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## END OF AN ERA

Kulis Air National Guard Base closes its doors after 60 years

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By Matt Alderton



# END OF AN ERA

IN 2011, THE 176TH WING OF THE ALASKA AIR NATIONAL GUARD SAID GOODBYE TO KULIS AIR NATIONAL GUARD BASE, ITS HOME FOR NEARLY 60 YEARS. HERE, A LOOK AT THE HISTORY OF THE BASE—AND THE FUTURE OF THE WING.

**It was 5:36 p.m. when the ground in Alaska started shaking.** Normally, families would have been sitting down for supper. This day, however—March 27, 1964—was Good Friday, a day of religious fasting. In many households, therefore, people weren't eating. They were praying.

The shaking started near the College Fjord in Prince William Sound. Vibrations were felt as far away as Oregon and California. The tremors rolled through coastal towns like Seward, Valdez and Kodiak, where tsunamis swallowed

chunks of communities, one big bite at a time. From there, the 9.2-magnitude quake ambled into Anchorage—Alaska's largest city—75 miles northwest of its epicenter. There, buildings buckled and homes swooned—if not from the quake itself, then from the landslides that followed.

All told, the Great Alaskan Earthquake lasted nearly 4 minutes and caused approximately 143 deaths, making it one of the most memorable and destructive events in Alaska's history.

**1 FAIRCHILD C123J PROVIDER** Taking off from Kulis ANG Base Alaska. The Alaska Air National Guard was the only ANG unit to ever fly Fairchild C-123s and the only unit in the Air Force to fly them with skis.

**NOTE:** This is the aircraft the unit was flying during the 1964 earthquake.

The damage would have been even greater, however, if not for the Alaska Air National Guard (AKANG) operating out of Kulis Air National Guard Base in Anchorage.



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3



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2 **LT. ALBERT KULIS**, 144th Fighter-Bomber Squadron, November 1954. Lt. Albert Kulis was a pilot assigned to the 144th Fighter-Bomber Squadron and a commercial pilot for Cordova Airlines. Kulis died on November 16, 1954, while flying a training mission near Goose Bay across Cook Inlet from Anchorage, Alaska. In May 1955, the new Alaska Air National Guard Base, located at the Anchorage Airport, was dedicated to Lt. Kulis. (Portrait by Charlen Jeffrey.)

3 **144TH FIGHTER-BOMBER SQUADRON PERSONNEL**, Air National Guard

4 **BUILDING 3**, 'The Million Dollar Hangar,' ca. 1959

Guard members began streaming into Kulis within 20 minutes—without being called. Immediately, they turned a C-123 aircraft into a mobile control tower that restored communications at the Anchorage International Airport, where a downed control tower had left radio silence between aircraft and the airfield. Shortly after, they converted a warehouse into a shelter for displaced civilians; it had a makeshift dining hall and approximately 100 beds, 97 of which were occupied by midnight.

Meanwhile, Guard members provided electricity, heat and medical supplies to hordes of quake-stricken civilians. In fact, the Guard over the next two weeks provided airlift for 131,000 pounds of cargo and 201 passengers, ultimately earning it the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award.

“When the earthquake happened, Guard members who may have been preoccupied with trying to take care of their own families all just showed up at the base and said, ‘What can we

do to help?’” says Chief Master Sgt. Steven Calvin, command chief of the 176th Wing of the AKANG, which at the time of the earthquake was known as the 144th Air Transportation Squadron. “That’s always been the Guard’s underlying message: We are your hometown force. When something devastating happens, you can count on us to be there. I look at the ’64 earthquake as a real benchmark moment. That’s when the Guard really became known in Alaska.”



The earthquake was a seminal event in Alaska's history. Equally, however, it was a defining moment in the heritage of Kulis Air National Guard Base, which was closed in February 2011 as part of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) action of 2005.

### HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

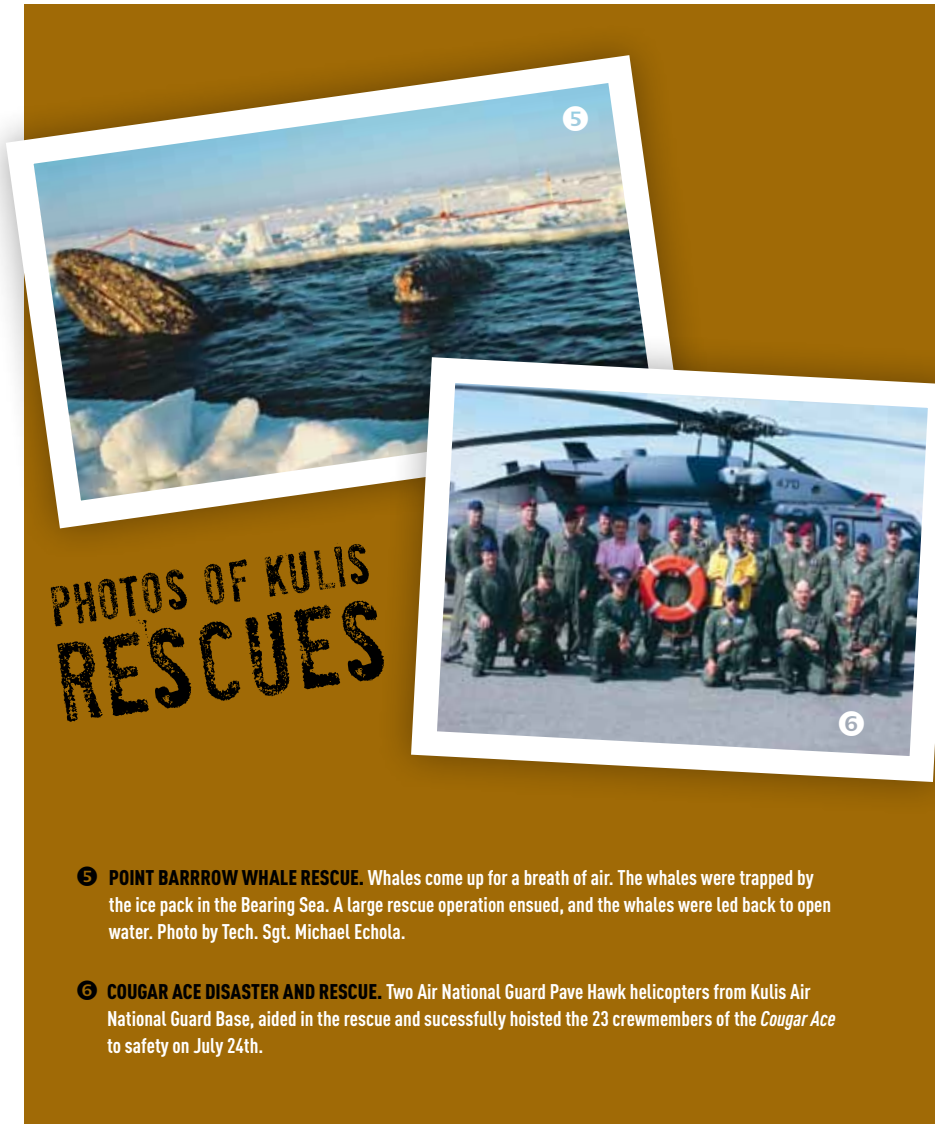
The history of Kulis Air National Guard Base dates back to 1952, when the U.S. government recognized the AKANG as the 8144th Air Base Wing. At the time, Alaska was still a territory and the wing—then headquartered in a small office in downtown Anchorage—had just 11 enlisted men, five officers and zero aircraft. When the wing received its first airplane in February 1953, it moved to Elmendorf Air Force Base on the north side of Anchorage. Later that year, in July 1953, it was re-designated the 144th Fighter-Bomber Squadron.

On Nov. 16, 1954, twin tragedies struck the 144th. First, a T-33 on a training flight over Point McKenzie vanished, its two occupants never to be seen or heard from again. Thirty minutes later, a training flight of three F-80s led by 1st Lt. Albert Kulis passed in formation over Goose Bay, approximately 40 miles northwest of Anchorage. Somehow, Kulis lost control of his plane. The wreckage was discovered two weeks later, but succumbed to mud before it could be recovered.

"They were just then developing what was going to be the AKANG Base," Calvin says. "1st Lt. Kulis' crash being of fairly recent memory, they decided to commemorate his legacy by naming the base after him."

The 144th moved into Kulis Air National Guard Base in spring 1955. When it did, it took with it a close-knit camaraderie, born of shared loss, that permeated Kulis throughout its 56-year history.

"That sense of camaraderie is strong among all Guardsmen," says Master Sgt. Kevin Combs, who spent 22 years at Kulis, "but I think it was particularly strong at Kulis."



5 **POINT BARROW WHALE RESCUE.** Whales come up for a breath of air. The whales were trapped by the ice pack in the Bearing Sea. A large rescue operation ensued, and the whales were led back to open water. Photo by Tech. Sgt. Michael Echola.

6 **COUGAR ACE DISASTER AND RESCUE.** Two Air National Guard Pave Hawk helicopters from Kulis Air National Guard Base, aided in the rescue and successfully hoisted the 23 crewmembers of the *Cougar Ace* to safety on July 24th.

### MISSIONS AND MEMORIES

Although it was beautiful—according to Calvin, its grounds were dotted with hills and trees, moose frequently browsed around the perimeter fence and it even had an eagle's nest inside the front gates—Kulis itself was rather unremarkable.

Its missions were another story. "From a base perspective, Kulis looked a lot like a lot of other Guard bases," Calvin says of Kulis, which totaled just 130 acres adjacent to Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport. "From a mission perspective, though, the Wing is extremely unique."

What is now the 176th Wing started as a training unit, became a fighter unit in the 1950s and then converted

to an airlift mission from 1957 until the 1990s. During that time, its activities were extremely diverse. When Fairbanks flooded in 1967, for instance, the Guard flew in supplies and evacuated residents—many of them to Kulis. In the 1970s, it flew to Panama, Germany and Korea in support of U.S. military and humanitarian missions. In 1985, it sent an emergency response team to the remote village of Gambell when an explosion destroyed its only source of power and heat in the dead of winter. In 1988—as depicted in the 2012 film *Big Miracle*—it flew to Point Barrow to help rescue three whales that were trapped beneath ice in the Arctic Circle. A year later, in 1989, after the

*Exxon Valdez* oil spill, it mobilized to assist with cleanup efforts in remote areas around Prince William Sound.

Perhaps its proudest moment, however, came in 1990, when the AKANG took over the search-and-rescue mission of the 71st Active Duty Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron. Given Alaska's mountainous terrain, harsh weather, remote location and undeveloped infrastructure, not to mention its large size—the state is one-fifth the size of the continental United States and has more miles of coastline than the other 49 states combined—that's a significant mission. Still, it's one the 176th has executed faithfully for more than 20 years. Among its highest-profile rescue missions, were the *Cougar Ace* disaster in 2006, during which it saved 23 crewmembers from a floundering cargo vessel in the Pacific Ocean, and the plane crash that killed former Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), to which it responded in 2010.

"If an airplane goes down in Ohio, or if a hunter gets lost, state troopers can respond because they can drive to the scene," Combs says. "In Alaska, we have no roads. So we've been instrumental in saving a lot of lives up here, and that's given us a great reputation."

### REMEMBERING KULIS

Today, the AKANG has more than 1,400 Airmen and several missions, ranging from strategic and tactical airlift to aerospace defense to military and civilian search and rescue.

"The 176th Wing today is the most diverse wing in the Guard as far as the mission set that we own and the things that we can accomplish," Calvin says.

Although Kulis was instrumental in shaping the 176th, its closure hasn't deterred it from its mission. In fact, the 176th is currently engaged in one of its largest missions to date: In May 2012,

it deployed for the first time all three of its rescue squadrons, which will be assisting active-duty troops in Afghanistan this summer.

"We haven't changed our mission and we haven't changed our outlook," Combs says.

Still, farewells are never easy. On the morning of Saturday, Feb. 12, 2011, members of the 176th Wing gathered for a special ceremony during which they saw something they'd never seen before: an empty airport ramp at Kulis Air National Guard Base, where all 18 of the wing's aircraft took off for the last time, made their farewell flyover, then headed north to their new home at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson (JBER), from which the wing had moved 56 years earlier.

"For many members of the wing, it was a traumatic event," Calvin says.

Indeed, the transition hasn't been easy. For one, JBER is significantly larger. At Kulis, one could walk from the airfield to the clinic to finance—practically anywhere—within five minutes. Now, routine destinations often are a 15-minute drive away. There are new rules, new protocols and, of course, a new landlord: a large, active-duty Air Force base.

There are advantages, though. For one, the wing had outgrown Kulis and now has room to expand. "Also," Combs says, "the dining hall is right on base."

Like the 176th Wing, Kulis has begun a new chapter. Located on public-owned land, it's been returned to the State of Alaska, which eventually will lease its empty structures to private businesses.

"If you were to drive onto what used to be Kulis Air National Guard Base, you'd hardly recognize it because a lot of the older buildings have been torn down," Calvin says. "It's kind of sad to see what used to be home for so many people for so many years, now no longer there."

**PHOTO ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:** Photographs supplied by Robert M. Braley Jr., MSgt (ret); AKANG, 176th Wing Historical Property Custodian; and the Alaska National Guard public affairs office.

## KULIS BY THE NUMBERS

1955

The year Kulis opened.

2011

The year Kulis closed.

18

The number of aircraft—including six HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters and four HC-130 helicopters—at Kulis at the time of its closure.

1,400+

The number of full- and part-time Guardsmen in the 176th Wing.

130

Kulis's acreage.

4

The number of hangars at Kulis at the time of its closure.

46

The number of buildings and related facilities at Kulis at the time of its closure.