



The 2021 Storm



Shemya Runway

The Real Birthplace of the Winds

On New Year's Eve, 2021, a "bomb" cyclone passed directly over Shemya Island and the other far western Aleutian Islands. It was the most powerful storm ever recorded in the North Pacific, with hurricane-force wind speeds over 90 mph, gusting to 130 mph (210 kh). Waves were measured in the area at 58 feet. The weather station at Shemya recorded a low pressure of 924.8 millibars, setting a new record low for sea level pressure in the state of Alaska. The previous record was set in October 25–26, 1977, described as the most powerful storm in Alaskan modern times, until it was eclipsed by a November 2014 Bering Sea "bomb" cyclone when a low pressure of 925 millibars was recorded.



The 2014 and 2021 storms were after my time, but I was there, baby sitting Cobra Ball, for the 1977 record-setting storm, and it was a "ball buster!" Parts of hangers 2, 3, and 4 were blown away. Some hangers had to have huge wall and door braces installed to keep the old WWII hangers from collapsing. The local anemometer, which was rated for 200 kph, simply blew away. You can imagine what happened to many of the remaining old Quonset huts and rectangular WWII structures that had not yet been removed by well-meaning government agencies. It was "debris city" and would have made the nightly news had it occurred in the "lower 48."

As I hunkered down in the AMS room, with the wind loudly whistling and whining around the outside and the hangar shaking and quivering with every new gust, I couldn't help the derisive grin that formed when I thought about the hubris of the US Navy at Adak Naval Operating Base which supported the P-3 aircraft flying the area off of Kamchatka. They called Adak "The Birthplace of the Wind," a term given long ago by the Nunangan (Aleut) people for the central Aleutians where they originally set up their first habitations. Since the storms generally came from the western Aleutians and

later hit the Central and Eastern Aleutians, it is only right to understand that the "Birthplace of the Wind" was Shemya (or actually Attu, just west of Shemya).



Photos of Adak Naval Air Station

Adak was run by the U.S. Navy as a deployment base for P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft, primarily to conduct antisubmarine warfare operations and surveillance of naval surface vessels of the former Soviet Union. The Naval Air Facility was also reported to be used as a refueling stop for U-2, Dragon Lady, ultra-high altitude reconnaissance aircraft. (Although we had little to do with the US Navy and its operations in the Aleutians, you may remember that on 26 October 1978, just a year after the storm mentioned above, a US Navy P-3C, tail number 159892, call sign AF586, operating out of Adak Naval Air Station, ditched at sea with the loss of three brave airmen. This accident was not caused by weather, but rather, ostensibly, by an engine fire caused by a propeller malfunction. A Cobra Ball operating in the area was reportedly involved in the rescue of the 12 surviving Navy crew by a Soviet trawler.)

The Aleutian Islands, a chain of storm-wracked mountains and volcanoes stretching over 1,800 miles between Alaska and Russia, marks the border between the warm Pacific Ocean to the south and the Cold Bering Sea to the north. Consequently, the weather on these islands is famously violent and capricious. According to the 1964 version of the navigational guide "The Coast Pilot," "No other area in the world is recognized as having worse weather in general than that which the Aleutian Islands experience." Such violence is routinely demonstrated by the crab-catching reality shows on TV and our own Shemya war stories.

During my 7 1/2 years supporting the Cobra Ball program at Shemya, we had many many "pucker factor 9" landings. I remember once, as we approached with considerable buffeting and shuddering altitude changes, the pilot asked the tower what the RCR and crosswinds were. The tower paused and then asked "What do you require?" The pilot informed him that our max crosswind component was 45 knots. Immediately, the tower calmly announced, "Cross winds now calling 45 knots!" We did land safely.

Our history of that program at Shemya is punctuated by the strong and fickle winds contributing to the January 1969 loss of Rivet Ball/Wanda Bell, 91491, and March 1981 loss of Cobra Ball2/Burning Star, 612664, (RIP our 6 fellow crew members), brave airmen and fine aircraft whose loss will be remembered and honored as long as there are historians like Larry Tart and story tellers like many of you. One Day, soon, I will share a story of importance about some good that came of the loss of Rivet Ball, from which all of her crew safely evacuated.



Rivet Ball/Wanda Bell



Cobra Ball 2/Burning Star

I claim then, using the information given above, that the US Navy is wrong: The "Birthplace of the Wind" was not Adak Naval Air Station but "The Rock," Shemya Island, Alaska. Let the guys marooned out at Attu argue with that!