

Virginia Aviation History Project



Kit Foxes to Alaska Text and Photos by John King

This is the story of seven pilots who built their own experimental aircraft and flew as a group over 10,000 miles to the most northern point of land in the United States, namely Point Barrow, Alaska.

The morning of May 31, 2002 was the start of the second Alaska Adventure for a flight of seven Kitfox Experimental aircraft. Exactly four years prior, eight experimental Kitfox's departed for Alaska with a goal of flying to and landing above the Arctic Circle. That goal was reached after landing at a gravel airstrip at Bettles, Alaska. The Kitfox group of 2002 set a higher goal, that of flying to and landing at Point Barrow, Alaska, located on a peninsula which jets out into the Arctic Ocean. We knew very well that the weather would be a significant factor in achieving the Barrow goal.

As in the case of the 1998 flight, the pilots joining the 2002 group were all subscribers to the Kitfox E-Mail List on the Internet. The Kitfox List, consisting of 300 to 400 subscribers, includes builders, pilots, or wanna-bees of homebuilt aircraft similar to the Kitfox. The announcement of the trip was in mid-2000, providing a two year window for preparation.

Since our pilots hailed from all parts of the Lower 48 and one from Mexico, and our route to Alaska was through Western Canada via the Alaska Highway, a group departure point of Caldwell, Idaho was chosen. First, it was conveniently located in

the west and just south of our entry point into Canada. Second, Caldwell was the home of SkyStar Aircraft, manufacturer of the kits for the Kitfox; our "Mother Ship", so to speak. In addition, it was a perfect place for us to perform last minute maintenance on our aircraft just before the long flight to the North. All parts required for maintenance were free of shipping costs. Our planned target date for the start of the group departure from Caldwell, Idaho was June 5th.

DAY 1 (MAY 31, 2002) – POPLAR GROVE, ILLINOIS

For two years I had been busy building my second Kitfox primarily for this trip. I chose the larger Series 6 Kitfox driven by a Rotax 912 ULS (100 hp) for the sole purpose of its increased payload. The month of May was totally dedicated to flying off the 40 hour airworthiness test phase required by the FAA. On the morning of our departure from Warrenton, VA (W66), N993JK was running well with 46.7 hours on the Hobbs.

On this year's trip I would not have to fly alone out of Warrenton. Chuck Tippett, a local pilot who had long dreamed to venture north to Alaska in his own flying machine, purchased my Model IV Kitfox (N193JK) and joined the group. An interesting aspect of this trip, as we would later find out, was the reaction we often received from airport controllers. The close similarity of the two aircraft designators

made it impossible for them to use the abbreviated form of “3JK” when referring to either aircraft on the radio. They had to spell out the entire identifier and sometimes got them mixed up.

Our departure out of Warrenton took us directly over the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia via Morgantown (MGW), then direct over the Ohio River to our first fuel stop at Marion, Ohio (MNN). We had also prearranged to meet Tony Begola at Marion. Tony was our third Alaska pilot who hailed from Sterling Heights, Michigan. He was flying a Model IV Kitfox powered by an NSI Subaru 100 hp engine. Our final goal for the day’s flight was to fly nonstop and arrive at Poplar Grove, Illinois (C77) to meet our fourth pilot. However, our first encounter with bad weather forced us to make an unscheduled landing at Huntington, Indiana (HHG) to check on what looked like deteriorating weather conditions to the west. After a two hour delay we were once again on our way as a flight of three to Poplar Grove.

For air to air communications purposes we always used the VHF common chat frequency 123.45 MHz, often referred to as “Hands”. This allowed us to chat back and forth without interfering with the established frequencies reserved for official aircraft business. In addition, we assigned code names to each pilot, such as “Bird Dog #1”, “Bird Dog #2”, etc. Somewhere south of Chicago I heard a familiar voice on the radio asking if we were the Alaska bound pilots. It was Tom Anderson of Arlington Heights, Illinois flying his Series 5 Kitfox from Poplar Grove. Tom was one of the eight pilots who flew to Alaska with me in 1998. He wanted desperately to be part of our group again, but work demands prevented him from taking off a four week period. The best he could do was to fly out and meet us for our last leg into Poplar Grove.

The sun was setting low on the horizon to the west as the four Kitfox’s entered the approach to Poplar Grove airport with Tom in the lead. Tom’s choice of runway, a straight in approach to 30, soon exposed the hazards of flying into a bright setting sun. The glare off the windshield obliterated all instrument

readings on the instrument panel to the point they were no longer readable. Not only was the runway ahead barely visible, the aircraft in front of you could not be easily located. A lone aircraft landing in those conditions would be tough enough, but a flight of four can be real unhealthy. Once on the ground I asked myself, why didn’t I go around and land on Runway 12, in spite of the wind.

Tom was a gracious host. He drove us into Arlington Heights for a good night’s sleep at his home. We spent the evening chatting with his wife Jan, and his daughter Stacey, who just happens to be a commercial pilot for Skyway Airlines, a feeder for Midwest Express.

DAY 2 (JUNE 1) - NORTH PLATTE, NEBRASKA

On arrival at the airport the next morning, we were greeted by Herb Gottelt and his family. Herb was the fourth Alaska pilot to join the group and was piloting a Model IV-1200 Kitfox powered by an 80 horsepower Rotax 912 UL. Just prior to our departure, Tom Anderson decided to join us, as a temporary “Bird Dog”, for a brief period in his Series 5 Turbo Fired Kitfox.

Ever since we departed Marion, Ohio, we always had problems communicating on the radio with Tony. He could hear us on his hand held radio, but we could hardly understand him due to high background noise. On our departure from Poplar Grove Tony, for unknown reasons, was not on the same GPS track as the rest of the group and our attempts to contact him were unsuccessful. He soon disappeared from view. Our only recourse was to land at the next available enroute airport and attempt to contact him on his cell phone. This was assuming that he would do the same. We immediately selected Clinton, Iowa (CWI) and landed, but our attempts to raise him failed. From our perspective Tony was lost. Our only hope was that he could play catch up, since he knew our planned route of travel.

Pella, Iowa was our next stop for two good reasons. It had very reasonable fuel rates and I stopped there

on my 1998 Alaska trip for an excellent Dutch meal in town. As before, the FBO was furnished and decorated just like a Colonial style family home. We were provided with an airport courtesy car and directions to a lovely Dutch restaurant. Our next stop was North Platte, Nebraska (LBF) where we decided to spend the night. That evening we were able to reach Tony on his cell phone and got some bad news. Shortly after departing Poplar Grove and separating from the group, he ground looped on the next landing and damaged his propeller. Getting a replacement prop would put him at least three days behind the group. Nonetheless, Tony was bound and determined to rejoin us somewhere along our route to Alaska.

DAY 3 (JUNE 2) - RAWLINS, WYOMING

On landing at North Platte, Nebraska, we fueled up as usual and borrowed the airport courtesy car for a ride into town for a meal and a good night's sleep. This would be our usual routine, except for nights when we would camp out under the wing. There would later be instances when a courtesy car was not available and we would bum a ride into town for a meal or lodging. As it would later turn out,



Day 3 - John King and Herb Gottelt soar over Nebraska in their Kit Fox aircraft.

there was never a time when we had to hail a cab for a ride. There always seemed to be friendly people around to help out when the need did arise.

The non-towered airport at North Platte had three runways, which turned out to be confusing to navigate during taxi for takeoff. On departure we discovered that we unknowingly took off on a taxi way. No big deal since there was no traffic or a tower operator to scold us.

Our plans were to follow the Interstate 80 west past Cheyenne to Laramie, Wyoming and pick up our fifth pilot Stan Specht from Lakewood, Colorado. While in route to Laramie, Bird Dog #2 announced that his generator warning light had just come on and was probably running on the battery. As Searle Airport (OGA) near Ogallala, Nebraska came into view, we decided to land and checkout the problem. Luck was on our side, as it turned out to be a disconnected wire on the regulator/rectifier terminal. After securing the wire to the connector the three Bird Dogs were once more back in the air and headed for Laramie.

The airport at Laramie (LAR) has two runways at a field elevation of 7,278 feet, the longest of which is 7700 feet. Factoring in the density altitude, high winds, and our near gross weight load factor, put our landing skills to a real test, with power on all the way. As it later turned out, this would be the highest field elevation airport for the entire trip.

Stan Specht was already on the ground awaiting our arrival. He was flying a Model IV-1200 Kitfox Speedster powered by an 80 horsepower Rotax 912 UL. After refueling and a check on the weather with Flight Service, we taxied for takeoff as a flight of four. Takeoff at Laramie was also a new experience with a full payload, including fuel, causing us to consume significantly more of the runway than we were used to. Climb out was very sluggish for a Kitfox that is used to jumping right off the runway at over 1000 feet per minute.

Being it was already 1:00 PM, our plan was to spend the night somewhere in Idaho by day's end.

This would take us through Rawlins (RWL), Rock Springs (RKS), Fort Bridger (FBR), and Ogden, Utah (OGD). After over flying Rawlins by 30 nm we began to notice convective activity ahead of us and radioed Flight Watch for an advisory. Rock Springs was reporting winds at 46 kts/gusting to wind squall. "Gusting To Wind Squall" was a term we had never heard used by Flight Watch. Herb also reported that he saw a bolt of lightning. That was it, lightning and winds gusting to squall was all it took to trigger an immediate 180 for a return to Rawlins.

Landing at Rawlins was another thrill with winds at 19 kts/gusting to 31 kts. After taxiing to the FBO they allowed us to park our aircraft inside the large hangar, since hail was expected. The hail never arrived, but the wind increased, developing into a dust storm that reduced the visibility to a half mile. It was obvious we were here for the night, so we borrowed the airport courtesy car and headed for town.

DAY 4 (JUNE 3) - CALDWELL, IDAHO

After an early departure from Rawlins we followed Interstate 80 west through the Wasat Mountain Range to Ogden. The view through the snow covered mountain pass was spectacular; however, I did notice that the amount of snow cover was noticeably less than what we experienced during the 1998 trip. While everyone was busy flying their aircraft for optimum photo positioning, we soon lost sight of each other. Once over Ogden it became obvious we had to land and regroup before proceeding any further. Brigham City (BNC) just north of Ogden was our first opportunity, so we landed to regroup and fuel up for our last leg to Caldwell, Idaho.

Our planned flight to Caldwell (EUL) would take us through Burley (BYI), Glen Ferry (U89), Mountain Home (MUO), and just south of the Boise (BOI) air space. This leg would have been very uneventful, except that somewhere

between Mountain Home and Glen Ferry we heard a familiar voice on the radio asking us for our location. It turned out to be John McBean of SkyStar Aircraft wanting to lead us into Cardwell in the factory built new Series 7 Kitfox driven by a turbo powered Rotax 914 engine. Now we were a flight of five.

Upon landing at Caldwell we immediately taxied to the SkyStar Factory Hangar at the southeast end of the runway and were greeted by Ed Downs the President & CEO of SkyStar Aircraft, as well as several other SkyStar employees. Miguel Ramirez of San Luis Potosi, Mexico, the sixth pilot to join the Alaska group had already arrived at Caldwell the day before. Miguel was flying a Model IV-1200 Kitfox powered by a Rotax 912 ULS (100 hp) engine. Shortly after our arrival, Robert Oliver from San Luis Obispo, California arrived in his Series 5 Kitfox powered by a Rotax 912 ULS (100 hp) engine. Robert's Kitfox was the only tri-gear Kitfox of the group; you know the type with training wheels.

After meeting everyone, we were provided with a SkyStar van for our use and drove into town for a beer, a great steak dinner, and rooms for two nights.

DAY 5 (JUNE 4) - AT CALDWELL, IDAHO



Day 5 - The intrepid fliers pose in front of their aircraft at the SkyStar Factory Hangar in Caldwell, Idaho

This day would be dedicated to just two planned ac-

tivities. First, completing all required routine aircraft maintenance. Second, attending the two hour Alaska pilot briefing session to understand how the trip would be conducted and all of the operating and emergency procedures we should adhere to. This was the first opportunity all of the pilots had to sit down together in one place and plan out the entire trip activities.

The routine maintenance to the aircraft consisted mainly of changing oil and cleaning spark plugs. I detected a cracked bracket on my oil cooler bracket and had it welded by SkyStar. Herb upgraded his tail wheel spring to the new configuration. He gave his old tail spring to Chuck, which we later found out would come in very handy. Dave Morris of SkyStar was busy digging up all the parts and supplies we needed.

The Alaska pilots briefing was conducted in SkyStar's conference room. The agenda for the meeting covered the following: (1) establishing flight groups, (2) assigning call names, (3) chat frequencies, (4) weather reporting, (5) filing of flight plans, (6) emergency procedures, (7) operating procedures, and (8) route of travel from Caldwell to Canada.

Since there was a significant difference between the indicated cruise speeds of the individual aircraft in the group (80 to 110 mph), it became evident that we had to break up into two flight groups. Each flight group was given a call name as follows:

Bird Dog #1	John King	Warrenton, VA
N993JK		
Bird Dog #2	Miguel Ramirez	San Luis Potosi, Mexico
XB-GYD		
Bird Dog #3	Herb Gottelt	Mt. Prospect, IL
N94HG		
Fox #1	Chuck Tippet	Warrenton, VA
N193JK		
Fox #2	Robert Oliver	San Luis Obispo, CA
N151RF		
Fox #3	Stan Specht	Lakewood, CO
N16KC		

Fox #4	Tony Begola	Sterling Heights, MI
N108TT		

As a rule, the fastest group (Bird Dogs) departed first, then the Foxes. There were times later in the trip where Herb (Bird Dog #3) flew as a Fox. Continued aircraft maintenance followed the Pilots Meeting. SkyStar provided several fuel containers so we could obtain auto fuel in town using the SkyStar van. Although our engines could burn 100LL aviation fuel, they ran better on no-lead 92 octane auto fuel.

DAY 6 (JUNE 5) - SWEETGRASS, MONTANA

We departed Caldwell Airport at 7:05 AM as a flight of six Kitfoxes. Given that Caldwell lies in a basin near Boise, surrounded by the Rocky Mountains, we had to choose a flight plan that would allow us to exit the Rockies prior to entering Canada. Our goal was to make it to the Canadian border prior to the day's end. Our route took us around Boise (BOI) through Glenn Ferry (U89), American Falls (UO1), and landing at Blackfoot (U02) for fuel prior to entering Monida Pass. Monida Pass is at the Continental Divide where Idaho borders Montana. During the 1998 trip IFR conditions at the pass kept us on the ground for a full day at Rexburg, Idaho. It was wise to be at full fuel prior to entering those mountains.

During our approach to Blackfoot we were advised by radio that the airport was closing for repairs. With a little begging we were allowed to land, refuel and immediately depart. The runway repaving crew moved aside as we readied for takeoff and gave a friendly wave. The sight of two red, two white, and two yellow Kitfoxes taxiing together to the runway and taking off one after the other always drew the attention of all those in the area. Airports seldom see flights of six or seven aircraft land and takeoff together.

After departure, our planned route took us to Dillon, MT (DLN), and past Three Forks (9S5), Helena, MT (HLN), Conrad, MT (S01), with a landing at Shelby, MT (SBX) for fuel and a call to Canadian



Customs. Once we entered the Monida Pass the flight through the mountainous terrain all the way to Helena was similar to that of parts of the Alaska Highway, in that there were few if any safe places to land, except for the highway below. We filed a flight plan at Shelby announcing our intentions to cross the Canadian border at Ross International (7S8) in Sweetgrass, MT. We soon found out that filing the flight plan to cross into Canada was not going to be easy for a flight of six aircraft. In addition to the usual required information, they wanted to know all the airports we landed at getting here, where we were going, and what airports we plan to stop at enroute. They had to hear this from every pilot even though we were all under the same flight plan. Nothing was taken for granted. We would soon learn that there was more to befall us on this subject.

The grass runway at Sweetgrass is right on and parallel to the U.S./Canadian border. One half of the runway is on the U.S. side and the other is on the Canadian side. The airport, depending on which side of the border you reside, is called "Ross International" or "Coutts" from the Canadian perspective. In this instance, the term "International Airport" is a really BIG STRETCH.

After landing in very strong winds down the runway, we were met first by two U.S. Customs agents and later by three Canadian Customs agents. All arrived in Official Customs vehicles, since there were no buildings or facilities at the airport. I noticed the Canadians were all wearing flack vests. Since we were entering Canada, the U.S. Customs just introduced themselves and stuck around until the Canadian Customs arrived. At this point we realized the fallout of the 9/11 terrorists attack would have a significant impact on our processing across the border. Having guns on board, as three of our aircraft did, was not going to make it any easier. Following lots of questions and 1 ½ hours of paper work delays, the wind picked up and shifted crosswind, so much so, we decided to spend the night. The Canadian Customs wanted us to depart so they could see us take off. When we indicated that we would prefer to depart early in the morning, they

told us to pitch our tents only on the Canadian side of the runway. Pitching tents was a real chore in the prevailing wind. At times it was so bad the tent poles would collapse as the tent sides caught the wind. Only the lower profile tents could withstand the winds. We finally had to tie some of the tent poles to our aircraft wing struts.

After clearing Canadian Customs they told us not to wander off on to the U.S. side of the runway. Otherwise we would have to go through U.S. Customs. Being that the grass strip runway was only 2900 x 80 feet, it seemed a bit ridiculous, since there was no white line down the center. There were a few small residential homes along the U.S. side of the runway, but none close by on the Canadian side. Since there were no taxies, it was a long walk to the restaurant in Coutts. During the night light rain could be heard on the tent sides.

DAY 7 (JUNE 6) - YOUNGSTOWN, ALBERTA, CANADA

The winds had calmed down by morning, so we were all airborne by 7:00 AM, without breakfast. Today's flight would be a relatively short one, less than three hours actually. Our prearranged destination was a private airstrip at Youngstown, Alberta on a 15,000 acre cattle ranch about half way between Hanna and Oyen, along Highway 9, 30 miles due east of Calgary.

We were invited there by Ernie Kiss whom I had met during the 1998 Alaska trip at Fort Nelson, BC. He offered to provide us a BBQ made from good Alberta beef, accommodations, hangar space, auto fuel, any required maintenance, or whatever we needed.

While enroute to Youngstown we encountered convective activity, mostly rain, but decided to land at the nearest airport to check out the weather ahead. The Vauxhall airstrip (CEN6) was right along our route on a highway far from any towns. The winds were quite strong, but right down the runway. On landing we noticed that the lone small building next to the runway appeared abandoned, surrounded by

tall grass with an abundance of prairie dog holes. The door was left unlocked, so we went inside and sat on the floor till the weather improved.

By the time the weather started to clear the wind picked up and shifted 90 degrees crosswind to the runway. We had two choices for a departure; take-off in a high crosswind, or use the 300 foot gravel taxiway that favored the wind. Nearby power lines were another obstacle to consider. We chose to try the taxiway, with the lighter aircraft departing first. The two heaviest Kitfoxes ate up every bit of the taxiway and just cleared the power lines.

As we approached the Youngstown airstrip, it soon became evident that a good part of the runway was covered with large pools of water from a heavy rain. The 4,000 foot runway was a mixture of sand, clay, and grass, half of which contained most of the water. After landing on the least wet portion we had to taxi through the mud and water to the hangar end. Wheel pants helped keep the wings clean. Fox #2 (with tri gear) landed on the narrow gravel driveway paralleling the runway.

We met Gordon Butler and his wife, owners of the Butler Cattle Company Ltd. Ernie runs the aircraft maintenance facilities of E.C. Air Ltd. located on the airstrip. The Butler's owned a very spacious, well furnished, beautiful log home at the far end of the runway. Gordon drove us to one of his private lakes so three of our fishermen could try their luck for trout. No trout for dinner that night. After dinner we parked our aircraft in the two hangars and laid out sleeping bags on the hangar floor. This was the first night we could finally pin point just who was doing all the snoring.

DAY 8 (JUNE 7) - EDMONTON, BRITISH COLUMBIA

At sunrise fingers were pointing in all directions, but no confessions. A terrific breakfast, consisting of bacon, sausage, eggs, pancakes, juice and coffee was prepared by the Butlers. Ernie saw to it that all of our aircraft were filled up with our preferred auto fuel.

As we prepared to depart we noticed that Ernie, Gordon, and the crew were gathering along the runway to get photos of us as we departed. So, once aloft, we decided to circle the field and do a low fly-by over the strip for their enjoyment.

Our flight plan for this day consisted of a 2.3 hour leg direct to Edmonton City Center Airport (CYXD). Several months prior to the trip I was contacted by Ms. Amy Cooke, the Coordinator for AirFest 2002 at Edmonton Alberta, Canada. She had heard of our planned trip on the Internet and asked if we would make plans to fly into the City Center Airport as part of their celebration during the month of June. Their theme at that time was "The Path To Peace", recognizing the time in early WW2 when the Americans flew military aircraft up the Alaska Highway into Russia.

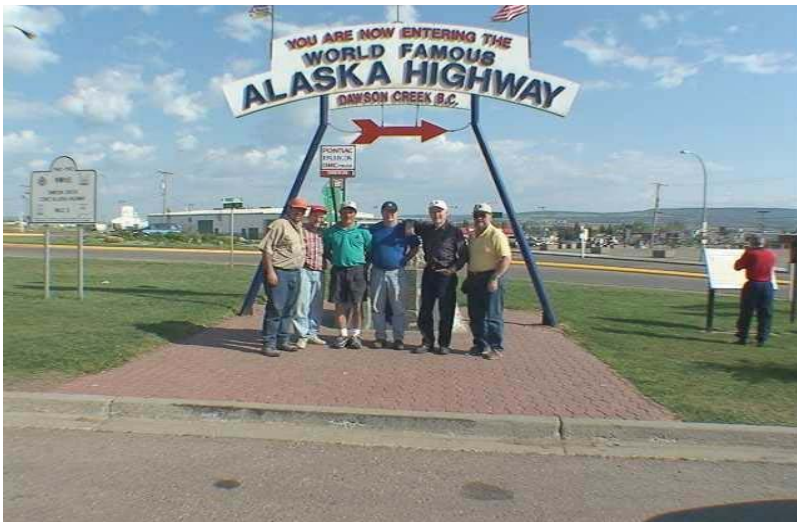
There are two large airports in Edmonton; the Edmonton International Airport well south of the city, and the City Center Airport, which happens to be located right in downtown Edmonton. Our approach to Edmonton was a real thrill, since we are not used to passing by and skimming over large city center structures on final approach. As we taxied to our tie down area right in front of the airport museum, we were greeted by a group of 12 to 15 people, as well as a TV video crew from CFRN TV.

Among those gathered to welcome us were members of the Edmonton Homebuilt Aircraft Association and the Canadian Recreational Aircraft Association (RAA). After a brief introduction we were all escorted to Chateau Louis Hotel, just adjacent to the airport, for both a complimentary lunch and rooms for the night (rooms that normally rent for \$219 a night). As it turned out these were the most lavish accommodations we would experience on the entire Alaska adventure. Following lunch, we were provided a personal guided tour of the airport museum which included restored vintage aircraft mostly from WW2. Since the aircraft restoration was an ongoing process, we had the opportunity to chat with the individuals actually doing the work.

Mr. Art Breier, manager of one of the very large air-

port hangars, made available the use of Hangar #11 to house all of our Kitfoxes that night. That evening we were once again treated to a complimentary dinner by the Chateau Louis Hotel management. We spent the rest of the evening in the hotel lounge watching a short news broadcast of our arrival at Edmonton on CFRN TV.

By days end we were all overwhelmed by the welcome we received at Edmonton City Center Airport, our complimentary stay at the Chateau Louis Hotel, the tour of the Airport Museum, and all of the friendly people who escorted and entertained us throughout the day.



Day 9 - Posing for the requisite tourist picture in front of Mile Post Zero of the Alaska Highway in Dawson Creek, British Columbia.

DAY 9 (JUNE 8) - DAWSON CREEK, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Art Breier was already at the airport when we arrived this morning to roll out our flying machines from Hangar #11. It was a relief from not having to remove tiedowns, cabin covers, and store all the equipment prior to departure. Our plan for this days flying was to at least make Dawson Creek (CYDQ) with one fuel stop along the way. We made a point to land at Dawson Creek for two reasons. First, that is where the Alaska Highway actually starts (Mile Post Zero), and like all tourists, we wanted our picture taken standing under

the Canadian flag at the famous mile post marker. Second, we had previously made plans to join up with three Canadian pilots from Ontario, Canada for the rest of the trip to Alaska. Two of the pilots (Phil Dennis & Ray Larsen) were flying in a Stinson 108-3 and the third pilot (Horst Peick) was flying a Cessna 172.

About two hours out of Edmonton the weather over the highway started to deteriorate with poor visibility and low ceilings, to the point we realized we could not make it to Grande Prairie, AB. Since we had just overflowed a small airstrip parallel to the highway, which was designated Fox Creek (CED4),

we decided to return there and wait out the weather. There were no facilities at the airstrip, except for a small storage building and the town was several miles down the highway.

After waiting an hour, we decided to try again for Grande Prairie. About 40 miles down the highway we once more encountered deteriorating weather forcing us to again return to Fox Creek. Once on the ground we noticed a police vehicle approaching the airport and headed in our direction. It turned out to be an RCMP Constable who was sent out to verify our tail numbers. It was then we realized that we had forgotten to notify Canadian Flight Service of our delay in route.

Our flight plan arrival time was overdue. Constable Doug Dewar was very courteous and helpful in notifying Flight Service of our location. He even offered to drive us into the town of Fox Creek for lunch and waited nearby to escort us back to the airstrip. It seems that even when we screwed up, the local authorities and townspeople in Canada bent over backwards to help us.

Our third attempt to make it to Grande Prairie (CYQU) was finally successful. After a quick fuel up we headed for Dawson Creek, BC (CYDQ) to join up with the three Canadian pilots. Soon after landing we were greeted by one of the local members of the Canadian Recreational Aircraft



Day 10 - The mountain passes between Fort Nelson and Watson Lake can be treacherous in bad weather, but quite beautiful when Mother Nature cooperates.

Association (RAA) named Gerry Randell. Gerry was not only a pilot himself, but he really enjoyed being around other pilots with lots of war stories. He seemed to laugh at almost everything we said. With gear in toe, we all jumped in his large van for a ride into town; first to a motel and then to a restaurant for dinner. The three Canadian pilots had already checked into the same motel.

DAY 10 (JUNE 9) - WATSON LAKE, YUKON

When we awoke in the morning there was Gerry, standing next to his van, ready to take us to breakfast and then to the airport. Our flight plan for the day consisted of following the Alaska Highway to Fort St. John (CYXJ), with a fuel stop at Fort Nelson (CYYE), and then on to Watson Lake (CYQH) for the night. This route would be taking us over a more mountainous terrain where you leave civilization behind as you cross into the Sparsely Settled Area (SSA). Here we would be flying under wilderness rules where one is required to bring along survival gear.

Between Fort St. John and Fort Nelson we were paralleling the Rockies basically heading north-northwest. The highway itself in this area never gets over 4000 feet, but the foot hills vary from 4

to 5 thousand feet. Our one and a half hour stay at Fort Nelson was dedicated to refueling and sandwiches for lunch.

Between Fort Nelson and Watson Lake the highway snakes its way through three mountain passes, any of which can be show stoppers when the weather does not cooperate. The first is the infamous Steamboat Pass, the second is located at Summit Lake near Stone Mountain, and the third has no name on the chart, but is located just a few miles south of Muncho Lake. Fortunately for us the weather cooperated and the scenery was magnificent. Once beyond the passes the highway follows the Laird River all the way into Watson Lake.

The airport at Watson Lake is located right on the north shore of a beautiful lake. Upon landing we immediately proceeded across the field to the campground facing the lakeshore, next to a large grove of trees. The campground itself has a very large wooden gazebo surrounded with numerous



Day 10 - The campground at Watson Lake

BBQ pits. The inside of the gazebo is lined with wood benches with a large wood cook stove in the center. The campground has an ample supply of firewood available, running water and outside toilet facilities. All one needs to bring along is a tent,

sleeping bag and food.

Herb, Miguel and Robert had the foresight to bring along fishing poles and soon wandered down to the far end of the runway. In about thirty minutes Herb brought in a seven pound pike, while Miguel and Robert were skunked. Chuck bummed a ride into town for pizza, beer and aluminum foil to cook the catch of the day on the wood stove. As we pitched our tents, we began to notice that the days were getting much longer while the nights were almost nonexistent.

DAY 11 (JUNE 10) - WHITEHORSE, YUKON

We woke up early to break camp without breakfast. Our goal for the day was to continue along the Highway nonstop to Whitehorse, YT (CYXY), a reasonable three hour leg. On this leg the Highway follows river valleys through a broad 7,000 foot mountain range and then runs along the series of large lakes forming the upper watershed of the Yukon River. The highest point on this leg of the Highway is only 3,400 feet at Pine Lake, surrounded by peaks as high as 6,700 feet.

As we approached the pass at Pine Lake it became evident that the mountain ridges were obscured in places by low clouds. Once in the pass the ceilings dropped to 1,000 feet with light rain. Flying 800 feet above the Highway provided adequate visibility, but only to the next turn in the road. Each turn in the Highway afforded another opportunity to either proceed ahead, do a 180, or land on the Highway. As long as we could see the Highway below to the next turn we decided to continue on. This process continued for at least 40 nautical miles. Once Telsen Lake came into view it was VFR all the way to Whitehorse.

The airport at Whitehorse sets high on top of a flat plateau overlooking the city below. Due to high cross winds, the tower cleared us to land on the short cross runway 01/19 and taxi to the dirt end for tiedowns. The gusty winds and dirt runway gave all of our flying machines a thin coating of dirt. That was our welcome to Whitehorse.

The one good thing that the Whitehorse airport has is some rooms for rent right at one of the FBO's. They have several upstairs rooms with two beds each and bath facilities with laundry machines in the downstairs. The rooms went for \$30.00 Canadian (\$19.00 USD), and divided by two was real reasonable. With a restaurant in the airport terminal next door, it is very convenient for a quick stop over without the need for local transportation.

DAY 12 (JUNE 11) - FAIRBANKS, ALASKA

When we arose the next morning, one of the Canadian pilots (Horst Peick) advised us that his Cessna 172 was damaged by wind blast from a departing helicopter as it was parked in front of the FBO. That would cause them at least a one day delay behind us for their arrival in Alaska.

Our flight plan for the day would include the goal of reaching Fairbanks Alaska by days end; with one fuel stop 20 miles over the Alaska border at Northway (ORT). On the 1998 trip we chose to stop for fuel at Burwash CYDB). Since fuel at that time cost us \$3.52 (USD) per gallon, we chose to avoid landing there and fly nonstop to Northway. This leg of the trip would take us very close to the Kluane National Park which includes the St. Elias Mountain Range of the Yukon Territories. This range is full of glacier activity, one of which, the Kaskawulsh Glacier, lies within ten miles of the Alaska Highway. Once past Burwash the Highway basically follows the Shakwak Trench.

Once at Northway we cleared US Customs, fueled up, and ate lunch. The \$25.00 Customs border crossing fee charged to each aircraft really bothered Chuck. Why is it that US citizens have to pay a fee to cross into their own country, while the Canadian Customs had no such fee, even for foreign registered aircraft? That he could not understand.

We departed Northway with wheels up at 2:30. Our flight plan to Fairbanks (PAFA) would include the waypoints of TOK Junction (6K8), Tanacross (TSG), Allen AFB (BIG), Delta Junction (D66), and

Eielson AFB (EIL). All along this route there are numerous MOA's and Restricted Areas reserved for U.S. Air Force military training exercises. Allen AFB is part of the Big Delta Arctic Training Center.

The United States Air Force provides an airspace information service in Alaska called the Special Use Airspace Information Service (SUAIS). This service covers areas mostly within the interior Military Operating Areas (MOA) along the Alaska Highway from Tok to Fairbanks. Our trip was scheduled to coincide with one of their Major Flying Exercises (Cope Thunder 02-3) from June 6th to the 21st. They operate a major military flying complex and the Alaska Highway has two long VFR corridors under two MOA's. The two VFR corridors allow conflict-free flights. We maintained radio contact with Eielson Range Control to provide us with the latest military flight activity.

Once through the corridors and just 15 nm from Fairbanks, our flight path took us right alongside the 14,507 x 150 foot runway of Eielson AFB. Numerous large C-130 type cargo aircraft and F-16 jet fighters were parked all along the taxi ways, while some of the cargo type aircraft were taking off mid-field as we flew by. It was a little scary flying so low and close to an Air Force Base conducting military exercises, but they had been tracking our group since we crossed over TOK and knew exactly where we were. We were under their control all the way.

At 4:30 in the late afternoon, Fairbanks International Airport came into view. Fairbanks, in my opinion, is the most fascinating airport I ever have landed at, with its two parallel runways separated by a 3,400 x 200 foot water runway. One of the two hard surface runways, the longest of which is 11,800 feet, is for commercial use, while the other is for general aviation. At the far end of the general aviation runway is another runway that is not plowed in the winter for ski plane use. At the north end of the airport, accessible by a taxi way, there is a fantastic camping ground for transient aircraft. The camping facilities were just completely refurbished and in immaculate condition. Several gaze-

bos, wood stoves, firewood, picnic tables, running water, toilets, telephones, and tie down areas were provided. The only thing one had to bring was your food, tent and sleeping bag.

Much to our surprise, Tony Begola showed up at the campground in his Kitfox. We had not seen Tony since he damaged his prop after departing Poplar Grove, Illinois on Day #2. We were once more a flight of seven Kitfoxes bound for Point Barrow, Alaska.

It looked like we might be operating out of Fairbanks for at least two days, so we needed a car. The only car available that would pick us up at the campground was a small 5 passenger Pontiac Grand Prix. We had a problem! However, Chuck, who will volunteer for anything, said that he would ride in the trunk. Everywhere we stopped in Fairbanks, people would stop and take a long look at six men getting out of a small five passenger car and one out of the trunk. Actually we all took our turn in the trunk. Embarrassing, but it worked out just fine.

DAY 13 (JUNE 12) - FAIRBANKS, ALASKA

Getting up early is not a tough thing to do here, since the nights are very short. Without night goggles I probably wouldn't get much sleep. Our plan for this day was make a short flight to a private 1,500 x 200 foot grass strip near the town of Healey, Alaska, approximately 85 nm southwest of Fairbanks following the George Parks Highway. About a year prior to this trip I was contacted by David and Pat Griggs, who were both owners and pilots of a Model IV Kitfox. They invited us to fly in for lunch and a short visit to talk about airplanes and such.

The Griggs were originally from Ohio, decided to move to Alaska after retiring, and build a log cabin for their home and a grass strip for the Kitfox. Since we rarely turn down a free meal and an opportunity to land on a private grass strip in Alaska, we called the Griggs on our cell phones and said we were in town.

DAY 14 (JUNE 13) - BETTLES, ALASKA

We were over the field in less than an hour. Landing at strange grass strips is always fun and this one was no exception. The Griggs were outside waving us in as the seven Kitfox's touched down. After being shown where to park, we shut down the engines, climbed out of the cockpit, and were immediately attacked by a zillion giant mosquitoes. They were all over our clothing, our head gear, the exposed areas of our skin, up our pant legs, and the immediate airspace surrounding our bodies. The Griggs seemed to take it all in stride, but soon recognized we were totally unprepared for the onslaught, so they invited us in the cabin for lunch. Several friends of the Griggs were aware of our arrival and joined the group for a visit.

Once inside the cabin, they lit a couple of what looked like spiral incense sticks, which killed all of the mosquitos that entered the door during our entry, within two minutes. It seemed to work great. After an enjoyable lunch and good conversation we boarded our aircraft, thanked them for their hospitality, and departed down the runway. Once in the

Our goal for this day would be a relatively short 152 nm flight north above the Arctic Circle to Bettles, Alaska (PABT). Weather permitting; we would then depart the next morning on the long journey up over the Brooks Range, down the North Slope, and over 150 nm of frozen Arctic tundra to Point Barrow. Once at Barrow we would have accomplished our ultimate goal, reaching the most northern settlement in the United States on a spit jutting north into the Arctic Ocean. Absolutely nothing beyond that native village but the Arctic Ocean ice and the North Pole.

Our route out of Fairbanks would follow the Haul Road northward along the Alaska Pipeline to Livengood (4AK2), Five Mile (PAFV), Old Man (abandoned), and Prospect Creek (PAPR). Just prior to Prospect Creek we planned to turn west and fly 20 nm to Bettles.

Departing Fairbanks, we headed due north to pick up the Haul Road and the Alaska Pipeline which generally runs west of the road, sometimes more than five miles away. It is buried in some places and elevated in others, but either way it is easy to follow. Just 44 nm out of Fairbanks we overflew the Livengood Airport, the site of a former pipeline construction camp. Of its 2,500 foot gravel runway, only 1,400 feet of the north end is useable.

As we continued northwest along the Haul Road toward the Yukon River, Fox #4 reported that his engine was not running smooth and suspected the spark plugs. Since the Five Mile airport was just five nm on the north side of the Yukon River, we decided to land and checkout his engine. While there, a little light rain fell for a short period. Five Mile is a private gravel strip owned by the Alaska Pipeline Company. The road running along the west side of



Seven Pilots at Bettles, AK

Day 14 - Posing outside the Bettles Lodge in Bettles, Alaska, just prior to departure to Barrow. The “flag pictures” included a U.S. flag and a Mexican flag in honor of Miguel Ramirez, the member from south of the border in San Luis Potosi, Mexico

air we decided to do a low flyby over the runway for their amusement. On landing at Fairbanks, we returned to the campground for another night's stay prior to proceeding north to Point Barrow.

the runway is sometimes stopped for aircraft operations and is used as a base for summer firefighting operations. The private control tower on the strip was not manned on our arrival.

After 20 minutes on the ground the weather cleared and the flight of seven continued northwest along the Haul road to our next waypoint; Prospect Creek. Just 16 nm south of Prospect Creek lies the Arctic Circle (66 degrees 33 minutes North latitude). There was no place to land and nothing on the charts or the ground was visible to mark its location. The GPS was our only clue. Rather than turning due north to Prospect Creek, we decided to continue northwest and short cut our route directly to Bettles, only 26 nm ahead.

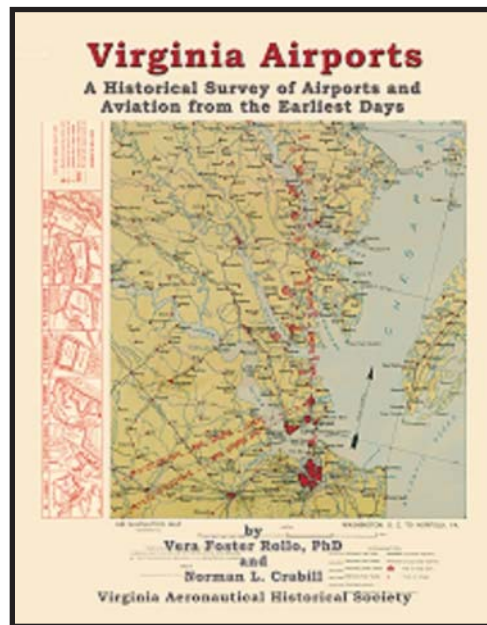
Landing at Bettles was not going to be uneventful. After touching down and taxing toward the Bettles Lodge, Fox #4 (Tony) broke a tail wheel spring and had to stop quickly. Fox #3 (Stan Specht) was right behind Tony and had to turn to avoid Tony's aircraft. Stan did not see one of the runway lights on the right side of his aircraft and damaged the tips of his propeller. Low objects on the right side of a tail dragger cannot be detected unless viewed early or the pilot steers a zigzag course. The runway lights were located about 10 feet from the edge of the runway and difficult to see from the left seat of a tail dragger.

Bettles was originally a trading post and supply center for the gold mines just after the turn of the century. After the gold rush died away, the town became a native village. At the end of World War II the U.S. Navy built a 5,000 foot gravel air strip to support the Naval Petroleum Reserves. The FAA built a Flight Service Station there after the war, but it was closed in 1993.

After checking into the lodge and settling in, we took a good look at Stan's prop. Only two inches of the tips were damaged, so it was the general consensus of the group that removing the damaged areas and rebalancing the prop would make it serviceable for the rest of the journey. After a static test run and flight test his Kitfox was declared flightworthy.

Lucky for Tony, Chuck still had the old tail spring that Herb replaced back at SkyStar on Day #5.

Coming in next newsletter: Will the six Kit Foxes make it to Barrow, Alaska, through the most difficult terrain yet encountered? Will the weather cooperate? Will Chuck Tippet charm a Canadian Policewoman and convince her not to arrest them? Or will this travel saga have a very different ending? Stay tuned!



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