

Sam White, Alaskan

By Sam O. White

Photographs from the Author

Part VII—Commercial Pilot

AFTER fourteen years as agent for the old Alaska Game Commission, I resigned in September of 1941 and went to work flying commercially for Wien Airlines. The switch seemed a natural one. It was Noel Wien who had sparked my dreams of getting into the air back in 1924 when I was with the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, and his brother, Ralph, who had taught me how to do it for my flying game patrols five years later. I knew the airline routes well, and the country in between the routes. And I knew the intricacies of landing a plane on lakes, swamps, rivers, ridges, and even in the saddles between mountain peaks.

I enjoyed making the mail runs for Wien. I bumped into old friends every place I went, and liked visiting with them as well as providing them with a needed service. The days I spent flying, and the evenings I spent shopping for everything from pins and diapers to light plants, axes and saws for the people in the sticks. Woe to the pilot who forgot the nipples for the baby's bottle! The people in those villages had two weeks to write their orders, but they never got around to it. When the mail plane arrived they were always caught by surprise, and a half a dozen at a time would be shooting verbal orders at the pilot and thrusting loose money at him. A pilot had to have a portable accounting outfit in his pocket and start "making book" even at forty-five degrees below zero.

The whole country was changing fast. There were still a few prospectors scattered about and many trappers, but soon they began to leave the hills for construction jobs. Along with World War II's drain on manpower, the big building boom was just getting started, and before long I was hauling passengers out of the river villages and packing very few of them back. The woodcutters at Fairbanks stopped cutting wood in favor of the higher construction wages, and Fairbanks became an oil burning town. It was the beginning of the end of the old Alaska.

There were still a number of oldtimers, however, who stayed put and made the transition of catering to airplanes instead of dog teams. One of them was Joe Anicich who owned and operated the saloon and roadhouse at Tanana, called the Tower House. In its day it had prospered, but as Tanana faded, so did the business. Joe was proud and independent. No welfare or relief for him. He

allowed as how he'd stay there and make his own way, and he did.

He had an old white horse upon which he lavished great care and affection. He used the elderly horse for light work, like hauling a load of gas to the field for airplanes. Then one morning, Joe found that the horse had died quietly in the night. For a time, he was inconsolable. But he made another bow to the changing times, and bought a small Caterpillar tractor to continue the hauling.

I often stayed at Tower House when in Tanana. One time I was weathered in there with a passenger, an FBI man, when the temperature went down to about sixty below. In deep cold like that, a very peculiar frost condition occurs. It is like a fine powdered frost—even finer than powdered sugar. It collects on every part of the aircraft, undersides, top and frontal, and on vertical surfaces. It wipes off easily, but it won't blow off. And if you keep on going, it will put you down in about twenty minutes.

Anyway, Joe kept a row of gas cans lined up against the wall of the kitchen in the Tower House, and one of his numerous cats could frequently be seen drinking out of one bucket or another.

"Sam," asked the FBI man, "is there any drinking water around here?"

"Sure," I said. "That is good old Yukon water than which the world has no better."

"But the cats are drinking out of those buckets," he objected.

"That proves it's drinking water," said I. And before long he was drinking it, too, and on his way to becoming a sourdough.

Fire in the air is another terrifying thing. That happened to me once when, appropriately enough, I had a Bureau of Land Management fire control man along as a passenger. But a couple of thousand feet up, his profession wasn't very reassuring to either one of us.

I had run into the willows at Holy Cross and dinged up a wing tip. After making temporary repairs, the fire control man, Maurice Smith, and I took off for McGrath. As the engine warmed up and settled down to cruising, we smelled something burning. A little later, to our very great discomfort, we thought we could see an occasional curl of smoke. We were over Reindeer Flats on the Innoko River, and there definitely was no place to land until we got to Flat.

But over Flat the smoke had quit, and we had tentatively identified the smell as burnt willow leaves scooped into the cowl on the take-off. Nearly all the bush fields in those days had four-foot, pencil-thin willows on them. So we pushed on to McGrath where Charlie Koenig, another oldtimer who had gone modern with the times, was gas-up man, field manager, and all around helper for the pilots on their way through.



Flying for Wien, I found old friends and made new ones everywhere I landed.

When we landed I told Charlie about the wing tip and asked him for some dope and a brush. "Go eat your lunch, boys," he said. "I'll fix your wing tip for you." He did, and it was an excellent job. He also scooped about a bushel of dry, scorched leaves out of the cowl.

Although I ran errands for the people scattered around in the bush, I was more than repaid in most cases by their generosity and hospitality. For example, W. R. "Blank" Blankenship, who had the trading post at Kiana, always furnished me with meals and lodging. He would never take a cent for it, and I was always treated as one of the family. Even when Blank was very low on gas, he could always dip up enough to get me to Kotzebue.

Blank was with the U. S. Geological Survey on the Arctic Coast in the early days of surveying. One of the earliest maps was a topographical survey strip about four miles wide along the principal rivers, with no connecting links in between. Blank used to tell about packing supplies from the Noatak into the head of the Colville for the summer's work, which was short. He waded in ice cold water up to his hips and fought swarms of mosquitoes which were murderous. And he told of having to kill his faithful lead dog, Prince, because the mosquitoes were eating his eyes shut. He buried the dog on the bank of a creek about two or three miles above Umiat, which now bears the name Prince Creek. The trading post at Kiana is still in operation and is run by Blank's relatives.

In those days, as today, pilots often had to deal with emergency cases of sickness or injury. These were the stickiest deals as most emergencies seemed to occur in the worst weather, often after dark, and in next to impossible places to land and take off.

One trip I remember vividly had to do with a woman school-teacher who was desperately ill at a river village. The only float ship available at the time belonged to a friend of mine who was recuperating from an injury. I took it and flew down, arriving just as darkness was closing in. We loaded the poor woman, who was suffering terribly, into the ship. Out on the river, the driftwood was running and the fading light made it hard to see. I took off all right, but at about fifteen feet the motor quit. I managed to land again in the swift water and a check of the engine showed that the carburetor was dropping off. Two studs were gone and no others were available. I tied up and put out a big sign, "HELP." Next morning early both Wien and the Army arrived. We got the sick woman into town and she survived. But during that night I suffered the agonies of hell right along with her.

I also had a few races with the stork.



This was Flat, winter of 1941, and there wasn't any place to land until we got there.



The Travelair 6000-B was a fine plane with lots of room in it, but it was too slow for racing with the stork.

Won every one of them, but some of the margins were pretty close.

On one such trip I was flying a Travelair 6,000-B—lots of room in it, but slow, and no ship to race with a stork. My expectant mother was a very fine lady but she'd waited too long. My only other passenger was an elderly trapper who had never married and knew nothing about the business of having babies. We were hanging over the wilderness with about a hundred miles to go when the trapper tapped me on the back.

"Sam," he says, "the woman is having pains. We got to do something."

"Ole," I said, "everything that has to be done, you have got to do it. So spread out some mail sacks and lay her out flat on the floor."

This was done, and then commenced the longest hour I have ever put in in the air. I should have logged a hundred hours for it. Fortunately the radio was working and when I parked the ship at Fairbanks, I hit the ground running and let the taxi man and the trapper and the

ground crew take care of the works.

There was another emergency which, in spite of its seriousness, hit me on the funny bone. I was cruising along on the mail run one summer day when I picked up what appeared to be an emergency message, but I couldn't make it out because the radio reception was very bad. The radio operator at Wien's nearest station was exceedingly good at picking such messages out of the air, and when I arrived there she had it put together.

"Man half drowned needs medical aid. . . . Crackle, crackle . . . Send Sam. . . . Blurp, blurp, etc. . . ."

So after refueling I was on my way and landed about an hour later to find the whole village out to meet me. They had a young buck on a stretcher in the dirtiest sleeping bag I have ever seen, and I've seen some rough ones. It was covered with candle grease, moose tallow and lots more that couldn't be identified. A good bit of tension was floating about and no one was saying much.

"Vertical or horizontal?" I asked. No



One of the regular chores after a winter landing was draining the oil.

one got it at once, but finally one Indian said, "Lay him down." Then I told another Indian, "You jump in here and take care of this guy until we get to the hospital."

Well, in due time we arrived at the airport where a doctor and nurse were waiting, having been alerted by the Wien radio system.

"Can he walk to the ambulance?" the doctor asked. I didn't know, so I looked at his companion.

"No," said the other Indian.

"Why not?" the doctor wanted to know.

"Him got no pants," the Indian said.

So they got him on a stretcher and put him in the ambulance. The doctor asked me to stick around while they X-rayed his chest on the chance that he might be able to go back with me. So I went up to the Wien terminal to have a cup of coffee and visit with friends.

The station agent took the telephone call from the doctor. He became quite agitated. "Gunshot wound!" I heard him say in a loud voice. Then it was my turn to become agitated.

"Tell Sam to go back to his mail runs," the doctor said. "I have to keep this man here. There's a bullet wound in his hip." So that was that.

Another mission I will never forget really didn't come off. It had to do with my good friend Jack Sackett, a wonderful rugged individual who came to Alaska in the 1890's and had been a police officer out of Nome for many years. He also spent a lot of time prospecting the Kobuk and Noatuk valleys and in later

years operated a trading post at Cutoff.

Jack died a few years ago way up in his 80's. I was stationed at Hughes at the time for Wien. We got the call there one bitterly cold night for me to fly down in the morning and take him to Fairbanks for hospitalization. But when I arrived in Huslia just at daylight, the plans had changed. Jack knew the end was near, and he had decided he wanted to die in familiar surroundings among old friends and relatives.

I went up and visited with him for an hour. His mind was as clear as a bell. We talked of the Kobuk and the Koyukuk as if we were to meet again. But both of us knew it would not be on this earth. He died a few days later, and the Koyukuk lost a valuable citizen whose advice and influence were enough to stabilize a community and keep it a law abiding place.

To me, visiting with oldtimers was a privilege and a pleasure. One winter when I was flying for Wien out of Fort Yukon I used to spend my evenings in town visiting with four old chaps in the "white man's ward" at Hudson Stuck Memorial Hospital. I had known them all for years. They were pretty well worn out from hardship and age, but each made his mark in Alaska and was honored and respected. They were Charlie DeBieu, Mr. McDaniels and Tony Rose, all longtime prospectors, and J. L. Thomas, known as Tommy the Mate because of long experience on Yukon steamboats.

One night Tommy the Mate asked me if I would get him a liverwurst sausage the next time I was in town. I brought him back a sausage that was three feet long and three inches in diameter. I recall his sitting up in bed, and slicing off chunks which he ate with great relish. He kept it hidden under the blankets, but eventually the nurse found what was left. It didn't take an

intellectual giant to figure out the source, and I was in the doghouse.

There are many things that can put a plane down—swallowed valves, broken pins, water in the gas, ski harness failure, ice or frost on the wings—and they have all happened to me. So with the odds of flying bush around the North, the day came, of course, when I was the object of an emergency mission. It was at Circle City in the winter of 1942, and it was the worst wreck I ever had.

The war was on, and many aircraft parts and supplies were either hard to get or impossible to get. I was worried about the ski harness on a gull wing Stinson we had, and talked it over with Noel Wien who agreed it should be changed. The sticker was that we had no new shock cord to replace it with. I didn't fly this ship much, and was concerned lest some of the younger, less experienced pilots would get caught in the air with a ski harness failure. But it was me that got caught.

I was heading into the Yukon Valley with twenty-two cans of gas aboard tied down in a cargo net. I had crossed the head of the Salcha at 4,000 feet and was letting down, and had the lake where I was to deliver the gas in sight. It was a beautiful day with no wind, but at 2,000 feet I hit some excessive turbulence and CRASH—a ski harness broke. Then CRASH, the other broke. The skis dropped down and jammed into a vertical position on some fittings that held on the wheel pants.

When I got control again I had 900 feet altitude. I not only couldn't climb, I couldn't hold what I had. My air speed was eighty-five miles per hour, just enough to stay in the air a little longer.

I got on the radio and advised everybody who was listening that I was in a jam and was going to try to make Circle for a crash landing. There was no place else to go. Eagle was about the same

"Sam, you land like moose ptarmigan. I think you come dead quick."



distance, but higher, so that was out. Following the Yukon, I looked for a stretch of glare ice but found none. I thought of two lakes I knew which the wind swept clear of snow every winter, but one was too high and the other too far away. About that time, I reached a point where the Yukon turned north for a ways, and I had a real tough decision to make. At the rate I was losing altitude, I knew that if I followed the river I would coincide with the surface before I reached Circle. So I took the "all or nothing" alternative, left the river, and made a beeline for Circle right across the treetops which were close and getting closer.

I called Fairbanks and reported I was getting ready to land at Circle. I didn't have altitude enough to circle the field, so I just hoped no other aircraft would be in the way and went right in. There was two feet of snow on the field, hard packed from use, but I plowed a furrow right down to and through the grass roots. The landing run was about fifty feet and the landing gear came off in pieces. The left wing took a beating, but the plane didn't turn over. Four cans of gas split at the seams and gas was gurgling all over. To roll the motor away, all they had to do was snip a few wires and it was disconnected.

During the landing I shoved my right knee into the instrument panel and it cracked my right hip. But when I came to a stop I was still in the seat with the belt in place, and sitting in snow up close to my waistline. I was, at the moment, rumdum.

The next thing I knew, strong hands were pulling me out. Ed Moore, a Wien pilot and longtime friend, was a small man, but he dragged me out of there like a sack of oats. He leaned me up against the fuselage and braced me there while my head cleared.

Then I noticed a line of Indians by the fence, maybe thirty men, women and children. They looked scared to death and were keeping their distance.

Finally Willie Moses got brave and came over. He shook hands and said, "Sam, you land like moose ptarmigan. I think you come dead quick!" Then all the bucks came over and shook hands. Then all the squaws came and shook hands. The kids thought was was a good idea, so they lined up and shook hands, too.

All this activity shook some of the cobwebs out of my head, and Ed steadied me over to the Northern Commercial Company store. An old friend of mine was running the place, a good reliable Scotsman by the name of MacGreggor. They eased me onto the couch in a sitting position. Then Mac did the most wonderful thing. He placed a fifth of Johnny Walker Black Label in front of me. The pain and terror vanished like magic. The old head cleared up.

About two hours later, Noel Wien flew in with the Travelair on what was likely his one-hundred-thousandth rescue trip. And seven weeks later I was flying again, none the worse for wear and tear.

(More next month)

A Summer On The Highway

Continued from page 28.

before. But living in Anchorage had spoiled our taste for life Outside. Although we saw some lovely scenes and found a few wonderful spots in British Columbia, Montana and Michigan for camping and swimming, the notebook records a number of things we found funny or tiresome.

"July 29th—Lost Creek Campground in Crater Lake National Park. This is the

place the ranger at the entrance referred to as 'primitive and lonesome'. I can walk thirty-four steps to the right and pass two campers with tents and the water faucet. Seventy steps to the left takes me to four or five other campers. There are good clean outhouses." The next morning, "We talked to another park ranger who called this place 'quiet and secluded,' and ten steps away were a whole bunch of noisy campers and a bus load of Boy Scouts just around a crook in the road."

We found fewer and fewer reasons to dawdle. On July 31st I noted, "Almost 470 miles and three states today."

August 6th—"No vacancies in Ashland (Wisconsin). No vacancies in Ironwood (Michigan). No vacancies in Bessemer. I *did* so want a bath."

August 13th—"So tired. No vacancies. Spotted this place and pulled in about 1:30 a.m." And the next morning, "Found out when we walked around that this is one of those open from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. deals. Sure glad Stan couldn't see that sign last night."

Then just 275 miles short of our destination in Virginia: "So near, and now trailer hitch problems. I wonder how long it will hold up. All Stan could manage was tightening the safety chain and shifting more weight to the rear of the trailer."

It held up. We got here. But we've talked ever since about going back. We'll have a new car and a strong durable trailer hitch. But we'll be pulling the same trailer we had thought we would use as an economy measure for one trip on the Alaska Highway. So if you see that old aluminum trailer in one of the campgrounds next summer, come on over for a cup of coffee and swap travel stories with us. ▲

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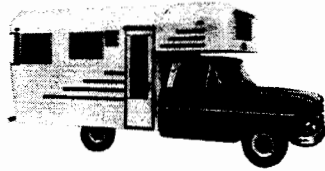
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