

Sam White, Alaskan

by Sam O. White

Part VIII—Air Force Charter Trips

DURING the winter of 1943 I was flying for Wien Alaska Airlines and carrying members of a U.S. Air Force geodetic team to various places on charter. There were two parties doing this work and Steve Miskoff was flying the second bunch. Steve only weighed about a hundred and twenty pounds, which meant that there was more space for cargo and payload. He was a sharp pilot, thoroughly competent on wheels, skis or floats, and had done his first flying in a glider. When it came to landing without power, he was tops.

Our area that winter was north of Fort Yukon and we based at that town in a Game Commission cabin. For the most part Steve took the western area of our plot and I worked over toward the Canadian border, but when we were beset by a spell of fog, bitter cold and snowstorms, we changed the routine and flew together as a safety factor. We left Fort Yukon one morning and kept the two ships close together as we headed for the place where the Old Crow River crosses the border and flows into Canada, near the head of the famed Old Crow Flats. That is somewhat north of sixty-eight degrees north latitude and well above the Arctic Circle.

The boundary between Canada and Alaska, which follows the 141st meridian

there, is marked by a series of monuments, each consisting of a four-foot iron post set in a concrete base. The posts are about six inches in diameter at the base and taper slightly to the top. The Air Force men wanted to locate one station as close as possible to a particular boundary monument but expressed some doubt that we could find it. I, however, assured them that we could go directly to it.

We left Fort Yukon just before daylight so we would have the best possible light for landing on a swamp lake that was only about 300 yards from the monument. We flew up the Porcupine River to the Coleen River, then up that stream and over a hill to Bilwaddy Creek, a tributary to the Old Crow. It was just about noon and the light was at its best when we flew over the lake and saw the monument in a clump of spruce trees standing at a bend of the Old Crow.

We landed and quickly made camp. The temperature hit 45 degrees below zero that night and that meant no work could be done on the project because the mercury in the instruments drew up into a knot. Next day we marked out a runway for safe takeoff and cut plenty of dry wood for the Yukon stove, but that night it only dropped to -32 degrees and they were able to make their observations and finish the work there.

While Steve and I were preparing the aircraft for takeoff next day, the USAF crew tore down the tent and packed things up in good compact bundles. They were getting to be experienced campers. We moved on to Husky Lakes in weather that was cold and calm, landed and made camp. It was 50 below that night, so no work was done, but the next night was favorable and the station completed. The next stop was a big lake a little east of Arctic Village. On our flight over it was bitterly cold. The air was clear but our visibility was restricted by what looked like a blue steel wall. It looked as cold as it was. I had seen this cold blue wall before and I had a hunch we were in for something out of the ordinary.

When we arrived over the lake, I talked to Steve on the radiophone and asked him to pick a landing near the best patch of timber, so we would have shelter and plenty of wood close at hand. Steve was very good at this and he picked an area, landed and parked his plane. I went into my approach and all the way down I could see Steve's taxi tracks as plain as anything until I got about thirty feet above the ground. Then my angle of sight changed and I could see nothing. I had experienced this before and was prepared for it. I used very little power, let the plane settle slowly and had no difficulty. It was -55 degrees when I landed and both Steve and I knew it was going to get colder.

We parked the ships in a little cove and made camp, pitching our eight-by-ten wall tent down low with a good part of its five-foot walls folded under and weighed down. We tromped down the snow inside the tent and spread a generous depth of spruce tips except where the stove would be. There we laid two frozen birch logs with one side hewed flat and placed the stove on them. The snow melted around the logs, then the ends froze in as solidly as though they had been laid in concrete. The snow also melted directly under the stove, clear down to the ground, leaving what we called "the sump hole." Coffee grounds and dish water could be poured in the hole without danger of pollution as they solidified at once. All available space inside the tent was piled with stove wood. This was so we wouldn't have to open the flap any oftener than was really necessary. We were doing everything we could to assure survival!



Members of one of the Air Force geodetic crews the author carried to isolated points above the Arctic Circle.

The temperature dropped some more and kept on dropping. We could feel it and we could hear it. Trees were popping all around and at times it sounded like a barrage of small arms fire. We kept a good fire in the tent and I crawled outside to evaluate the sparks and went back to adjust the dampers for good draft and a minimum of sparks. I cautioned all hands to leave the dampers alone and keep running their eyes over the inside of the tent top, watching for signs of sparks. If the tent burned, we would soon be frozen mackerels, I assured them.

It went down to -65 degrees and stayed there for several days. We divided up into two-hour watches and kept the fire going, cutting enormous quantities of wood which we tiered up all around the tent. Frost collected on the inside of the tent surface to the depth of an inch or more and twice each day we covered everything and knocked it off. Actually, we were comfortable enough, but we were hanging by a thread, so to speak, and any little mishap might have spelled disaster.

There was no chance of taking off with a plane. The loose, dry snow wouldn't let the skis get up enough speed to lift us off the surface, and even had we been able to get into the air, there was great danger that the motor would swallow a big chunk of cold air it could not digest, and blot out. We sat tight for three days. Then it began to warm up and finally the Air Force boys got their work done and we took off. It was quite an experience for the boys from Texas, Georgia and the Carolinas.

On the next trip, we split up again, Steve heading for the Chandalar with his crew while I took mine to Howling Dog on the Porcupine River. We landed on a small marsh lake and made camp. The first thing I noted was that we had landed in the middle of a rabbit pasture. They were at a population peak and as soon as it got dusk they swarmed out of the thickets and began to eat tent ropes. We foiled them there by covering the ropes with grease heavily fortified with pepper. Snowshoes and other edibles were hung up out of reach. You could stand in one spot with a flashlight and easily count fifty pairs of rabbit eyes.

Cold weather and ice fog developed at that spot, too, and after a few days some of the boys began to get a little restless and edgy. I thought it was time to create a diversion and liven things up, so I began to spin yarns about bears that didn't den up, mean wolves, wild wolverines and crazy lynxes. Their eyes were popping by the time I finished setting the stage. When the boys got to arguing among themselves about how much was true and how much wasn't,

I left the tent with a flashlight. I got a rabbit in the beam, did a little sneaking and grabbed. The first two I missed, but I got the third one, made a quick run to the tent and tossed it inside.

There was a big grunt, followed by as near complete pandemonium as I ever hope to see. There were shouts and curses and pots and pans clattered around. The stovepipe came down and the tent bulged and writhed and finally spewed forth its contents of three men and a rabbit.

By that time I was doubled up and incoherent and while they all smelled a rat, they still weren't sure what had hit them. The rabbit was all over the tent so fast they didn't see it before it knocked over all the candles and put them out. One of the boys got kicked in the chest and said it really hurt, but he still wasn't sure what had kicked him.

We rescued the tent from possible destruction by fire, repitched it and put up the stovepipe. When I confessed what had happened, the boys were so relieved it wasn't something worse, which might repeat the performance, that I was forgiven and they all agreed it was quite a to-do. It furnished merriment for quite a time.

From there we went to another location between the Porcupine and Black Rivers where there were two hills, a saddle between them, and a lake in the saddle. The trouble was that the lake was crosswise in the saddle, not lengthwise as they usually are, and this put a steep hill at each end of the lake. I figured out how to get down. It was cold and calm and we slipped down one of the hills sideways, then straightened out and we were down in good shape. Said Sergeant Emory, USAF, "Sam, you are not so damned smart. You didn't make that landing. I *prayed* you down." I said, "Keep right on praying; we have got to get out of here yet."

Getting out actually wasn't as difficult as it looked and in a few days we were at another lake, finished our work there and took off for Fort Yukon late one afternoon. We had a passenger, a Native trapper named Tim Wallace who had come over to our camp from his trap line and wanted to go to town. It was okay with me and okay with the Air Force boys, so we took him along. We ran into a blinding snowstorm about the time it started to get dark and it was soon evident that we wouldn't make Fort Yukon that day. I knew of a lake we could get to if we were lucky, and finally found it. By that time it was so dark that I couldn't see where the drifts were and by that time of year they are hard as concrete. I picked a spot sheltered by some spruce trees and we made a very short landing run as the snow was good and deep and soft there.

While I was taking care of the ship the others dragged the tent out and Tim Wallace had it up so fast and so neatly that it impressed me as much as it did the Air Force boys. We were just boiling coffee and heating up the beans when across the lake we saw a light bobbing among the trees. It got closer and soon a voice hailed, "Is it Sam? Are you all right?"

"Is there any place in Alaska where they don't know you," Lieut. Hank Kragiel, who hailed from Connecticut, wanted to know.

"Not around here," I said. "Nobody else would be out on a night like this."

By then the light had reached camp. It was carried by Philip Peter, another Native trapper, whose cabin was three miles away. He had heard us circling, thought we might be in trouble, and came to see whether he could help. That was the spirit of the North and it made quite an impression on the Air Force. Philip had dinner with us and when



The Travelair 6000B was a good ship and performed nobly during the Arctic winter.

he returned to his cabin he carried with him some real luxuries for a bush trapper.

Next morning we got away and made Fort Yukon to refit for another trip.

One trip for the Air Force took me clear up to the Arctic Coast in March, going by way of Kiana on the Kobuk River. Three Wien ships left Kiana early one morning—Sig Wien in a Bellanca leading, "Red" Crosland in a Fairchild 71 on his left, and myself on his right in a Travelair with a Wright E. engine. It was cold and a wind was blowing as we crossed to the Noatak River and we stuck together because this was a remote and rugged country with little or no timber. We crossed the Brooks Range at 9,000 feet and the valleys of the north slope below us were filled with fog. It was a desolate sight in many ways, but there was also an indescribable beauty.

Once we got out of the mountains it was clear and bright, but looking down on the barren hills we could barely make out the ground contours because of blowing snow. We arrived at Wainwright, refueled and spent the night there, then went on to Barrow the next morning.

There was at that time no Sea Bee camp at Barrow and the place was much as it had always been, with Charlie Brower firmly established and exerting a beneficial influence over all. He was a commanding personality. When I landed at Barrow—I had to climb out of the window of the Travelair because it was completely filled with camp gear—the school children were lined up and they began shouting, "There is Sam! Hello, Sam." And a very attractive school teacher was trying to shush them, telling them, "You must not call him Sam. Call him Mr. White." It didn't work. To them, I was always "Sam."

From Barrow we took off for the hinterland toward the Colville River, carrying an extra drum of gas. Since there was no wood, we also carried stove oil to burn in a converted Yukon stove. We worked out a radio schedule with Stanley Morgan who was in charge of the U.S. Signal Corps station there. We were to call every night at 8 o'clock, with no calls in between except in an emergency. But our generator went out, the battery went flat, and we missed all of the schedules except the last one. It was a case of hand propping to start the engine, too.

Barrow was almost out of reindeer meat and apparently none was to be had, but with the aid of the Rev. Mr. Klerkoper I finally was able to get a supply. That same night, a polar bear had been killed right in Barrow and I told the Air Force crew that I had been unable to get any reindeer but did get some



Unloading for the night at Kako Lake near Russian Mission on the Yukon.

nice fresh bear meat. The first night in camp I made up a stew but the boys wouldn't eat it even though I was digging in and pronouncing it good. "No bear for us," they said.

Before the second meal, I told them the truth but they wouldn't believe me and still were having none. The next day I abjectly apologized for my deceit. But they still wouldn't touch the meat. I was reduced to begging them to partake, and they did so on the fourth day but only, I think, because by then they were so meat hungry they would have tackled a skunk.

We ran into a lot of bad weather on the trip and by the time the work was done our gas supply was very low. I figured that we had enough to get to Barrow in one straight shot, if we didn't have head winds. Because of the dead battery, Barrow had not heard from us since we left and did not know of our situation. We took off in brilliant sunshine but we had no luck and as soon as we got over the hills we ran into fog banks and whiteouts. At the head of the Topagoruk River we caught it good and heavy. The hills began to blot out, but fortunately I had spotted a place a few minutes earlier where we could land. We swung back to it and put down in a narrow river with ten-foot banks. Unfortunately, the straight stretch of the river was short and at each end was a perpendicular ledge and a right angle turn. To stop I had to kick the plane into a snowbank where it went in deep.

We dragged out the tent, pitched it and built a snow wall around it. We were getting low on stove oil and I told the boys that we would run the stove one hour in the forenoon and one hour in the afternoon to cook, dry clothes and get warmed up. There was not much enthusiasm for this program, but they accepted it.

Our first problem was to get the ship turned around. It could not go ahead. We shoveled deep into the snow and found a few willows, each the length of a broom handle, crooked and about as thick as my wrist. We froze these into the ice as deadmen, fastened ropes to them in the form of a Spanish windlass and used another willow as a twister. This way we could move the ship a few inches at a time and it took us three days to back it out of the snowbank and turn it around.

Our troubles were not yet over because quite obviously we could not take off from there. We just would not be able to clear the ledges. And the day we got the ship out of the snowbank, disension broke out in the camp. The boys demanded that we keep the fire going until the oil was gone so they could "be good and warm for a few hours before we freeze to death."

I told them our only chance for survival was to continue rationing our oil supply and I made them a proposition. We would hold a shooting match to decide whether we did it my way or their way. They agreed. We had a .30 Auto M-1 carbine along and I suggested that they draw lots for one man to shoot against me. We would fire three shots apiece at a good target. I made some other restrictions, too, that would favor me and my luck was in. They accepted. As I had hoped, the man who won the draw was the least experienced. I shot first and made three hits dead center of the target, a feat that was not too difficult. My opponent was a little shaken by it, however, and after two good shots his third one went wild. Groans and cheering intermingled, with me doing the cheering. All of this served to some degree to take their minds off our troubles. We dug around in the snow for an hour or so and got enough willow



A camp on the Kuskokwim River during an Air Force charter flight. From the left: Sgt. Pearce, Cpl. Bennecke, the author and Sgt. Mel Griffith. "I had just cooked the boys a big feed, and it wasn't polar bear stew!"

to make a fire and boil a pot of coffee which helped to restore morale.

Since we couldn't take off from the river, I hunted for another "field" and located a bench on the mountainside a quarter of a mile away. It was smooth enough and, I hoped, long enough for us to get into the air. I would give me about 800 feet for the initial stage, after which there was a six-foot drop-off, then another 350 feet of smooth going. I figured the ship would be "almost" flying at the end of 800 feet and would settle in gently on the second smooth stretch, then would start flying.

We broke camp early in the morning and moved all the gear up to the bench. Then we had to manhandle the plane up there, with the boys pulling on ropes to help the engine. We jettisoned about twenty-five pounds of cargo and this served two purposes. For one, it lightened the load and gave us a better chance of getting into the air. For the other, it provided markers for the runway. We scattered it along the sides of the bench so I would have something in the prevailing whiteness on which I could keep alignment. Finally, at the place where I figured the skis would touch down after the drop-off, we beat the soot out of several lengths of stove-pipe, making a big black spot on the white snow.

After we loaded the ship carefully for the best possible performance, we climbed aboard, cinched up the belts and I poured on the coal. It went about as I had hoped, although the boys claimed that the touchdown was three feet short of the soot patch. Our

luck hadn't really changed, however, and we ran into a whiteout just as we got to the Meade River at the big bend. We landed and sat there for an hour. I was about to give the word to make camp when the snow lifted as suddenly as it had come and we took off. Gone by then was any chance of making Barrow on the gas we had. All we could do was fly as far as possible and hope for the best.

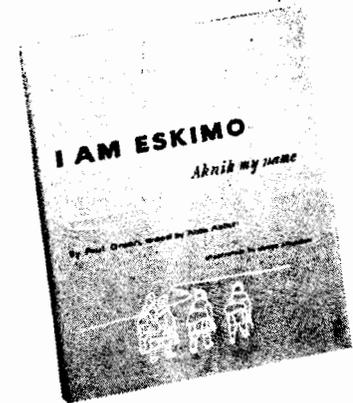
It was getting late and the visibility was poor when the gas gauge hit the peg. Just then I saw a telephone pole loom out of the murk. That couldn't be right, so I shook my head and it turned into a lead pencil sticking up out of the snow. That didn't make any more sense than the first impression and I concentrated and made it look like what it actually was, a single joint of stove pipe protruding from the snow. A stove pipe meant an igloo and an igloo meant shelter, at least, and possibly some supplies, too. The old Wright engine was running beautifully—mostly on its reputation, I guess—but that igloo was too good to miss and I put her down. While the rest of us were tying down the ship and draining the oil, one the boys went up to look at the igloo. He was soon back. "We can't stay in there," he said, very crestfallen. "It stinks."

"You finish this job," I said. "I'll go have a look."

The igloo had an entrance tunnel about twenty feet long. As soon as I opened the wooden door, which was about three feet by four, a dark brown odor assailed my nostrils. It was a combination of muktuk, seal oil and meat

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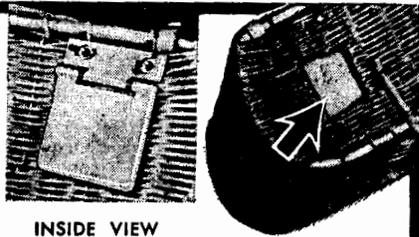
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and it meant that there were plenty of eats at hand. The entrance way was divided on each side into three chambers by blocks of ice about four feet square and six inches thick, set on edge. One chamber held whale meat, another had seal meat and a seal poke. Another held four or five bushels of an Arctic fish something like a herring and delicious to eat. On the other side, one chamber held a few waterfowl and the others were filled with nets and other fishing gear. Sure, the odors were a little overpowering at first, but they were good clean smells and ones you could quickly get used to.

Another door, at the far end of the entrance way, opened into the igloo itself which was made of woven willows and covered with two or three feet of sod. The inside was the shape of an inverted bowl and at the back was a window about two feet square, the pane another six-inch thick piece of ice. It let in a spooky sort of light. The stovepipe I had seen was far from the window and we moved in and hooked up our Yukon stove to it. We still had five gallons of stove oil, although the boys did not know this. I had kept it hidden in a snow bank at our previous camp, and sneaked it back into the ship when we left. The stove burned very little oil at the lowest carburetor setting and at that setting provided enough heat to cook a stew and make coffee. An igloo is a good deal warmer than a tent and would remain comfortably warm for five or six hours after the fire was turned off.

We carried the battery from the aircraft up to the igloo and warmed it because I wanted to make one more effort at radio contact. We were only thirty-five miles from Barrow and they should

be able to hear us even with a weak battery. The battery was good and hot when we rushed it back to the ship and hooked it up. Barrow responded instantly to my call and I heard Stanley Morgan's voice: "Where are you, Sam? We've been worried."

I told him we were at Meade River in a very comfortable underground apartment but that we were out of gas, with the tanks so dry they would probably crack open if we didn't get some liquid into them soon.

"Sig Wien is here and says he will bring you gas tomorrow morning," Stan said. We could hear one of his dogs, Penny, barking and a deep growl from another, a big Newfoundland named Chief. Mrs. Morgan was a wonderful cook and we thought we could hear the sounds of cooking and even fancied we could smell it.

Morning seemed an awful long time coming and nobody was hungry for breakfast. We gulped down our coffee and there was scarcely a sound in the igloo. I glanced at the ice window now and then, but it didn't seem to be getting any lighter. Finally, I could stand it no longer and went out for a look. In the passageway I could hear a slight sound, like a faint breeze blowing, but when I released the outside door it was torn from my hand and I was enveloped in a smother of snow. The grandfather of all howling blizzards was going on out there. It was like sticking your head into a bowl of milk.

I secured the door again only after a wrestling match during which I was handled violently. Then I went back and broke the sad news to the boys. They sort of collapsed and we settled down to ride it out.

That storm was a humdinger and lasted four days. I was thankful we were in an igloo because I doubt that we could have held a tent. On the fifth day it cleared and we were happy to see that the lines had held and that the aircraft was still fastened down to the ice. Sig Wien, Stanley Morgan and Ned Nusunginya showed up before long with three cases of gas for us and two hours later we were back in Barrow. We had been gone fourteen days on a trip that had been expected to last three or four.

When the boys started to unload, they came across my cache of stove oil. There was still a quart or so in the can and a roar went up. "Rationing us on heat when he had all this left over! Pour it down his neck!"

But to do that they had to catch me and at the first roar I was on my way, leaving Ned Nusunginya to put the faithful Travelair to bed and groom it for another day.

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