

ACTIVITY REPORT



Alaska/Yukon Arctic Field School, November 2024

North American Arctic Stories

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On 23 November 2024, I embarked on an Arctic adventure. The Arctic Field School ('AFS') students and participants boarded their respective flights to fly to Anchorage, Alaska, to participate in an experiential learning program specifically designed for those who work in and/or research the various elements of the North American Arctic. Led by Dr. Ryan Dean and Dr. P. Whitney Lackenbauer, students received exposure to different elements of Arctic security and defence, ranging from military defence, to economic security, to climate security, to human security, and energy security. It would become abundantly clear that these various interpretations of 'security' are all inextricably bound in one way or another. I am a legal researcher focusing on Canadian Arctic sovereignty and the Law of the Sea, and it was beneficial to connect with non-strictly legal researchers, looking at similar subject matter and learning about the different perspectives and interpretations. Many of the students who joined in this adventure were from Trent University, at varying stages in their respective degrees, and we had the opportunity to connect with twelve members of the United States Air Force ('USAF'), ten of whom were behavioural science students at the USAF Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Travel to and through Alaska

I live in Halifax, Nova Scotia, so it was logistically difficult travelling from one side of the North American continent to the other, which gives one a whole new appreciation for the vast distances of North America more broadly. This would be reinforced when the AFS drove from Anchorage to Fairbanks to Whitehorse later in the trip. I ended up connecting flights through Phoenix, Arizona, which was a wonderful experience. I met a friend on the flight that I was on, and she and I explored Phoenix when we landed, killing time during my seven hour layover. I ended up at the perimeter of Luke Air Force Base, where I saw a few F-35 aircraft on the tarmac. This was an incredible experience, as Canada does not possess this fighter jet capability (yet).

Anchorage, Alaska

Our first official day in Anchorage was a day for AFS participants to catch up on sleep and adjust to the time zone. We picked up our modes of transportation on this day, including two Sprinter 15-person vans and a U-HAUL (to haul our luggage). We then ventured to lunch and to the Anchorage Museum, which is home to a remarkable amount of Alaskan history, Indigenous art, culture, and language. I am a 'museum person', so I am always willing to visit a museum that I have never been to before. Dr. Whitney Lackenbauer and I talked through this museum together about a wide array of topics, and connecting our lived experience back to what we have read and/or heard about the content that we were seeing in the museum. My favourite painting depicted a sleeping polar bear on ice, by F. Machetanz. That night, the AFS walked around downtown Anchorage, and went to dinner. Here, we were regaled with tales of how a USAF Academy cadet thwarted an alleged robbery in progress at a local shop in Anchorage, and spent time getting to know our fellow Field School instructors and students.

Fairbanks, Alaska

The next morning, students were up relatively early, as we would begin our journey to Fairbanks, Alaska. According to Google Maps, this journey is over 359 miles (just under 578 kilometres). However, before we hit the road, we visited the Alaska Native Heritage Center, which was an opportunity for students to engage in cultural tourism and learn more about Indigenous Alaskan heritage. Here, we saw traditional art, historic items, and many photos of different Indigenous Alaskan 'tribes' from all over the State of Alaska. It was here that we met the incredible Dr. Troy Bouffard, with whom I enjoyed a great discussion on the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea ('UNCLOS')* in one of the vans enroute to lunch.

After this visit, we began our journey, convoy-style, up the highway to our next destination. Along the way, we stopped at various rest stops; my personal favourite sights during this trip was all of the moose that we saw along the highway and the beautiful snow-covered trees as far as the eye could see. In Healy, Alaska, the AFS students picked up a quick dinner at the 'Three Bears Alaska' grocery store. It was here that Dr. Lackenbauer got his infamous van rotisserie chicken which he ate on a piece of cardboard with a plastic knife.

On our first day in Fairbanks, the AFS travelled to the University of Alaska Fairbanks ('UAF'), where we had the privilege of receiving a presentation from the researchers at ACQUASI, the Alaska Center for Unmanned Aircraft Systems Integration, which is the UAF unmanned aircraft system research program. Here, we were told about some of the research activities that have been explored, including the monitoring of right whales in the Gulf of the St. Lawrence via their SeaHunter drone. There were some great discussions about the application of this technology when it comes to military endeavours, and some great opportunities to engage further with respect to their previous working relationship with Transport Canada and securing airspace licences to operate in Canadian airspace. Yours truly asked questions about the role of this technology with respect to military deployments, potentially seeing an opportunity for its use in the Canadian Arctic, as part of Canada's annual joint and combined Arctic sovereignty security exercises, *OpNANOOK*. The feasibility of this is to be determined, but it does highlight an important capability gap that Canada has with respect to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance ('ISR') in the Canadian Arctic, and whether industry (and/or civilian drone technology) would be able to fill this gap.

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The AFS also received a presentation from a community health physician, Dr. Alisa Alexander. Dr. Alexander's presentation was illuminating, especially when it comes to the human aspects of Arctic security. Dr. Alexander is from Old Crow, Yukon, and talked to us about her experiences in obtaining American citizenship through the Jay Treaty. My legal brain loves this, and it is an important point to be made about relations between Canada and the US and the travel of Indigenous populations across the borders. She also talked quite extensively about community healthcare and the dichotomy that is often drawn between conventional understandings of Western approaches to science and traditional Indigenous health knowledge. She hammered home some of the issues that permeated throughout Alaska's history with medical/'scientific' experimentation on Indigenous Alaskans, and some deep distrust of the Western scientific medical regime for some Indigenous people, which is, of course, right now, topical because of broader discussions about COVID and pandemic resilience. Her overall message was unambiguous: we cannot have Arctic security without human security.

Shortly after our morning at the UAF, the AFS travelled to the US Army Corps of Engineers Permafrost Tunnel Research Facility. The odor that emanates from the tunnel is an experience in and of itself, but is an important element to understanding the natural and biological processes of the permafrost. 'Permafrost' was quite thematic throughout our time in Alaska, as we had many discussions about the impact of melting permafrost with respect to the structural integrity of military installations, the impact upon Indigenous Alaskan communities, and the ecological implications of this loss. Something that struck me about the permafrost tunnel was the ice features within the tunnel itself; these were absolutely remarkable to observe and is unlike any other experience that I have had. Our guide on this journey told us all about the tunnel, the research, its history, and its broader purpose. Some students left their autographs in the dirt on the ice features, and we all emerged from the tunnel emanating a certain *je ne sais quoi* in terms of smell.

Following our experiences at the US Army Corps of Engineers Permafrost Tunnel Research Facility, our convoy-style drive down the highway would take us to an open clearing where we could all observe part of the Alaska Pipeline, an 800-mile long pipeline from Prudhoe Bay, AK to Valdez, AK. Later in our journey to Destruction Bay, Yukon, Dr. Dean and I were surprised to see another portion of this pipeline suspended in a suspension-bridge like manner as we crossed over a body of water. We all took some photos here and took the next step in our journey back to UAF. At the university, professors told us about the forced relocation of a particular Indigenous community in Alaska because of the disappearing permafrost, and this highlighted the nexus between a changing climate, human rights, and Indigenous rights more broadly. Many of the students from Canada and the US have a keen interest in Indigenous issues, and this was the perfect opportunity to explore these issues in the North. Furthermore, all of the USAF cadets were behavioural science majors and had a keen interest in information operations, especially from Russia and/or China in the context of the North American Arctic. I also find the information operations fascinating from an Arctic standpoint, and I look forward to engaging further with these issues.

At the conclusion of our time at UAF, we headed back to our hotel to get ready for a dinner reception at the University of Alaska Museum of the North. This reception allowed the AFS to be the only patrons in the museum, which was a fantastic learning opportunity for us, as there was no pressure to hurry to be able to see everything. The food was great, and I met a new friend, a nurse, who is originally from Michigan, but moved to Alaska to

work in gerontological nursing. Her and I had some very interesting and heartfelt discussions about healthcare and access to healthcare in the North, as we walked around the museum. At the conclusion of the reception, Dr. Lackenbauer, Dr. Bouffard, and USAF Captain Samantha Van Cleave participated in a keynote panel to talk about the impacts of misinformation and disinformation in the broader Arctics environment. This was a fruitful discussion, and generated many thoughts and questions from AFS participants.

The following morning, the AFS would stop at one of my favourite parts of this trip, which was our visit and briefing at Eielson Air Force Base ('AFB'). It is always a privilege to visit a US Military Installation, and the AFS was greeted by the roar of a couple of F-16s taking off as we arrived to check-in, which, for a Canadian and self-proclaimed military nerd, is amazing, as our opportunities to hear fighter jets is few and far between unless you live close to a Canadian Forces Base that is home to Canada's CF-18s. The AFS received a briefing from the Base Commander, where he told us all about the history of Eielson AFB, the purposes of the base, the aircraft flown, and the integral role the personnel there play in Western Arctic security and defence. We were also told about some new innovations that Eielson AFB is receiving, including the development and delivery of a nuclear microreactor on base. Eielson AFB is also home to nearly 50 F-35 Lightning IIs, which is a remarkable capability to have in the North, in my humble opinion. From a military capability standpoint, I reckon this visit, at least for the Canadians, served as exposure therapy, to wake us up to the fact that we are lagging behind in the context of Arctic military security and defence. I hope that Canadians take Arctic security and defence more seriously by investing further in the Canadian Armed Forces; we (Canada) have a strong position regarding our sovereignty in the North, and we (collective 'we') must do more to protect and enforce it.

Following our visit to Eielson AFB, the AFS began our journey to Destruction Bay, Yukon. According to Google Maps, this distance is 403 miles (or just under 649 kilometres). The sun was already starting to set by 14:00 local time, which was an adjustment for many of us. By 15:30 local time, the AFS officially reached Delta Junction, Alaska, which is the end of the Alaska Highway. The AFS stopped at the 'Alaska Highway' sign and took a group photo, for posterity.

Yukon

The AFS arrived at the US/Canada border around 22:30 Yukon time (a two-hour time change from Alaska time). What surprised me about this international border crossing was that you are in the Yukon for 27 kilometres before you reach the Canada Border Services Agency ('CBSA') building. There is one permafrost road that leads to this building and the one two indicators that you have entered Canada is the 'Welcome to Yukon' sign and the sign indicators that the speed changes from mph to km/h. From the CBSA building to Destruction Bay, we still had two-and-a-half hours to drive. We arrived in Destruction Bay around 02:20 local time.

The next morning, the AFS awoke to a beautiful sight – snow-capped mountains, as far as the eye could see. We all had breakfast, did some souvenir shopping, and began the final leg of our journey to Whitehorse. This was approximately three more hours on the road. We arrived in Whitehorse in time to head directly to Yukon University to engage in a red team/blue team exercise about strategic communications in the Arctic information environment. We dove deeply into a wide array of topics, ranging from climate change, to infrastructure, to

energy security. There were some interesting ideas generated by the AFS, and it was a beneficial exercise to develop a better understanding of the complexity of the tangible (and sometimes intangible) aspects of the broader Arctic security environment.

Following our first half-day at Yukon University, we arrived at our hotel in Whitehorse just in time for a presentation and discussion with two local Canadian Rangers, who are part of 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group (1 CRPG), which is geographically responsible for the entirety of the Canadian territories. Here, we had the privilege of meeting Jim and Graham, both very personable, funny, and immensely helpful in answering our questions about their role in Canadian Arctic sovereignty and security. Many of the Americans (and Canadians) did not know about the Canadian Rangers, so this was a great educational opportunity. I personally believe that the role and actions of the Canadian Rangers is underappreciated in Canada. The Canadian Rangers are indispensable to Canadian Arctic security, defence, and sovereignty, and I hope that they are recognized as such.

We spent our last day in the Yukon with Dr. Dean and Dr. Lackenbauer at Yukon University for the North American Arctic Security Youth Symposium. After breakfast, we said goodbye to our USAF colleagues, as they began their journey back to Anchorage. The Canadians remained in Whitehorse. I was asked by Dr. Dean and Dr. Lackenbauer earlier in the trip if I wanted to be the Keynote Speaker for this event, and I was honoured to accept immediately. My presentation focus on my PhD research exploring the legal aspects of foreign dual-purpose/use marine scientific research in Canadian Arctic waters and whether these actions could potentially contest Canadian Arctic sovereignty. After my keynote, we had the best university cafeteria lunch that I have ever had, and we returned to the classroom to have some group discussions about our different areas of interest and research. The AFS was balanced in terms of content, as I was the only lawyer, but we had more fundamental science-focused, social sciences, humanities, and political science-oriented students. This meant an array of different research interests from all of those who participated in the AFS, which made this Arctic adventure truly interdisciplinary.

Following the departure of Dr. Dean and Dr. Lackenbauer (who returned to Ontario), eight Canadians remained in Whitehorse for the evening. There was consensus about what to do with the final night in the Yukon, and everyone wanted to visit the nearby hot springs. I was the only student that did not visit the hot springs, as I wanted to meet up with one of our new Canadian Ranger friends and talk to him more about his role as a Ranger as well as his job as a Conservation Officer in the Yukon. I was invited to Jim's residence, where I had the privilege of meeting his family and seeing his beautiful property, including a ridge, which provided the optimal viewing platform for Aurora Borealis. The NOAA Aurora projections for the evening of 29 November were strong, and they did not disappoint. Jim ensured that I was warm enough in the Canadian Ranger kit, including the famous red parka, to stay outside for four or five hours in -30 degree weather. Rest assured, I was warm, and at one point, I was too warm. The skies were clear, and this night was one of the best nights for stargazing. One of the AFS participants and I had some great discussions about how the Canadian Armed Forces kit could be changed and/or modified to meet the realities of operating in the North, from a warmth standpoint. There are challenges with the existing CAF Northern kit, that we believe could be ameliorated with discussions with local community members and a desire to engage with supporting local economies to procure proper mukluks and

mittens/gloves, to start. This became rather apparent for me, as I was laying in the snow in Whitehorse, or tripping in deep snow in my moon boots.

The final morning in Whitehorse we went off to see different things. I wanted to see the cenotaph in front of City Hall and go to the MacBride Museum, and we ended up stumbling upon the SS Klondike National Historic Site. While driving to and at the Whitehorse airport, I did see one RCAF asset in Whitehorse – a CP 140 Aurora long-range patrol aircraft. This aircraft has participated in *OpNANOOK* before, but it cannot be compared to an F-35. I did get some photos and videos of this aircraft, as it plays an important role in the air domain, in asserting Canada's Arctic sovereignty from the skies.

Truth be told, I was secretly hoping that our flight out of Whitehorse was going to be delayed, as I did not want to leave!

Concluding Remarks

Overall, the AFS was an invaluable opportunity to learn more about the Arctic. I found the experiential learning piece immensely important. It is one thing to read about the history of Alaska and the Yukon, but it is another to learn about this history whilst being in there and hearing from people who live and/or are from there. I had many wonderful discussions from many different perspectives on different aspects of Arctic security. I would be remiss if I did not take the opportunity to sincerely thank Dr. Dean and Dr. Lackenbauer for their steadfast leadership and all of the time and energy that they invested in planning this AFS. Here's to being able to tell our own North American Arctic stories, to share the beauty of what we experienced with others, with the goal of helping others develop a passion for this beautiful region – a region definitely worth protecting!

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