

CIRCUS TENT

By James Collins

In 1988, I was the program manager assigned to install a Top Gun range outside of Anchorage Alaska. The range covered 80 x 120 miles including the Western Alaskan range. The system transmitted information from fighter aircraft, participating in a simulated dogfight, down to a central location in Sparrovon Alaska. It was then transmitted to a satellite and recovered at Elmendorf Air Force Station in Anchorage.

I was responsible for the program and had a heavy influence on the logistics involved in constructing the facilities for this program. This was immediately after the Exxon oil spill in Valdez Alaska. EPA now strictly enforced all rules and regulations. We had to transport diesel fuel, gasoline, aviation fuel and other combustible liquids. The only way in or out of this location was by C-130 aircraft. They installed a large bladder in the body of the aircraft and then filled the fuel of choice into the bladder. Upon landing, another series of bladders surrounded by an earthen embankment acted as the fuel holding tanks. The ground crew pumped fuel from the bladders on the aircraft into the bladders on the ground. Since we were responsible for all of the construction, we had to order the ground based bladders from a manufacturer in Detroit. We ordered three major bladders and had them flown to the commercial airport in Anchorage. In the meantime, management promoted me to head a different department in the company. However, I kept track of the creation of the top gun range, which resulted in my promotion.

The new program manager called me on a regular basis to keep me informed on the progress of the construction. One morning when I picked up the phone, I recognized his voice and he was laughing.

"Jim, you will love this one. Detroit sent the three bladders in huge wooden cases to the airport in Anchorage. We sent in our C-130 with the range manager to pick up the three crates. They took him to the hanger to sign for the consignment. Immediately he recognized that two of the crates were of one size but the third was of a different size. Since we had ordered three identical bladders from Detroit, he was very suspicious and made them open one each of the two different types. The one that was identical to the remaining third crate included a bladder to our specifications. The oddball crate when opened contained a circus tent. It was obviously well used, worn and covered with sayings from the Old Testament. Further investigation indicated that this was a tent used by an itinerant preacher who covered Alaska in the summertime praising the word of God. Somehow, he took our fuel bladder on his truck and disappeared into the Alaskan wilderness."

What the preacher did with that bladder we never did find out. We had to immediately place an order for a replacement third bladder and pay a premium to the Detroit manufacturer to get it delivered within two weeks. It caused a lot of problems and consternation and we never heard any more about the circus tent. The preacher might've come back and picked it up from the airport storage yard but our missing bladder was never heard from again."

THE END