

JOHN LOFQUIST

ON

KODIAK, ALASKA SINCE 1966

Interviewed by
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I was a civilian employee for the navy. I just finished my apprenticeship at the shipyard in Bremerton, Washington. The Vietnam War was in full swing pretty much and it was in late 1965. There was a job opening here in Kodiak with the Navy that I qualified for and I really wanted to get out of the Bremerton area. Working in that shipyard was like being an ant on an anthill. There was over 7000 employees at the time working three shifts a day on military ships; destroyers and aircraft carriers. I worked on almost every aircraft carrier in the Pacific Fleet at the time, the Hancock, the Taicondaroga, the Constellation, and the Kittihawk. They were all involved in the Tonkin Gulf in Vietnam. And I just wanted to get out of that rat race type of deal. I had been to Alaska before, Southeastern Alaska, but I had never been to Kodiak. I thought it was a good idea or good opportunity to get away from what I was doing and to get up here and I had no idea what I was getting into. I didn't know whether it was ship repair or what it was, I just put in for the job and was selected. I came up here late in February 1966. It was a nice clear day seventeen degrees out, and no wind. It was bright and sunny and not a cloud in the sky. Pyramid over there was just like a big white snow cone against the clear blue sky. We came up here in a Constellation, a four engine piston driven airplane it took six hours. It really didn't seem all that long it was real casual and the inflights were just great. They would get you anything you wanted get if you wanted to just sit and talk they would sit and talk with you. The door to the flight deck was open and you could get up and go talk to the pilot if you wanted to. He'd come back and talk to the people in the cabin it was just, you know, it was none of "this is your Captain Joe Snort", no the guy would actually get up and come back into the cabin and say "Hi I'm your Captain". It was a long flight, and the easiest way to get through it was for everybody to be nice and friendly so that's the way it was. That was in the days before security inspections. You know how paranoid everybody is these days. You would just get on the airplane and if part of your personal gear happened to be a rifle, why you carried that on board too, and the stewardess would

get it and put it in the coat closet for you. If you didn't want it in the coat closet and would rather hang onto it they would let you do that. I just wasn't an issue. It just wasn't particularly coming to Alaska. Most everybody coming up here was either coming up here to stay or to work, or to come hunting so if part of your personal gear for any one of those reasons happened to be a gun, well then no problem. It is part of your Constitutional Rights to own a gun so no problem as long as it wasn't loaded. They didn't want you getting onto the plane with a loaded gun, but it was not uncommon seeing people in the airport carrying guns. What was the airport like when you got here?

The airport was on the opposite side of runway seven of what it is now. It was a little building of about twenty or twenty-four feet square. It was an old military wooden building nothing fancy. The floors were not carpeted or didn't even have linoleum on it was just bare wood floors and it was muddy and everybody was tracking mud in and out and where the plane parked was right there in front on the concrete apron that the fish hauling planes use nowadays. The Connie, I was telling you, the cabin is so small that they really don't have any cargo space so they carry everything in a cargo pod under the belly. It is a pretty good size cargo pod that is detachable from the airplane it is on cables that are attached to electric winches on the belly of the plane. So when the plane parked on the ramp they would lower this cargo pod underneath the airplane down onto the ground and you'd just go out there and root through all the suitcases until you found you own gear and pull it out of the cargo pod and walk away with it. I don't know if they even had claim check tickets in those days. Even if they did it didn't mean anything because they would just lower the cargo pod and you'd go out and find your own gear and get it out of there, and the people who were leaving they just take their gear and throw it in the cargo pod and when all the stuff was in the pod they would winch it back up to the belly of the airplane and away they'd go. Yea, it was real casual. [Vanessa] You know I don't expect stuff like that. I expect it to be

unloaded for me and put on a belt. [John] Well, maybe down in the world, but not up here in the wilderness. That's not the way it worked.

[Vanessa] So you came here and you worked where? I worked at the powerplant and at that time it was the navy base. It was a navy airstation. The controllers in the tower were navy personnel. I don't think the FAA took over the tower until about 1970. Up until then it was military controllers. [Vanessa] So when did the Coast Guard take over? The Coast Guard took over about the same time. I think that when the navy left they turned the tower over to the FAA. We still had an operating flight service station on Woody Island. The whole island, or at least a large part of the island was a federal reserve and it still is. All the navigation aids were out there and they still are, but they were all manned in those days. They were not remoted or automatic. There were people living out there. There were administrators, flight service specialists, and electronics maintenance people. There were a lot of people out there. There is a summer camp out there now, but there is no FAA people out there anymore. The VOR Station is out there. They [military] go out there to maintain it, but it is strictly to go out there for a day on a helicopter and work on the radio gear and come back there is nobody out there to man it. It is all automatic and all remoted. Were lucky really to still have direct weather observations we still have the National Weather Service, but there has been a lot of talk about removing the National Weather Service too from here. Originally, there again, that was military too. All the weather observations were done by navy specialists up until the time the navy left. Actually the navy controllers were pretty good. It was kind of funny because the military controllers make it a habit of telling pilots who are on approach to check their gear down, which is a good idea, but if you are flying a fixed gear airplane then it is not too applicable. A lot of times even if it was a fixed gear airplane they would ask you to check your gear down and before they would clear you to land you would have to respond that your gear was down. When Wien was flying in here they were flying jets and twin engine turboprop. F-27's

Fairchild and they had a pilot who thought he was Joe Cool and he just did his best to sound like he was just bored stiff and one of the navy controllers asked him to check his gear down and there was just this long pause and finally he said "Uh, yea its hanging out there" so they did clear him to land. You 'd hear a lot of crazy stuff on the radio. You hear a lot of stuff that often times doesn't sound real professional, but Pacific Northern Airlines was the outfit to fly in those days they were flying into Kodiak from Seattle three times a week and the Constellations took six hours to get here as opposed to three or four in a jet. The amenities weren't quite as comfortable in those days, but it was alright. For its day the Constellation was pretty fast. It was a lot better than coming up here in a slow DC-6 which took eight hours or more. If you had a headwind, I've talked to people that took almost ten hours in a DC-6 to get here.

[Vanessa] What about the Grumman's? They were amphibians? The Grumman's were built back in the 1930's and they built a lot of them for the military back during the war. A lot of civilian outfits that did a lot of water work bought them up after the war. There was a lot operating in California, Florida, Michigan and places like that. There was a guy here named Bob Hall who had Kodiak Airways which was probably the biggest air carrier here on the island, and he had quite a number of Gooses and Widgeons. I don't know just how many, but I think he had as many as six Gooses at one time and four or five Widgeons or more as well as a number of other airplanes and even before the Widgeons and Gooses were common there was a lot of amphib work with Republic SeeBea's, a single engine airplane with a pusher engine. I think Bob Hall had some SeeBea's before he started getting his Grumman. [Vanessa] Is that how the people got their household goods to places like Port Lions or Larsen Bay? No, they had to rely on barge for most of that because it was too expensive to fly stuff like that and plus the size of the airplane is limited to what you can fly anyway. I think Kodiak Airways, later Kodiak Western, they relied pretty heavily on a mail contract for their income and it was basically a mail service and passenger service. There wasn't

a lot of hauling furniture and building supplies and that sort of thing. It was too difficult to get that stuff in and out of a small airplane. A lot of those villages weren't getting mail but a couple of times a month until they started flying to the villages and they airmail contracts and they were making as many as two stops a week in these villages which was unheard of. Man, people thought that they were in the lap of luxury getting mail service twice a week, weather permitting! There are still a couple of Grumman flying, but not too many they were old WWII vintage airplanes and those that are still in regular service, I doubt that anything original is left of them. They have been built and rebuilt so many times, and wrecked and salvaged and so on.

There was a number of wrecks right here that I can think of over the years, Grumman wrecks. Bob Hall lost one of his sons in a Grumman Goose disappeared one night off of Cape Chiniak in a storm, he and a State Trooper and two or three women from Old Harbor. There was another couple of Goose's that wrecked down in Akhiok. One of them was carrying salmon fry in a rubber bladder and the bladder broke and all the water and the fish sloshed in back of the airplane. I don't remember if he was taking off or landing, but the center of gravity went way out and the airplane smashed back into the water and sank. Another one down in the Akhiok area was transporting an anesthetized bear and the bear woke up inside the airplane and the bear went crazy and he wanted out of the airplane and so did the pilot as fast as he could get out. Nobody was hurt, but I think they sunk that airplane too. They hit a rock, I mean he just flopped it into the water as quick as he could get it into the water. They just wanted the bear out. The bear wanted out and the pilot wanted out, and the fish and game biologist wanted out. Everybody wanted out of that plane now! Early one spring they worked all winter on a Widgeon up at the hangar. They completely rebuilt it. There were a lot of new parts in the airframe. They recovered the wings it had a new paint job. It was like a new airplane. The pilot took the airplane off from the municipal airstrip and it was still cold enough the lake was still frozen over so he took

off from the strip and their main office was downtown about where the floatplanes park and he landed in the channel out there in the front. The only thing is, is that when he took off from municipal he forgot to retract his gear and he landed gear down in the bay and put the plane down and sunk it. He didn't have five minutes on that airplane. They sent some divers down, got some lines on it and pulled up the beach but it was just basically parts from there. This is really not unusual, anybody who operates a lot of those old amphibians have horror story after horror story about one wreck after another for one reason or another. We lost another Goose right out here on the State airport landing gear problems. He got one gear down and the other wouldn't come down. He pulled both of them up and the one that was down wouldn't come back up. So he landed on the grass along side the runway, but it messed the airplane up pretty bad and the main carry through where the wingspar carries through the center of the airplane over the cabin collapsed down into the cabin and it crushed the pilot between the wingspar and the instrument panel and broke him up pretty bad. He was an invalid from that time on. Just one of those things. It would have been just as bad if he would have landed in the water. You really don't have much choice with something like that.

[Vanessa] What was here on Kodiak when you came here? Well, when I came here it was about a year and a half after the earthquake and much of the old town was still here. The only new buildings that had been built when I came here were the Harbormaster building, Krafts downtown store and the Elks bowling alley. The Post Office is now the new KANA building, but I don't think the Post Office had even been built yet, because in that location there was a restaurant. The Belmont and it was shortly after I got here and the Belmont closed down and the new Post Office was built. So, even that wasn't here when I first came here.

They were having the Crab Festival even then. In those days it was quite a bit different than it is now. [Vanessa] Were their crabs available? As a matter of fact there

were and some of them were really large. Larger than you see nowadays. Crab was King in those days and they were really huge. The bodies were a good eighteen inches across. The legs from tip to tip would be over three feet. They were really big crab, and a lot of them. That was before the days of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. So, we had seal skinning contests. At that time there were people living here in Kodiak and around Kodiak who made their living hunting seals, and so, there were a lot of people who were extremely proficient at skinning seals. They would have a dozen or so seals that somebody would go out and shoot and then as part of the festivities would be these guys competing to see who could not only skin a seal faster than anybody else, but better than anybody else. They took points away for nicks in the skin. [Vanessa] Who did they trade with? They traded with furriers. Just like trappers now sell their furs to fur buyers the seal hunters would do the same. They would salt their hides down and sell their skins to fur buyers. You could buy a seal skin coat in the exchange. They were going for about six hundred dollars at the time. Which isn't a lot of money now, but you can't even buy one now. A common item on almost every restaurant menu in Kodiak were crab tails. You can't get those anymore either. You could get them at the civilian restaurant which doesn't exist anymore, but it used to be where the Administration building is now right inside the gate of the Coast Guard base. You could get it at the old Beachcombers.

[John] Did you ever see the old Beachcombers? Actually, it was the new Beachcombers the old one went out with the tide when the tidal wave came in. The original Beachcombers floated out to sea. The guy who owned the Beachcomber somehow got a deal on this old Canadian Princess Boat. The Canadian Government used to run passenger liners up and down the West Coast, and they all had Princess' names that's why they called them Princess Boats. This one was called the Princess Nora. He probably got it for a song and dance and had it towed up here. He pulled into the inside of Mission Road just off of Mission Beach, and then tilled in a parking

lot. There it sat high and dry and had a restaurant downstairs. They had state-rooms that you could rent out like a hotel. A lot of them were taken up with people in the band, and go-go dancers which were popular at the time. These weren't topless. They wore skimpy outfits, but weren't topless. They worked after hours too. Then upstairs was the bar and it was real tiny. Everything on that thing was tiny. The bar was only eight or ten feet long. The dance floor was real small and they had these real dinky little cocktail tables around the dance floor. The stage was real small. It was the only place that had a live band and dancing girls. It was outside the city limits so it was open until five a.m. Springtime you'd go there in the daylight and come out at four in the morning and it would still be daylight. It would get dark and daylight again while you were still in there partying. Eventually it got so rundown and it was so small that we outgrew it and they built the new Beachcomber which is now the Salvation Army.

I told you when I came up here I had no idea what the job really was. When I got here I found out that I would be doing maintenance in a steam powerplant that provided all the power for the Navy Base. I knew absolutely nothing about powerplants, but I knew a lot about steam equipment, so it worked out alright. I worked there almost four years and I quit to go to school. I moved to Texas to go to college for a couple of years. When I left my boss told me that if I ever needed a job to give him a call because he said that he thought that I was a good employee and that he wouldn't mind having me back, and I wasn't leaving under any bad terms. When I was ready to come back I just called him up and he said just fill out an application and send it to the personnel office and I'll take care of it from there. I came back in Fall of 1972. By that time the Navy was out and the Coast Guard was in. It was kind of funny because I was driving back to Seattle from Texas and I still had Alaska license plates on the car, and almost every place I stopped for gas or anything somebody would always comment on the Alaska license plates. I stopped in Falen, Nevada to get gas and a guy came up to me and said "I see you've got Alaska license plates on your car. What part of Alaska

are you from?" Well I've had people ask me that before, and when I tell them Kodiak they just sort of give you a blank look and say "Oh" , most people have never heard of Kodiak. So, I said "Well, its a little island out in the middle of the ocean you probably never heard of it called Kodiak." He said "Thats amazing I just came from there." It turned out that he was a Chief Petty Officer in the Navy, and had been one of the last guys out of the base while it was still Navy. So we talked about Kodiak a little bit and a lot of the places we both knew about, and how the place had changed since I left. So there was a little lull in the conversation, and I asked him how he like Falen, Nevada and he says "Well, I'll tell ya how I like it here. I like it so much that I just volunteered for duty in the Antarctic." He was serious, yea he was going to go to the Antarctic. But, the powerplant; getting back to the powerplant when I came back it was not as a maintenance worker, but as an operator which is what I wanted to do. It started out as \$7.77 an hour which doesn't sound like much money now, but I was working as a machinist for Marathon Corporation on swing shift and with my swing shift differential I was making only \$3.36/hour in Texas. Just between the time I had gotten hired and by the time I got up here I had gotten a raise. When I got here it was almost \$8.00.

[Vanessa] Were you still flying? Did they still have a flying club here?" Yea, they still had the flying club. The Coast Guard took it over, and if fact they still had the T-34, but that wasn't to be here very long. There were other Navy flying clubs that wanted it, and they were at a premium. There wasn't that many in the system that were licensed for civilian flight. I think ours went to Wigby Island, and some LTJG promptly landed it in the ocean. That was a fun airplane to fly. The Navy still kept their claim on it even though it licensed for civilian use. I worked doing all the maintenance for the flying club here up until 1979. When I left here to go to school it was a fairly big flying club about one hundred fifty members. There were at least two four-placed Cessna's and a couple of two-placed Cessna's, a little two-placed piper, a Republic See-Bea, the T-34. We had five or six airplanes. The club was real active. When I came back and the

Navy had moved out, and we lost the T-34 we were down to about one four-placed Cessna and one 172 and two 150's. That is basically all we had, and I think that is what the flying club still consists of today. In fact the 172, I was instrumental in buying. It was brought up here by Mike Brechen who owns Brechen Enterprises. At that time it was a fairly new airplane. We heard that he had it for sale, and we decided that we were interested in buying it and we eventually settled on a maximum figure that we were willing to pay for it. I called him and approached him about buying it, and he was more than willing to sell it to us, but of course, he wanted his price, and it was considerably more than we were willing to pay for it so I told him that we were only prepared to pay \$19,000 for it. I think he wanted \$24,000 for it. So, he decided to sell it through a regular retailer on consignment. I told him that by the time he paid him [the retailer] his cut that he wouldn't wind up with as much as we were offering him [Mike Brechen]. I left him my phone number and told him that if he changed his mind to call me back, and about a week later he called and apparently he'd talked to a few of the people that specialized in selling airplanes and found out how much it was going to cost him to sell his airplane and he was a little more humble.

[Vanessa] Can you explain a little bit about the A76 Program? Well, before A76 came along this powerplant that we had out here on the base, which is the old concrete building down on the waterfront with no windows in it. All the machinery is still there. That building was built before WWII, and all the equipment that is in that building is all pre-WWII vintage stuff, and we operated it continuously 24 hours/day up until we shut the plant down in 1979. All that stuff was over forty years old, and it was a lot of work and a lot of expense to keep it running. The lead time on a lot of the machinery was three years. It was so long that if we got into a jam that we had our own machinery shop and I would make the part because we just couldn't wait three years for it so I would make whatever it took. The Coast Guard could see the handwriting on the wall. It was going to get too expensive to keep on the line, so they

eventually negotiated a contract with KEA to buy electricity from the local electric utility. The powerplant not only provided electricity, but it also provided steam heat to the base, and they still needed the steam. So they built a new boiler plant on top of the hill. The blue metal building with the stacks sticking out of it. After we shut down the powerplant we moved up to the steam plant and ran that. Then along came the governments' A-76 Program which actually had been in effect for a number of years, but the government didn't really push it. I don't think any of the services really wanted to do it. They were eventually forced to do it by Congress. What it amounted to was putting everything they had that the Civil Service people were doing into a contract for them and putting that contract into a bid so that private contractors could bid on this same service. If they could come up with a bid that was ten percent lower than what Civil Service was doing the job for then they would get the bid. This was the case here in Kodiak. It was called A-76 presumably because it became law in 1976. It was some contracting company from back east that took over. They were never satisfactory for the Coast Guard. Now Pic-Wic is doing it. All of us that were here and working for Civil Service had the opportunity to keep our jobs and go to work for the contractor doing the same work that we were doing and a lot of people chose to do that. A lot of those people are still here. Some chose to try and remain in government service because they had a lot of time in government service. So they transferred to several different places. I chose to terminate my civilian employment even though I had twenty-four years service. It was the only way that I could get the severance pay that I had coming. I wanted to do something different anyway. I was disenchanted with working for the Coast Guard. It left me with not a very good feeling with working for federal civil service. It made me realize that there is no such thing as job security no matter how sincere you are about your job and doing it well. I decided to go and do some of the things that I wanted to do, and one of the things that I wanted to do was to fly professionally which I had done on a part time basis.

So I went to work for Mark Air for three years. I had a lot of fun. I didn't make any money, but I had fun. Probably the best I ever did was the year I quit and that was right in the middle of the year, and I think I grossed about \$22,000-23,000 in the first six months. I wouldn't have grossed that the second six months because they moved the Caravans out of here. The Caravans were good money for me. I was making \$42.00/hour flying the Caravan. Shortly, after that I went to KEA doing maintenance; back to where I started thirty years ago. Just a different company and making more money.

Aviation is a hard way to make a living. It is hard if you own your own airplanes and own an aviation business, or just fly airplanes. It is long hours, twelve to fourteen hours a day for only five hours of flying, and you only get paid while you are in the air. Your pay doesn't start until your wheels leave the ground and it stops when your wheels touch the ground. Loading and unloading, computing weight and balance, dealing with passengers, preflight briefing, all of that is gratis. You are doing that for free. Flying around in this weather was scary but it was kind of satisfying knowing that you were good at it. I managed to earn the respect of my peers in this business, and that's not easy to do. I think I accomplished just about everything I wanted to do. I put in over two thousand hours in Caravans, and that was the most remarkable plane that I ever had any experience with. It was a lot more airplane than I ever expected to get to fly. I had a lot of fun doing it, but I couldn't really make a decent living at it. Plus I am getting to old to work fourteen hours a day seven days a week. [Vanessa] Did you ever do instrument flying in these? I did some instrument flying in the plane, but technically on a revenue flight in a single engine airplane it is not legal under part 135 rules, so we called it special VFR (Visual Flight Reference). A lot of my special VFR approaches into Kodiak were basically instrument approaches. What I would do coming in here, if it was really hard instrument conditions, and I was stuck out there and the airport was under instrument flight rules, I would go outside the control zone to

the East out over the ocean and establish myself on the localizer on the runway. The localizer is a highly directional electronic signal that goes right down the center of the runway and miles and miles out over the ocean. I would then call the tower and tell them that I was ten miles east of the runway, and requesting a special VFR clearance into the airport. I couldn't ask for an instrument approach because I was operating under Part 135 rules in a single engine airplane. If the tower has any instrument aircraft out there then they couldn't let me in, and I would hold outside the control zone. Once the traffic is out then he would clear me in. Now, I know that I am the only guy in the control zone regardless of whether I am flying under instruments or under VFR. Now, I can basically do anything I want and not worry about running into anyone. I would then fly down the localizer. The Caravan had good avionics and you always knew right where you were. I just had to watch the DME countdown and keep the needle centered until I saw the runway. Nothing to it, but you don't tell the guy in the tower that you are out there flying in the clouds. Number one, if you are out there flying in the clouds you had better know exactly where you are. I did have a few bootleg procedures for some of the other flying around here, but I didn't use it too often. I just had to decide to either spend the next three days in Ahkiok, well who wants to do that. Or, I would decide to come on home the best way I could. Getting into Larsen Bay, a daily destination, the weather would be good on top and it would take a long time flying down below at two or three hundred feet. Plus, it was dangerous flying down that low. So, I would fly through a break in the clouds and get on top. This was fine until you get to Larsen Bay and there would be no holes to get down back through. When, you talk to the agent in Larsen Bay and he says that it is clear to one thousand feet and he could see all the way across Shelikof Strait. Good flying weather underneath, and good flying weather on top, but how do you get down below? I doped out a procedure on that on a boring day. The loran was good on the west side and when I was six miles out of Larsen Bay on a direct line from Larsen Bay to Kodiak I

would turn to a heading of 315 degrees and begin my descent. That would take me right out to the middle of Uyak Bay towards Shelikof Straight. Now, you have only thirty miles of open water ahead of you and that is all that is ahead of you. I would then turn around and backtrack and hope I wouldn't run into some other fool doing the same thing. That is how I would do that stuff, but I wouldn't tell anybody that I was doing it. Everybody in Larsen Bay would say "Oh send John. He knows how to get here". There was a lot of satisfaction flying while I was doing it because there weren't a lot of people that could do it that well. I had a lot of guys tell me that my minimums were a lot lower than everyone else's, but it was just from familiarity. I learned to fly here. I learned to fly here in 1968, and I have been flying here ever since. You can't expect some guy to come here from New Jersey and do the same thing that I was doing. A lot of the situations that I would find myself in were anticipated and planned for. Old Harbor, for instance has a couple of passes that are fairly low that you can go through. You can go to Kalsin Bay and across Summit Lake and across Lake Miam and Uyak Bay to Eagle Harbor. From Eagle Harbor there is a real low pass into Shearwater Bay. You make it at four hundred feet if you are willing to get into the trees. You get into Shearwater Bay and start looking for Left Cape which is only about four miles across and sometimes you can't see it. You have already gotten that far by the braille system, now you are in Shearwater Bay. Left Cape is all shear cliff right straight up for fifteen hundred feet, and you don't want to be surprised by that. You don't want to be going 120 knots and all of a sudden see that. One day I decided to see what it would take to get me about 100 yards off of the Cape. Well, it was only 170 degrees. Come out of Shearwater and steer 170 degrees and I would be 100 yards off of the Cape. In a minute and a half you should see the Cape. The whole idea of survival here is to have a plan B, C, and maybe a plan D because a lot of times plan A doesn't work. If you don't have another plan you'll be dead, or worse yet you will survive and have to explain it to the FAA. The differences in the weather around here is incredible.

I have seen it where you can't see across the apron to the runway here in Kodiak, and in Larsen Bay they are calling to find out why we aren't coming in there. They are saying that it is sunny and we can see the volcano spewing steam seventy miles away on the Peninsula.

[Vanessa] How have you found that it has changed since you first started flying here? Well, it has changed a lot. The navigation aids are a lot better than they were. Kodiak was one of the last places in the whole federal airways system that still had low frequency four legged range out on Woody Island. Those things were invented back in the thirty's. A lot of the equipment that they were using on that island was from that era. Low frequency radio has a lot of limitations. It is not accurate in bad weather. It is real unreliable. Communications now are incredibly good compared to what we had then. Most of the communications were also low frequency communications, and there again, if you were in bad weather it affected those to the point where they were unusable. When I first came here you would see a lot of planes with low frequency antennas. You could tell which planes had the low frequency radios in them because the antenna looked like a badminton birdie. This was located on the back of the vertical fin of the airplane. The antenna on the inside of the airplane was a big reel with a crank on it. When you wanted to use your radio in flight you would crank out all this wire. The badminton birdie would act as a drag to pull out this wire until you had several hundred yards of wire hanging out of the rear of the airplane, whichever was the right amount of wire for whatever frequency you were using. To get the channel on the radio you would have to dial it in. You just couldn't punch it in like today. The only way you knew if you were dialed in was to listen to someone else talking on the frequency, or get fairly close and call somebody and wait for an answer so you could fine tune it. When you were done talking you would then have to crank in all the wire. You never see an airplane anymore with a little badminton birdie on the back of it. That was common to see here in those days. That was the state of the art

communications. We of course didn't have loran or satellite positioning. There were a lot of guys flying around here that didn't have radios period much less navigation radios. The most common navigation radio was an ADF (Automatic Direction Finder) used to tune into a local broadcast station or the NDB on Woody Island and the needle would point towards the station and you would point the airplane in the same direction and with a little luck you would get there. Most guys didn't have VOR's even the commercial airplanes. The original ADF had directional ambiguity. The needle would point towards the station, but with the system that they had you couldn't tell which end of the needle the station was at. Another words, the needle would swing around and line up with the signal from the station, but you had no way of knowing whether it was behind or ahead of you. They eventually solved that little problem. Most of the guys in the 1960's didn't have to worry about that too much. The old WWII radios had directional ambiguity and if you weren't careful you would end up flying away from the station instead of towards it. That is how those guys got lost in the desert in North Africa. It was way after WWII when they were found. They were supposed to be going to Italy and wound up in Africa. So things have changed quite a lot. Not only the commercial pilots, but the weekenders take this stuff for granted, and it is expensive, but they buy it. Now, a lot of private pilots have loran and hardly anybody flies without a VOR. There are probably a lot of guys flying around today that couldn't get from point A to point B without a loran and a VOR, and a good radio to talk to flight service to point him in the right direction when he does get lost.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

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