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Bob Reeve

1966

RAYMOND BANKS: Alaska is 100 years old, and one of the men to help pioneer the skyways of Alaska is Bob Reeve. Bob, you've been quite prominent in opening up the skyways here in Alaska. What brought you up to Alaska? BOB REEVE: Well, to tell you the truth, I was flying the airmail for Pan American Airways down in South America, and I become involved in a wreck, which I felt — and I got — I lost my job, I got canned, I got fired. And that did something to me that I made up my mind I was never going to work for anybody else and I was going to go on my own there and I was never going to let anybody have anything to do with my life, and I was going to be the biggest bum or the biggest success that there ever was. And it looked for a time like I was headed to be the biggest bum, but I finally overcame the obstacles and came on to be a modest success.

SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: And you came to Alaska in what year? BOB REEVE: I first came in 1921. And I spent two years in the Orient and I left, came back by landing the stocks, and we'd lost a propeller to the boat off of the Aleutians at Unalaska Island, and we drifted in, were picked up by the Coast Guard, and that was my first contact with Alaska in 1921. SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: Now, I understand you are the oldest Second Lieutenant in existence? BOB REEVE: Well, according to the records, I held a reserve commission from — after World War I, and — but just recently, in the meanwhile I had a job here as the Commander of F-Flight of the 317th Fighter Interceptor Squadron of which I was a Second Lieutenant. There's many people that called it — various times they called that flight F-Flight as the Fink Flight, but in defense, I wanted to say it's got the highest ranking people in there there ever was. And for instance, my wingman is a Lieutenant General. They — even though they all made me ride in there, we got a lot of prestige. Another thing about Fink Flight, we got — we got our own still. We are the only flight in the 317 that's has got its own still. And we have our own system of navigation, which I devised myself. You take off, and you're heading for a place, and you've got a red light on one wing and a green on another and you stay right between those two lights and you'll never fail to get there.

SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: Some of the notables that you've associated with the last 40, 50 years are Jimmy Doolittle. Can you tell us a little something about Jimmy? BOB REEVE: Yes, I'll tell you something about Jimmy. There's a thousand stories about Jimmy and every one is true. In fact, Lowell Thomas for many years is going to write Jimmy's true biography, but since Jimmy got to be a Medal of Honor winner and an American hero, he cannot tell these stories, but I'll tell you one myself that — for which I — which I've always thought was one of the best stories of Jimmy. Back in the early '20s in Rockwell Field, he was a — he went out and he wrecked an airplane. And in the process of the — of the — he had to report to his commanding officer, an old officer named Harvey Burwell. Many of the people in the Army will remember Harvey. He was a — he was bedeviled by these young lieutenants. And he called Jimmy in and he gave him heck for this, for this wreck. Well, Jimmy very derisively turned around and made a

movement with his hind end and derisively to Harvey Burwell. And he says — in the meanwhile, his pants had been torn in the wreck and he didn't know it. And Harvey was infuriated, he got up and says, you Doolittle, you such and such, and he says you can't even keep your hind end in your pants. Get the heck out of here. SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: When did you first meet Jimmy? BOB REEVE: Oh, in the early air racing days in the '20s, late '20s.

SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: I imagine you've seen quite a few changes since those days, haven't you? BOB REEVE: Yes. Most of them have been — have been for the best, although I have a great nostalgia for — for some of the old-timers and some of the days before it became overcivilized, and the Great Society has tried to take us over. SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: Can you relate some of these experiences in Alaska? BOB REEVE: Well, I've had many of them. Many of them. For example, in the flying around here, I'd had — I've had 21 forced landings, including two ditchings, and pert neared drowned both times. But I made it through. And in the omnipotent hand of the Deity, I guess he was watching out for me. And all I — at times, I couldn't consume — I wouldn't want to consume all of the day telling about some of the — the instance in the forced landings and so forth. SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: Why don't you relate to the listeners a couple of them. BOB REEVE: Well, say, I just want to — I think I might be — you might be interested in this. When I first came to Valdez, there was very little money around the country. And I had an old Fairchild 51, and I realized that if I was going to make it a success, and I couldn't make it flying, and there was a lot of gold mining around there, and I decided to find a gold mine, and I did. I found one of the richest little gold mines in the — in the area.

BOB REEVE: And I came home that night, and I had been out there for a week, and I was all full of whiskers and everything, and I badly needed a change of underwear and everything, and what do you suppose the first thing I did? I didn't go — you think I'm going to say I shaved. I went down to the bootleggers and I got two quarts of moonshine, and I went down to the pool hall with my friends, we celebrated and we celebrated, and say, that was a great day. We — we were great flyers, we were great prospectors and we were officially millionaires, and, oh, yay, we believed in the brotherhood of man, and we couldn't do no wrong. And about that night at about ten o'clock, I decided to go up to the Moose Hall where they had a dance. And there was a girl up there and I asked her for a dance. And of course, I was not being outfitted for the Great Society with the proper attire and everything, she — she appeared very ashamed of me. And of course, I was insistent to have a dance with her. In the meanwhile, I told her, I said, hey, haven't you read the news that I struck it rich up in the mine, I'm going to be the next millionaire in the country? And after awhile she says — she followed me to the corner, and she says, yeah, she says, I know all about that Mr. Millionaire business. I says, what do you mean, you saw the rock? You heard about it? No, she says, I got a reading on you. You know what, Mr. Millionaire, I found out that you owe 11 months meal tickets at the Chinaman's, and you haven't paid your gas bill for 13 months down at the Standard Oil Company. But I had the last word. I said, you can't deny I hadn't gotten good credit around this town anyway.

SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: And I do believe you do have good credit around here now. BOB REEVE: Well, yes. After 35 years around here, starving myself and underpaying my people and overworking them and everything, I finally got paid, and all my debts paid up, and I hope to keep them current for a while, although the Great Society has been doing its best to get me on the — on the red again. There... SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: Now, your office was located on Fourth

Street during the earthquake — oh, Fourth Avenue, during the earthquake. BOB REEVE: Yes. Well, it survived the earthquake very well, but I — in a way, I was a — I had quite an experience during the earthquake. Of all the times, that was my birthday. That was my 62nd birthday, and you know where I was, I was destined to be up on the 15th floor of the Anchorage Westerner Hotel at the Trillion Club, which is the highest point in Alaska. And I was up there getting in training for my big birthday party at home, but all at once came the — came the — that quake, and it was something. Words can't describe the — the horror of that. And my — of course, we were thrown all over, and the building itself is reputed to have gone 50 feet over on each side of the street. And this lasted for three and a half minutes. And I laid there wondering it isn't when, when are you going to die, if — are you — if you're going to die, you says, it's just when. When is the building going to collapse. But one thing I found out in that three and a half minutes that I wasn't afraid to die. And it was a great thing to me. But I want to tell you that I eventually got out of there. Now, there's some awful snide stories going around about me getting out of that building. Everybody says I was scared getting out of that building. Well, I wasn't scared but I passed four fellows who really were.

SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: Bob, you're quite a hunter, too. As I look around your office here, I see big grizzly bears that you have shot, whatnot. BOB REEVE: Those are giant Peninsula brown bear. See that big bear I got? Well, I dropped vitamins to that bear four years during the war to get him built up there, and he finally — when he came out, I got him. SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: What are some of the other trophies that you've collected in your years here in Alaska? BOB REEVE: Oh, white sheep and that ram, it's a ram, the Dall sheep. And say I want to tell you about a real hair-raising account I had one time. After I had shot this big bear, I got a — had a reputation, of course, as a bear killer and a hunter, and there's a fellow named Jack McCord, an old Alaskan who had a bunch of Russian cattle which he was trying to move, which these Russians had transplanted there a couple of hundred years ago. And he had room like all the animals in, they had long horns and small bodies, but they could run like a deer and they were very vicious. Well, but he also had a bunch of Hereford cattle there. He was trying to go and make a beef stock out of them. And in the meanwhile, the bear had swung over from the mainland and had started to kill off his Herefords. And, of course, with my reputation as a mighty hunter, and says come, come on and get my bear, it was a big one. And I says, I'll get another record. Well, I had chased this bear up this gulch amongst the alders, and the alders are 7, 8 feet high. And I got within the — about a couple of hundred feet of him, and I had to get on a big rock to shoot him. But I got on the rock, and just then a williwaw came along and blew me off the rock. As I went off the rock my gun went off. And I climbed up on the rock as fast as I could, and the bear had heard me, and the bear, he was charging, and I was just about to shoot him when I heard a noise behind me, and here was one of these wild cattle of Jack's that had been stalking me. Well, I only had a chance to shoot one animal, so I shot the bear. SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: And what happened? BOB REEVE: I knew I could shoot the bull any day.

SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: All right. So I fell into it. Bob, you're something else. Bob, you were here when the Second World War broke out. What play part did you play in it? BOB REEVE: Well, I did a — I had a contract with the Army to go into a lot of their stations where — where I want to say that they didn't exactly want to go in, but the weather was so bad and the other people wouldn't go in, so they hired me so they could have an airplane right there available

and go whenever they wanted to. Now this was the Alaska Communication System in particular. And they had the responsibility for maintaining all the communications, most important in operating war, and I did their flying for them. This was from 1942 through 1945 until after the Armistice. Believe me, when I was over in that, I laid in bed until the morning all morning wondering why I was still alive.

SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: Do you remember any of the hair-raising experiences during this time? BOB REEVE: Oh, yes. I'll never forget one time I came swimming in from the Bering Sea one time. This was in — I'll never forget the day and the hour, July 6, 1943, and it was during the — getting ready for the Kiska invasion, and I had some radar equipment that they badly needed and I was on my way to Amchitka. And I had an old Boeing 80A at that time which had only 5 hours fuel. And I got over Cold Bay, my first fueling point. And I — at that time of the year, as fog started and I was going into Cold Bay, Cold Bay closed in. But I wasn't worried at the time because 10 miles south of there was a little satellite field, which is a base where they could use in case the weather got real bad. And I headed for that, and I got there that's closed in. Well, Sergeant, I was in one of the most unenviable situation any flyer was. Here I was on top of the fog a thousand feet, pitch dark, with a half an hour of fuel, and no place to go. However, I got the — I knew I had to do something. Well, naturally, that's the understatement of the — of the minute, as it was, and you understand I had to do something. And so I had planned to go to a — they had a Pavlof Volcano about 15 miles from there, and I knew that I just had enough fuel to make Pavlof where I could stash myself on the side of Pavlof Volcano.

BOB REEVE: And like all flyers, you know, you think you're stronger than the elements and you can get away with it. But as I got close to Pavlof, I realized I didn't have enough gas to make it there. And so I suddenly remembered that on the — wherever the streams that had run down from the Alaska Peninsula on these mountains, wherever they hit the Bering Sea, there were not spread in the dew point and temperature where they create a very thin rift in the clouds above where these — where these rivers join the Bering Sea. And I headed and looked for one, and I found one just in time because one engine quit of my Boeing, which meant that I had about 4 minutes of fuel left. And I — and I immediately dive down this rift and came out. I — I knew where I was by the phosphorus of the Bering Sea, which had a pretty brisk wind, and I ditched the ocean — ditched the airplane out about 5- or 600 feet out in the — out in the surf. And didn't — the airplane hit with a terrible impact, and there were a number of us injured, but I got everybody together and I got a rope, and I got them on and I got — and I swam and I got to shore, fortunately. They were the — they could all do a little swimming and I got them all to shore. That was my copilot and six passengers.

BOB REEVE: Well, in the meanwhile, I had radioed that I was coming down there, and that night we all lay in the — along in the sand to keep warm, just paralleling each other. And I suddenly — and meanwhile, one of the people has rescued his most valuable possession, it was a quart of whiskey known as Tom Burns Whiskey we had during the war here. It was powerful stuff, as you will see later. In any event, we all lay down, and about three or four o'clock in the morning, you know how you're aware of a presence. I was aware. I looked up and here was the biggest brown bear I ever saw sniffing my feet. And he went right down the line sniffing of everybody. And all at once the fellow, the other fellow that he came to the line, he turned tail and he ran as fast as he could, and it looked like a fur-lined barn door going off there. And — and I

thought it was a phantasmagoria, a bad dream. And I got up and I looked around and this bear had circled us three different times closing in every time, and you can imagine that he was picking one of us out here to eat. And I looked and went down the other end to see why he hadn't eaten this fellow on the end, and here was this empty Tom Burns bottle. And the only reason I can figure is he smelt — he got a sniff of that Tom Burns Whiskey that was left — and he figured there was six panthers lying there in the sand. SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: Now this isn't another one of your stories, is it? BOB REEVE: That is true, so help me.

SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: Bob, you never did tell me what happened to your gold mine. What did happen to your gold mine? BOB REEVE: I developed it and I sold it for the freight contract. And made a living off of it for several years. However, the war came along and it was closed down.

SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: Bob, you're pretty renowned for landing and taking off of glaciers. BOB REEVE: Well, yes. I developed that technique, as I said, when I had to develop this gold mine. And I would take off in the mud flats and go up in the glaciers in the summer and land in the ice fields, which enabled me to — to give a service that developed a lot of the mines in that area. Well, I want to tell you there's one time I went and I tried it and I never expected to get out alive, and that was in 19 — I think 1937. I took a mountain climber named Brad Washburn over in the Canadian Yukon and landed on the big ice cap there at Walsh Glacier where he was going to climb Mt. Lucania (phonetic). And we went down one of the crevasses and I got stuck there for five days. It was real rotten snow. Crevasses everywhere. And meanwhile, I never expected to get out of there alive, but they wanted me to walk out with them. But I — I knew that they had to face a lot of these big glacier streams and the Wolf River and glacier, and I've had my experiences with them, and I decided that I was a flyer, not a mountain climber, and I would fly it out. But I eventually made it out — made it off. And the only reason I got off, I ran about three or miles in and out of this — these crevices of slush and dove off of a big ice — ice floe about 500 feet off, and became airborne just before I got to the bottom.

SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: You wrote a book about this, did you not? BOB REEVE: Well, no, I didn't write a book. I do those things, instead of writing the books. There's several of them been written. I was the principal character in Rex Beach's last novel called the Belly of Thunder. He wrote about 1936. And then there's been other ones written called The Flying North by Gene Potter, and — and my real biography is Glacier Pilot by Beth Day; however, I do not like to look upon it as my biography because I've got all my friends in there and it's everybody's. I'm honored to be the presiding officer, the president of the Cook Inlet Historical Society here in Alaska that was dedicated to the perpetuation of the old history and artifacts of these life around the Cook Inlet area here. SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: And — BOB REEVE: And over Alaska, too, and the Aleutians.

SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: You must find quite a difference in the equipment used back in your day and the present day pilot. BOB REEVE: Sergeant Banks, that's the understated question of the year. In those days, I had no — no radio, very — practically no weather, and the planes were without sweet engines, they were quitting all the time. And in those old days, I'll tell you the truth, we went on, we all expected to get killed sooner or later, but we went on doing what we wanted to do with that thought in mind. But nowadays, we have — in Alaska here we have

one of the finest systems of air navigational aids and fields. In fact, our operation down in the Aleutians down here is predicated on an almost 100 percent bad weather operations. And we keep a — we maintain a pretty fair schedule. I would say over the year there we've maintained — we complete at least 99 percent of our schedules, and complete — that that's the total of completion. We may be delayed a few hours or maybe even a day on rare occasions by weather, but we — but we — we get the mail out. We are the biggest mail carrier in the Pacific Northwest. This year we'll fly a million and a half mail ton miles and almost 4 million freight ton miles and 20 million passenger miles. Our average passenger ticket is over a thousand miles.

SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: I'd like to thank you very much for talking to us today, Bob. BOB REEVE: Sergeant, it's an honor to be with you on your — in your service. And I listen to it hours each — each evening. Principally in the morning, there around the early morning hours. And it's the one station which I — which I really enjoy, which has got the good music and all of the news from all over about what our Armed Forces are doing, and the Great Society in a modest way, and it's unbiased news, and it's one of my favorite stations. SGT. RAYMOND BANKS: We've been talking to Bob Reeve, president of Reeve Aleutian Airways. And this is your Army Hour reporter, Sergeant Raymond Banks, returning you to Washington D.C. and the Army Hour. This is Sergeant Raymond Banks returning you now to Monitor Radio Central. Reporting for Worldwide, this is Army Sergeant...