

Sam White, Alaskan

By Sam O. White

Part IX—More Charter Trips

AFTER chartering to the Air Force during World War II, it seemed natural enough to pick up a peacetime flying contract with the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. I was particularly pleased to be working with the Survey as it was the outfit which first brought me to Alaska as a reconnaissance man back in the early 1920's. At that time I was getting around a little slower, however, by foot and by dog team. Then in recent years I'd done some flying for the Survey when I was with Wien Airlines.

It seemed even more like old home week when I reported for duty at Anchorage in May of 1948 and found I'd be working under Commander A. N. Stewart. He'd been in my reconnaissance party back in 1923 and, since he was a diligent and faithful worker, he'd been getting promotions steadily ever since.

That summer's work was to be in the Bristol Bay area of Alaska. So the day after my arrival at Anchorage, Commander Stewart and I flew out over Lake Clark Pass to Naknek. There I found one of my major problems concerned the use of tide water. Most of our flying was to be to lakes and rivers, but when the open water of the bay

was involved, the tides had to be watched very carefully. Shortly after our arrival I had to make a trip to Platinum on Goodnews Bay. I'd provided myself with a tide book at Anchorage, so I went to work on this and after a considerable search found PLATINUM, followed by the notation, "Same as LIMA, PERU." Well, then I started hunting for LIMA, PERU, and finally found that. After all the effort, when I got to Platinum I discovered that its tides didn't necessarily jibe with Peru's tides, no matter what the book said. But I made out anyway.

In some places we had to land in six inches of water and the rest mud, and take off the same way. Seagulls in swarms were a very great menace and it was necessary to let them do the dodging. They were especially thick at one of our early camps on a long spit of land that ran out into a lagoon across from Hagemeister Island. I counted twenty-eight brant's nests on that spit, all with eggs in them, and I used to lie in the grass and watch the seagulls rob these nests. The method used was as follows: The gull would walk around the brant, occasionally pecking at it. The brant would turn clumsily on the nest to keep facing the gull. Soon an

egg would spill out of the nest, and the gull would roll it away and eat it. Then the gull would return and repeat the performance for another egg. I kept close track of the nests on this sand spit in my spare time, and of the twenty-eight, only three got to hatch. Even then, the gulls molested the goslings. The gulls also were busy at a good sized creek which ran back of our camp and near Cape Newenham. There they gathered at the riffles by the thousands to pick the eyes out of ascending salmon, leaving the fish blind and foundering.

At this camp we were subject to high winds and the most atrocious weather. Fog banks rolled in quickly to catch the unwary. One afternoon I flew to Togiak River, a short hop of about forty miles, got fogged in, and had to stay overnight. We started back to the lagoon about noon the next day, but didn't arrive until late in the evening since we had to land five times en route.

Another one of our early camps was at Pike Lake about twenty miles south of Dillingham. There was a young fellow at this camp who kept pretty much to himself. He seemed to like animals better than people, and all the animals around camp trusted him. In addition, birds kept roosting on him and mice kept running in and out of his pockets. He kept cereals in one pocket and raisins in another. It was pretty interesting to watch a mouse pop out of one pocket, run across him, and disappear into another pocket.

At another lake camp, there was an over-abundance of animals of a different kind. I had noticed a movement out on the tundra that I thought might be a wolf, so I took my .22 emergency and strolled out to investigate. Soon I found myself completely surrounded by belligerent dogs that I didn't care to have any nearer. I found out later that the native people who worked in the canneries during the summer would turn their dogs loose to forage for themselves. There was ample food for them, but they'd get wild and run in packs. One day I flew over a dead whale washed up on the beach at the mouth of a nearby river. On my way back I buzzed low to get a better look, and about a hundred dogs ran out of the carcass. At five hundred feet, the odor was noticeable.

Commander Stewart was a man who wanted a dollar's worth of work for every government dollar expended. But he also looked after his men well, and even pitched into the camp work himself.



U. S. Bureau of Sport Fisheries & Wildlife
A bird nesting area at Izembeck Bay, near the end of the Alaska Peninsula.

between his office and field duties, he accomplished an enormous amount. I have seen him working in his tent until late at night and then be up and ready for the field with the gang in the morning.

As the summer's work progressed, a minor hitch developed over getting in to a very small lake which was a sort of hub of operations at that point. I told Commander Stewart that I could get in to and out of this lake if I had a certain wind of ten miles per hour. Well, after the work got up to and beyond this lake, it was absolutely necessary that we get in at once. So with a slight breeze I stripped excess weight out of the plane and Commander Stewart and I landed in good shape. It took him about an hour-and-a-half to get the work done, and by that time there was no breeze at all. Besides that, the light had gotten poor and there was a slight mist rising from the water.

I figured that by backing the plane into a grassy spot in a small bay and taking off in a left curve towards the sloping shoreline, we could make it. On the first try I had to cut, but I found that by using a little English I could lengthen the run maybe twenty-five feet, which would be a big help. The second run also failed, but I picked up a little more information which I thought just might do the trick. On the third try we got off to a good start and progressed favorably to each stage of my highly calculated take off. The mist rising from the water now was playing hob with my perception, but I looked at the grass ahead and got what I thought was a favorable reading. I lifted one float out of the water, and then in that split second when I was carefully rolling the other up, we were in the grass.

I cut everything. We skidded over marshy ground, across a small creek, and when we stopped we were out in the blueberry bushes 400 feet from the lake and headed in the wrong direction. We got out and looked the situation over.

"If we can turn her towards the creek, I can straddle it and she will pull herself back to the lake," I said.

But on second thought I added, "For two men to turn this plane around is going to be a chore. We better wait for help from camp. They'll be looking for us."

"No," said Commander Stewart. "I want to do it now."

Well, that suited me okay, so I explained to him how it would have to be done. He'd flown aircraft a bit, so I told him to get on the gun and run full throttle for about thirty seconds, then idle for sixty seconds and repeat, and I would sit on the tail.

"No," he said. "I'll get on the tail." So we did it that way.



Hungry gulls made terrific inroads upon the eggs and young of the ducks and geese.

We had a 180 degree turn to make, and after we'd accomplished about 15 degrees of it I didn't feel any help on the tail during the power periods. So I shut down and climbed out. Commander Stewart was all in, but still game. This time he took my suggestion and got on the gun. I was fresh and heavy and we made real headway for about the first four power surges. Then I began to get weak. We'd only gained about another 15 degrees, so I told him I'd rope myself to the tail and lean on the rope. The rope, though new, was rotten from salt water use. It broke, and I made a big splash in the coldest water on earth.

After that we both agreed it was time for a rest, so we brewed a cup of tea. While we were drinking it a plane showed up looking for us. But they looked in the lake instead of out in the blueberries, and went back to camp. Commander Stewart and I went back to work, and this time we got the plane around the 180 degree turn and astraddle of the creek. We had her licked.

Then, of course, after the work was all done, the other plane came over and looked in the right place and landed. It was still dead calm and the mist was still rising from the water. So we brewed tea again and sat around the fire on Kapok cushions and told stories and waited for a breeze. After all that effort, it was kind of nice to just sit, but all at once I imagined my seat was getting warm. Then a few minutes later I knew it was hot and leaped off the cushion in a billow of black smoke. A spark from the fire had done its work but, judging from the chorus of ribald laughter, I didn't know whether it was accidental or otherwise. Finally about five a.m. a fresh breeze sprang from the right direction, and we were off and soon back in camp.

Another time that summer I found myself feeling rather foolish. When we had good weather on this job, we'd fly for hours since there were many days when we could not fly at all. On this particular day, I'd flown one of the men to a small lake, parked the plane in the grass, and then settled down for a nap inside while he climbed a nearby hill. While I was asleep a sudden wind blew up, and the sound of it on the aircraft, along with the pitching and rocking, half woke me up. I thought I was in the air. When I looked out the sides and saw grass waving, I grabbed wildly at the controls and got no response. But when there wasn't any crash either, I woke up to the fact that I'd been asleep.

Heading for home that fall, I flew via the Wood River and the Tikchik Lakes. These are eleven beautiful lakes side by side, ranging from seven miles to thirty-five miles in length. The waters are clear and cold and contain the greatest concentration of fish of the largest proportions that I have seen in a lifetime. Lake trout, rainbow, Dolly Varden, pike, grayling—they're all there and all king-sized. After passing over the lakes, I flew down the Hohlitna River to Stony River and on to McGrath and then to Fairbanks. On the way back the following summer, I flew direct from Fairbanks to Platinum, a long hop.

That season we all gathered at Platinum and then moved on down to Port Heiden on the Alaska Peninsula. This is the land of the big bears, and we saw from three to fifteen every day we flew, but on the whole they were not troublesome.

One sloppy day two of our men dressed in raincoats and rubber boots and left their camp to climb to the top of a hill and tend their light. There they met a big bear who took out after them. The



The monotonous tundra of the Far North.

Mac's Foto Service

men ran until they could run no more, and then stopped to peel off their rain-coats and boots. The bear, gentleman that he was, waited patiently for them to accomplish this, and when they started running again he obligingly took up the chase. When they finally reached their tent, it dawned on them that the bear never tried to gain any ground. And after speeding them home, the bear turned around and wandered off.

On another occasion, two of our men were camped way out on the tundra in a nine-by-nine conical tent. One of the men, Monte Owens, liked to have things just so around camp. His tent boxes were always neatly arranged against one wall, the cot beds against the two sides, the dishes tucked away in their places in a box, and pots and pans hung on the center pole. Early one morning Monte awoke and thought he felt the tent jiggle. He parted the tent opening just enough to peek out, just as a big bear stuck his nose up to the same opening to take a big whiff of what was inside. Monte said that when that bear sniffed, he pretty near lost his eyeball. But the bear apparently didn't like the smell of Monte's eye, as he blew the sniff right back and sent Monte cartwheeling against the center pole yelling "Bear!" The center pole broke and the tent fell with a great clatter of pots and pans and yells. When they finally got themselves and their guns disentangled, no bear was in sight.

The weather was always a factor out there. One rainy night, with the wind

blowing at fifty-five miles per hour with gusts up to sixty-five, three of our party failed to come in. I knew which lake they were working, so I took off in the slop and followed the shoreline, which was about all I could see, flew up the Messick River, and then took a compass reading and struck out across the tundra to the lake. There I spotted the men on a small beach. The waves were very high and I really was afraid I might lose my ship. But I couldn't leave them there overnight, so I screwed up my courage and went in. About three big splashes and the landing was accomplished. Four more big ones and we were airborne. And I can still remember plainly how my landing lights picked up the faces of every single member of our camp waiting on the shore at Port Heiden that night to help us beach the plane.

I got help on another stormy night from a man whose name I am no longer able to remember. But if he reads this, he'll know I haven't forgotten what he did.

I'd arrived at Dillingham one evening on a very low tide and taxied through the mud to the beach. We took great pains to secure the ship as the wind was rising and a high tide was coming up during the night. We were so tired we went straight to the hotel and turned in. We'd barely closed our eyes when a truck driver woke us up with the news that our ship was in danger. He took us down to the beach and there we were greeted by a sight I

hope I never see again. A great bunch of green spruce trees had torn loose from some bank, with roots and earth still attached, and were rolling and pitching with wind and wave just inches from my aircraft. Worse yet, a large spruce tree had slid over the bores of the tangle and about twenty feet of its top was hanging diagonally over the wings and fuselage of the ship.

The truck driver was cool as a cucumber. He said, "Help me hook onto the root and I'll drag the top one away first." He pulled it up the beach with the truck and out of the way. Then one by one he hauled the others away in various directions, like a giant game of jackstraws. I tried to pay him, but he wouldn't take anything. He was a very right guy.

One of the other pilots on the job was Ken Armstrong, a very competent fellow. I remember one day at Platinum we got word that the small crew stationed at Chagvan Bay had lost their tent and all its contents by fire. So despite wind and weather, Ken loaded up a tent, sleeping bags and other needed supplies and flew over there. I'm sure the crew members were more than glad to get the replacements, but evidently one of them still missed his old stuff. When I landed there a few days later, I found a mound of appropriate height and length, and at the head a wooden cross with this written upon it: "R.I.P. Here lies a dam good sleeping bag."

Ken and I had an agreement whereby each could use gas out of the other's caches when necessity or convenience demanded it. We would keep notes on this, and would square accounts in the fall over a steak dinner. But about mid-summer Ken noticed he was unaccountably losing gas from his big cache near Egigik while I was losing gas from mine farther up the line. I arrived at Ken's cache one day to find some stranger helping himself. I took three cases out of his aircraft and put them back in the cache. Then I said to him, "You took six cases out of this cache several days ago." And he said, "No, I only took four." So I said, "Get them back here immediately or I'll send for the U.S. Marshal." He took off and I never saw him again.

There were several of these men running loose up and down the peninsula. They were bootleggers, and caused a lot of trouble for the canneries by selling whiskey to their crews, who were mostly native. The canneries, of course, blackballed them and wouldn't sell them gas or give them food or shelter. But for those of us who were flying coast survey, the canneries went out of their way to help us all they could.

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timing device in motion. It will continue the countdown until 10 a.m. May 26, 1967, when the celebration officially gets under way at Fairbanks, designated the state's centennial center.

The residents of Fairbanks already are feeling the urgency of the situation. Several weeks after the clock was started, they blasted off their Alaska 67 membership drive with what was billed as the world's largest fireworks display to raise funds for the centennial. The show featured a red, white and blue fixed display, six stories high, which formed the city's official Alaska 67 symbol.

Sled Dog Trails

Continued from page 4

the idea. If enough of you think you would like to see such an organization formed, then we would like to work with you in setting up a meeting of all clubs' representatives in a central location. Then this representative group could establish the International Association, headquarters, constitution, etc.

We would appreciate hearing from you as soon as possible.

Address: Bill Wilson
Box 300
Oquossoc, Main
(From *Northern Dog News*)

Sam White, Alaskan

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Late in July a very interesting trip came up which really logged the miles for me. The Survey had several parties scattered around Interior and Western Alaska, and Commander Stewart was ordered to take a plane and pilot and make an inspection of each camp. There was one party at Shishmaref way up north on the Chukchi Sea, another at Anvik on the Yukon, and a third at Aniak on the Kuskokwim. We left Port Heiden and flew to Fairbanks where I got a hundred-hour inspection. Then we flew to Shishmaref via Kotzebue. We spent two days at each camp, and everywhere I found old friends, some of them pilots and some of them old Coast Survey men. Near Egigik on the way home, we ran into the most awful weather and had to put down and sleep that night in the plane. But the next morning the weather lifted and we returned to Port Heiden, glad to be back with the old gang.

(More next month)

Mileposts in Northland Travel

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Yukon clocks had to be set ahead two hours. Yukoners generally considered the idea a bunch of foolishness. "Well," quipped somebody, "with two extra hours of daylight the gardens ought to really go this year."

FAIRS take the spotlight in Alaska during the month of August. The 34th annual Tanana Valley Fair will be held at Fairbanks August 19th through the 22nd, featuring agricultural and commercial displays, art handicrafts, a midway, and the usual fair paraphernalia. Homer and Skagway have scheduled their annual fairs for the last week in August, with more of the same.

During the first week in August, Kenai will hold its Kenai Days celebration, which features Beluga whale hunting activities, along with a carnival and arts and crafts show.

And in mid-August, Dawson City in Yukon Territory has scheduled its Discovery Days celebration, reminiscent of the gold rush to the Klondike. The main activities, including a parade, sports competition and stage shows, will start things off on August 17th.

In addition, silver salmon derbies will be held at Valdez throughout the month, and at Seward during the second and third weeks of August.

CONSTRUCTION started this summer on a 140-mile road from Ross River to Carmacks through one of the richest mineral areas in Yukon Territory. Construction will be spread over three years on the \$3.8 million projects. The highway will be an extension of the nearly completed Watson Lake-Ross River road, and will complete a long-range plan for an area development loop from the Alaska Highway at Watson Lake to Carmacks on the Mayo Highway. Running through the Little Salmon and Magundy River valleys, the new road promises future tourist attractions.

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