

2019-03_edited

Alfred McNeil

Unknown date

Claresholm, Alberta, Canada

Some material from this summary has been removed at the request of the narrator.

Bracketed information is a self-correction by the narrator.

Alfred McNeil, photographer for the Geophysical Institute, talked about his experiences at Poker Flat and Churchill Rocket Range. He explained he was using an old tape recorder and old memory. He had been reading about Poker Flat and it brought back a lot of memories for him. He said Neil Davis was extremely interested in establishing the rocket range. There were a lot of difficulties. He remembers hearing the call for crews to come out and help at Poker Flat. His first sight of Poker Flat was a large clearing in the trees. In those days they just called it Chatanika. The name Poker Flat might have come along a little later. It was mostly bog, permafrost and ice prisms. He can remember trucks buried in mud up to their hubs. Eldon Thompson was the driving force. He kept everyone busy. He remembers Thompson racing across the area on a snow machine because it was the only thing that wouldn't sink into the mud.

It was common knowledge that Neil Davis was having some serious difficulty with the federal government. He was also having difficulty lining up the scientific community behind him. There was some doubt about it working. People just weren't convinced in the scientific world that it would work. McNeil said he was going to talk about something that happened at Churchill and Dr. Akasofu. It happened many years ago. At the time Akasofu, McNeil and 32 other experimenters were flying around the North Pole in NASA's Galileo. They were stationed at Fort Churchill. He had five cameras on board. This was in 1968 and 1969. They had cameras that pointed out to the sides and all sky cameras pointing straight up. They went to Greenland, Norway, and all over the north. They were aboard the Galileo the night the B-52 bomber crashed off the runway at Thule [Air Base]. They had to land and passed through the radioactive cloud from the crash. They spent an entire day up there. It was one of the reasons the United States was thrown out of Thule. As they landed people were standing around waiting for the hydrogen bomb to go off.

One of their purposes with the Galileo was to coordinate an aerial shoot and rocket shot at the same time at Churchill. A university was going to launch the rocket shot and they were going to fly under it in the Galileo with all their instruments pointed up where the rocket was going. They had delays because of poor weather. The plan was they would circle about twenty miles away from the rocket site until the rocket was fired. The Department of Transport in Canada refused to allow them to talk to the rocket range directly. The only communication was through the Department of Transport radio operator in Churchill who was in touch with the rocket range. The countdown went down to one minute and the pilots of the Galileo headed to the rocket site. When the countdown reached one minute the radio operator in Churchill went outside to watch the rocket go off. When the countdown reached 30 seconds a one minute hold was called. They did not know this and headed into the rocket site at 400 miles an

hour. From this point on things were hushed up. He did have a talk with one of the pilots and apparently as they got to the rocket site the rocket took off right in front of them. The pilot took a tremendous right turn to get out of the way of the falling second [first] stage. They turned around and headed back to the airport. The next morning a meeting was called for all participants of the rocket launch, people in the plane and scientists. Everyone was very angry. The pilots were very expressive about never doing this again. The person firing the rocket said it was a wasted rocket because they didn't gather any data.

[material removed at the request of the narrator]

They complained about Canadian customs and the delays in getting things to Churchill. He said because one man screwed up it could have very easily killed all 32 of the people on the airplane. Akasofu got up at the meeting and asked everyone to support their rocket range at Poker Flat. McNeil thinks this was a turning point. Everybody said they can't fire rockets at Churchill anymore. It was too difficult and dangerous and there was support for a shift over to Poker Flat. Within eight months they were firing rockets at Poker Flat.

McNeil said they left Churchill and were due to land in Thule, Greenland. They had to get permission to land there. They had to call every 30 minutes. When they were about 30 minutes away from the base the tower came back and said their landing permission was cancelled. They had flown all night to get there. As far as he remembered they were low on fuel. They had planned to refuel there. When they were refused they didn't have enough fuel to go back to Churchill. Eventually and reluctantly they were told OK they could land. They were advised that special conditions existed and they would be at risk. The B-52 Bomber carrying nuclear weapons had crashed on the end of the runway and it was on fire. There was only one approach and they had to fly through the smoke and radioactive debris. They were parked on the runway and instantly there was a bus there. They were taken to the far end of the airport. Everyone there was scared that the bombs would go off. They stayed in barracks at the airport. They were there for two or three hours and told to leave. They had a long leisurely breakfast along with commander and the pilot of the crashed B-52. Their airplane had been washed overnight. They boarded the plane and then sat there for 12 [8] hours. There was a problem with the correct connectors to refuel their plane. Eventually there were many aircraft landings with emergency crews coming in. They eventually had permission to take off and went back to Churchill.

McNeil said he would include four prints to go with the tape. One of them is Dr. Akasofu and the person who was firing off the rocket at the Churchill Rocket Range. There is also a picture of the big triangle building at Poker Flat. Neil Davis bought ten inch aerial cameras. They put them on Ester Dome, one at Fort Yukon and several other places. They operated the cameras with color transparency film. They were 500 foot rolls. They took one photo every five seconds and they were all connected to a LAN line. They all fired at the same time. There are a couple of photos of himself running the cameras. They had to keep the cameras warm up to the last second. They would mount them and start them when the barium rockets were fired. He said they will be making prints from slides of activities around the Institute. He will label the 4 x 5 negatives. He will be sending this information later.

McNeil said they seldom ever saw the results of what the photographs they took during the rocket launches. [material removed at the request of the narrator] They took the rolls of films out of the cameras and take them to their laboratories and develop them. They were 500 feet long and ten inches wide. It was difficult work. He doesn't remember being allowed to see the information on them. Almost all of the photographic data that was produced vanished.

McNeil said he has gone through just about all of his files. He has 200-300 scenery and aurora shots on two and a quarter transparency and he doesn't think they would be of any use.