

Lt. Col. Harold Wolverton (ret.) Phone interview- August 5, 2010. Interviewed by Kathryn Plimpton of HDR|e2M, Inc.

Lt. Col. Wolverton (ret.) was the former commander of Kulis ANGB from 1964-1971.

Lt. Col. Wolverton was arrived at Kulis ANGB in 1958 as a Drill Pilot (part time National Guardsman).

Kulis ANGB was the only unit flying C-123Js, Elmendorf was flying C-123Bs. The C-123Js allowed the base to haul more and heavier equipment. The C-47s were limited to a 3000lb load but the C123Js allowed the base to carry a 10,000lb load.

In 1958 Lt. Col. Wolverton was flying C-47s to resupply the DEW Line stations. The electronic approaches at the remote stations were non-existent (only Anchorage and Fairbanks had electronic approaches) and the weather complicated the re-supply mission. The C-47s and later C-123Js were flown to re-supply the stations 2-3 a week.

The highway from Anchorage to Seward was susceptible to avalanches and the Kulis ANG would fly 75mm recoilless rifle rounds from Juneau to Anchorage for the State highway department.

Kulis ANGB received 10 C-123Js that had been equipped with skis. Originally the planes were used by the Air Force SAC to service Fletcher's Ice Island or T-3. When the SAC decided to no longer support the ice island, the C-123Js were sent to Kulis ANGB. They had been used minimally and were in good condition. Seven of the planes had their skis removed. Two of the ski planes were later lost, one crashed in December 1965 on approach to Cape Romanzof (five were killed) and one was lost in April 1964 in the bay at Valdez after the Good Friday Earthquake. A C-123J carrying Alaska's first adjutant general Maj. Gen Thomas Carroll and three others were lost while inspecting the damage from the earthquake.

The C-123Js were built with skis. They could be removed, but that modification had to be done at a factory, as they were integrated into the plane itself. From the cockpit you could select wheels or skis to land or takeoff. Not every pilot at Kulis ANGB was cleared to fly the C-123Js with skis. Approximately 1/3 of the crew was qualified to fly the planes with skis. They were used for very specific missions (landing on glaciers, frozen rivers or lakes) so it wasn't necessary to have everyone qualified. The planes with skis operated very much like the C-123js without skis. The difference was that you needed a longer run to take off because adhesion from the snow would slow you down.

With the arrival of C-123Js (with and without skis) Building 3 could not be used. The tails of the C-123s were too tall to fit inside. Connie Miller, a machinist at the base, developed a "nose jack" system that would lift the nose and lower the tail so they could back it in and let the tail come up between the trusses. The Kulis ANGB machine shop created the "nose jack" and used it for five years while looking for funding to modify the hangar.

In 1967, during Vietnam, Fairchild Aircraft at the Hagerstown Maryland plant began modifying C-123Bs with jet engines slung on the wing between the drop tanks and the main engines. This gave the planes, now known as C-123Ks, increased short field performance. Many of the C-123 qualified pilots were

already operating in Vietnam so there was a shortage of crews to ferry the newly modified planes to the fight. So the Air Force asked for qualified pilots to help and Kulis pilots answered the call. One of the first planes to be ferried was piloted by 144th crews. They asked to fly the plane through Alaska to show off the modifications to the base. The C-123Js had wingtip jets, but they didn't perform as well as the C-123Ks (the new planes had three times the thrust). It was during this stopover that the plane was branded with the Alaskanized logo (the logo was designed by Connie Miller). While many of the C-123Ks were ferried to Vietnam by 144th crew, only a few came through Alaska. Most often the crews flew from Maryland to California, Hawaii, and Wake and on to Southeast Asia.

Lt. Col. Wolverton (then a Major) accepted command of Kulis ANGB in the fall of 1964.

During the earthquake, Lt. Col. Wolverton was headed back from meetings at the Pentagon in Washington DC. Because of the earthquake, Lt. Col. Wolverton had to land the following day at Elmendorf AFB.

Damage at Kulis ANGB was minimal. The hangar doors were damaged and could not be opened mechanically, it had to be opened by hand. The runway had some heaves. The new steel frame Base Supply building was twisted. "I suppose, in 1964 terms, we had a quarter million dollars in damage."

Kulis ANGB supported Kodiak, Seward, and Valdez for approximately two weeks by air as roads, rails and harbors were damaged. In addition to bringing supplies, food, dispensary items, and equipment to these towns, the ANG transported the injured in affected areas to hospitals in Anchorage. The Anchorage Airport control tower collapsed--one man died and a second survived. The ANG used a C-123 as radio control until the flights that were still in the air were all diverted to Elmendorf AFB. Approximately 100 people who were displaced from their homes by the earthquake stayed at Kulis ANGB. Cots were set up in the Base Supply Building and the mess hall was opened to them.

Lt. Col. Wolverton was commander of the base during the 1967 Fairbanks Flood. At the Fairbanks airport, the FAA had abandoned the Control Tower and Operations building so the ANG took it over to provide air control for flights evacuating people and bringing in supplies. Lt. Col. Wolverton served as On Scene Commander. The runways were never covered in water, but it did come up between the taxiway and runway and just outside the terminal building. Kulis as well as an ANG unit from Idaho flew in supplies. The ANG and commercial carriers helped evacuate people. The Alaska airlines were particularly helpful because they could [provide a] manifest [of] all the people and keep track of the victim's names, contacts in Fairbanks, and other data. Lt. Col. Wolverton was also responsible for making sure all the Army National guardsman who were helping in the evacuation of Fairbanks citizens were accounted for, ate and slept as necessary, and, most importantly, came back safely.

Prior to the flood, Kulis ANGB had received a new accounting machine that allowed the guardsmen to catalogue all the people in Anchorage that had called in saying that they could house a certain number of people and "marry that up with those 3300 we evacuated from Fairbanks." Once the ANG planes landed they were quickly met by Anchorage citizens. Kulis ANG again opened the mess hall to give food, water, and hot drinks to the flood victims while they waited.

The Army Corps of Engineers in Alaska and other federal agencies were organizing the gear that needed to be brought to Fairbanks to contain the floodwaters. Kulis ANG and AF planes would transport these materials and the workers necessary to stop the flooding.

During the height of the Cold War, Kulis ANGB started a project to complete a base sized shelter/bunker that would survive heavy bombing by Russians. The cost was too much so the plan was scrapped. Lt. Col. Wolverton felt that it was particularly important to keep Kulis ANGB operating so that if Elmendorf AFB was ever hit there would be some military survivability seven miles away.

In 1963, Kulis ANG rescued 11 Arctic research lab technicians/scientists from the ice pack off the north coast with C-123J(skis). The researchers were doing research at the T-3 ice island when one of the ground crew pumped diesel into their C-47 fuel tank rather than jet fuel. They got 1/3 of the way back to Barrow, Alaska when one engine overheated and burned up. They turned back to return to the ice island, but couldn't make it. They had to make an emergency landing on the flow ice. It was winter so almost complete darkness. An Air Force C-54 flew cover to locate them and an ANG C-123J equipped with skis was dispatched to pick them up.

Lt. Col. Wolverton flew missions to support Professor Maynard Miller's work on the Taku glacier. Initially he would hike from Juneau onto the glacier field, a trip that would take a day and a half. Once the ANG was able to help, he was very appreciative because the guardsmen were able to take people and supplies and land on the glacier with the C-123Js equipped with skis. Prof. Miller's crew would stay several weeks conducting research. The ANG would land on the glacier at three different elevations; 3000, 5000, and 9000 feet. It was a more difficult mission at 9000 feet as the snow was wet and would grip the skis firmly and the thinner air required a longer takeoff. The ANG supported Prof. Miller's crew for 4-6 summers.

In 1971 Lt. Col. Wolverton moved from Commander of Kulis ANGB to the National Guard Headquarters in downtown Anchorage where he served as an Operations Staff Officer. He developed training for crews and units in Alaska.

Lt. Col. Wolverton feels that Kulis ANGB's contribution to the Cold War was an important one. Having an integral unit with its own assets, people, and training ready to augment the active service if "things got hot" was Kulis' prime contribution.