

Virginia Aviation History Project



Kit Foxes to Alaska – Part 2

Text and Photos by John King

In the last VAHS newsletter, the article ended on Day 14 with the fliers and Kit Foxes in Bettles, Alaska, with the intent of heading north to Barrow. We resume the travelogue at that point.

DAY 15 (June 14) – POINT BARROW, AK

There are two passes through the Brooks Range, the “Atigun Pass” and the “Anaktuvuk Pass”. The “Atigun Pass” is where the Haul Road (Dalton Highway) and oil pipeline pass through on their way to Prudhoe Bay near an airport called Deadhorse (PASC). The pass we chose to transverse the Brooks Range was the “Anaktuvuk Pass” that is over 50 nautical west of the Atigun Pass at the head of the roadless 80 mile long John River valley . It is a shorter distance to Barrow from Bettles (more direct) than through the Atigun Pass. With the Anaktuvuk Pass route, you do not have to take the long way to Barrow through Prudhoe Bay, via Deadhorse.

We were advised by a local pilot at Bettles to take the Anaktuvuk Pass, since it is much wider and

easier to fly through. The walls of Atigun Pass are so steep in places that it would be much more difficult to turn around in an airplane when the weather deteriorates. There is no weather reporting at Atigun and the weather often deteriorates without warning. The only weather reporting for the pass is via PIREP’s.

We departed Bettles at 10:55 AM with a planned route to Barrow via the Anaktuvuk Pass (PAKP)



Anaktuvuk Pass on the way to Barrow, Alaska

and Umiat (PAUM). Finding the entrance to the Anaktuvuk Pass was easy; just follow the John River up the South Slope of the Brooks Range to the Village of Anaktuvuk. The Anaktuvuk Pass airport lies atop the Brooks Range almost overlooking the North Slope. The Umiat village and airport is just beyond the North Slope and lies on what is referred to as flat frozen Arctic tundra.

Just prior to entering the pass, Fox #3 (Stan Specht) reported that he felt some unusual vibration up front and did not feel comfortable continuing on at this point. He thought it might be related to the prop and was going to return to Bettles, since he might have to order a new prop. The rest of the

had completely separated from the cylinder head. Could we possibly find a welder here at the Anaktuvuk Village?

A couple of the female locals drove up in a van and advised us that; (1) the village was DRY (no alcohol allowed), and (2) no taking pictures of the native population without their explicit permission. Any alcohol consumed, brought in, or sold would result in a \$200 fine. Oh yes, there was a welder in the village. We had only two requests; is there a place to eat lunch, and could we talk to the welder?

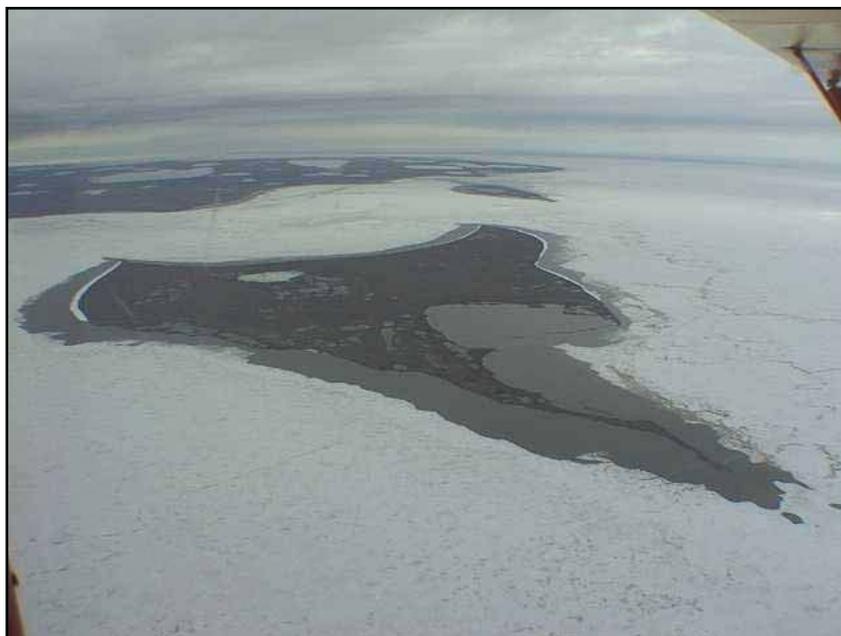
We were taken to meet Scott Szmyd, the local machinist and welder and fellow worker Bill Weber.

When Scott introduced himself as the “Town Drunk and he just came out of the closet”, our first thought was; “this is not a good idea”. As it turned out, Scott was a great guy that loved to kid around. Herb, who is our self-appointed technical counselor, inspected Scott’s repair work and Robert was pleased with the workmanship. Scott refused payment, stating all he wanted was to take a close look at our airplanes.

After lunch when the repaired exhaust pipe was installed, we departed Anaktuvuk for Umiat (PAUM). Our only reason for stopping at Umiat was to top off on fuel prior to our last leg to Barrow. While we had sufficient fuel to make Barrow, it would be unwise to proceed without a large

fuel reserve. Cold northerly winds over the arctic ice cap could quickly fog in Barrow and the entire Arctic coastline, extending our flight time far beyond our existing fuel reserves.

It would be an overstatement to say that “there is very little at Umiat”, which is basically operated by the oil exploration companies. The airport was simply a gravel strip with a couple of small shacks and several white fuel tanks. Most of the buildings were a series of special built industrial trailers, tee-



Enroute to Barrow

group continued on stating that we would see him on our return from Barrow. As he would later discover the problem was really related to spark plugs, not the propeller.

As we passed over the village of Anaktuvuk, Fox #2 (Robert Oliver) reported a suspect break in the engine exhaust system, causing an EGT reading to go to zero. We immediately turned around and landed on the gravel strip at Anaktuvuk. A quick examination verified that the right rear exhaust manifold

connected together. Fuel cost us \$5.25 per gallon and a small cubical room went for \$200 a night. Not a good place for an overnight. After refueling we immediately departed for Barrow. The terrain from Umiat to Barrow consisted of vast stretches of flat Arctic tundra with thousands of frozen small lakes or ponds. There were no trees or substantial vegetation, except for marsh grass that was brown in color. Not a safe place to put down anywhere. We did see a sandbar or two along the Chipp River that might afford a possible landing spot, but you would never get airborne again. We had 150 nm of nothing but this stuff between us and Point Barrow. As it turned out, this was the only leg of our entire Alaska trip where the conversation over the radio was almost nonexistent.

About 35 miles out of Barrow, as we approached the frozen Admiralty Bay, we started to enter light rain and the visibility began to deteriorate, but no fog. Barrow Radio cleared us for landing on Runway 6 with rain and high wind. Our approach to Runway 6 took us several thousand feet out over the Arctic Ocean and shoreline pack ice. Rain on the windshield was not being sufficiently cleared by the idling prop wash as I turned to base. High on my list of concerns was flying low and slow in cold rain; normally ideal conditions for carburetor icing. After touching down and turning off the runway, the wind and cold rain became the next concern. Flight Service instructed us to taxi up to the tower and tie down. It soon became obvious that we were not adequately dressed for Point Barrow. Tying down the aircraft in the cold, blowing rain was the most unwelcoming experience we had encountered to date.

Having made our way up the tower stairs to get out of the cold rain and talk with Flight Service, we quickly managed to display our ignorance with two simple questions. First, is there a courtesy car available, and second, where can we get a quick beer and pizza? Response was loud and clear: "Where the Hell do you think you are? There is NO courtesy car and this village is DRY!" Welcome to Point Barrow!!!

After we checked into the Barrow Airport Inn, one block away, and eating a good meal served with ice tea, we completed our self-guided walking tour of everything interesting to see in Barrow in just two hours. All the roads and property surrounding the buildings were hard packed dirt and gravel, no grass or vegetation of any kind. Structures were mostly single story, wooden buildings with lots of telephone poles running everywhere. Some of the Government buildings were larger with two or more stories.

Our plan was to arise at sunrise the next morning, eat breakfast and depart Barrow early. Since it never gets dark this time of the year, there is no sunrise, so to speak. We soon learned of another Barrow phenomenon. In addition to a fuel charge of \$4.34 a gallon, the fuel truck driver advised us of a required \$50.00 callout fee PER AIRCRAFT. To most of the large cargo aircraft that service Barrow, that is an insignificant added cost, but an outright rip-off in our case. After a little negotiation, our only recourse was to purchase all of the required fuel on one charge card. That we could do - a savings of \$250.

After fueling our Kitfoxes we saw a DC-6 from Air Cargo Express land and taxi up to the maintenance hangar. They fly in from Fairbanks twice a week to provide Barrow with all their supplies. The pilot, who also owns a homebuilt, allowed us to tour the DC-6. When we complained about the fuel charges at Barrow, he stated the four radial engines on a DC-6 burn more fuel on takeoff (over 100 gallons) than the combined fuel all of our flying machines can carry together. Although interesting, we didn't feel any better.

DAY 16 (JUNE 15) - BETTLES, AK

Our early departure from Barrow was not going to happen, due to heavy fog all along the Arctic coastline. While checking the weather at the FBO we were befriended by another pilot, David Kessler the CEO of Barrow Computer. David took us under his wing and allowed us the use of his store for Internet updates. The heavy fog delayed our departure un-

til 6:55 that evening and only after our request for a Special VFR departure. The ceiling to the south was only a few hundred feet, but that would be no problem since the terrain was flat frozen tundra, void of all vegetation and any obstacles. You could fly just 10 feet off the surface and not run into anything. Twenty miles out of Barrow and the Arctic coastline it was SVFR all the way to the North Slope. Of course, we had to once more traverse the vast stretch of flat Arctic tundra with thousands of frozen small lakes or ponds prior to flying up the North Slope and over the Brooks Range.

Our return plan was to fly nonstop from Point Barrow to Bettles and not stop at the airstrips at Umiat or Anaktuvuk, as we did on the flight north. As we over flew Umiat, we soon discovered that locating the Anaktuvuk Pass from the North Slope side of the Brooks Range was not going to be as easy as it was from the South Slope side. The river that follows the Pass was not that well defined and there were several to choose from. Neither of us Bird Dogs in the lead flight could agree on the exact location of the Pass. We also notice convective activity ahead in the general area we were headed. If the tall dark clouds forming ahead were over the Pass we would have to do a 180 and land at Umiat.

By this time the Bird Dogs were climbing up the North Slope following a small river we hoped was the entrance to the Pass. The dark clouds were just off our right wing and light rain was visible on the windshield. Our GPS's were of no value at this time since there are no navigation aids to define the Pass. It was then we realized that we had made two mistakes. First, we did not punch in the lat-long position on our GPS's defining the entrance to the Pass before departure, and second, we had already erased the trails on our GPS defining our flight path on the trip north. Flight trails take up a lot of the GPS memory if not periodically erased. BIG MISTAKE HERE!!!

We soon discovered another problem. The small rivers flowing down the North Slope often joined together where the pass narrowed, forcing us to decide which path to follow -- turn right or left? The

Bird Dogs wrongly guessed right and soon found ourselves heading the wrong way up a very narrow valley. Fortunately, we passed a small cut in the mountain to our left that appeared to lead to the other pass. Once back on the correct mountain pass, we radioed the Foxes to take the left pass going up the slope. Since we were low in the mountains, we often lost radio communications with the Foxes. Once we overflew the village of Anaktuvuk we knew we were in the pass which is well defined at this point.

The rest of the flight to Bettles was uneventful, except that the scenery flying down the South Slope of the pass was stunning. At this point Bird Dog #2 (Miguel) was a couple of miles behind me, so he decided to join up with the Foxes for the rest of the leg. The John River valley was much wider at this point and the winding river snaked its way through tall green grass and low pine trees. It was a real treat to see some green vegetation on the ground once again. I flew as slow as I could at 500 feet following the river as it wound its way down the valley looking for wild life.

About 30 nm out of Bettles, but still in the Pass, the Foxes and Miguel decided to land on a small private grass strip at Crevice Creek. After meeting the family that lives there and taking some pictures they took off for Bettles. Since I had already landed and met up with Stan, we stood by and watched the Foxes and Miguel showing off by doing a low flyby over the Bettles Lodge. After they landed on the ground we were once again a flight of seven Kitfoxes.

DAY 17 (JUNE 16) - CIRCLE HOT SPRINGS, AK

Big decision time was at hand. Before we return for home, we wanted to see more of what Alaska had to offer for pilots eager to find a landing strip that offered interesting places to visit, different from those we can access in the Lower 48. The Alaska Interior has hundreds of hot springs where some of them have been used for centuries by Natives and more recent arrivals. The three most popular, that are

accessible by airplane, are Chena, Manley, and Circle. Since I had flown to Chena Hot Springs during the 1998 Alaska trip, and some of the local pilots talked a lot about the Arctic Circle Hot Springs (called Circle), we decided to treat Circle to a flight of seven Kitfoxes.

We departed early from Bettles heading eastward just 20 nm to Prospect Creek (PAPR) to pick up the Haul Road and the Pipeline and head southeast to 5-Mile (PAFV) and Liven-good (4AK2). Just about 15 nm north of Fairbanks we diverted northeast and headed to the Poker Flat Research Range to follow the Steese Highway to Circle on the Yukon River.

As usual the Bird Dogs were well in the lead, while the Foxes were several miles behind. We had a rule that the fastest flight group would takeoff first and the slower group of aircraft would take off last. This was so that we all would not be together in the pattern at the destination airport, and that we would not all be at the fuel pumps at the same time. The Foxes never really understood that. They hated being last, so they took short cuts whenever possible, sometimes flying over unfriendly terrain (a No, No). They even went so far as to provide the Bird Dogs with false position data in hopes to beat us to the destination airport. It never worked, but they came close once, at Circle Hot Springs. The Foxes had taken another short cut through another mountain pass without a highway below. As we approached Circle there was a race between the Bird Dogs and the Foxes as to who could get on the ground first. Not a real smart thing to do.

The Circle Hot Springs airport was built in 1924 and claims to be one of the first in Alaska. The 08-26 gravel, 3,670 feet long runway, has no buildings and is a long walk to the resort hotel. They will drive out and pick you up as well as return you when you leave. There is no fuel at the airstrip, but a local bush pilot who runs an air charter service out of his home at Circle, offered us fuel if we wanted to taxi down a gravel

road to his home where he keeps several of his aircraft. His name was Ronnie "Frenchy" Drouin and he flies hunting parties and sightseeing groups to wilderness drop-offs in Alaska. He allowed us to tie down our aircraft at his home for the night.

The hotel was built more than 80 years ago and still looks much as it did then. The adjacent saloon is one of Alaska's more atmospheric watering holes. We watched the World Cup Soccer championship match between Mexico and the USA in the saloon that night. Bad news for Miguel, Mexico lost. The hotel had rooms available from fully appointed suites to spartan attic dormers where you can unroll your sleeping bag on the floor. The outdoor Olympic-size swimming pool is the biggest hot-spring-fed bathing facility in the state.

Each room had its own sink, which only had one spigot, that was hot water direct from the hot spring. Even the toilets were plumbed with hot spring water, providing a nice warm sensation when in use. We had a very relaxing day, enjoying the swimming pool, the excellent meals, the saloon, and the tranquil surroundings. Room rates and meals were very reasonable.

Without much dickering, the very nice lady/owner offered us an excellent discount on single room rates. They love to meet pilots.

DAY 18 (JUNE 17) - FAIRBANKS, AK

After breakfast the hotel van drove us back to Frenchy's home so that we could taxi our aircraft back to the Circle airstrip. Ill fortune was about to ruin Tony's day. Again, as we taxied out to the narrow gravel road, Tony failed to stay in the center of the road and his right main gear dropped down into a drainage ditch shattering his propeller. This was a show stopper for Tony; for it would take three to four days at best to receive a replacement prop. Good news; there was no further damage to the aircraft and he was in a place where he could order a replacement and wait out its arrival. Frenchy would take him into Fairbanks to pick up a new prop shipped from the Lower 48.

The six remaining Kitfox's departed Circle Hot Springs back down the Steese Highway straight into Fairbanks International. The air traffic on arrival to Fairbanks was heavier than we experienced before. Since we were in two flights, each of three Kitfox's, separated by 5 to 7 nm, and the two lead Kitfox's of each group had similar tail numbers (i.e. N993JK and N193JK), the tower and two other nearby aircraft on approach at the same time were confused as to just where they were in relation to the two Kitfox groups. The almost identical tail numbers of the lead aircraft confused the tower relative to which group was the first to land. With lots of radio chatter and some time lapse, the Fairbanks tower finally sorted it all out and everyone landed safely on runway 19L at Fairbanks.

While at Barrow we had become friends with one of the pilots of a DC-6 flying in cargo with Air Cargo Express. He was also the owner of an experimental aircraft and was interested in our Kitfoxes and what we were doing at Barrow. As a result he suggested that we stop by the Air Cargo Express hangars at Fairbanks and say hello. So, once on the ground we asked Ground Control to direct us to the Air Cargo Express on the west side of the airport. This would be a perfect place to perform our required maintenance, such as oil changes, spark plug cleaning, and anything else that required looking into.

Our arrival at the Air Cargo Express hangar facilities was a bit of a surprise to the Air Cargo Express management personnel. They were not expecting to see seven Kitfoxes line up in front of their hangar. After all they only serviced DC-6's and the like. We were greeted by the vice president who gracefully accepted our rationale for being there. They not only allowed us to pull up to their hangars and service out aircraft, but drove us into town for things we needed. We met a lot of really friendly and helpful aviation people during our trip, in both Alaska and Canada.

As soon as our maintenance was completed we taxied over to the campground facilities at the other side of the airport, rented a car and drove

into town for a meal and a room at the Golden North Motel.

DAY 19 (JUNE 18) - DAWSON CITY, YT

We had another decision to make the next morning. Should we fly back to the Lower 48 from here and head back down the Alaska Highway, the way we came, or should we take a different route back home. We had heard a lot about Dawson City in the Yukon Territories of Canada, the heart of the Klondike Gold Rush where they still have operating gold mines. Dawson City is east of Fairbanks almost on the same parallel as Fairbanks. From Dawson City we could then fly south over the Klondike Highway to Whitehorse and join up with the Alaska Highway heading south through Canada to the U.S. border. Dawson City won out.

By the time we checked out of the motel, had breakfast, drove back to the Fairbanks airport campground, and turned in the rental car, it was 9:30 AM before wheels up departure. Our route to Dawson Creek would take us back down the Alaska Highway over Eielson Air Force Base, Delta Junction (D66), and on to TOK Junction (6K8). Just 10 nm east of TOK at Tetlin Junction, we picked up the Taylor Highway north to Chicken (CKX), and on to Boundary (BYA) at the Alaska/Yukon border. At the border we followed the Top Of The World Highway into the Dawson City Airport (CYDA) with wheels down at 10:15 AM.

The Dawson City Airport is a small but very well equipped facility with very welcoming FBO management as well as a friendly Canadian Customs lady. The airport is located several miles out of town, but the Fifth Avenue Red B&B in Dawson City drove out to pick us up. Once we checked in at the B&B we had the whole day to tour the town.

Dawson City lies at the convergence of the Yukon & Klondike Rivers. With its year around population of 2000, it is very rich in history dating back to the gold rush days of the 1890's. They say it would take a whole week to see it all, but we were only going to be there for that day. They still have

the dirt streets and wooden sidewalks. That evening we decided to try out the Diamond Tooth Gertie's Casino, Canada's first legalized gambling hall. It has live entertainment with three different live shows nightly, plenty of booze, slot machines, black jack tables, poker, and roulette wheels. The entertainment with dancing girls was professional and outstanding. The good news; Miguel got lucky. He borrowed two quarters from Robert, hit the slots and won \$100.00. He then bought all of our group drinks from the bar. The bad news; he poured all the rest back into the machines. At best, we got some free drinks that night. Being a tourist spot you'd expect prices to be high, but lodging, food, and entertainment are very reasonable, especially for us Americans getting an exchange rate break on the U.S. Dollar.

DAY 20 (JUNE 19) - WATSON LAKE, YT

After a nice breakfast at the B&B and the long ride back to the airport we managed to get wheels up at 10:40 AM. The first leg of our flight plan for the day would take us along the Klondike Highway to McQuesten (CFP4), Pelly Crossing (CFQ6), Carmacks (CEX4), Braeburn (CEK2), and landing at Whitehorse (CYXY).

As the Bird Dogs approached Carmacks, the point where we would no longer follow the Yukon River, they were the lead flight about 10 to 15 miles ahead of the Foxes. About the time it became obvious that the Foxes were not going to be able to close on the Bird Dogs, Fox #2 came on the radio saying "I got to pee, so let's make a pit stop at Carmacks." I had just overflowed Carmacks and Bird Dog #2 (Miguel) suggested we turn around and land. As we taxied to the FBO, Fox #2 (Robert) came back on the radio and said, "I no longer have to go, so let's proceed on"!!! This was an obvious tactic to play catch up. After thinking it over, they thought better of leaving us on the ground and landed. Otherwise, they would have missed our second encounter with an RCMP.

After landing and taxing up to the FBO, it became obvious that the airport was not manned. As

soon as I opened the door to the FBO the burglar alarm sounded, both inside the building and from a nearby power pole. We all stood there knowing there was nothing we could do to shut down the alarm. It continued for about five minutes before shutting itself down. Just about that time, we could see a police vehicle approaching the airport with lights flashing. It turned out to be an RCMP female Constable who pretty much figured out what the situation was. After we apologized for the trouble we caused her, we inquired about where we could find a place to eat. It turns out that the local town was several miles down the road and there was no taxi service available.

This is where Fox #1 (Chuck) usually steps in. He could charm a bird right out of a tree, honey flows freely right from his mouth, especially when talking to females. We often capitalized on that. Within two minutes we had a ride to town in a police vehicle. After lunch we had a similar problem, no transportation back to the airport. I didn't think setting off another alarm was the smart thing to do, so we sent Fox #1 out on the hunt. In five minutes we had a pickup truck ready to take us back to the airport.

The remaining portion of the flight to Whitehorse was uneventful with wheels down at 3:30 PM. Immediately after refueling, our planned last leg to Watson Lake would take us along the Alaska Highway via Telsen (CYZW). On arrival at Watson Lake, the man running the fuel pumps convinced us to stay at the Hardwen's Airport B&B which happens to be run by his wife. Our other choices were to stay at the camp ground, as we did on the trip up, or get a cab into town and stay at a motel. Mr. Hardwen drove us into town in his van so that we could bring back some beer and pizza for our dinner.

DAY 21 (JUNE 20) - DAWSON CREEK, BC

After an early breakfast at the B&B, we walked back to the airport where our aircraft were tied down and taxied back to the FBO to check weather and file a flight plan. An early departure was

not going to happen. Miguel detected fuel dripping from the trailing edge of his left wing, aft of the fuel tank.

This had to be fixed now. Lucky for us the Watson Lake airport had a very large World War II military hangar, which has been converted to civilian use for maintenance and hangar space. We folded the left wing at the maintenance hangar and discovered the fuel was leaking at the fuel sight gauge. With the aid of some borrowed tools, fuel cans, and a ladder from the locals, we decided to remove the sight gauge and plug the holes in the tank. Replacement parts for the fuel gauge were not available.

We were finally off the ground at 10:50 AM headed for Fort Nelson, BC (CYYE). Our route would take us via Liard River (now abandoned), Muncho Lake Sea Plane Base, and Toad River (CBK7). We would once again have to traverse the three mountain passes that are sometimes impassible for aircraft flying the Alaska Highway. The first one we would encounter is not named on the charts. The second is located at Summit Lake near Stone Mountain, and finally the infamous Steamboat Pass.

The Highway basically follows the Liard River eastward until it reaches the Town of Liard River. From there the Highway turns southeast toward the seven mile long Muncho Lake, one of the most beautiful lakes in the Canadian Rockies. The Highway hugs the eastern shoreline, in places cut into the sides of cliffs over 300 foot deep water.

The flight through the three passes weather wise, although not ideal, was far better than that which we experienced on our flight north up the Highway on Day #11. The visibility was excellent, but the turbulence and strong headwinds took a lot of the joy out of the flight. In an effort to seek more favorable winds through the first two passes, we decided to climb out over the tops of the mountains. Although this did help reduce the effects of turbulence, the view was more spectacular at the higher elevations. On our flight north we flew low

in the passes over the Highway looking up at the towering snowcapped mountain peaks. Sometimes it felt like we were flying through a long tunnel. Now we were looking down on the same passes from a completely different perspective. The entire mountain range was now visible in all directions. By the time we approached Steamboat Pass we were back flying low over the Highway and the weather was more favorable.

On landing at Fort Nelson we taxied up to the Shell FBO for fuel and were greeted by the same friendly crew we met on our flight up. They called over to the nearby sandwich shop to keep the doors open until we arrived for a bit to eat. Just prior to our departure the FBO operator gave us all "Skynorth AV Fuels" baseball hats with "Fort Nelson CYYE" embroidered on the back. These were high quality hats.

Our flight from Fort Nelson along the Alaska Highway would be nonstop to Dawson Creek (CYDQ) where we planned to spend the night. This route would take us via Profit River (abandoned), Sikanni Chief (abandoned), and Fort St. John (CYXJ). The airports designated "abandoned" on the charts were originally part of the chain of airstrips developed in 1942 all along the overland route to Alaska (then called the Alcan Highway). These are gravel strips that are 4,000 to 6,000 feet long by 150 to 200 feet wide. Although they are unmanned and listed as use-at-your-own-risk emergency strips, they are still quite usable and are excellent for camping and picnicking.

The weather along this leg was just great and the winds had subsided. As usual on the longer legs, the Bird Dog flight group was way ahead of the slower Foxes. They were at their usual gamesmanship of trying to play catch-up. On landing at Dawson Creek we immediately fueled up and gave our friend Gerry Randall a call to let him know we were back in town. Gary soon drove up in his van and we were off to register at the Lodge Motor Inn, followed by a good steak dinner at Mike's Restaurant.

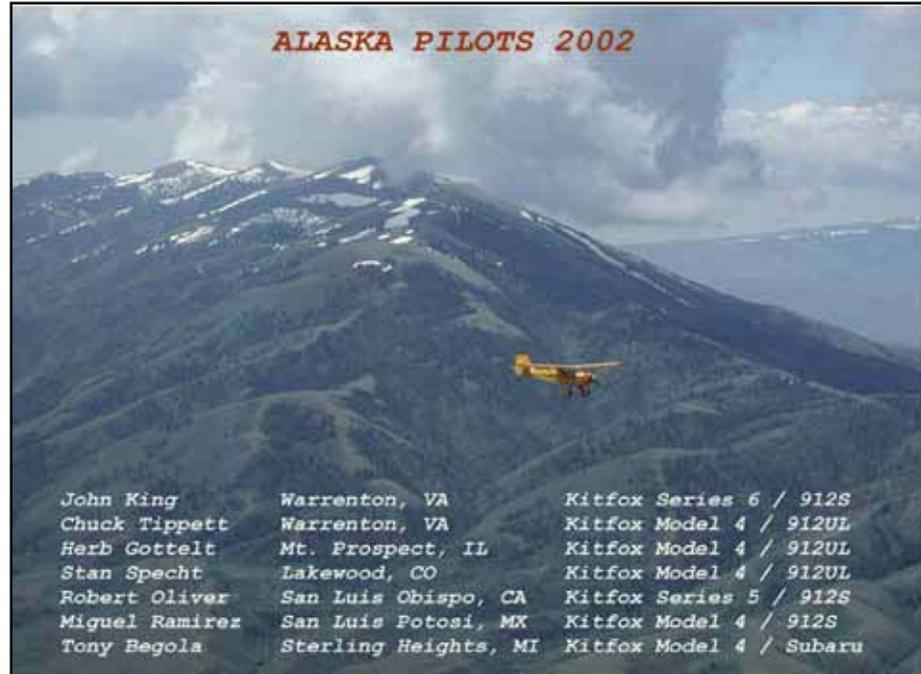
DAY 22 (JUNE 21) - CUT BANK, MT

As usual, Gerry was right on time to take us to breakfast and back to the airport. Our plan for the day was to make it all the way across the U.S. Border by days end. Robert (Fox #2) decided that this was a good point for him to depart the group and start his solo journey back home to San Luis Obispo, California. One of the benefits of saying goodbye to your fellow pilots is that you can talk to them on the radio long after seeing them depart. We chatted back and forth with Robert for about a half hour. Robert made it back to California without any mishaps and great cooperation from the weather. He spent the night in Wenatchee Washington (EAT) and made it home the next evening about 7:00 pm.

For the rest of us, we planned our next leg along the Highway through Grand Prairie (CYQU), Valleyview (CEL5), Fox Creek (CED4), Whitecourt (CYZU), Edmonton Villeneuve (CZVL), and then Red Deer (CYFQ). The visibility started to deteriorate somewhat as we approached the Edmonton airspace. Edmonton Approach vectored us west of Edmonton and in the process instructed us to squawk a designated transponder code. Under these circumstances all other aircraft in the flight group except the lead aircraft should place their transponders in standby. We were warned several times by Edmonton Approach to place all other transponders in standby, because they were receiving more than one reply. It took some time before we realized that Herb could not place his transponder in standby without affecting his radio. Anyway he finally turned it off and Edmonton was happy.

While in the pattern at Red Deer you could see many aircraft parked in front of the FBO, far more than you would normally expect to see. We also heard on the radio someone ask about the COPA fly-in. That was our first clue that we were about to be guests at the Canadian Owners and Pilots Association (COPA) Annual Fly-In at Red Deer Regional Airport (CYQF) in Alberta, Canada. COPA happens to be the Canadian equivalent of the AOPA in the USA. We taxied up to the tarmac next to where most of the other aircraft were parked and called for the fuel truck.

While being fueled several of the pilots attending the convention came out to look over our flying machines, apparently thinking we were mem-



The adventurous pilots who comprised our international team of travelers.

bers of COPA. Finding out most of us were really members of AOPA, they invited us to be their guests and look over the exhibits. They gave us pins and decals commemorating the COPA convention and the Red Deer Flying Club. Although our initial intentions were to just get fuel at Red Deer, we stayed for a couple of hours to take in the festivities and have a little lunch.

Our next task was to file a flight plan for the next leg which required notification that we would be entering U.S. airspace and landing at Cut Bank, Montana (CTB). Chuck spent a lot of time on the phone with U.S. Customs, passing along the vast amount of required information for five aircraft to enter the United States. This leg would take us over Calgary (CYYC), High River (CEN4), Leithbridge (CYQL), the U.S. Border, and finally landing for Customs in Cut Bank, Montana (CTB).

After overflying Leithbridge, following the 151 degree radial to Cut Bank, Montana, we were just 40 nm north of the U.S. border. Current U.S. Customs regulations following the 9/11 terrorist attack, required us to radio ahead our intentions to cross the U.S. border on a specified frequency. All attempts to contact anyone on that frequency were fruitless, so we proceeded ahead anyway. Since we were a flight of five aircraft crossing the U.S. border, I was expecting to see a couple of F-16's fly up alongside, but that never happened. After all, we did file a flight plan notifying Customs of our intended arrival.

Cut Bank (CTB) is a relatively small airport out in the middle of the flat plains of nowhere Montana with two 5,300 foot cross runways. Nothing to stop the winds except maybe a barbed wire fence or two. Two customs agents were standing by as the five aircraft approached the FBO. After identifying the Aircraft ID plates, we were all invited inside to answer a lot of questions and fill out lots of paper work. One of the agents stated that they never had five aircraft land at one time from outside the country.

By the time we cleared Customs and refueled the aircraft, it was well past 8:00 PM and we were ready to end our long day. We borrowed the airport car, drove into town to eat dinner, and registered for the night at the Glacier Gateway Inn. There was one problem. Only one room was available with two beds and a cot. Stan volunteered to spend the night on a sofa at the airport, since he wanted to rise at dawn and start his solo journey home

on his last leg to Lakewood, Colorado. Herb and Chuck shared a bed, Miguel took the cot, and I had the other bed all to myself. One of the few rewards for being the trip organizer/planner.

DAY 23 (JUNE 22) - LAUREL, MT

On our arrival at the Cut Bank Airport it was obvious that Stan had left early as planned. With good weather he could make it all the way home to Colorado that evening. Our flight plan was to fly southeast over Great Falls, MT (GTF), Lewistown, MT (LWT), Billings, MT (BIL), Sheridan, WY (SHR), Gillette, WY (GCC), and then due east as far as Rapid City, SD (RAP). The first part of this route would take us on a course paralleling the east side of the Rockies and then due east following Interstate 90 at Rapid City.

The weather was not going to cooperate this time. After passing west of Lewiston, MT and on our approach to Billings, the wind picked up and the weather started to deteriorate. Reports indicated strong winds and a possibility of hail in the area, so we decided to set down at the nearest airport and wait out any possible storm. The charts showed a small airport at Laurel, MT (6S8) with two cross runways just 10 nm southwest of Billings. After landing and refueling, the fuel man advised us to park our aircraft under the nearby "Hail Hangars". These open sided hangars were primarily constructed to protect aircraft from the damaging effects of hail, not necessarily from wind or blowing rain. However, they were greatly appreciated, since all of our aircraft were fabric covered and could easily become unflightworthy in a heavy hail storm.

Even though we never experienced any hail, periodic weather reports indicated that the weather was not going to clear for several hours. Although we had only flown for 2.8 hours this day, it became obvious that we were here for the night. We borrowed the airport courtesy car, drove into town for dinner, and checked into the Travelers Motel. The owner of the motel recognized the airport car we were driving, since he was also the owner of

the FBO that loaned us the car. I love these small towns where everybody's connected, lots of nice things happen. We received word via cell phone that Stan made it safely home.

DAY 24 (JUNE 23) - IOWA CITY, IA

Arriving at the airport, we turned in the car and checked the weather with Flight Service. Since yesterday's flight was relatively a short one, we would have to put in two long days of good weather flying if Chuck and I were going to make it to Virginia in just two more days. Today's flight would take us due east over Interstate 90 to Mitchell, SD (MHE), then southeast to Gurney, SD (YKN), Sioux City, IO (SUX), Harlan, IO (HNR), and then due east to Des Moines, IO (DSM) paralleling Interstate 80 and on to Iowa City, IO, (IOW).

About 100 nm out of Laurel, Montana, Miguel departed the group and flew south all alone for Colorado Springs, then on his final leg home to San Luis Potosi, Mexico. It gets really depressing to see your flying buddies of the past few weeks separate from the group one by one. We would soon be saying goodbye to Herb on our approach to Chicago. Then it would be just Chuck and I headed for Virginia.

The intermediate stops for fuel were at Rapid City, SD (RAP) and Gurney, SD (YKN). As usual, flying in the morning hours was far better with smooth air, whereas turbulence would build up in the afternoon as the sun warmed up the surrounding landscape. The combination of long hours in turbulent air and the lack of continuous radio chatter when there were six to seven aircraft in the group made it very difficult to stay alert or even awake. With the constant low level roar of the engine, it becomes very scary at times to find yourself nodding off for a few seconds. The only way to stay alert is to keep yourself physically and mentally active. That takes a bit of creativity when flying an airplane in a straight line at a fixed altitude.

After passing Gillette, SD (GCC), Chuck noticed on the charts that we would be passing close by

the Mt. Rushmore National Park which was only 20 nm southwest of Rapid City. He wanted to get some close up pictures of the four U.S. Presidents. The monument is located right in the middle of the Black Elk Wilderness Area so we did not fly too low in front of the monument. We circled once, took our pictures and then departed for the Rapid City Airport for fuel.

Once at Harlin, Iowa (HNR) we were flying due east, parallel to Interstate 80 once again. That is the same highway we took on Day #2 flying west from Chicago to Wyoming. The remaining part of our flight took us over Des Moines, Iowa (DSM) and then on to Iowa City, Iowa, (IOW) where we planned to spend the night. With wheels down at 7:35 PM, we borrowed the airport courtesy car, drove into town for dinner and checked into the Sheraton Hotel. For some strange reason all of the motels were booked for the night. Our total time in the air that day was a long 10.4 hours.

DAY 25 (JUNE 24) - WARRENTON, VA

An early morning call to Flight Service confirmed that, weather wise, we should be able to make all the way home to Virginia by early evening. By 7:48 AM we were wheels up headed to Davenport, IO (DVN), Joliet, IL (JOT), Ft. Wayne, IA (FWA), and finally Lima, OH (AOH) for fuel. As we approached Davenport, Herb (Fox #3) turned northeast and headed for home at Mt. Prospect, Illinois, leaving Chuck and me to carry on as a flight of two.

Once we overflew Joliet, IL the rest of our flight home to Virginia would be relatively boring. Every year for the past eight years I have flown this route traveling to the EAA Fly-in at Oshkosh. The constant changing of the ground topology and magnificent scenery of the past 24 days was now gone. Now all we wanted to do was get home.

On landing at Lima, Ohio for fuel we did have a little bit of excitement. Lima is just a small county airport, but we noticed a small twin business jet parked in front of the FBO. When one of the pi-

lots of the jet came over to look at our Kitfoxes, we found out that it belonged to Senator Dole and he and his wife were due there within the hour. I really would have loved to meet the Senator and his wife, but we had a long flight ahead of us. Sometime later when we were back in the air and approaching the Ohio River, one of the pilots of the Senators jet overheard Chuck and I talking and chatted with us for a brief period.

The heavy haze in the afternoon, especially over the Allegheny and Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia, limited our visibility. That was something we were not used to seeing in Canada and Alaska, except when we entered areas where smoke due to forest fires created a haze effect limiting visibility. Landing at Warrenton at about 5:00 PM was a nonevent, but it felt good to roll the airplane in the hangar and forget about it for a couple of days. The last two days of the Alaska trip were the most tiring. Nothing exciting happened and we just wanted to get home. Now we can wind down.

FINAL TRIP NUMBERS

The following is a summary of the statistical data for the entire Alaska trip. These numbers are solely related to my aircraft and my point of departure; Warrenton, Virginia (W66).

Trip Duration = 24 Days

Total Mileage Traveled = 10,230.4 Statute (8,896 Nautical)

Total Flying Time (Hobbs) = 118.5 Hours

Total Airports Landed = 50

Different Airports Landed = 43

Fuel Consumed = 507 U.S. Gallons

Fuel Burn Rate (Rotax 912 ULS) = 4.27 Gal/Hr

Total Fuel Cost = \$1,358.52 (USD)

Average Cost of Fuel = \$2.72 per Gal (USD)

Highest Cost of Fuel (Umiat, AK) = \$5.25 (USD)

Total Lodging Costs = \$679.59 (USD)(most times 2 to 3 to a room)

Total Number of Charts = 19 Sectionals

Sharing a room or tent sure saves money and effort, but one soon finds out who snores the most. Everyone I slept near or with did. The trip miles traveled is on the low side since we did not fly point to point, as the numbers indicate. We usually followed the roads (IFR). However, since the "Foxes" (2nd Flight Group) often took short cuts to keep up with the "Bird Dogs" (lead flight group), the indicated miles traveled will be more realistic for them.

ABOUT FLIGHT PLANNING

Even though we flew in two flight groups, we always filed a VFR flight plan as a single flight group. That was acceptable to Flight Service provided we all stayed relatively close together and arrived at the same airport within a few minutes of each other. When the first flight group arrived at the destination airport, the tower or Flight Service wanted to know where the last group was and wanted to know their tail numbers. In Canada and Alaska the tower or airport advisory would automatically close your flight plan for you on landing. Although we usually followed the roads and rivers (when a road was not available), we always had our GPS tuned to the next waypoint or destination airport. That way the two flight groups could give relative position data (DME) to the next waypoint.

Another thing that worked well was to talk to all the airports enroute. In the event you go down somewhere, or fail to close your flight plan, they will know where you were last. That helped out once when we landed short of our destination due to encountering bad weather and did not timely close the flight plan. The RCMP's in Canada knew just where to look for us.