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John Kelley

Aviation Museum lectures

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Pete Haggland introduces John Kelley.

John Kelley said he would be talking about Naval Arctic Research Laboratory (NARL), but you can't talk about NARL without talking about aviation. The research on the North Slope would not have gone anywhere without aviation. Pilots blazed new territories.

In 1947 eight men got off a C-46 at Point Barrow and that was the beginning of the laboratory. They started out in a Quonset hut. You can still see Quonset huts all over Alaska. It was mainly a terrestrial lab. Max Brewer had the idea to study the ice. The Navy at that time was developing the oil fields known as the NPRA. Max Brewer was looking forward and engaged some of the pilots to take the scientists into various areas of the North Slope. They put out cabins which are still around today. The lab got its first aircraft which was a Cessna 195 in 1958. He came up to the lab in 1959. He had a flight in the 1959 and then it had an accident. The admiral in charge did not like having civilians flying the aircraft on a naval installation. They were able to get a used Cessna 180. They needed a more powerful aircraft. They got a Lockheed Lone Star. They then got a C-47. Brewer wondered why they couldn't land on the ice and had the C-47 equipped with skis. This convinced the Navy to slowly build its shops up in old WWII canvas hangars which were prone to burning down.

In the 1950s the International Geophysical year came up. The idea was there were Antarctic stations and Barrow would make another nice research station, but a better one would be up on the ice. In the early 1950s Colonel Joe Fletcher was flying over the sea ice and noticed that the radar returns were very strong in some places. The strong returns were from the ice islands which were actually pieces of the Ellesmere Glacier. The Air Force established Station Bravo. It was a full blown Air Force base with C-47s. The station operated for a short length of time. Brewer liked the idea. He established ice stations out of Barrow. They established Arliss I. It was put in with an ice breaker. It lasted about six or seven months. It set the pace. The Russians also started establishing ice islands and still do it. They worked out well. They flew with C-47s.

He talked about the 5480 which was flown up to the North Pole.

In the 1950s the Air Force pulled out of T-3 and Brewer took over. Kelley said he was on the first flight to go out to look at it to see if they could handle it. They had one person on the island who agreed to be the station manager. He was left out on the island by himself for several months over the winter.

T-3 started to break up in 1959. It was down to a few miles. It lasted until his shift. Kelley became director of NARL. They knew that T-3 was probably doomed. In 1973 T-3 drifted over to near the North Pole. It got stuck in the McClure Straits by Baffin Island. They abandoned the lab and the Canadians

weren't interested in it. In 1974 just before he became director of the lab he flew over T-3 on his way to Stockholm on an international flight. He was able to go up and sit with the pilot and could see the T-3. He returned to Barrow and sat down with the aviation people. They had business in Greenland. They saw that T-3 was on the move and they landed on it. They were able to put a small crew on it. It was drifting from east to west. Ahead of it was a Russian ice station. They did have a chance to land on the Russian Station. They raised flags over T-3 for the last time. He presented one of the flags to Pete Haggland. He shared an aerial photo of NARL.

Kelley said during the Air Force occupation of T-3 the C-47 was the real workhorse. In 1952 one of the supply flights went out to T-3. T-3 was at the time getting close to the North Pole again. The plane crashed and was left on the island. They landed on T-3 in 1970 for the last time.

Kelley had another photo of some of the people who worked with the lab. He said Bobby Fisher was one of the best pilots they had. He talked about Wade Zimmerman.

They bought their airplanes used. They wanted to have a new airplane. Bobby Shelton looked at what they had and traded them for a new Cessna. Eben Hopson called the afternoon it arrived asking for help with search and rescue. The plane crashed into a pressure ridge. He talked about where the aircraft went when the university pulled out. Now the North Slope Borough runs the laboratory.

Someone in the audience asked when NARL shut down. Kelley said it was in 1980. He talked about the original hotel that was in Barrow.

Another person asked about the animals at the lab. Kelley said Max Brewer loved animals. They collected lemmings. They paid the children fifty cents a lemming. They started collecting wolverines. Brewer had a wolverine as a pet. They also had wolves. The wolves howled at feeding time. They had a resident veterinarian. They had two polar bear cubs. Irish got to be a very big bear. When Kelley was director they had to get rid of the animals. The wolves went to Montana. They shipped the bear to Boston. Kelley said the bear caused some problems. Some of the handlers were injured. Kelley said their animals attracted other animals. A polar bear came into the compound one time through a gate that had been left open.