, "You're not married, so you won't mind...." I did not like those words, but... However, in retrospect, the experiences were interesting.

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ENROUTE TO THULE VIA DAVIS STRAIT AND BAFFIN

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