

# REFLECTIONS OF FRIENDSHIP FLIGHT

25 years later



From Lieutenant Governor Mead Treadwell, Chair, Alaska Historical Commission

## Mead Treadwell

Participant

As Chairman of the Alaska Historical Commission focused on Alaska’s unique anniversaries, I saw an opportunity this year, the 25th anniversary of the Friendship Flight between Nome and Provideniya Russia, to celebrate the historic occasion. As part of that celebration, we asked people who were on the flight to reflect and share. This article and the others in this publication, captures those memories.

There are three important reasons to celebrate the opening of our border between Alaska and Russia, which began with the exchange of Friendship Flights between Nome and Provideniya, and the Russian return visits between Magadan and Anchorage in 1988 and 1989.

First, the flights were a significant milestone in the end of the Cold War. Our so-called “ice curtain” came down well over a year before the breach in the Berlin Wall, the symbol of the “iron curtain” which divided Eastern Europe. Alaskans helped make this happen. We can be proud of hastening the end of a nuclear standoff that, at best, threatened misery and death to millions of people, or at worst, could have ended human history altogether.

Second, the opening of cordial relations in the Arctic region begat significant circumpolar cooperation. That is none too soon, because the Arctic which became accessible on a political basis in the late 1980’s became much more accessible on a physical basis with the ice retreat of the last decade. The Northern Forum, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, and the Arctic Council allow Arctic residents to work together to protect our common environment and to forge a

common, sustainable future. These flights created a neighborhood in the North.

Third, and perhaps most important, is what the era after the Friendship Flights has allowed on a people-to-people basis across our border in the last quarter century. Alaskan and Siberian Yupik families were reunited. New families, with Russian and American parents, have been formed and children have been raised. Many Russian and American students have studied at each other’s Universities. Russian ships have helped deliver fuel to keep Nome residents from freezing in a dark winter of 2012. Alaska Eskimo whaling captains now work together at the International Whaling Commission to maintain indigenous whaling with their Chukotka counterparts. Our National Park authorities work together in the Beringia Region, and the Beringia program helps keep the door open. Alaska contractors and oilfield workers play a major role in Sakhalin Island development. Church groups and Rotary Clubs regularly do good works across the border. Russians join athletic events here, and Alaskans compete there. Tourists have come to engage with the people, cultural and archaeological wonders and flora and fauna of both sides of an ancient land bridge responsible for the original settlement of the Americas. This good list could go on and on.

By celebrating these friendship flights we celebrate the people who made it happen. Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev toasted Lynne Cox, whose August 1987 swim between the Diomed Islands was a precursor to these flights, at a White House dinner. Alaska Performing Artists for Peace founder Dixie Belcher, of Juneau, used



Lieutenant Governor Mead Treadwell visits with members of the press while attending the 2nd International Arctic Forum, The Arctic: Territory of Dialogue in Archangelsk, Russia September, 2011

the magic of song to charm Gorbachev’s spokesman Gennady Gerisimov to come to Alaska to see the opportunities of cooperation. Nome resident Jim Stimpfle waged an endless campaign of faxes to leaders on both sides of the Bering Strait, and Ken Wells, a Wall Street Journal writer and Jeff Berliner, then writing for UPI, made the prospect of an open border a front-page story. A group of us, including myself, Stimpfle, Leo Rasmussen, former Governor Wally Hickel, Nome Chamber President Neil Colby, State Chamber President Dave Heatwole, University of Alaska’s Vic Fischer, ISER economist Gunnar Knapp, and State Division of International Trade leaders Ginna Brelsford, Dan Dixon and Bob Poe went to work. Native leader, and State Senator Willie Hensley helped push. The Siberian Gateway Project was

born. Bruce Kennedy and Jim Johnson of Alaska Airlines joined the cause, seeing potential new routes, and Alascom’s leadership joined seeing potential new telecom connections. Ron Sheardown made us aware of mining prospects that could grow from accessibility. Then Sen. Frank Murkowski, and his assistant Jessica Gavora, lobbied the White House. And then-Governor Steve Cowper seized the idea, and when our efforts became an official objective of the State of Alaska, the mission was accomplished.

The two flights themselves produced magnificent memories, some chronicled here. I have many from that day, but never in my life to that point would I have thought I would experience what happened later. In years that followed, I’d

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## Jim Stimpfle

Participant

Before I came to Nome I met my wife Bernadette Alvanna who’s from King Island in Fairbanks and followed her to Nome. I used to listen to some of the elders in the King Island talk about the early days of crossing the Bering Strait. It was 1986, and I wasn’t selling any houses so I said, “Gee, you know that sounds like fun.” So, I started writing letters to our Congressman and people like that and I started talking to other people in Nome.

I remember one late August day that year, I went up to the city dump to dump the garbage and I noticed that the wind was blowing toward Russia. We had a constant breeze, and between the dump, the breeze, and the smoke, I thought maybe I could launch a balloon with my name on it, instead of throwing a bottle in the water with a message. So I got some balloons and I went down to the jetty and I started to blow them up but they were big balloons, almost as big as this table, and I couldn’t blow them up. It was cold because it was a fall day and my car was running. I looked at my exhaust pipe, and

sure enough was able to fill them with my car exhaust and wrote a message on them and let them just kind of bounce across the Bering Sea. Well, I don’t think any of those balloons made it.

So later I thought to myself, “Maybe I should go to the weather service and get a helium balloon? And my wife was a bilingual teacher at the school and she was doing a class with the kids and we thought, “Well, let’s send some messages of friendship from the kids in the elementary school. Let’s put some messages written in English, Inupiaq, and Siberian Yupik.” And we had a woman named Astrid Smart, who was a German. She knew a little bit of Russian, so she translated some of the letters to Russian. And we even had a woman write in Cyrillic. We made a little bag of goodies with sugar, tea, sewing needles, thread, chewing tobacco, because when I’d listened to the elders going over in the boats, I heard them talk about trading. I thought it would be a nice little bag of trading items going across the Bering Strait.



In November we filled the balloon with helium and we launched it. We didn’t want it to go too high so we tied some rocks on it so it’d float about 200 feet above the water. We launched it off and it went across and then it came back down again. It cooled off and it started bouncing across and I was watching with my binoculars as the balloon was going over. And I saw this boat come rushing up to it. I said, “Jeez, whose boat is that? And this boat came up to it and grabbed the balloon and stabbed it with a knife, throwing it on board. It was Tim Gologergan who got real excited. He

opened the bag of goodies and saw the Russian handwriting and said, “This is from Russia! This is from Russia!”

So, I followed him down the coastline with my binoculars, down to his camp. And he gets out of his boat and I come running up to him and Tim’s really excited and says, “Jim, this came from Russia! I said, no, Tim. I’m trying to send it over.”

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## Jim Johnson

Participant



Jim Johnson was Vice President of Alaska Airlines at the time of the Friendship Flight and one of the passengers on board.

Here's How it all began. Alaska Airlines was having a community advisory board meeting in Nome and a local realtor by the name of Jim Stimpfle asked to make a presentation to the group. He wanted to talk to us about the possibility of getting a regular flight to Provideniya in Russia. He talked about how the Eskimo people had been trying to communicate with their relatives, separated from them by the Cold War, by sending balloons with messages on them.

After the meeting I talked to our Chairman, Bruce Kennedy about the idea and he liked it. He started procedures to get a flight over there, applying for permission from the Russians to go. We heard nothing back from them for a while, but in May of that year we received notice from the Russians granting us the authority to fly there.

The problem was we didn't have any information about where we'd be landing; where was the airfield or how long it was. There was no way we were going to fly a jet in there without having that information. So we asked permission to take a smaller plane over to check it out. We flew Bering Air out of Nome and a group of us flew over and met with the Mayor there. When we landed, the air traffic people came out and gave us a hard time because they said we hadn't let them know we were coming. Soon they invited us inside and we shared all of the information we'd sent to Moscow that was never shared with them.

## Mead Treadwell

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find myself in a Russian tracked vehicle, circling a Russian missile site, or stuck inside a Chukotka nuclear power plant at 2 a.m. to use the computer to forge a new emergency response protocol between us, or sheltering an abandoned polar bear cub on Russia's Wrangell Island in a tiny cabin with my late wife Carol, or working with Shane Johnson and Roman Bratslavsky and Mike McBride to bring thousands of tourists to this region to experience adventures at Whale Alley, the Walrus Festivals of Chukotka, the bird rookeries of the Bering Strait. I've been in the room in Archangelsk with Vladimir Putin to discuss the Arctic, and dispatched Alaskans to help clean up the Komi oil

spill. I've toured a gulag in Magadan; days after its political prisoners were released. We've hosted Chukotka's past Governor Roman Abramovich, an oligarch and one of the world's richest men, and co-conspired with Russian native leaders to promote whaling, expand and profit from reindeer herding, save walrus, bears, seals, and birds from over hunting. Taking advantage of this open door to help Alaskans has been a continuous adventure.

As Lt. Governor today, I have the honor of chairing the Alaska Historical Commission. We celebrate our anniversaries to remind ourselves and educate our kids as to how

## Governor Steve Cowper

Participant

Before the Friendship Flight initiative, the Soviet Union was a baleful presence across the Bering Strait. As far as we could tell, they didn't like us and we certainly didn't like them.

But Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan changed all that, beginning with the Reykjavik Summit in 1986. In keeping with the spirit of Reykjavik, there was a follow-up bilateral agreement to allow the Siberian Yup'ik, mostly from Savoonga and Gambell on St Lawrence Island, and their relatives in New Chaplino, Sireniki and other coastal villages in Chukotka, to visit each other without visas. That seemed a small and manageable initial step, and it led to the Friendship Flight on June 13, 1988.

The Friendship Flight changed Alaska's relationship with Russia forever. I felt lucky to play a role in the flight; as it turned out there was a tightly-packed Lower 48 press scrum trying to muscle its way onto the plane and David Ramseur had to kick several big shots off the plane to accommodate the Yup'ks, who after all were the purpose of the visit.

After a forty-minute flight in an Alaska Airlines jet provided by Bruce Kennedy, the chairman, down we came in Provideniya. As the nominal leader of the Alaskan contingent, I was met by a young lady who presented me with the traditional gift of salt bread. The people of Russian America had come home to Mother Russia. The great Tim Gologergen, whose knowledge of the lands and waters of the Siberian Yup'ik was unsurpassed,

was the clear leader of the St Lawrence group and, I would argue, of the entire US contingent as well.

Alaskans and Russians walked together to the various planned events and mingled happily. Some Alaskans were surprised that even in this remote port, the Soviet ladies in no way resembled NFL linebackers, as suggested by US cartoonists. Au contraire, they discovered.

After the publicity of the initial flight subsided, Russians began coming to Alaska, and Alaskans flocked to the Russian Far East, most of them on Alaska Airlines. Anecdotally, by 1993 ten percent of the students at UAA were Russian. There were the usual grave pronouncements about business and trade, but in the end the Friendship Flight delivered exactly what its name implied: friendship. There was solidarity among the people of the Arctic that transcended national borders. We had more in common with each other than we did with Moscow and Washington.

Recently, during a conference in Vladivostok, I was constantly amazed at how much knowledge the Far East officials had of those times, and the importance they attached to it. Alaskans had played an historic role, and for once we focused our attention outside our own borders. We looked outward instead of looking inward.

For us, that in itself was a revelation.



things came to be, and to set us off to make better things happen yet. As global shipping comes to the Bering Strait and the accessible Arctic Ocean, we are busy building new cooperation in marine safety, to prevent oil spills and protect food security for a world that depends on our fish, and Alaskans who depend on the Bering Sea's bounty. We seek stronger cooperation on science. Cheaper energy may come from new shipping routes for residents of both Alaska and Chukotka. Alaska's exports to neighbor Russia are about the same as with Mexico, ten or eleven million dollars a year, and could be much bigger. Air routes have started, stopped and started again. But we're past

the notion that we can't talk, walk, hunt, fish, trade, and explore for resources and work together.

As we approach the 150th anniversary of the transfer of Alaska from Russia to the U.S., there is a new generation of Russian Americans who have joined descendants of the 18th and 19th Century relations in this region, to celebrate our common heritage. And whether we can see Russia from our homes, as the national joke put it on Saturday Night Live, Alaskans know there are friendly neighbors to the west, close to where we live.

"Cheers," to all that, as we would raise the toast, or "Na zdorovie!"

## Governor Frank Murkowski

Participant

I was in the U.S. Senate at the time, on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and chairman of the Subcommittee on Pacific and East Asian Affairs. As a consequence, I was pretty active in foreign affairs, which was both an interest and part of my responsibility, particularly as they applied to Alaska.

There had been a lot of conversation in Alaska and nationally on relaxing relations with the Soviet Union. I don't know if perestroika was high on the horizon, but clearly it was a "flavor" – opening up the eastern frontier of the Soviet Union that affronted the state of Alaska. So Governor Cowper along with the State Legislature and Congressional delegation [Representative Don Young, and Senators Ted Stevens and Murkowski] had several opportunities to highlight the prospects of opening the frontier. Alaska Airlines was a frontier pioneer for new air routes and nuclear and foreign affairs groups in Anchorage, Fairbanks and the University had generated a high level of interest resulting in a formal request by our federal government to Moscow on the prospects of "raising the Ice Curtain." It was a more regional approach to what had been called the Iron Curtain elsewhere.

The trip was scheduled, and there was a high level of interest from the Native community, particularly from Nome, the Bering Straits Native Corporation, and that region in the Northwest, because prior to the Ice Curtain and WWII, there was seasonal, unrestricted traffic. After the War that was closed down.

The delegation included a number of Alaska Native Eskimos from the Nome area and the usual representation of government officials, the president of the University of Alaska Anchorage and members of State Chambers of Commerce and other groups. We were taking a smaller plane, an Alaska Airlines

737-200 jet. Because there was a lot of interest generated, Alaska Airlines put a backup airplane in Nome. We were a colorful group – Native participants dressed in Hawaiian shirts. Many had relatives or distant relatives on the Russia/Soviet side. We were a boisterous group. It was not a long flight; 35 minutes maybe. We were over there before we knew it.

We landed on a gravel strip in Provideniya and were met by military officials. Our first reaction was how stark and bleak it was. No trees. The buildings were dark gray concrete, not painted. It was striking to see a huge smokestack in the middle of the town, belching black smoke from the power plant. I thought this was probably a gulag. That may have been, but at least it was in our minds. There was no specific identification, but if you were sent to Siberia you were just left in those days – no fences.

A lot of military met us however. We didn't feel like we were being watched. Frankly, there wasn't a lot to do or places to go so we were wandering around.

The Russian native people were very friendly – very outgoing. I remember going to a luncheon. There was native music and dancing. Alaskan Eskimos got up and danced with them. We looked for things to do like shopping. I went to a leather tannery where women were selling black reindeer leather. We were anxious to buy, but there were not many things to purchase.

There was a banquet that night. In our minds, this was an important event because it seemed to be an opening for further exchange. We got a few gifts that were seized by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service because they were walrus carvings, skins, etc. Nothing extraordinary, but we appreciated them and the thoughts behind them.

## Dixie Belcher

Participant

In March, 1977, while on tour as director of a large folk rock group, I flew to Little Diomed. We were in Nome, had some spare time, and I was curious. We landed on sea ice – on the International Date Line that runs between Big and Little Diomed, and briefly entertained ourselves by running back and forth between today and tomorrow. We arrived at the village of Little Diomed on snow machines, clutching the young Inupiaq drivers that bounced us over sea ice, frozen into high waves.

Little Diomed had about 100 citizens, living in tiny houses guy-wired into cliffs that jut up from the sea. One of them was the National Guard Armory. Inside was a large sign "If the Russians Attack, Surrender". Outside, Eskimos waved through binoculars to people on Big Diomed – 2 ½ miles away – where close relatives had lived – people they had been forbidden to see or correspond with – since 1940.

The scene was unforgettable and remained with me long after I had left.

Eight years later, in February, 1985, Marti Behr, representing the Palo Alto group "World Beyond War" was in Juneau, drumming up members. Someone sent him to my house. He made a long presentation, ending with his hope of someday taking Alaskans to Siberia.

Having witnessed, with my folk/rock group, the incredible power of music to effect change, a preposterous idea instantly formed and I blurted out "Let's take a group of Alaska performers across Russia! Let's try to open the border!"

Thus began Alaska Performing Artists for Peace – 67 Yupik elders and teenagers, Black Gospel singers, Caucasians – and one Tlingit – that, after months of organization and rehearsals, in 1986, performed for three weeks across the former Soviet Union to wildly enthusiastic crowds that sometimes broke down doors to see us.

We met Gennady Gerasimov, Soviet ambassador and spokesman on a preliminary trip. He thought the goal of opening the Alaska/Soviet border was important and said he would help. We finished our tour as guests of Gerasimov at the Soviet Press Center, with international press in attendance.

In 1988, Yupik storyteller and musician, Chuna McIntyre, and I went on a three month U.S speaking tour entitled: "An Eskimo's Vision of Hope: Melting the Ice Curtain". Our appearance in Washington happened simultaneously and accidentally, with Gorbachev's first Peace Summit. Gerasimov was there, and agreed to a three week lecture tour



We looked forward to seeing more trade and travel. You get there – you see it—you reach an evaluation in your own minds, and then where do we go from there? When we got back, there was a lot of interest and inquiries and a lot of coverage of what the significance of the event was. It was significant as it opened up the Russian frontier and created the cultural recognition that although the two worlds were alike in many ways, they very different in many other ways. It was an eye-opener and a breakthrough and of value because it eased the tension between the two countries. After the trip trade and commerce didn't grow as rapidly as we thought. One of the Nome airlines established a charter flight that went on for a while.

The distance between Moscow and Provideniya was quite long – the Soviet embassy was initially not enthused or impressed that we wanted to go to the Soviet eastern frontier from Alaska. Moscow had little interaction with the area – it was too far away. There was nothing significant they could identify there except military for their own security. We got the feeling they wondered, why would anyone want to go to the Russian Far East? There was some delay until they realized our interests were honorable, and we were interested in a people-to-people trip. Finally we

across the United States, ending in Little Diomed – talking up peace between our countries and the idea of opening the "back door".

In the meantime, other Alaskans thought the idea of opening the border to trade and tourism was a good one and were writing and lobbying Washington. Alaska Airlines wanted to establish flights to Russia and the idea of a Friendship Flight was being discussed. Mead Treadwell, a representative of this group, asked me to fly to Moscow to the June Peace Summit between Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev, to encourage Gerasimov to keep lobbying Soviet leaders to open the border.

I was almost penniless – but people contributed until I had just enough money for a ticket. I arrived in Moscow with \$5.00. Gerasimov met me with the news that no one was interested in opening the border and he was pretty sure the effort was hopeless. I remembered Soviet officials telling us "Of COURSE we're not letting Americans in! We don't even allow Russians there!" I begged Gennady to keep trying.

After the second joint press conference with Marlin Fitzwater, Reagan's spokesman, Gerasimov met me with the incredible news that the Friendship Flight had been approved.

pushed the Native interest (to reunite families) which was tangible. The Russians were reluctant but ultimately honored the request, and we were assured we wouldn't be shot down on the way over.

You wonder if the circle is going to come around again or is it going to be extended. President Reagan said, "Tear down that wall," and it ultimately came down. Now we have a problem again. Nothing stands still – everything changes in the world. Putin has been able to master the Russian political system to where he's back in power and a force to be reckoned with. They might regain influence under his leadership that they lost during perestroika. Technology, nuclear power, and the Star Wars concept brought the Soviet's to their knees. The Soviet Union collapsed internally. Putin's contributions need to be played out. He's in forefront now, but his stature in world leadership has increased dramatically.

Alaska Airlines offered an entry into a frontier not available to people for so many years. It's too bad it didn't work out, but the Russian bureaucracy and the cost of fuel made it too cumbersome to endure.

"What about the Eskimos?" I said. "They want to visit their relatives"

"They can" he said.

"What about tourists?"

"They are welcome."

"Small planes?"

"Yes, they are welcome too."

"Then the border must be open!" I said, incredulously.

"Must be."

"Can we have a celebration in Anchorage? This is historic!"

"Yes," he smiled "If you invite me".

In June, Alaskans boarded the historic flight to visit their neighbors across the Bering Straits. The following February, 92 Russians landed in Anchorage for a memorable week-long celebration and the beginnings of many friendships and joint businesses – and even marriages!

This experience proved to me that a group of ordinary citizens can, absolutely, effect change.

George Krusz  
Participant



The first I heard of Provideniya, Chukotka Autonomous Region, USSR was in January or February 1988 on a Sanibel Island, Florida beach. I was walking with Mead Treadwell, now Lt. Governor Treadwell. I had become acquainted with Mead through my association with Governor Wally Hickel. I was President of the Alaska State Chamber of Commerce. Governor Hickel was past Chairman of the chamber. I must have mentioned to Mead I would be staying on Sanibel a few days following a meeting near Miami. His grandmother lived on Sanibel and he would be visiting her at the same time.

Vic Fisher

Participant in 1989 return Friendship Flight

Having missed the June 1988 Friendship Flight to visit his wife in Australia, Vic Fisher was eager to participate when the Alaska State Chamber asked him to coordinate the February 1989 return flight from Moscow to Anchorage via Magadan.

Vic's role was to make sure that the approximately 100 Russian guests aboard the flight – including national and regional officials, artists, writers, musicians and reporters – were warmly received and left with a good impression of their Alaskan hosts. Vic orchestrated the greeting, interpretation, transportation, lodging, agenda, and volunteer support for the event. It was these original, special-arrangement flights, and the host committees that coordinated them, that cleared the way for the permanent opening of airspace between Russia and Alaska.

Perhaps the most significant impact of the return flight was that it established a sister city relationship between Anchorage and Magadan.

Among other business relationships, the Governor of Magadan, Vyacheslav Kobets, invited Doug Drum, owner of Indian Valley Meats, to share meat



As we walked, Mead told me of his and Governor Hickel's interest in melting the so-called "Ice Curtain", the imaginary line separating the Soviet and U.S. Diomed Islands in the Behring Straight. He mentioned Provideniya, a small village on the tip of the Soviet mainland where relatives of Alaskan natives lived. Prior to the curtain's descending these families would frequently visit but it had been many years since this had occurred. He and the governor were in the planning stages of arranging such a reunion.

It immediately occurred to me that if this came about it could possibly be of great interest to the Alaska business community, a first step leading to trade between Alaska and the resource rich Soviet Far East as the area was then known. No doubt the thought occurred to many others. I followed the development of the idea closely keeping in touch with Mead.

I don't remember much about the "The Friendship Flight" except thinking what a bleak looking landscape as we descended into the Provideniya airport. That impression dissipated quickly as we

processing techniques with processors in Magadan; academic ties between Magadan and the University of Alaska were formed, along with high school exchanges between Anchorage/Kenai and Magadan; and scientists from both areas led scientific collaboration and established a joint scientific research center between the Russian Academy of Science and the University of Alaska.

Subsequent to the return flight, Aeroflot Russian International Airlines began a regular, direct route between Moscow and Anchorage, and an agreement for visa-free travel between Russia and Alaska was negotiated the following year.

Today, the only direct passenger flight between Russia and Alaska is Yakutia Airlines' seasonal, summer service between Kamchatka and Anchorage – which Vic guarantees is only due to airline economics, not airspace restrictions nor a lack of goodwill.

Vic's further involvement with Alaskan-Russian cooperation included a March/April 1989 flight from Anchorage to Magadan, and he later became Director of Russian Affairs for the University of Alaska in the Office of the President, where he worked to foster and coordinate Russian-Alaskan scientific ties.

were greeted warmly by the citizens of this remote village.

What I do remember was the many phone calls I received prior to the flight from people asking, and in a couple of instances, almost begging to be included. I explained I had nothing to do with the flight manifest suggesting they try Jim Johnson of Alaska Airlines. Jim never forgave me.

And indeed the flight was the first step in opening trade and regularly scheduled flights to cities in the Soviet Far East. The Alaska Chamber led the way in this development sponsoring several trade missions to the area and one which included high level talks in Moscow.

*(If I may be permitted a personal note: my fondest memory of the current Lt. Governor is he and I carrying something like \$20,000 cash in paper bags at midnight from the Anchorage Convention Center to a safe in the Hotel Captain Cook following the closing of a chamber sponsored trade show of Soviet made goods. We made it safely.)*



Jim Stimpfle

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That was the first attempt and we decided to be more serious, so we formed a small committee of citizens in Nome. Some of the people that I remember were Chick Trainor and Janet Ahmasuk also came to one of our meetings. We started this action group to find a way to open the border and find somebody to write letters to. Coincidentally we had a ship that came to Nome called the Surveyor that was going to Provideniya, so we wrote a bunch of letters and sent them over. And then we had a woman by the name of Lynne Cox who swam from Little Diomed to Big Diomed. And because of those two events we actually got a chance to meet some people by way of letters. We met the Mayor of Provideniya named Kulinkin.

This was a great event, because a lot of us had been taught that Russia was the Evil Empire, the enemy and the border, first closed in 1948, was never going to be open. We got lucky and Gorbachev and Reagan became buddy buddy. Reagan stopped talking about the evil empire and had a few summit meetings. And then Alaska Airlines came to Nome for its Board meeting, I went before them and said, "How about flying to Russia?" There was utter silence. They didn't say a thing. And I sat down in my chair after the meeting and I said to myself, "Gee, I must have bombed. And I remember one of the Alaska Airlines people came up to me and said, "Jim, that's a great idea we're going to do it!" So we started planning the whole thing and it was June 13th, 1988 that we went to Provideniya directly from Nome in a jet.

Francis Alvanna

King Island Dancer, drummer, singer, hunter and carver

The 1988 Friendship Flight was my first visit to Russia, I have been there three times. I did not have family there but went as part of a dance group. Before they closed the curtain my dad and uncle used to go there – I was about six years old then. They would go by skin boat. I was born on King Island but we moved to Nome when I was twelve. Although we were close to Russia I felt safe and did not give much thought to (the Cold War). I don't remember talking about Russia during those days growing up.

I remember when the plane landed we saw border guards, soldiers. It made me a little nervous at first, but when we walked to the meeting hall there were soldiers by the road and everyone was friendly. We spent many hours talking in Indian and Russian. The Russian dancers danced longer than expected and we ran out of time so the twelve or fourteen of us who went to dance never did have the chance. The dances were very similar to ours. During my second trip a guy from Gambel sang the Walrus Song for me and I danced.

In September of this year, Francis again boarded a plane bound for Russia. This time to Anadyr.

David Ramseur

Participant

Twenty-five years later, I can still see the glee on the faces of Alaska Native elders reunited with long-lost relatives on Provideniya's crumbling tarmac after Alaska Airlines' Friendship Flight set down on a sunny June in 1988.

For generations, Alaska and Russian Native people traveled freely across the Bering Strait to trade and share a common culture. A Cold War "Ice Curtain" slammed shut the U.S.-Soviet Maritime border in the late 1940s, freezing regular contact for nearly 40 years.

A goal of the Friendship Flight was to reunite those families and capitalize on growing momentum to improve relations with Alaska's second closest neighbor.

I was press secretary for then Gov. Steve Cowper, who took office two years earlier pledging to expand Alaska's international ties. Russia was also my avocation, so touching soil in the "Evil Empire" for the first time and practicing my shaky Rusky language skills on real live Russians was especially thrilling.

In the months preceding the flight, efforts to improve Alaska-Russian relations already were underway. Juneau's Dixie Belcher led Performing Arts for Peace across Russia, Nome's Jim Stimpfle launched balloons across the Strait and Lynne Cox swam the 2.5 miles between Big and Little Diomed Islands.

The challenging logistics for the flight were cemented when Cowper hosted at the Governor's Mansion in Juneau President Gorbachev's telegenic spokesman, Gennadi Gerasimov. He worked behind the Soviet scenes to clear the runway.

The flight attracted international media attention and launched nearly two decades of enthusiastic and proactive

citizen diplomacy between Alaska and Russia. Headly days followed.

Just a few months later, Cowper became the first Alaska governor to lead a trade and friendship mission across the Russian Far East, from Russia's northeastern-most village of Elen to Vladivostok.

Alaska communities established sister-city relations with their Russian counterparts. Alaska Airlines launched regular air service to several Far East cities. Stores in Nome accepted rubles. The University of Alaska established the American Russian Center to teach U.S. business practices, attracting hundreds of Russians to Alaska.

One of my more memorable jobs after the Cowper days was at the Center was administering a \$2 million grant courtesy of the late Senator Ted Stevens and Vic Fischer for educational, scientific and cultural exchanges between Alaska and the Russian Far East.

Then just a few months after taking office, Governor Tony Knowles led an urgent relief mission carrying tons of medical supplies to Sakhalin Island, Russia, after an earthquake leveled a community there. I'm still struck by the contrast between those destitute survivors and the promise of Provideniya eight years earlier. During those years, love even blossomed: scores of Alaskans and Russians got married.

Regretfully, like January in Magadan, relations across the Strait cooled. I attribute it to a combination of factors. First, the novelty wore off. Most Alaskans I know hosted at least one Russian in their home, which satisfied their curiosity.

Second, doing business with Russia was too challenging. Between currency exchange issues, lack of fuel for airplanes and the burden of securing visas for

travel, the hassle wasn't worth the result.

Third, the world changed. With the Cold War over, interest in Russia waned as the Middle East heated up. President Putin hasn't helped, ejecting Western non-profits, banishing young female rockers to Siberia and snidely telling Americans we're not exceptional.

In my current job as U.S. Senator Mark Begich's chief of staff, we're doing what we can to overcome those obstacles. My boss meets with his Russian counterparts to focus on issues such as governance of the Arctic, management of shared fish and game resources and enhanced cooperation in trouble spots like Syria.

We recently participated in a workshop at the Russian Embassy in Washington, D.C., to brainstorm ways to resume regular air service between Alaska and the Russian Far East.

Elisha Miller

Participant

Nome, Alaska. June, 1988. We are a group of six passengers for the six-seater plane: two officers of Alaska Airlines, two senior B737 captains, a flight technician, and me. The pilot and co-pilot of the Piper Navajo are veteran flyers in Alaska's Far North. Our task: to cross the Bering Strait the next morning and fly a short distance to Provideniya, USSR. There we will make preparations for Friendship Flight One to follow two weeks later.

I had lots of practice telephoning my family while living solo in Khabarovsk (a large city to the south of Provideniya). I knew the ropes: be certain the phone number is correct, cross my fingers that the connection will be clear enough to hear both the incoming voice and the outgoing voice. Talk quickly before the

While most focused on glasnost through a Moscow lens, Alaskans joined hands across the Bering Strait in our corner of the globe to melt the Ice Curtain. That's the legacy of the Friendship Flight a quarter century ago.

With renewed dedication, that legacy also could be the foundation for a future Alaska where our leaders and our citizens embrace the benefits of cross-border relations, making us strong, self-reliant and cognizant of our unique place in the world.

*(David Ramseur staffed his boss, Gov. Steve Cowper, on the Friendship Flight and has been active in Alaska-Russian relations since. He is currently chief of staff to Alaska U.S. Senator Mark Begich.)*

line is cut off. So the night before we were scheduled to depart, I went underneath the cafeteria table where we had been conferencing (yes, under the table, for better acoustics), cleared my voice, and asked the operator to put me through. We would either get a clear connection, or not. I would either have time to say what was needed, or not. The call went through. Mayor Kulinkin's wife answered. Fate, it seemed, was in our favor.

I had only one sentence I needed to say. I raised my voice and spoke in slow and clear Russian; do you know

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Willie Hensley

Participant

I was born and raised in Kotzebue, and we were in the midst of the Cold War. I was a war baby. They had built a DEW (distance early warning) line system, so we were quite aware that there were Russians not too far away. They created a citizen ground observer corps and I still have my patch. They wanted us ordinary people to observe and report any unidentified aircraft. Whenever we saw a plane, we'd get ahold of the telegraph office and let them know. We were always aware there were Russians in the neighborhood. And we knew our own people lived a couple of miles away in Little Diomed, but Siberia was the other side of the moon. We knew it was there, but we never saw it. Occasionally we'd get reports of hunters pursuing polar bears closer to the Siberian side than the Alaskan side and we'd hear about meetings on the ice of native hunters from both sides.

We were in a Cold War zone, and the U.S. military was concerned about spying, and the Russians getting onto St. Lawrence Island to watch America. I had been to Russia and studied the language both in Fairbanks and with George Washington University in Leningrad and Moscow. I spent most of the time in Poland which was phenomenal and eye opening because I'd been in two countries where communism existed, and got a closer view than most Americans. Twelve



years later, in the late seventies, I was able to organize a reindeer trip taking folks from NANA, as the corporation was getting into the business, to see millions of reindeer in Russia. We got the funding to travel to Russia to visit with people who managed reindeer. Of course, we had to go around the world to get there. I also had a chance to visit the Russian Far East in Yakutsk which was almost impossible to get into. It was a fascinating trip in November of 1979 and it gave me more impressions of the country.

Twelve years later was the friendship flight. After that it was an amazing speed in the change that began to happen. I remember we barely had time to drink a cup of coffee and there it was this land mass coming down into Provideniya. I was with people from St. Lawrence Island who had relatives on the Russian side where tons and tons of trade had gone on for hundreds of

years. The first western goods came across Siberia to Chuckchi and into Alaska. Things like tobacco, coffee, pots and pans and metal. People were traders and for the people from St. Lawrence Island, it was a phenomenal experience to visit and talk to people with the same language and lifestyle. Every human being in Provideniya was at the airport observing this alien craft from Alaska touch down. It was quite a celebration, and phenomenal visit, but a symbol of a new era dawning for Russians and involvement by Alaskans in business and tourism, etc.

Later, I was part of a delegation from NANA that went over there and spent time with Yuri Tetotta the last regional official under the old system and we got to revisit with him and the community of Lavrentia. We traveled to the hot springs and got another whole look and visit with the native people. We had a chance to see the unusual

control the government had over the Russian hunters. The government kept their boats and gear and equipment and fuel and clothes and they had to check with the government when they were going out hunting. That's something we would never been able to live with in this part of the world. They saw hunters as on low end of the political and cultural scale. But after the old system fell apart, hunters were more self-sufficient as the government support began to diminish. Siberia, like the Arctic is a hard place to live without access to natural resources, whales, walrus, ducks, seals, etc.

Later Russian visitors came to Kotzebue in boats and we had a big celebration. They weren't able to travel well, but they were not well equipped. So we offered them rain gear and motors. For our part, Ted Mala had organized a ship that went from Nome to Provideniya, and we were on that ship after the Friendship Flight.

## Chet Walukiewicz

Participant

In 1988 I received a call from a woman who was interested in having me help her raise money for the Nome Cultural Center by selling commemorative covers. A “cover” is an envelope with a special design on the left-hand size (called a cachet), as well as a stamp and a cancellation. The idea was to get the stamp and cancellation in Nome and Provideniya respectively as an opportunity associated with the Friendship Flight to raise money. I was a member of the Anchorage Philatelic Society, Alaska’s oldest Stamp Club.

The problem was the flight was to take place in two weeks, short notice for the task ahead. I was the only one who really knew how to pull it off (I had worked on similar projects for the Pope’s visit to the state and the USS Alaska visit and other activities during the 80s), and we had precious little time. I knew who I had to call to design the artwork for the cover. I got ahold of Jon Van Zyle who was willing to do the design. I asked him “How fast can you provide me with a design of the native culture coming together.” The design was used with press packet and Frank Murkowski put out a packet with the commemorative cover with the cachet art work. I was able to get the

funds and make the right connections and somehow everything fell into place. It got political, however, because with the ability to raise money came arguments over who would receive it. In the end, we were successful in raising the money for Nome Cultural Center.

Because of our mission, Jon Van Zyle and I were able to get seats on the plane that was limited to 85 because of the runway in Provideniya. I felt fortunate to be on the plane. The rest of the story unfolded during the thirteen hours in Provideniya.

The passengers were divided between the natives, the politicians, the press corps and the business leaders who all wanted to communicate and reestablish relations with the Russians. We knew it would be an historical moment because the Berlin Wall had broken down. But we never felt the press coverage was there.

The friendship flight was the first crack between east and west relationships. We would only be successful if officials on both sides signed off on the covers – and we had to work through a language barrier, but somehow they knew exactly what we needed and we were able to pull it off.

the Governor’s office about what the opportunities might be for trade and travel between Alaska and Russia.

We knew very little about Provideniya or the Soviet Far East. I think none of us had ever been there. All of the Soviet Far East was closed to foreign visitors and even most Russians. It was only twenty-five years ago—but it was before Google Earth, the internet, and all the other amazing changes that have made so much information so instantly accessible.

It was an amazing—actually surreal—experience to have breakfast in Anchorage, have lunch in Russia, and return to Anchorage—all in one day. It still

so often, so fervently, or in so many accents. Many news stories in the years following documented that business – oil and gas, mining, fishing, finance – was the primary reason for continuing efforts at cross-border cooperation and communication.

Was it a publicity stunt, a political gesture, a family reunion, or an international cold sales call? Yes, and more. The Friendship Flight opened a brief window of international relations across the Bering Strait. Its origins as a grass-roots diplomatic effort reminded the ordinary folks on each side of the border of our shared history, and reinforced our common isolation from central authority (as the Russian proverb stated, “God and The Czar are both far away”) that meant almost anything was possible if you were audacious enough. Most importantly, I believe it played a small but significant role in eroding away the harsh walls, whether stone or political, that the Soviet Union had so long used to keep the Russian people isolated from their neighbors in the larger world. I’m glad it happened, and I’m proud to have been a part of it.

What was clear to me and everyone else was the excitement felt by the Alaska Natives who made up most of the passengers, eager to seek out long-lost relatives on the other side of the Ice Curtain during our frantic one-day visit. Just about as keen was the desire of the hosting Soviets to leverage this brief cultural visit of Alaskans into more lasting economic links – I’d never heard the word “joint venture” uttered



We had made a print of the Van Zyle cover art and as we crossed the international dateline at Little Diomde we had the dignitaries on the plane sign it. The day we landed was an unbelievable day and we made friends with the Russians. When I look back I realize that it really opened up the East-West Relationship. Ultimately the Russians came over a year later.

It was on the trip I met Mead Treadwell for the first time. He served as our treasurer for the day. People on the plane wanted to be able to buy souvenirs in Provideniya. So Mead and Neil Colby gathered up everybody’s money and took it to the bank in Provideniya and

would be. But it was particularly amazing then because until then our world had ended at the border: what was beyond was unknown and closed to us. And hostile, too: it was less than five years since Korean Airlines Flight 007 had been shot down by Russian military jets en route from Anchorage to Seoul.

It was amazing, soon after taking off from Nome, to see the mountainous coast of Chukotka to the west, to circle the ice-choked bay, and to see the big concrete buildings of the town along the shore below us. It was amazing, as we landed, to see the hammer and sickle flag of the USSR, Soviet border guards, and crowds of Russians waiting to greet us. It was amazing to find ourselves in a place so close to Alaska but so Russian—with Russians in fur hats and speaking Russian, Aeroflot jets, Communist party banners and slogans, a statue of Lenin—and borscht. Provideniya was as Russian as Nome is American.

Our few hours in Provideniya are a blur of memories—speeches by Russians and Americans in a packed auditorium, Native elders from Alaska and Chukotka joyfully reunited, a banquet with more speeches and toasts, talking with Russians who walked with me around the town, taking pictures with Russian kids.

And then it was time to fly home. There was no time to get to know each other. The chances for that, unleashed by the Friendship Flight, came in the following months and years, in places like Nome and Anchorage and Anadyr and Magadan and Petropavlovsk. There were many conversations and meals and toasts and banyas and adventures and encounters with dreamers and schemers—both Russians and Alaskans. A great comic novel is waiting to be written about some of those times and characters.

After a decade much of the early excitement of our new relationship with our Russian neighbors began to wear thin. Economic and political realities set in. Direct Alaska Airlines and Aeroflot flights to the Russian Far East began and

stood there for a couple of hours while American dollars were exchanged to rubles.

Riding on the bus coming from the airport in Provideniya was such an odd feeling. We were in a communist country, but we all comingled-- people to people -- the same thing we do day in and day out. And I thought to myself what in the hell are we fighting for... we should be friends not enemies. It was very emotional for me.

The Russian press corps put out press corps sheets and they were willing to share, so we grabbed everything we could get our hands on. My mission over time has been to try to preserve what I could.

then ended: most travelers wanted to fly to places like Moscow and New York, not Magadan or Anchorage. Many dreams for business and cultural cooperation were frustrated by bureaucracy, corruption, cost and misunderstanding. In recent years Russian (and perhaps American) officials have been acting more and more like their cold war predecessors. It has taken more and more effort to maintain relationships with Russians, and sadly, after so many years of trying, I’ve mostly stopped trying.

It’s too easy to be cynical about the disappointments. The Friendship Flight symbolizes momentous changes that profoundly altered our world for the better. Most importantly, we no longer live with the constant threat of nuclear catastrophe. We’re not yet the close friends we had hoped to become with our Russian neighbors, but we’re no longer enemies. We know each other; we cooperate in many ways. As the Arctic changes, we will need to cooperate much more.

In the years after the Friendship Flight, many Russians stayed in my home. Many became dear friends. Many became my students. Many live in Alaska and have enriched my community and my life in many ways. I’m profoundly grateful that the normalization of our relationship which began with the Friendship Flight made this possible.

Life didn’t change very much after the Friendship Flight for most of us Alaskans. Not so for the Russians we met that day. Within two years the Soviet Union collapsed, and with it the political and economic system that had built and supported remote places like Provideniya since the terrible times of the Stalinist gulags. Decades of turmoil followed. I suspect that few of the people we met that day remain in Provideniya. It is hard for us to know what their lives were like then and afterwards. Remembering them from my pictures of that day, what I hope most is that out of all that turmoil has come—or will come—a better life for them, their children, and their country.

## Bob Poe

Organizer

The call came early on a Saturday morning. It was Governor Cowper. He said, “Poe, the Russians just called, they want us to come over in a few days.” My response, “yes sir, I’ll get on it right away.” As the State’s International Trade Director it would be my job to pull this adventure together. There was just one problem with my promise; I basically had no idea what the Governor was talking about.

After a morning, making calls to people involved with the idea of a friendship flight, both around Alaska and around the world, it was clear I had to get on a plane to Nome, where the idea began, immediately.

Jim Stimpfle, the Nome resident who started the idea by sending balloons with notes from Nome to Provideniya, Russia, began with a simple thought. Wouldn’t it be great to reunite Siberian Eskimo families from King Island, who regularly traded and intermarried with the Eskimo people on the other side of the Bering Strait? Jim’s wife was from King Island.

The Nome perspective on what the flight would be about was quite apart from what leaders in Anchorage were imagining. The Resource Development Council, who had also taken an interest in the idea, imagined a trade mission to open trade opportunities with Russia. And still there was another perspective I had never even imagined. Many Alaskans had, in earlier lives been quite active in monitoring Soviet movements during the Cold War – in short, they had been spies. They were also very interested in seeing Russia for themselves.

So one day after the Governor called, I was in Nome trying to understand how we could pull together a flight full of Eskimos and business leaders, and fly them to Provideniya, Russia – legally and safely. In Nome I was presented with a list of approximately 50 Eskimos who had family on the other side. In Anchorage, I was building a list of dignitaries who wouldn’t miss the first flight between Alaska and Russia, since Alaska Airlines “Golden Samovar” flights during the 70’s.

Two things had to be decided in Nome, who needed to be on the flight from Anchorage, and what schedule was possible – we all knew a “few days” was probably not going to happen. After also meeting with Alaska Airlines President Bruce Kennedy we thought 2 weeks was more doable. This thought was followed up the next week with Bruce Kennedy

and Jim Rowe of Bering Air traveling on a twin engine Beachcraft to Provideniya to check out the air strip there to see what size aircraft could be accommodated. I remember seeing the two wing their way west having left Nome without any clearance to enter Russian air space. But clearances came while they were in the air, and the real “first trip” to Provideniya happened with few problems. Luckily, an early version of the 737 200 with gravel deflectors on the landing gear was just the ticket for the Provideniya airstrip, and Alaska Airlines still had a few in service. So 10 days or so, after the Governor’s initial call, we now had a time schedule, an appropriate aircraft, a list of Eskimo family members, and an infinite list of Alaska dignitaries who wanted on this historic flight. Just one more problem, there were only 90 seats available due to load factor issues. My job – choose who went on the flight. While this task might have seemed mundane, it was fraught with political peril.

Probably one of the two smartest decisions I made at this moment in the project – half the airplane seats would be assigned to the Eskimo families since their numbers were roughly half the available seats. The second decision – I wasn’t going to be on the flight myself. This made the next and most difficult job a little easier – which dignitaries would travel with the Eskimo families to Provideniya.

Once Governors, U.S. Senators, Congressman and their wives were assigned seats the list of available seating became pretty scarce. But because we maintained a clear view of the original purpose of the flight – to reunite Eskimo families that had been separated by the “Ice Curtain” J. Edgar Hoover established during the Cold War, it was fairly easy to prioritize the seating. In particular I remember one politician who was berating me on the telephone suggesting that he would eliminate my organization from the budget if I didn’t get them on, I was able to simply say, “Senator, I’d be happy to get you on the airplane, just let me know which Eskimo family I should kick off to make your seat available.” That comment was usually followed with “then give me your seat!” And, once again I could calmly tell them, I wasn’t going either. At that point the threats ended. And once the Friendship Flight took off from Anchorage International Airport, my role in this historic flight was also, thankfully, finished.

## Leo Rasmussen

Participant

I wasn’t one of eighty five people that was scheduled to be on the Friendship Flight and that included my nephew the Mayor of Nome, John Handeland. Neither of us was scheduled to be on the flight. There were eighty five seats on the plane and anyone who thought they were someone, wanted to be on that first flight to open the border between Alaska and the former Soviet Union. When the plane landed in Nome, every seat was full of “wanna be’s”. The people upon disembarking were hoping someone scheduled to be on that plane would die so they could get on and be a part of this monumental flight. Congressman Don Young and his wife had seats provided for them as honored guests, however the Congressman and his wife Lu could not make the flight and he turned his seats over to the Mayor John Handeland and me, as at the time, I was Don Young’s Northwest Alaska campaign adviser.

That Friendship Flight and that experience opened up a whole new avenue in my life even compared to my experience as the US Official to receive the Greenpeace 7 back from the Soviets in 1983. The flight in the Alaska Airlines 737 over to Provideniya only took 30 minutes to cover a couple hundred miles between Nome and Provideniya. When we came to Flower Bay, the Alaska Airline’s pilots flew down the full length of the Bay and then circled back, landing at Urellicki, the community across Providence Bay from Provdeniya. As we got off the plane, we were surrounded by young kids who had come from their classes, 1st through 4th graders. Their signs read “MIR” the word “peace” in Russian. For them there was no question of us being enemies or anything of that sort, they sang and cheered. This was quite a surprise for those on the flight. We were there for thirteen hours, and had a conference of

### Elisha Miller

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we are coming tomorrow, arriving at eight in the morning local time? And only one sentence I needed to receive. Yes, we know.

With that affirmation received and with the special bravado of Alaskans, the next morning we took off. We landed in Provideniya. The Mayor greeted us cordially. No one had a visa. Seven of us had our passports. One of the pilots had only his driver’s license.

The ice barrier had begun to melt.

While the others talked about the technical details of landing a B737 at the small airstrip, I assessed what meetings we could arrange for Friendship Flight One passengers: business, cultural, native family reunions. I was interested in the potential for joint business. I listened carefully as the Director of the Port of Provideniya explained how the port served as a repair and emergency shelter for both Soviet and foreign ships in distress (including American). And how it also served as a staging area for small supply convoys to other areas in the region during the ice-free season. I listened, took notes, got contact information.

On the flight back to Nome that day, our small group was ecstatic with our reception: both by the goodwill exhibited by Provideniya’s Mayor Oleg Kulinkin and the possibilities for interchange, cultural and commercial. I knew that one-on-one personal rapport and good communication would be requisite for cooperation—and we’d have that. But I also knew that decisions almost always are made by players in Moscow who hold the strings even for a far-away small town like Provideniya—and that could put a wrench in things. Nonetheless, that year, 1988, was my first on-the-ground work for American companies and all of us who made Friendship Flight One happen were thrilled with the success of this cross border project.

Now, fast forward ten years to 1997, to another cross border cooperation project at Russia’s southeast corner where Russia, North Korea, and China meet. Under the initiative of the United Nations Development Program, the Tumen River Delta Project envisions a tri-country industrial delta and transportation scheme. This project is as visionary, equally pioneering, and considerably more complex. The preliminary work I was tasked with in 1997 would not be as simple, but footwork always starts in the same way: a fact-finding mission to the area. The week-long trip I planned

people in an auditorium where we talked back and forth. I was able to propose to those in that assembly that a Soviet (Russian) Native Chukchi was to be given and offered the opportunity to participate in the Iditarod as a musher. The Soviets had shipped in some people from the seat of the larger Government, Magadan. All of us were rather stunned when the Governor of Magadansk spoke and admitted that the natives of the Far East area had been mistreated. To have their government admit that, and that they were on the wrong path was astounding -- it impacted me and all of us.

For me, then President of the Iditarod Trail Race, the intent was to offer the opportunity for a musher from Russia to participate in the Iditarod; eventually two mushers were to come over and would actually participate. Both completed the Iditarod and Nikolai Ettyme would again

would require special permissions and cooperation. I would need local good will. Yet I was on my own. I had neither the driving inspiration of the Governor of Alaska, nor the unflagging efforts of Jim Stimpfle, nor the Alaska Airlines Company to support me on the ground. Here was no common family culture to bring impetus and energy to the project. I wished for someone like Oleg Kulinkin, Provideniya’s mayor, someone who wanted to help. Who wanted to help me?

Fate again appeared in positive dress. My guide for this fact-finding mission (whose name I have sadly lost) had been the Director of the Port of Provideniya where we had met ten years before. He remembered me and I remembered him. We greeted each other as old friends. I knew he would do all he could. And he did. This is the perspective I am left with. Friendship Flight One helped us to make friends, fast friends, lasting friends reciprocating favors as, and when, we could. The projects that followed the 1988 Friendship Flight One are too numerous to delineate. The consequences of that flight too nuanced to describe. What happened in 1988 was a big step. Looking back 25 years later, we established border cooperation between peoples of different countries. Even though some of the promising ideas didn’t come to fruition, some did. Some got started then got stuck. Some got started, changed or ran their course.

So too, with the Tumen River Delta Project. Now 15 years since its first steps, I can’t say its progress has been smooth. On the contrary. Yet, after a decade of delay, recent announcements tell us that two major railroad routes in the tri-country delta area have re-opened after being closed down. The success of first steps takes years to assess.

Interventions of governments or powers greater than the individual make uncertain any project’s outcome. Initiatives and projects can derail, but the people who authored those projects, the people who became friends carry the friendships. — and the projects’ lights—forward. This is what lasts. It is this essence of Friendship Flight One that I honor. Once we get to know each other, we become friends. And as friends, we hold fast. We can even hold forever.

*Elisa Miller, PhD, was the Soviet Affairs Consultant and an interpreter for Friendship Flight One. She now lives in Clinton, Whidbey Island, Washington. She is interested in obtaining any film footage taken in Provideniya. Email: elisam@whidbey.com*

participate in the Iditarod and the Yukon Quest. Nicolai Ettyme who was of Chukchi blood, continued that relationship between Chukotka and Alaska. His youngest Child was born in Alaska.

That day in Provideniya, we had a celebratory luncheon for which they shipped in food from all over Russia to treat us like kings and queens. A young lady waitressing us eventually married a Nome Bering Air pilot and continues to live here in Nome. Her son was born and raised in Provideniya. He ended up being my interpreter for one of the later trips to Anadyr when we went over to witness the swearing in of Roman Abramovich who became Governor of Chukotka. Our relations with Chukotka have continued on since then in spite of our, and their national government’s creating hardships

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Participant & Organizer of Friendship Flight, Governor  
Steve Cowper's Office of International Trade

One had the distinct feeling new paint had arrived the day before for the buildings and a few ‘merchants’ had been rounded up to promote a form of commerce. And even though it was dubbed the Friendship Flight, the entire field of visitors was shrouded in a sea of stern-faced guards with berets bearing the shields of the KGB. We had already pushed our passports into their hands but now we could deliver the gifts we had carefully chosen in Alaska stumbling through the Russian our translators taught us on the short flight from Nome, Alaska to what we called at the time, Provideniya. Even maps hid the city. That’s how secret it was, we couldn’t find it anywhere.

My speculations were greater at the time than my expectations. There were layers of relationships and views about our neighbors across the Bering Strait: mostly we had eyed one another across a strait of water which was such a small body of water really – less than 1.5 miles -- with a wariness and a military might on both sides that flying across that on an Alaska Airlines flight with a mix of natives, business leaders, political leaders, journalists and citizen diplomats was beyond, at that time in my life, my

The leadership and the ability to take a risk like Governor Cowper and Alaska Airlines CEO Bruce Kennedy were willing to take demonstrated a vision that has resulted in decades of openness for culture and commerce, adventurers and diplomats. Today, natives can travel visa free to see their blood relatives. Adventurers can ski, kayak and travel across the water, sometimes treacherous, that lay between our two nations.

It was a great honor to have been the point person to organize the Friendship Flight for Governor Cowper and Robert Poe and the State of Alaska Office of International Trade. It was an even greater pleasure to witness the Alaska frontier character and warmth extended to those across the Bering Strait whom had lived under conditions far less fortunate than our own. It allowed us all for however brief our visit, to dream together of the opportunities and accomplishments that might well grow from this endeavor and to have this serve as catalyst for a hospitality that would be repeated again and again.

An honor. A privilege. A frontier adventure. A true Alaska unfolding that crossed cultures and made long lasting connections. And after all, is that not the definition of our frontier spirit? Is that not the definition of ‘friendship’ that we all want for our children and especially our school children in both our nations to learn? The flags the kids in the streets flew that day caught that spirit. Many of those kids, now adults are in their 50s and maybe 60s and I’m willing to bet that day changed their lives. Some may have suffered severe consequences by their government for the risks they took in even talking to us that day – speaking to a foreigner, often forbidden. But yearning for human connection, for friendship has a way of doing that. We all want it and it has a way of winding its lovely and long lasting way into our hearts. Friendship can do that to all of us.

Another thing we did was few of us had cooked up an idea to have a dog race between Siberia and us. We hadn't been dealing with the Russians for God knows how many years. The Olympic committee was considering re-doing sled dog demonstrations to be included in the Olympics, which had been done in 1925, but not since. They ended up having the demos, and we knew the Russians would want to participate. A couple of us challenged the Russians at the meeting to a dog race and they accepted and a few weeks later we had Russians sitting in our living rooms

Another scary experience after the Friendship Flight was that I was almost arrested during the “Hope Race”. There were only three people who officially headed up the race, Leo Rasmussen from Nome, Jerry Tokar from Anchorage and me. We each had our assigned duties and were dealing with the sports committee in Anadyr. I was the only official from the three of

Without that friendship flight, we would not have had the “Hope Race”. I had known I was going to Siberia as the artist for the friendship flight. Because of my life-long interest in the Siberian husky, I wanted to know more about them in Siberia. They had been imported in early 1900’s into Nome from that area. I shot gunned letters to every museum and university in Russia asking to meet somebody in Provideniya for the friendship flight. Somebody from the University did meet me and she was an expert on the Chukchi Native and the Siberian husky. I would never have done anything more with the Russians except for the friendship flight if it hadn’t been for that connection. It was a very, very wonderful time – an absolutely wonderful time, and a memory of time gone by.

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It was one of the highlights of a lifetime and after thirteen hours of finding and hopefully creating friendship, we came back to Nome. For another two years, we'd broken down the border, going back and forth by ship, Umiaks, boats, flights, and dog teams -- everyone wanted to cross the border and extend the arm of peace. Then our governments hastily retrenched, got back in and the friendship became once again long distance.