

UP

One Man's Journey to Feminism

Peter W. Pruyn

he / him / his*

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Cover photo: 7,500 feet over Galveston Bay early on a Saturday morning. ©2020 Peter W. Pruyne.

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Content warning:
Contains descriptions of physical and emotional violence

* Pronounced “prine”. He/him/his: This is the set of pronouns I ask others to use when referring to me. People who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming may use pronouns that do not conform to binary male/female gender categorizations, such as “they, them, theirs.”

4: Alaska

Age 29-31
(1996-1998)

“There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots.”

— Anonymous

On the way home from the Seychelles, I traveled through Vietnam. I loved it and promised myself I would return someday. But not now. Still with an eye on a future astronaut application, now I wanted to pursue the path of a commercial pilot.

Due to the combination of its large size and lack of roads, Alaska has more entry-level flying jobs than anywhere else in the world. My goal was to stay in Alaska until I earned the highest level of pilot’s license, an Airline Transport Rating, which requires a total of 1,500 hours of flying time.

Before driving to Alaska from New York, I completed training for my Commercial Pilot’s license. The following story is from that experience.

The World’s Greatest Landing¹⁹

My flight instructor Rob and I are practicing crosswind landings for my Commercial pilot’s license at a neighboring airport in the flight school’s Cessna Cardinal 177RG. With the hot and humid August afternoon giving us wind gusts of 25 knots, I’m having a hard time. Invariably, close to the runway, the aircraft begins to move in a way that feels completely alien. Each time Rob smoothly takes the controls and effortlessly guides us back to the runway centerline. I am left in awe of his abilities. Each time he has to “help”, however, I feel his intervention as indication of my failure, a pin-prick in my pride.

After the third landing, he suggests we go back home. I protest—I want to do at least one landing without any help from Rob. After carefully lining up on final and putting in a corrective bank angle very early, I finally make it down with Rob’s hands staying in his lap. It feels good. Rob gives me a verbal pat on the back: “A nice way to end the day.” I measure my success by thinking that my skills have inched a tiny bit closer to the obviously superior level of Rob’s.

We leave the pattern and head back to our home field, about 15 miles to the north. The afternoon haze has gotten much thicker. As I track an AM radio station near our airport with the ADF (Automatic Direction Finder), the haze also begins to get markedly darker. I’ve tuned in the control tower frequency to listen for the local weather, but I’ve heard nothing for quite a while. I finally call in.

“Warner tower, Cardinal two-two-seven-five-mike is ten miles south, inbound.” The tower responds immediately.

¹⁹ A version of this story appeared in *Flight Training Magazine*, November, 1996.

“Cardinal two-two-seven-five-mike, Warner tower. Wind two-six-zero at one-zero, altimeter three-zero-one-two. We presently have a thunderstorm just overhead the field now, estimated ceiling five thousand broken, two-zero thousand broken, visibility four, thunderstorm, rain shower and haze, lightening cloud-to-cloud, cloud-to-ground. Thunderstorm west, moving east.” That’s coming our way.

My immediate thought is, well, I guess we’re going to have to divert.

Rob, however, says to me, “I bet the visibility is better than four [miles].” I know what he’s thinking. Flight Service Stations have a reputation for making forecasts more dire than it actually turns out to be. How many times have I heard from a weather briefer the phrase, “Expect afternoon thunderstorms” and then never see a dark cloud in the sky all day?

“So what should I tell him?” I ask Rob.

“Tell him we’ll continue for now.”

I call the tower: “O.K., ah, seven-five-mike, we’ll continue inbound for now and keep you advised.”

“Cardinal seven-five-mike, roger.”

We continue north towards the airport. The haze is now black. Rob turns up the volume on the ADF to continually verify the radio station’s existence. I spot a landmark that puts us on a three-mile left entry for runway 26. I am not feeling comfortable about our situation and hint this to Rob by saying, “It’s no problem with me if we go someplace else.”

Rob looks at me with a reassuring smile, as if to say, well, let’s just see how it goes. He takes the controls, which, this time, I surrender willingly. We are now turning a three-mile final for runway 26. We are high. I call in our position.

“Warner tower, Cardinal seven-five-mike is, ah, on a three-mile final for two-six.”

“Cardinal seven-five-mike, cleared to land. Wind two-eight-zero at two-zero, now.” He’s telling us that the wind speed has now doubled from 10 to 20 knots since his last report.

“Cleared to land, seven-five-mike,” I echo back.

Then, without warning, the blinding vertical shaft of a lightning bolt arcs by. It is close enough so that I can make out the individual bumps and ridges of the multi-stranded giant white spark. The deafening thunder clap follows instantaneously. Was it a hundred feet away? Five hundred? A thousand? I don’t know—all I know is: that was too close.

Rob sees my reaction and asks reassuringly, “Have you ever seen lighting from a plane before?”

“No,” I reply meekly. My only reassurance is that he has more experience than I do. The tower comes back on. There is an underlying unease in the controller’s voice. He forgets “Cardinal” and starts using “Cessna.”

“Cessna seven-five-mike, ah, the wind’s starting to really pick up now. Wind, ah, two-six-zero at two-five, and the visibility is dropping. How far out now?” The wind is now 25 knots. Rob responds.

“We have the airport in sight. We’re, ah, one mile out. We’re going to make a low approach, at least.” The controller is confused by this and asks for confirmation. He wants to know if we’re actually going to try and land or not.

“Cessna seven-five-mike, say again. You’re going to do a low approach?”

“We’d like to come in and try to land.”

“Roger, ah, because we’re going to be going IFR shortly.” When visibility drops below a mile, we will be required to have an Instrument Flying Rules (IFR) clearance. Rob doesn’t want that to happen.

“Roger, well, I’ll tell you what, we’re a mile out, and we can see the airport,” he responds.

We are now on a mile final, still high. I can just make out the two white pulsing strobe lights on either side of the runway threshold. I figure Rob must have seen them much earlier. The far end of the field, however, is now completely obscured by a solid dark gray wall of rain. The wall is moving

steadily down the runway towards us. The tower updates the wind.

“Cessna seven-five-mike, wind’s two-four-zero at three-five, sir.” Thirty-five knots. This is the strongest wind I’ve ever been in near an airport.

Rob starts making S-turns to get us down faster. The tower gives us a final ominous report at half a mile: “Cessna seven-five-mike, wind two-three-zero at four-zero, sir.” Forty knots.

At hearing this final report, I am aghast. I know that we should not continue the approach. The best my non-confrontational personality can muster, however, is a, “Well, I guess we might have to go around.”

Rob responds, “Yeah, we might have to,” as he comes out of the S-turn. I take this as an acknowledgment that Rob expects to go around, too.

But by this point we are past the runway threshold. With hills to our left and the cell dead ahead, our only out is a steep 135-degree turn to the right, and at that altitude and conditions, it’s anybody’s guess as to whether that would be riskier than continuing the approach. All I can do is to trust in Rob’s proven seat-of-the-pants ability. At 100 feet, fighting the gusts, Rob says, “Well, this should be interesting.” That’s the understatement of the year. As I see us and the giant gray wall of rain on a collision course, my mind’s eye replays all the windshear animations that I’ve seen, and I brace myself for the invisible fist of our adversary to reach out from the dark mist and mash us into the asphalt like a bug on a windshield.

But, this time, Nature’s hand chooses not to flex its muscles. Rob does it—The World’s Greatest Landing. With the storm cell fast approaching from mid-field, we touch down with a forward speed of no more than 10 knots over the ground. I can run that fast. Rob fights the controls all the way. The instant before we touch down, the wall of rain hits us. It is deafening. We gingerly turn onto taxiway Bravo, now a river, and a gust tries to flip us. Rob deftly fights it off.

“We’re about to take off again,” he exclaims. I glance at the airspeed indicator and see that it is reading 42 knots—even though we are sitting still.

After what has seemed an unusual radio silence, the controller finally gives us another call. You can hear the tension in his rapid voice: “Cessna seven-five-mike, Warner.” He doesn’t know we’ve made it down. The tower, at mid-field, was at zero visibility when we touched down, even though from our position we could see the runway all the way. Rob calls them back.

“Seven-five-mike’s on the ground turning off at Bravo.”

“Cessna seven-five-mike, when you get in, I want you to give the tower a call.” That’s the FAA’s way of telling a pilot to go to the Principal’s Office.

“Seven-five-mike.”

As we slowly inch our way along the taxiway Rob asks, “Have you ever flown a helicopter?”

“No.”

“Well, I guess that’s what it’s like—coming in with the ground standing still.”

As we taxi up the ramp the line crew watches us in awe. Their expressions seem to say, “You came in ... in that?!” After we get out of the plane they ask me, “How’d you do it?”

“Ask Rob,” is all I can say.

We are greeted in the office with the scene of Rob’s boss, Greg, getting a lengthy lecture over the phone from the tower. The air traffic controller was so excited, he’d called the flight school before we could call him.

Apparently just after giving us the forty-knot report, the tower had recorded winds of 62 knots. The control tower cab windows began vibrating so violently that the flight controllers evacuated the cab. That’s why we didn’t hear anything more from the tower until we were on the taxiway, including the 62-knot report. The controller said that it was the single most violent storm that he had witnessed on the field in his thirteen years of experience. The top of the thundercloud had been reported at 55,000 feet. As if to substantiate the controller’s claim, eight 100-foot-tall pine trees at the far end of the field, each about two-feet in diameter at the base, were taken down by the storm. The two largest

trees had been blown over with their root systems intact; the other six were broken off fifteen feet and higher up their trunks as if they had been toothpicks.

If we had made our approach thirty seconds later

After the rain has stopped and Greg has exchanged points of view on the incident with Rob, we go back out to the Cardinal to collect our gear. Through the warm haze, the sun is trying to decide whether it's safe to come out yet or not. As the gravity of the risk that he decided to take on slowly begins to dawn on him, Rob finally remarks to me, "Gee, I guess I should have asked you what you thought."

It is only then that I realize that he honestly doesn't know that I never would have tried to do what he just did. I realize that my two polite hints to him as we were approaching the field just hadn't gotten through.

What were the dynamics of power in those moments that shaped my behavior?

Moral No. 1: Don't mess with thunderstorms. Rob's mistake wasn't deciding to fight the 40-knot gusts and "ride the tiger" down to the ground. His mistake was not diverting as soon as the tower said, "thunderstorm". Discretion is the better part of valor.

Moral No. 2: Ask your crew what they think. It's not enough to expect your crew to voluntarily contradict you when you are the pilot-in-command. It is the command pilot's responsibility to continually nurture an atmosphere that encourages diverging points of view. Feedback must be pursued actively and systematically.

Moral No. 3: Don't tolerate a flight instructor, or anyone for that matter, doing anything that you don't feel comfortable with. Make yourself heard. Be direct. Despite the dozens of times I'd read, "stay at least 20 nautical miles away from a thunderstorm", when the time came, I didn't express myself. I allowed Rob's superior talent to lull me into a false sense of security. I was wrong.

Flight instructors have things to learn, too.



Figure 21: Muncho Lake, British Columbia near mile 423 of the Alaska Highway.

Once in Alaska, I worked my way into my first flying job with a small regional airline called Yute Air in Bethel, the largest bush community in Alaska. With a population of about 5000, Bethel is located 400 miles west of Anchorage in the middle of the Yukon-Kuskokwim River Delta. Yute is a Yup'ik word for person or people.

The Pilot House

Housing in Bethel, Alaska is expensive. A two-bedroom apartment can be \$1,000 to \$1,200 a month. To provide free housing for new pilots in-training and a bunk for \$400/month after training, Yute Air built this nondescript two-story, white house in the Tundra Ridge neighborhood at a cost of \$215,000. While pilots are not required to live here, most do. This leads to an interesting experiment in communal living.

At any given time about 10-12 pilots live there. The make-up of this group is diverse: ages between 20 and 40, single and married, extroverts and introverts. But there is one way in which the residents are not diverse: they are all male. Combined with a fair amount of turn-over, this creates the feel of a cross between a fraternity and a halfway house.²⁰

There's Bob, a tall good-natured Californian known for his beer brewing hobby and by his passengers for his hairy neck. Randy, a baseball fanatic, pines endlessly for his Southern grits. Jim is a church mouse. Aside from a few incidents of people's food being anonymously raided during their days off, it's a good bunch of people.

And then there's Phil, one of the more vocal residents, with whom I got my first introduction to pilot house living. When I first arrived, centerfolds adorned the walls around the television in the living room like a shrine. Above the sink, a smaller version smiled back at you. They were Phil's. Coincidentally, there have been no female pilots at Yute for a number of years. I know of only one in the area who works for another carrier.

My first night there, I was washing my dishes in the kitchen as Phil was chatting with some other pilots. They were scrutinizing my washing methods. Finally, Phil turned to me and said facetiously, "You use *soap*!?"

As I passed the group watching television on my way to the staircase, I asked if the dilapidated VCR worked. Phil responded, "Yeah. Got any pornos?"

This question felt like a Catch-22. If I gave the honest answer of "No," I would likely invite more shunning from a coworker I may need help from in the future. If I lied and said "Yes," I'd feel like I was shunning myself. I chose to obfuscate: "No, not with me."

"Got any at home?"

"No." I felt my favor with Phil slipping.

The way new pilots get integrated into the group reminds me of what I've read about American GIs in Vietnam. A new pilot's name takes over a space labeled "FNG" on the pilot schedule, the "NG" standing for "New Guy". It seems like new guys are somewhat ignored at first, as if it was a risk to invest emotional energy in getting to know someone before they might wash-out of training. In addition, if a pilot leaves under less than happy circumstance, it's easier for the troops to make fun of him leaving rather than express any sorrow. Perhaps it also helps keep the troops in denial about whether it could ever happen to them.

Shortly thereafter I have the opportunity to make progress in nurturing my relationship with Phil. I've joined the television viewing audience in the living room to eat dinner. Phil gets up to go to the kitchen, and, perhaps noticing something in the way I'm holding my fork says, "You know what

²⁰ Halfway house is an American term for a reduced fee or charity group home for those who are "half-way" between being homeless or unable to support themselves and living independently.

your problem is?”

“No” I await his pronouncement with baited breath.

“You’re too ... proper.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah.”

“Well. I’ll try and work on that.”

“Yeah. Hey, do you know if Mike and Will left?”

“I don’t fuckin’ know.” The curse word is music to Phil’s ears. His face lights up in a big grin, and he laughs. “Alright” Apparently using what he considers manly language is the key to unlocking Phil’s heart. I’m “in”.

Well, a few week later, Phil has a little incident on an icy runway that dings his propeller. No big deal, really. Except a week later, he has a little bigger incident that results in the destruction of another propeller and an eight-hour-old engine. It’s not looking good. We finally get the word that Phil may no longer be with the company. Immediately, there is pandemonium in the kitchen. Arms and bodies make a wild dash for Phil’s kitchen food cabinet. They are raiding his food.

“I got the Lipton noodle things!”, cries a giddy Andy.

“Oh, *sweet*. Salsa and chips!”, a victorious voice retorts. Suddenly in the midst of this merriment, John, one of the senior pilots’, loud voice bellows, “Before you do that, you might want to find out if he’s going to come back for it when he goes to work for Camai.” The pack of salivating hyenas pauses momentarily to consider the possibility of Phil coming back to work for one of our competitors—and just as quickly rejects the idea in favor of the tender flesh of the wounded antelope. Food continues to fly. In a few moments, even John sneaks some Tang back to his room.

I stand off to the side regarding this scene from *Lord of the Flies*. They can’t understand why I’m not taking anything. A can of jellied cranberry sauce is all that is left. It is offered to me. I decline. The next day I find the can surreptitiously stuffed in my food cabinet. If everybody’s guilty, no one’s guilty. I put the can in Robert’s cabinet.

A few weeks later, I’m chatting with Ben, one of my captains, who lives with his wife in his own home. Prompted by another event, Ben remarks, “I think the pilot group has a tendency to behave like a pack of wolves.”

I agree and relate the scene of the pack pillaging Phil’s food. I wonder out-loud, “I wonder what they do with a pilot’s food if he gets killed in a fatal accident?”

“Oh, they have a ritual for that,” Ben explains sagely. “They all sit in the living room for a moment of silence—and then they all run to the kitchen to raid his food.”

Postscript

A new pilot who happened to be a 6’2”-tall ex-Texas cop politely convinced the residents to remove the centerfolds from public walls.

I now live in a two-bedroom apartment with our dispatcher.

Phil never came back.

Memory: The Stairwell

I am walking up our school's central stairwell to our third-grade homeroom. I am with my friends, Paul Forrest and Jeremy Finmore. Another group of four boys—Sam Veltman, Aaron Kaplan, Jake Kanane and Ricky Stepanov—begin to pick on me, I don't remember about what. The next thing I know, they have knocked me down on a flight of the metal stairs. As I fall, the back of my head hits the metal edge of a stair. It hurts.

I am now lying on my back stretched out on the stair, the four of them standing over me, kicking me from all sides and yelling at me. Around us, colorful student murals of a cityscape and jungle scene decorate the cinderblock walls. Their ear-splitting shouts resonate in the concrete column of the stairwell. Jake begins to walk up and down my body from my feet to my chest and back, like I am carpet on the stair. I hold my hands up to protect my face and wince, terrified he will stomp on my genitals.

At some point, satisfied with the damage they've done, they leave me on the stair and move on. Slowly, I get up. I'm trembling and feel a bump on the rear of my head. I join Paul and Jeremy who had been standing on the next landing watching the ordeal. We walk to class.

The welt was there for the rest of the week.

I never told anyone.



Figure 23: Top: The Cessna 208 Caravan N1232Y, *Victoria's Wings*, in which I flew as a copilot on the snow-covered ramp in Bethel. Bottom: A Cessna 207 "Sled". This photo was taken by fellow Yute pilot Scott Burns in King Salmon.

Janice Voss

In 1995 I came across an email listserve for those who were interested in the astronaut selection process. Members shared tips about the application process, asked each other questions, and offered a wide range of answers. Every once in a while, a member would get invited to a coveted week-long astronaut interview at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. Members would also discuss/gossip about NASA history, spaceflight, astronauts, and pretty much anything else on their minds.

It was therefore surprising when one day an actual astronaut, Janice Voss, outed herself to the listserve that she had been listening-in for a while. Suddenly members were incrementally more business-like in their behavior. Every once in a while, Janice would provide the gift of a “from the horse’s mouth” answer to some of the group’s questions. Given how busy astronauts are, I found her presence on the listserve an enormous act of generosity.

A basic concept I learned from the listserve is that most successful astronaut applicants applied multiple times over many years before actually being selected. It therefore made sense to always maintain an active application.

In 1997, I finally got my records in order and began preparing to submit my first application. Coincidentally, around the very same time, Janice flew on her third space shuttle mission, STS-83. A picture of her floating in zero-G appeared on the front page of the *Anchorage Daily News*.

Inspired by these events, I wrote her the letter below. I was surprised how quickly she responded.

PETER W. PRUYN
Avenue
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(907)
yute@alaska.net

21 April 1997

Dear Janice,

You do not know me, but for the last year and a half I have read your comments to the ASCAN e-mail list.

Last week, I had the fun of following your mission through e-mail updates and by watching live mission audio and video via the United Space Alliance web site. It was a thrill to hear someone that I "knew" speak live from Columbia only to then see a picture of you floating weightless in the *Anchorage Daily News* the very next day. It made me feel part of NASA's work.

This summer I will submit my first application to Duane Ross. I recall you mentioning that the book *The Real Stuff* was your inspiration to start seriously thinking of applying, that that book put in terms that you could relate to the real possibility of being an astronaut.

Dreams can be fragile things, and the presence of a personal example to follow makes all the difference. I realize that the ASCAN mailing list has had it's ups and downs, and I'm sure that you have, more than once, considered signing off. I know I have. I am writing to let you know that your example and contact, as long-distance and one-way as it may be, has been a significant sustainer of my dream. You've made a difference. Thank you.

Good luck in your future missions.

Sincerely,

Peter W. Pruyne
yute@alaska.net

National Aeronautics and
Space Administration

Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center
Houston, Texas
77058



May 10, 1997

Peter,

Thanks for your April 21 letter. When I was trying to figure out how to become an astronaut (and whether or not it was the right thing for me), I got a lot of help from astronauts along the way. That help meant a lot to me, and helped keep me going.

One of my favorite stories: When I was in graduate school, I went to a talk by Rusty Schweikart, an Apollo astronaut. In response to a question about how one could become an astronaut, he said something like:

It is very hard to predict what NASA will be looking for in 10, 15, 20 years from now. However, one thing you know they will want is excellence. The best way to achieve that is to try to be honest about what you are good at and enjoy doing, and pursue that path. Excellence then becomes a game, not a chore, and your ability and enthusiasm will make you very competitive. If your qualifications match what NASA is looking for, you have a good chance of achieving your dream, as I did. If not, you have a career you're good at and enjoy, which was really your goal anyway.

There were many times when I chose career paths which I was pretty sure would decrease my chances of becoming an astronaut, but were paths that fitted me better. On every one of those occasions I thought very hard about what Rusty had said, reaffirmed in my own mind that he was clearly right, and pressed on.

I ran into Rusty in the grocery store here in Clear Lake City a year ago. (His son, Randy, works for McDonnell Douglas here and helped train me on STS-63.) I couldn't resist thanking him for that advice.

The reason I told the e-mail list I was listening was that I wanted to give some of that back to people coming after me. I very much appreciate letters like yours letting me know that I have made things a little easier for someone else. Good luck!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Janice Voss".

Janice Voss

P.S. I'm astounded that your letter reached me. I have never lived at the address you sent it to, and haven't lived in that zipcode for 4 years.



Figure 24: The photo Astronaut Janice Voss included in her letter to me.

Captain Chickenhawk

Inhaling my corn flakes, I regard the dim view out the living room window. It's the same as it's been for the last few mornings: gray and overcast. Another chilly summer morning in Bethel, Alaska, although it could get very warm later in the day if the sun comes out. I brush my teeth, lace up my black Army-surplus combat boots, and go outside to unplug "The Blue Magoo", a pale blue 1972 Ford Fairmont station wagon that belongs to my roommate, Robert. Robert is one of two dispatchers who work week-on, week-off schedules. When he's off, Robert is gracious enough to let me use his car, no small gesture when the alternative may be a 30-minute hike in minus-20-degree wind-chill. With a loud "VRRrrooommm!!!" the Blue Magoo starts as I pump the gas—and just as quickly dies: "bub-bub-bub-bub ... bub ... bub." The week-old fragrance of salmon from one of Robert's midnight fishing expeditions mixes with the fresh scent of carbon monoxide from the muffler which terminates somewhere beneath my feet. I try again. "VRRROOOOmm!!! bub-bub-bub-bub" It starts!

We're off to work.

I careen down the bumpy dusty dirt road that is an obstacle course of 6-inch-wide mud ruts and washboard at only half the speed at which Robert would drive. (Robert's wisdom about driving in Bethel: "If you see something ahead that you're not sure you can make it through, just speed up.")

Five minutes later, I arrive at the maintenance hangar. I'm the first one here, so I unlock the pad lock with the key that hangs to the right of the door jamb and go inside. I look up my name on the daily aircraft assignment sheet. Unfortunately, the sheet hasn't been updated from yesterday because the pilot who usually does this is out of town. I had been flying temporary duty as copilot in one of our Cessna Caravans for the last few days because Ben, my captain, had twisted his ankle and needed some help. Now that his ankle is better, I was hoping to be back in my own plane today. With the schedule not having been updated, however, it doesn't look like that's going to happen. I find the Caravan OLN's ("zero-Lima-November") clipboard, an 8½" x 11", 1-inch thick aluminum box with a clipboard on the lid which contains the aircraft's paperwork. We refer to this clipboard/paperwork box as the aircraft's "can". I check to make sure all the documents that are supposed to be there are there and that no maintenance items are overdue. I take the can outside back to the car and drive up to the passenger terminal, a large nondescript metal hangar picturesquely situated on the shores of a 7-inch-deep sea of brown mud that is the passenger parking lot. The airport's green and white rotating beacon is on indicating the weather is poor. It'll be a little while before anybody flies anywhere this morning.

No one's here yet. Someone's supposed to open the terminal at 7:30. It's now 7:45, and I see Jimmy, our other dispatcher, walking up to the door. I say good morning, and he mumbles something unintelligible. I follow him inside, get my flight bag from upstairs in the pilot lounge, and head out to OLN to preflight it. I check the fuel, do the walk-around, sump the fuel drains, trying to get as little of the pungent JP-4 jet fuel on me as I can, and check the oil. Then I check three times that I've correctly secured the oil dipstick. I do this because if I get it wrong, the \$250,000 PT-6 turboprop engine will blow its oil overboard in-flight, this \$1.4 million airplane will end up in the tundra—and I'll probably be out of a job. As I do this, Dave Rolson, one of the more senior pilots, comes out to preflight his 207. "How's it goin', Dave?" I ask.

"Lovin' life, man! Lovin' life." With the possible exception of that one morning he started his engine with the engine blanket on, Dave's morale appears perpetually high, almost irrationally so.

I walk back to the hangar and pass Ben limping out to the Caravan. I let him know that he'll be stuck with me for another day. He shakes his head, presumably because he knows that I make three times as much when I am assigned to my own plane.

As I walk in the hangar doors, Mike O'Clary, our station manager, sees me and breaks into a grin. He takes the dwindling cigarette out of his mouth and shouts his daily morning greeting to me

with a slow, bravado, mimicking a T.V. announcer's dramatic voice which fills the hangar: "Captaaaaain Chickenhawk!"

We fly two types of smaller Cessnas. The 207 Stationaire and the 172 Skyhawk. The 207 holds up to eight people; the 172, four. But no one calls the planes by their marketed names. Instead, the 207 is affectionately referred to as a "Sled" because it is so ubiquitous in the Alaskan bush and hauls so much that it has become the aerial equivalent of a dog sled. And the 172s, because they are the smallest aircraft in the fleet and most male pilot egos feel cramped when assigned to fly one, have taken on the nickname of "Chickenhawk". Ever since I was "kicked out of the nest", that is, the Caravan's copilot seat, and able to fly on my own in a 172, Mike, an ex-Marine with a foot-long gray ponytail, has dubbed me, with a curious mix of affection and derision, Captain Chickenhawk.

When I walk back into the dispatch office, Jimmy informs me he would prefer that I fly one of the 172s today, instead of the Caravan, to cover any charters that might pop up. I look at Ben, and he nods in agreement. I don't mind this, but it does mean that I now have to preflight another airplane. I go find the can for 10U ("one-zero-Uniform") and go out and preflight it. When I come back in, Jimmy has looked over his mail loads and realized that he doesn't have all the 207s manned. He reassigns me for the second time to 0GV ("zero-Golf-Victor"), the last 207. I find GV's can and go out and preflight it—now my third preflight of the morning.

Aircraft have registration numbers like cars have license plates. In the U.S., these registration numbers begin with the letter 'N', and all letters in them are pronounced using the aviation phonetic alphabet to avoid misunderstanding them over the radio: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, etc. For example, the N-number N67PW would be pronounced as, "November-six-seven-Poppa-Whiskey." After an initial call-up, one usually uses only the last three digits: "seven-Poppa-Whiskey."

To entertain themselves, pilots frequently take the extra step of slightly modifying these official call signs to express either their opinion of the particular craft or simply their prevailing mood. For example, one of our Cessna 207s is tan with brown trim and looks pretty beat up. Its official call sign of "four-niner-Uniform" is frequently modified to be "four-nine-Ugly". Sporting a similar fetching brown paint scheme, "eight-four-Uniform" has upon occasion been "eight-four-Underwear". "Zero-Golf-Victor", whose audio panel is notoriously perplexing to a first-time user, gets its lumps as "Goat-Vomit"—don't ask me why. 10U becomes "I.-O.-U." Our Caravan, "November-niner-zero-Lima-November"—a mouth-full—on company frequency becomes "Limp-Noodle", and its twin, "three-two-Yankee", on a bad day, flies as "three-two-Spank-Me."

My favorite aircraft nickname, however, utilizes the term "Heavy" which is normally appended to call signs of aircraft over 300,000 lbs., the largest wide-body jets such as 747s and MD-11s. For example one might hear an airliner call itself, "Eastern two-four-seven Heavy." The smallest plane in our fleet is the four-place Cessna 172, and the worst 172 we have is "three-niner-Hotel." It is notorious for being extremely reluctant to start, and its Loran navigation instrument would be better put to use as a door stop. To honor this proud ship, the tiniest and most loathed of all our craft, it will frequently putter up to the ramp with the laconic call, "Three-nine-Heavy's on the ground."

Finished with pre-fighting "Goat-Vomit", I walk back in the terminal and pass the ticket counter where Angela, one of our Yup'ik Eskimo²¹ ticket agents, is sitting quietly on a stool waiting for the morning rush of passengers to begin. Like most of our agents, Angela passes time in-between checking-in passengers by telling unsupervised Eskimo children to stop playing near the baggage conveyor belt, asking drunk passengers to leave, laughing at certain pilots, and simply waiting. This morning, for some inexplicable reason, as I approach the counter she greets me with, "And a fine

²¹ I wrote this in 1998. At that time, the term Eskimo was in common use in the U.S. Since that time, there has been a greater shift towards using the names of the individual Native peoples, such as the Yup'ik and Iñupiat, or the term Native Alaskans. Meanwhile, in Canada, the term Eskimo is considered pejorative. Inuit, Indigenous Canadians, or Aboriginal Canadians is used. For more, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eskimo> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_peoples_in_Canada.

morning it is!” That’s my line! I don’t know what to say. She is mimicking what I usually say when I walk in the terminal in the morning. Sometimes cultural chasms are forged only when you stop trying to cross them.

I go back to the dispatcher’s office to check the weather. “The weather” is six or seven pages of official synopses and forecasts from the National Weather Service. Unfortunately, the weather out on the Yukon-Kuskokwim River Delta, the southwest corner of Alaska, is so local, both in time and location, that such official reports are next to useless. One end of the Bethel runway can be fogged-in while the other end can be CAVU (Ceiling and Visibility Unlimited, a.k.a “severe clear”). Five minutes later, it can be the other way around. The bottom line is, if the weather’s good enough to take off, you take off. If it’s good enough to get where you want to go, you get there. If it’s not, you turn around. I skim the reports and initial the top sheet.

At about this time, it strikes me that it’s peculiarly quiet. I finally realize why: none of the phones are ringing. Normally by this time of morning they are ringing off the hook with reservations, while Jimmy is simultaneously in the process of calling each of our village agents for “Weather and traffic?” Village weather information is a local, look-out-the-window report made by an Eskimo village agent, some of whom can give eyeball reports with uncanny accuracy while others may have had a little too much last night (Dispatch: “How’s your weather?” Agent: “Do you have my paycheck?” Dispatch: “Yes.” Agent: “O.K., the weather’s good!”). Traffic is a count of how many passengers each village has for Bethel that day. Apparently, the phones are disconnected because the corporate office didn’t pay our phone bill. Jimmy will have to wait a little while for those weather and traffic calls. Mike is on his cell phone to try and get a check flown out on the next flight from Anchorage so we can hand-deliver it to the phone company. Meanwhile, we pilots wait for the weather to lift and receive our flight assignments.

Our flights are typically to small clusters of the surrounding satellite Eskimo villages of Bethel. Like aircraft nicknames, pilots have developed their own lingo for the multi-syllabic Yup’ik names of these villages that requires a “secret decoder ring” for any outsider to understand.

The two closest villages are officially Napakiak and Napaskiak, but pilots refer to them as “Wanna and Pocka”, after the airports’ FAA three-letter airport identifiers, WNA and PKA. The villages out on the tundra just west of Bethel are Attmautluk, Nunapitchuck, and Kasigluk—a so-called “tundra run”. The four villages just up the Kuskokwim River from Bethel, or “up river”, are Kwethluk, Akiachak, Akiak, and Tuluksak. To the south are Eek (my favorite) and Tuntutuliak or “Tunt” (pronounced “Toont”). The coastal villages of Kongiginak and Kwigillingok are “Kong and Kwig”. Nearby, Kipnuk and Chefornak have the alias “Kip-Shiff”. The four villages of Nelson Island off the Bering Sea are Nightmute, Toksook Bay, Tununak, and Newtok, referred to collectively as “The Island”. The three villages due west of Bethel on the coast are Hooper Bay, Scammon Bay, and Chevak, or “Hooper-Scammon-Chevak”. And the villages north of Bethel along the Yukon River interestingly all have English names: Mountain Village, Pilot Station, Marshall, and Russian Mission, or “Mountain-Pilot” and “Marshall-Russian”.

Although we have “scheduled service” to each of these villages, a flight will only be flown if we have mail or passengers to fly there, and any given flight will only make the stops that are needed on that day. Furthermore, one’s routing can change in mid-air as you contact the village agent and find out that the passenger traffic is not as advertised. For some reason communication in the bush can always stand improvement.

The pilots have migrated up to the pilot lounge, a giant empty room with bare light fixture holes in the ceiling, lighted by a single floor lamp in one corner that is run off an extension cord. The reason that no electricity is wired to this room is that it didn’t meet fire code, so we weren’t allowed to use it for public occupancy. So the lowly pilots get it. With bad weather, we sit around a card table on an old car seat and left-over passenger waiting-room benches to play “Fours”, the Official Yute Air-Bethel Pilot Card Game. Play is punctuated by loud bursts of “Ha-HAAA!!” from Chris Hayes

as he plays a King immediately after somebody else has played a King to reverse their reversing of the direction of play.

The sixth game of Fours is interrupted as the speaker on the phone crackles with Jimmy's voice: "ROLLLson!" The card game is put on pause as Dave Rolson listens for his flight assignment. The weather must have improved. Jimmy continues with Dave's routing and payload: "Nightmute, Toksook, Nightmute, Newtok. Thousand-fifty pounds." The routing indicates that there will be inter-village passengers from Toksook Bay to Nightmute requiring Dave to double-back along the route. The payload of 1,050 lbs. along with the extra fuel required for this long flight will put the plane at max gross weight. Dave yells back at the speaker phone, "What's the weather?" Jimmy responds with the current village weather reports. The phones must be back: "Toksook, 600 [foot ceiling] and 3 [miles visibility]; Nightmute, 700 and 5; Newtok, 500 and 2." The Newtok weather is right at minimums. "Coming!", Dave yells back. The cards are thrown down on the table, and Dave lumbers down to dispatch. Knowing that their assignments will probably be soon forthcoming, the gaggle of pilots stampedes down the banister-less steel stairs to the hangar floor and into the dispatch office.

For some reason I always seem to get my manifest last. Like all pilots observing dispatcher behavior, I have spent many weathered-in hours attempting to fathom a rational explanation for this mystery, and, like most mysteries of dispatcher behavior, it has gone unsolved. I know I usually take the longest to get my plane ready in the morning, so perhaps this is a factor. Also, since I'm one of the newer pilots, perhaps Jimmy knows that I will be more likely to turn around when I encounter questionable weather, so he sends more seasoned pilots first to reconnoiter. At any event, I am finally handed my manifest: "Eek-Tunt, 768 lbs." It's 470 lbs. of mail and one passenger. Weight-wise this is no big deal. I check Jimmy's village weather clipboard; Eek is reported as 800-foot ceiling and 3 miles visibility; Tuntutuliak is 600 and 3. Away we go.

I sign the manifest, give Jimmy the pink copy, and walk into the hangar to find a ramper to help me load the mail onto my plane. Since I'm the last one to get my manifest, however, all the rammers are already out on the ramp helping other pilots load their planes. I go over to the mail pallets labeled "EEK" and "WTL", the three letter identifiers for Eek and Tunt. I cross-check the weights of the yellow and green nylon mail sacks and brown packages that are there against what's listed on my manifest and load them onto a red four-wheeled cart. I then search the luggage bins for my passenger's 60 lbs. of bags and load them up, too. As I wheel the cart out to my plane, Danny, one of our rammers, intercepts me. Danny is the best ramper we have. He's been around long enough to know the subtleties of loading the planes, balancing the conflicting constraints of putting heavier objects up front against the equally important goal of loading the first destination last so you can unload its cargo first without having to dig through any of the rest of your load. We take out the rear seats to make room for the mail, put a "triple mailer" (a stack of three, 24-can cases of soda-pop, a common item) up in the nose compartment, and secure the rest in the cabin with the nylon-web cargo net and cargo straps. As Jimmy takes the red cart back into the hangar, I give two final tugs on the cargo straps to make them extra snug, and go inside to get my passenger.

Yup'ik Eskimos have interesting names. A curious mix between traditional Yup'ik names and Anglo-Saxon words I'm guessing from missionary influences, their most unique aspect is how traditional European first names are frequently used as last names. A consequence of this is that sometimes a person will have the same first name as last name. It happens more frequently than one might think. A typical flight manifest could include such passengers as: Maggie Alexie, Mike Alexie, Nancy Beaver, Freda Beaver, Violet Flowers, Joseph Andrew, John Oscar, Oscar John, Bessie Friendly, Alice Prettyboy, Willie Kasayuli, Ivan Ivan (pronounced "Eevahn Eevahn"), and, my personal favorite, Wasalie Wasalie. The single passenger listed on my manifest today is Richard Anvik.

I walk out into the passenger waiting room with my manifest and immediately all eyes lock on to me, each hoping that I will be calling their destination. Side-stepping bands of stray Eskimo

children, I announce over the din, “Honolulu! Honolulu?” The response is three laughs, five smiles, and 27 blank stares. I try again: “O.K., how ‘bout: Eek! Tunt! Richard Anvik!?” Richard, a middle-aged man in a red baseball cap, blue parka, jeans, white Nike sneakers and glasses looks at me and slowly begins to rise from the black plastic contoured chair that he has been occupying for the last hour and a half waiting for the weather to lift. I walk over to him and ask, “Ready?” He nods in reply. As he stands up, I regard him momentarily and do a quick estimation of whether he might have been drinking. It’s rare, but part of my job is not to carry those who have. “Follow me.” He follows me outside to OGV.

With the rear of the plane loaded with cargo, I have Richard sit in the copilot seat next to me and give him his safety briefing. “O.K., as you know, please keep your seatbelt fastened at all times; no smoking. On the floor between our seats is a fire extinguisher. To operate, pull the pin, squeeze the two handles together, aim at the base of the fire.” With each sentence, Richard nods at me continuously through his thick glasses. He probably knows enough English to understand what I’m saying, but one can never really tell. The only consolation is that by living out here all his life, Richard has far more time riding in 207s than I ever will. “You’ll find passenger briefing cards in the ceiling. There are three emergency exits: the two forward doors and the rear cargo door. They all open the same way: pull the handle hard all the way back, push on the door to open. There’s an Emergency Locator Transmitter in the rear of the aircraft. A survival kit is in the forward baggage compartment. Do you have any questions?” Richard keeps nodding. I take that as a “No.”

I belt in, start up, and suddenly realize that this is the first time I’ve flown OGV. Above the radios is the set of switches called an audio panel which determines which radio you are transmitting on and which ones you are listening to. There is zero standardization of audio panels in our fleet. Each plane has its own idiosyncrasies which you must discover for yourself through experimentation while the passengers regard you with skeptical stares.

I set up to transmit on what I think is COM1 and make my initial call to the Bethel control tower to request permission to taxi to the runway: “Bethel Ground, niner-seven-zero-Golf-Victor, west ramp, India, Special VFR²² departure, eastbound.” Perplexingly, instead of an air traffic controller responding, I am greeted with Jimmy’s gleeful voice: “Roger, Golf-Victor, you are cleared to orbit Uranus.” Apparently, I have transmitted on the marine radio on company frequency instead of on the VHF radio to the control tower. This is dispatch’s fun way of letting me know I’ve screwed-up while the entire rest of the fleet is listening. “Thanks,” I respond flatly. I re-examine my black plastic adversary, the alien audio panel, and try another button. This time the tower hears me, and, equally good, I can hear them. I taxi down to runway 36.

After Jason Micham takes off before us for a west departure to the tundra villages, the tower clears us for takeoff. I ease in the throttle, and the engine begins to make its comforting racket. We accelerate down the runway, and as the control pressures stiffen, I gradually increase back pressure on the yoke. We liftoff. I release some pressure to let the airspeed build, raise the flaps, and start a shallow turn to the east as the brown tundra skims by 300 feet below. With the air freshly moistened by rain, the underside of the overcast layer is irregular, with wispy lumps of gray hanging down from the clouds like cotton-candy stalactites. I stay at 500 feet, report clear to the east, and head south to Eek.

In contrast to the weather around Bethel, the view ahead across the Kuskokwim River begins to look rather lousy. White clumps of cloud begin to appear up ahead where I would like to be flying in a few minutes. My altimeter needle is wavering just above 500 ft., the legal limit of how low I am allowed to fly. But there is really only one way to know how low clouds up ahead are: go there. As we trundle along, I hear Jason out to the west on the marine radio: “It’s not looking too good out

²² Visual Flying Rules. This means the weather is good enough to navigate by looking outside rather than flying in clouds and having to navigate using cockpit instruments. Special VFR is used when the weather is marginal.

here, Jimmy.” Here is the real value of a common radio frequency for all airborne aircraft. Pilot weather reports from all over the Delta are available instantly. I now know that trying to go around these clouds to the west is probably not going to work. I examine the view to the east and see nothing better.

As the clouds get denser, I try to gauge whether it’s better or worse to the south towards Eek. Is this just a local ridge of clouds? Do things improve towards Eek—or get worse? What about my passenger, including the ones waiting for me in Tunt who have been promised that I will be taking them back to Bethel? Surely they will be disappointed if I don’t make it. Will they be less likely to fly with us next time since we all know that there are other airlines on the field who would fly illegally all day long without even thinking about it? What kind of a disparaging look will I get from Jimmy when I walk back into dispatch and he has to reschedule this mail for another flight because rookie Peter turned around?

Like a flickering television signal interspersed with “snow”, the view out my windshield begins to become intermittently obscured by white clumps of cloud. The ground momentarily comes and goes. A little voice in the back of my head asks the question, “Should I really be here?”

Unlike what I thought I might learn about flying before I came to Alaska, two years here have not significantly improved my stick and rudder skills. Nor have I learned many new aeronautical tricks to help me land more perfectly, or fine points of navigation that might squeeze that much more performance out of my plane. The most important thing I’ve learned in Alaska ... is how to turn around. Unlike what I might have previously imagined, deciding when to turn around does not come from superior knowledge of Federal Air Regulations, or becoming intimate with the reams of technical data about your aircraft’s performance, or memorizing company operations manual procedures, though all these resources are important and certainly a good place to start. Unfortunately, however, all of these documents share a common limitation: they are written in black and white while the world remains gray—out here frequently literally. It is possible to be legal while being unsafe just as it is possible to be safe but technically illegal.

Deciding when to turn around, then, comes ultimately not from the FAA, the manufacturer of my plane, or even my boss, but from listening to that little voice in the back of my head which asks the question, “Should I really be here?” And what I have learned is that as soon as that little voice even has reason enough to form the question, I already know the answer: “No.” Suddenly, all those concerns about what other people think become irrelevant. I start a slow and wide 180-degree turn through the mist and head back to Bethel.

Making the turn mostly on instruments in and out of visual contact with the ground, I return to a northwest heading, and tune in the control tower frequency. Listening to the other aircraft in the pattern, I learn that Bethel weather has improved enough so that I will not have to follow Special VFR procedures to return. I shout at my passenger why I’ve turned around and apologize as best I can over the deafening roar of the Continental IO-520 engine’s 300 horses. The response is yet another inscrutable nod. I switch to the marine radio to tell Jimmy the news.

“Jimmy, I’ve turned around. Ceiling, viz.”

“O.K. We’ll try again later,” Jimmy replies unemotionally.

I switch to transmit to the tower again and tell them that I’m coming back in to land. As I’m listening to the tower’s response, another voice comes on from the marine radio. It sounds like Tony, one of our senior pilots. Over the tower controller’s voice, I can’t hear what he’s saying completely, but I barely make out, “Just look ... blue sky” I wonder if Tony is out flying ahead of me to the south and is trying to help me by letting me know that the weather gets better up ahead. I pick up the marine mic and ask him to stand-by while I talk with the tower. I finish with the tower and then switch back to the marine.

“O.K., go ahead, Tony,” I say. Tony’s voice comes back dripping with condescension. I can hear him shaking his head: “Just look at the attitude indicator, Peter. There’s blue sky in there.”

The attitude indicator is the artificial horizon instrument on the instrument panel that tells the pilot the aircraft's angle of pitch and bank. It does so with a small airplane symbol that is superimposed over a lower half-circle of brown that represents the earth and an upper half-circle of blue that represents the sky. What Tony is saying, on an open frequency for all the world to hear, is that I should continue flying through the clouds illegally by flying on the instruments—where there's "blue sky".

I can't believe what I've just heard. It takes me a few moments to work through the denial of his insult. But while the comment makes me angry, I have something more important to do at the moment: fly the airplane. I shut off the marine radio. If his comment deserves a response—if it deserves one at all—now is not the time, nor is the company frequency the place to do it. Pilots need to be good at a mental trick called "compartmentalization", the ability to put aside emotions, feelings, or problems that would interfere with flying so that they can address them at some other time. A risk of this "skill", however, is the danger of having such issues accumulate by burying them and then never bothering to address them.

I successfully compartmentalize Tony and continue on in to Bethel and land. We taxi up to the ramp, shut down, and I again apologize to Richard. I promise that we will try Eek again later in the day.

As I walk towards the building, I have resolved to just let Tony's comment go. Who cares what he thinks? He wasn't there. I open the door to the passenger waiting area and turn the corner to go to dispatch. Standing right there at the ticket counter, the first person I see is Tony. And as soon as he sees me, he begins to slowly shake his head with a smirk of disgust.

I am more in control of my anger than almost any other person I know. I can count on one hand the number of times since age 12 that I have granted rage the permission to pulse through my veins. But when I see Tony standing there shaking his head, that is *it*. It isn't just that he made fun of me for turning around, but that he did it on an open frequency so that everyone else could hear, and finally, to top it all off, while he himself had been sitting on the ground in a room that has no windows.

I march directly up to him, level my eyes five inches from his, extend my index finger out the remaining four and say in a low seething whisper, "*Fuck you, Tony.*"

Tony's head backs up, his face flushes, and his expression goes blank. All he can think of to say is, "W-what?" Not bothering to relish the moment, I walk through to dispatch, rip off the pink copy of my manifest while forgetting to write down my in-time, and go outside through the hangar doors. I walk around the side of the building and lean up against the corrugated metal siding in the sun. This job has enough built-in adversities without a peer making himself one, too. What is the origin of this most ugly of human characteristics: building oneself up by putting someone else down?

I let the warm sunlight on my closed eyelids purge the events from my system as best it can.

Memory: Van Cortlandt Park

We are playing touch football in a field in Van Cortlandt Park for gym class. I'm in tenth grade. There are about a dozen of us on each team. The spot we're playing in is more dirt than grass.

I am playing the line. Our team has the ball. As the play starts, without warning, Chad Bateson and all his teammates collectively tackle me, for no apparent reason. Twelve 16-year-old male bodies pile on top of me, mashing my face into the pungent moist soil of Van Cortlandt Park.

As they slowly get off me, they are all laughing. Chad has a knowing grin. As I gradually get to my feet and try to brush the dirt off my gym shorts, t-shirt and face, I yell, "What the hell was that, Chad?!"

I look to my right for our gym teacher, Mr. Caldera. He is engaged in close conversation

with an upperclassman about twenty feet away, not paying any attention to the game. Even if he had seen what happened, it occurs to me that football is exquisite camouflage for bullying.

And then something unprecedented happens. Mike Hartzell, who is not a close friend but generally an all-around good guy, pulls me aside and whispers in my ear, "The way to get them to stop is to give it right back to them." I consider this spontaneous peer coaching for a moment. In the brief pause in-between plays, I resolve to follow it.

In the next play, with Mike next to me, I tackle Chad. Without an entire team joining me, it lacks the impact of Chad's attack, but the modicum of justice it affords feels good.

This is the only time in twelve years I can remember a classmate standing up for me.

Thank you, Mike.

A few minutes later I am sitting alone in the cold dark upstairs of the pilot lounge, and Jason Micham walks in. When he sees me, he says with a broad smile, "My hero!"

"Huh?", I respond, bewildered.

"I try not to say anything to that guy," Jason continues, "but if I did, that's probably what I'd say, too." Apparently just as I was trying to decide whether to turn around or not, Jason already had. He landed back in Bethel just ahead of me. I laugh. It feels good. Friends are revealed by the most random of circumstances.

"Everybody downstairs is talking about it," he continues. I am surprised and embarrassed.

"Really."

I had tried to express myself to Tony in a low enough voice that no one else would hear. Apparently the few who did have told all.

A few moments later, Billy, one of the reservationists, and Pat Lynn, a more senior pilot, come upstairs and regard Jason and me. I find it odd that Billy is up here. He never comes up here. Billy stands next to the table and looks at Jason and then at me and then back at Jason. He remarks, "Gee. It's awful quiet up here." Apparently just after I had turned my marine radio off, Pat had told Tony what he had thought of his comments, too. After a few more silent moments, they turn around and go back downstairs to dispatch.

Forty minutes later, the ceiling has lifted to 1,500 feet. Jason and I are still the only ones in the room. Jimmy calls on the phone with the new weather and asks if I want to try again. I do. I go downstairs, and as I walk into dispatch, the ring of pilots around the walls of the room become silent. Tony is sitting in the corner by Jimmy carefully inspecting his shoes.

I take my new manifest, sign it, and walk out to go look for Richard again. We load up for the second time, and just as I'm about to crank the engine, something on the instrument panel catches my eye. On the upper left corner of my artificial horizon, taped on the upper edge of the light blue semi-circle that represents the sky, someone has fashioned a tiny yellow smiley-faced sun, complete with tiny wavy radial beams of sunlight and a dimpled smile. Juxtaposed with the sky-blue of the instrument, the effect reminds me of a child's sketch of a summer's day. I do a double-take at this second reference this morning to my attitude indicator. Was the intent of this solar artist to make more fun of me, or was it to try and make me feel better through a little humor? I decide that if they were going to go to such trouble, it would probably more likely be the latter intent. I find the tiny sun's wide grin infectious. I crank the engine and taxi out while pondering the identity of this mystery artist.

When I call Jimmy on the marine radio with my off time, he asks how the weather looks. "It looks pretty good, Jimmy," I respond. In twenty-five minutes we land on the diminutive gravel landingstrip at Eek.

Most of my life I have felt that I do not fit in. In most groups, I find myself feeling separate,

apart, different. Actions like Tony's only intensify such feelings. In contrast, moments in Air Force ROTC, at Cornell's Program of Computer Graphics, and in Peace Corps created a few of the exceptions to this sense of separate with temporary feelings of belonging and acceptance.

The mystery solar artist turned out to be Pat. Through this small gesture, I heard him say, "It's O.K., Peter." By doing so, I felt appreciated and accepted. I'm not sure I ever thanked him for that.

Thank you, Pat.



Inbound to Bethel, I call Jimmy with my ETA, and he lets me know that next I'll be taking a 172 charter to Kwig for YKHC, the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation, which operates all the local village health clinics. I taxi in, shut down, and walk inside. Charters can be some of the more fun flights we get to do. They provide welcome variety to normal scheduled flights. This afternoon I will be flying a health care technician out to inspect the quality of bottled oxygen in the Kwig health clinic. Apparently, he periodically visits all the clinics on the Delta with a small bag of gas "sniffing" tools. I fuel up 10U, and we depart south. The weather improves markedly as we approach the coast, and by the time we reach Kwig, it is positively beautiful. Typical temperamental Delta weather.

Although I call the clinic three times enroute to try and insure that my passenger will have a ride when we land, no one is there to meet us when I shut down on the small gravel ramp. It's a good 20-minute walk to the clinic across the maze of boardwalks that elevates the village of Kwigillingok one foot above the marshy tundra on which it appears to float. Unfazed by his promised ride being missing in action, the technician takes off under the hot sun for his hike to the clinic. I am left by the small bright yellow and blue plane under a clear hot summer sky.

Off to my left, some Eskimo boys are playing in one of the small lakes of which there are thousands covering the Delta. The boys have a float in the middle of the pond from which they form various games, most involving gaining control of the float. They also have two large green plastic kayaks with which they are doing battle. They sure look like they're having fun. Images of a carefree Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn cooling off as best they know how come to mind. I take off my jacket.

It sure is hot.

I go down by the shore of the little pond just behind the plane and regard the boys enviously. Between tall green reeds, the edges of my boots sink into the soft fine mud. About 75 feet away on the opposite side of the pond, a tall, middle-aged gussik (Yup'ik for "White person"), probably a school teacher, emerges from a house that I would describe as fancy by village standards, and surveys the boys' playing. One of the boys is trying to swim from his kayak to a dock in front of the house. The man encourages the boy, "Let's see you try the crawl like you were doing yesterday." The boy switches to a hand-over-hand motion. "That's it; come on," the man continues to coach. By now I have taken my boots and socks off and am feeling the wonderfully cool water seep between my toes in the suction-laden fine brown mud. God, I'd do anything for a bathing suit. By this point the man has noticed me, and, as if reading my mind, shouts at me from across the lake, "Would you like a swim suit?" I can hardly believe my ears!

I pause for a moment to consider the plane and my passenger. I am right next to the plane, so I'll be able to keep an eye on it from all points on the pond. My passenger has 40 minutes of walking to do, and about 30 minutes of work at the clinic, so he won't be back for more than an hour.

Why the hell not?

"Would I!", I yell back. The man goes inside his house and comes out a few moments later with a plastic bag that he gives to his son in the green kayak. He points at me. The boy spins the kayak around and paddles back across the little lake to me. Held in place under two bungee cords, an extra-large plastic baggie rides on the bow of the kayak. Inside are a neatly folded blue bathing suit

and a large red beach towel. I shout, “Thank you!”

I take the suit out of the bag and change next to the plane under the wing. Now barefoot, the cold mud oozes between my toes. I wade out just far enough to be deep enough to float, take a breath, and submerge.

Cool, cool brackish water exorcises the heat from every pore in an instant. God, it feels great! I catch up with the kayak and its captain and instantly the gussik pilot is the center of attention in the small lake. The two other Eskimo boys dive off the raft and come over, one paddling the other kayak, the other being pulled along by it. There isn’t a cloud in the blue blue sky. It is just glorious. Tom and Huck would be envious.

I try to catch the boy on the kayak, and he swiftly backs away, does a 180 on a dime, and keeps going. He laughs. I laugh. He finally lets me catch up, and I grab onto the kayak’s bow line. “Can I try?” I plead. He reluctantly acquiesces. He slides into the water, and I try to figure out a way to get up into the kayak without it rolling over and dumping me. It’s hard. “Don’t fall in!”, the boy taunts with a smile. I promptly fall in. He laughs. On my third attempt, I manage to slither up the bow to the seat and wriggle in. I just barely fit. I take the double-ended paddle and flail around a little before I start zooming across the little lake. The boy tries to hold onto the kayak’s rope but loses his grip, and I enjoy the resulting increase in acceleration. I chase after the other kayak, and we bump against each other. I’m beginning to feel hot again. I paddle back to the teacher’s son, and try to get out of the kayak. I promptly lose my balance and capsize, much to the delight of my audience. On the other side of the lake, 10U patiently waits for me by the runway in the sun.

Suddenly, I have a realization: “Hey, wait a minute. I’m paddling around in a kayak ... given to me by an Eskimo ... in Alaska!” O.K., O.K., so the kayak is made of pea-green plastic, but still

A few paddling and capsizing sessions later, I realize that my oxygen technician will be returning shortly. With great reluctance, I drive the kayak at full speed up onto the mud by the plane, dry off, change, and with profuse thanks to the owner of the bathing suit, shove the kayak back to its captain in the little lake. It’s the best thing that’s happened all month.

How profound the effect a spontaneous gift of kindness can be.

When my passenger returns from his round-trip hike to the clinic in the hot still air, his brow is dripping with sweat, and his shirt is mottled with dark patches of perspiration. He looks at the boys swimming in the lake and then at my wet hair—and then back at the boys again.

“Did you ... just go swimming?”

National Aeronautics and
Space Administration
Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center
2101 NASA Road 1
Houston, Texas 77058-3696



Reply to Attn of:

AHX

June 21, 1998

Mr. Peter W. Pruyn
[redacted] Avenue
Anchorage, AK 99[redacted]

Dear Mr. Pruyn:

Thank you for applying for the Astronaut Candidate Program.

I regret to inform you that you were not selected for the Astronaut Candidate Program during the recent selection process. The Johnson Space Center recently announced the selection of 25 astronaut candidates who will join the astronaut corps in August 1998. We received over 2,600 applications for these few positions, making the selection process a difficult one.

Your application will remain on file for consideration during our next selection process. You will be required to update your application annually, and will be sent a letter notifying you when it is due.

We appreciate the opportunity to consider you for the Astronaut Candidate Program and wish you success in your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

Duane L. Ross

Duane L. Ross
Manager, Astronaut Selection Office

“Had any close calls?”

The Yute Air pilot schedule is to work 20 days on and 10 days off. This allows for the time-consuming round-trip to the lower 48 states to visit friends and family. During those visits when I mention what I do professionally, I’m sometimes asked—exclusively by men—“So, had any close calls?”

I have a visceral hatred of this question. It reduces my job to fleeting heroics rather than the persistent self-discipline that is the core of what keeps me and my fellow pilots alive. This self-discipline is driven by the direct opposite of heroics: humility.

But more than that, the question is a distraction from what I feel is the most meaningful part of flying in Alaska: its natural beauty. No other word will do; flying in Alaska is a spiritual experience.

So over time, I experiment with responding to this question by explaining that while it is difficult to fly in Alaska professionally for any length of time without occasionally having “a close call,” what is far more meaningful to me are the following kinds of experiences:

Flying a tiny Cessna 150 alone at night north from Anchorage up the Matanuska-Susitna Valley to Talkeetna, flanked by the Talkeetna Mountains on your right, the Alaska Range on your left with Denali in the distance, looking up at the thickest blanket of the brightest stars you’ll ever see, and watching in awe as luminescent green shimmering vertical curtains of Northern Lights dance in front of you across the expanse of night sky.

Flying that same tiny plane on a pristine summer day up the Knik Arm of the Cook Inlet over Knik Glacier, looking straight down into pastel blue crevices of ice that at that altitude look like the wrinkles of a giant albino elephant’s skin except they are large enough to swallow a house, the surface dotted with aquamarine jewels of melt ponds from the mineral-laden glacial ice.

One day I am flying copilot with Ben in 32Y in the dead of winter. We depart from Tooksok Bay on Nelson Island, and Ben takes us up and around a bluff to the west that rises out of the Bearing Sea. A stiff wind is blowing plumes of snow off the crest of the snow-covered bluff. Approaching from above, I notice a collection of dark brown boulders at the peak standing out from the snow. As we get closer, I do a double-take. They’re not boulders; they are a small herd of musk ox. Native only to Greenland and Alaska, musk ox—or *umingmak* to the natives—are curious-looking creatures. Their shaggy brown fur, drooping white horns and diminutive size make them look like some kind of prehistoric Rastafarian pygmy buffalo that Lewis Carroll might have made up. Their wool is prized as the softest and warmest of any animal. It’d better be! The sight of these tiny brown specks, knowing they are living creatures huddled so closely together, surviving only by using the herd’s warmth as a shield against the harshest weather our planet has to offer, evokes a primal sense of empathy and awe.

I will never forget that image. It is the iconic symbol of needing each other.



Figure 25: Aerial view of Knik Glacier from about 2,000 feet.

Victoria's Wings

Ben turns the battery switch on. At the top of the instrument panel, half a dozen yellow and red annunciator lights light up, waiting impatiently for power from the engine so that they can turn back off. At the same time, the fuel valve OFF alarm beeps loudly until Ben reaches up and turns both fuel valves on. The alarm prevents a pilot from taking off with only the fuel in the fuel lines feeding the engine, ending the flight unexpectedly just after takeoff. It's happened.

As soon as Ben throws the starter switch, the 100-inch across, 8-inch wide black propeller slowly begins to turn in front of us with the muffled whine of the starter. When the rotation of the turbine climbs above 12%, Ben adds fuel to the ignitor section of the engine. As soon as the fuel ignites inside, the whine begins to steadily increase in volume and pitch, and the giant propeller blades start to become a blur. A few seconds later the secondary ignitors kick in with a low-pitched "WHOOOSH!", and the engine spools-up to full idle. The internal turbine temperature gauge peaks and stabilizes. Six hundred and seventy-five horse power is now at our finger tips.

Yute Air's Cessna Caravan, N1232Y (pronounced "November-1-2-3-2-Yankee" in the aviation phonetic alphabet), has some writing below the windshield on either side of the cockpit. In small black script letters it says, "Victoria's Wings". Victoria is the youngest blond-haired and blue-eyed child of the owner of Yute Air, who was age two at the time 32Y ("3-2-Yankee") came on line. I am sitting in the copilot's seat of this one-year-old, \$1.4 million airplane. As my first commercial flying job, I will be the copilot of 32Y for the next few months. For a variety of reasons, Caravans have accumulated an abysmal safety record in Alaska. Although the Caravan was designed as a single-pilot airplane, to lend greater safety to the operation Yute has decided to start operating its Caravan with two pilots. I am the guinea pig for this SIC (Second-in-Command) program.

Today I will be flying with Ben Rael, known behind his back—and sometimes to his face by dispatchers in the heat of confrontation—as "Mario", an attempt to imply a resemblance to the protagonist of the popular video game "Donkey Kong." Ben is one of a few Yute Air pilots in Bethel who has any gray hairs. Maybe that's because he's been flying in the Yukon-Kuskokwim River Delta region, which Bethel is smack in the middle of, for the past eight years. After 7,500 hours of flying in some of the worst weather the world has to offer, I'm surprised he has any black hairs left at all.

I've only seen Ben get anywhere close to being excited twice in all the time I've known him. The first time was when he had to go around three times while trying to land at Nightmute, a gravel runway by the Bering Sea notorious for nasty winds off the nearby hills of Nelson Island. After three landing attempts in the gustiest conditions I'd ever seen in my life, we went home. The second time was when Ben once tried to plug a photocopier into the middle outlet of a decaying extension cord. Grey smoke immediately began to gush from the socket, and Ben sprang into action to unplug the cord. The rest of the time, Ben acts like he's on Valium. When I shared this observation with him once, he responded laconically, "So you've found out my habit, huh." The only other thing that seems to phase Ben is when he flies somewhere and realizes that he's left his brushed stainless-steel coffee thermos behind at the terminal.

In concert with this perpetually laid-back manner is an unpredictable facetious sense of humor. One day when I was flying, as we passed through 1,500 feet I got a nose bleed. I grabbed a paper towel as Ben offered to take the controls. The combination of the five-point seat belt harness and the seat's headrest made it difficult to tilt my head back to avert the flow of blood. As the paper towel grew redder and redder, Ben turned to me with a concerned look and asked, "Do you want me to declare an emergency?"

We use the Caravan to carry up to nine passengers, or about 2200 lbs. of cargo, or any combination thereof. In the bush, cargo is usually by-pass U.S. mail, which is typically foodstuffs. Pepsi, Pringles, and Pampers seem to be favorite commodities of the communities we serve.

But today we have a special flight. A family is chartering 32Y to transport them and their

deceased father for burial. He had been taken into Anchorage last week where he had died in a hospital a few days ago. We will be taking him and his family home.

His home is Kotlik, a small Yup'ik Eskimo village 70 miles north of the Yukon with a population of a few hundred. The flight will be a little over an hour from Bethel.

The casket, enclosed in a non-descript long white cardboard box tied up with plastic rope, has been loaded onboard and strapped down to the cargo tracks that run the length of the cabin. The family is seated in front of it, and I turn around in my seat to brief them.

“Welcome aboard everyone. If we could ask that you keep your seatbelts fastened at all times and refrain from smoking. You’ll find passenger briefing cards in the ceiling or the seat backs. We have an emergency locator transmitter located behind the aft bulkhead. A survival kit is in the rear compartment of the cargo pod accessible from the outside. There’s a fire extinguisher up here in the pilot’s door. There are four emergency exits, the air-stair door you came in on, the cargo door opposite, and the two pilot’s doors. And thanks for flying Yute Air today.”

I call the Bethel control tower, and Ben starts to taxi out as I read him the After Start checklist. Once at the runway and cleared for takeoff, we do our final checks, and Ben eases the power lever forward. With the engine instruments all in the green, we accelerate rapidly down the runway to liftoff, and I fine-tune the power setting to insure not going over the torque red line during climb-out. A turn northwest, and we’re on our way.

Ben turns on “George”, the autopilot, and we skim under an overcast layer at about 900 feet. It’s a typical grey day on the Delta, with the white snow-covered frozen tundra stretching for hundreds of miles in all directions with no roads, trees, or animals to speak of. Here and there a snowmobile track, perhaps, appears to make a bee-line towards nowhere. The starkness reminds me of what it must be like on the moon. “A magnificent desolation,” Buzz Aldrin had called it.

But today our view gets slightly more interesting, forty-five minutes later, as we cross the Yukon. On the north shore of this famous river are mountains which reach about 2,000 feet in height. Covered in snow and pine trees, they look more like the stereotypical Alaskan landscape that one might be apt to think of. When the ADF (Automatic Direction Finder) needle pointing to St. Mary’s swings over our right, we know we’ve passed most of the hills.

As we get closer to Kotlik, I look on our manifest for the marine radio frequency and number to announce our arrival to the villagers. In the bush, marine radios are more common than telephones, with reception reaching for hundreds of miles. Each village or group of villages has a specific channel that is used like a cross between a party line and citizen’s band radio. You can hear some pretty weird things on the marine band out here—and everybody’s listening. Announcements about social gatherings, calls for sons to come home, inebriated cursing-outs of the world in general. Once on channel 68 near Scammon Bay we heard an adult female Yup’ik voice belting out the words to “Disco Inferno” at the top of her lungs for all the world to hear.

Like telephones, villagers have a four-digit number or “handle” that you identify them with when you call them. I dial up the Kotlik channel, 68, and call.

“Kotlik 6027, Yute Air.” A female voice answers right away.

“6027, Yute Air.” She’s been expecting us.

“Yes, good afternoon. We’re twenty minutes out, that’s two-zero minutes, with the Kasayuli family plus a casket.”

“Roger, copy twenty minutes out.”

“And we’re going to need some help unloading the casket.”

“O.K., we’ll see you in twenty minutes.” Immediately, the voice starts broadcasting in Yup’ik to the rest of the village, repeating what I have just said to the rest of the village. I once heard a fellow pilot describe Yup’ik as sounding like someone trying to talk with a bunch of chicken bones in their mouth. To a *gussik*, a White person, that’s pretty much an apt description.

In 15 minutes we are back over flat tundra, and the overcast dissipates to reveal rare blue skies

ahead. I read out the Descent checklist. The GPS is indicating that Kotlik is right over the nose, but spotting tiny snow-covered villages on endless snow-covered tundra can be challenging, to say the least. A few miles later, we can make out the collection of black specks that make up the huddle of corrugated metal houses that is Kotlik. The gravel runway with orange traffic cones on the sides is on the south side of the village.

Ben throttles back and calls for ten degrees of flaps. “Ten selected,” I respond. He calls for the rest of the flaps and to put the propeller on High on final. Ben aims right for the beginning of the 2,100-foot-long, 20-foot-wide landing strip, beginning his flare before we actually reach the runway. I have a hard time completely taking in the rushing up of the tiny runway threshold as we whiz by it at 80 knots the instant before touchdown. Runway is too precious to waste.

Rolling out and approaching the gravel ramp area, we find that we have a welcoming committee. Most of the village, having heard the radio call, has come out to meet the plane. There look like there are about 80 people there, old and young, men and women. They stand huddled in an arc of community at the side of the ramp as Ben turns 32Y into the wind with the cargo door facing the crowd. We hope the adults will keep the children back until after the propeller stops turning. As the whine of the engine slowly dies away, I jot down our shutdown time on the manifest clipboard. We both open our cockpit doors, fold down our two-rung ladders, and hop out onto the frozen ramp into the 0°F wind. The villagers begin to walk towards the plane.

Ben takes the tail-stand out from the belly pod and installs it under the tail. This prevents the plane from tipping back on its tail should too much weight be placed at the rear of the aircraft during unloading. Once the tail-stand is attached, I open the air-stair door to let the passengers out, and the villagers crowd around. The family slowly files down the little staircase: mother, sister, two sons, and three daughters. Some are crying. Tight hugs are exchanged with villagers. I feel awkward, like I’m intruding on something private. With some sense of relief, I remember I have a job to do.

I climb up into the rear of the plane. The double cargo door has already been opened on the other side of the fuselage, and Ben is undoing the cargo straps from around the long white box. Helping arms wait outside below. We push the casket off out into the crowd, and it floats on a sea of waiting hands to the sled of a waiting snowmobile. We close and lock the cargo door and stand by the plane waiting for the crowd to thin so we can start-up. But before we can do that, people come up to greet us. They take off their gloves and want to shake our hands. They chat with us about who the man was and who he was married to. I no longer feel like I am intruding. They say, “Thank you for bringing him home.” I am moved.

After several minutes, the crowd and snowmobiles dissipate back into the village. We wave goodbye, climb up our ladders back into the warm cockpit, and start up. It’s my leg, so I get to do the takeoff. Lights on; ignition on; transponder to ALT; high idle. The engine spools up, and we bounce along the frozen gravel runway until 32Y leaves the bumpy ground for the smooth air. I call for flaps up and bump up the power lever for max climb, leaving Kotlik and the Kasayuli family—and the extended Kasayuli family—behind. With no passengers or cargo on board now, we climb rapidly. I give George a rest and hand fly it.

I remark to Ben, “You know, I think Western society does a lousy job of coping with death.”

“What do you mean?”, he says.

“Well, just how you get sick and go to some nursing home to die in such a sterile way. The whole family is separated from the process. I think there are some things native societies do better than we do.”

In the clear approaching the Yukon, *Victoria’s Wings* climbs over the puffy white cotton overcast now far below and into the piercing warm sunshine.

Scott Burns

When Yute Air opened a bush station in King Salmon, a highly competent senior pilot, Scott Burns, was assigned to be the lead pilot there. Several months later, one day Scott's plane was several hours overdue. After a search, his plane was found pancaked into the side of a mountain outside of Togiak. He had been killed instantly.

The text box in the September 28th, 1997 issue of the Anchorage Daily News was so small, it would have been easy to miss. The headline of the five-sentence-long article read simply, "Yute Air pilot dies in crash".

Due to the location of the crash site and impact angle, the consensus among pilots at Yute was that Scott had been "joy-riding"—skimming close to the ground for the fun of it—and got caught in too-tight a turn close to the mountain.

The following is the eulogy I read at his memorial service.

I am sitting on a used car seat in the Yute Air pilot lounge in Bethel waiting to see if I can snag any rides that day. In walks someone who looked a little older than most of our pilots. He's bothered to buy his own light blue Yute Air jacket. He doesn't just sit to wait for his next flight. He keeps moving, purposefully. He stood out. One of the younger pilots made a minor complaint about the aircraft he had been assigned to fly. He gently ribbed him, "You've never owned one of your own airplanes, have you? If you had, you'd know how to fix that."

A little while later, the dispatcher gives him a "tundra run", a short flight to deliver mail to a few villages close by. I introduce myself and ask if he's got room for a passenger. And that's how I met Scott Burns.

As we taxied towards the runway, not knowing I had a pilot's license, he pointed to the cowl flaps lever. He warned me, "Whatever you do, don't touch that lever. If you do, the engine will blow up." Later when he found out that I was a pilot, he was very embarrassed and apologized profusely for having made the joke.

From then on, whenever he would come into town and pass through the Anchorage office, he would always make a point of stopping by my desk to say hello. He would ask me how my flying was going and share nuggets of aeronautical wisdom that would not be found in textbooks. I try to seek out pilots who not only have enormous experience, but also a desire to nurture those skills in someone else. Scott was one of those pilots. He had *14 times* more flying hours than I do.

I admired him.

Later, he became Yute Air's bush presence in King Salmon. On one of his visits I asked him how he liked it. "Oh, I love it!" He couldn't hide his enthusiasm. "You've got to come visit. There's always an extra room at the Pilot Lodge." "Lodge?" I questioned. "Sure! Makes it sound better."

I ran into him at the Anchorage Airport one day when his mother visited him. He again extended an invitation to visit. He was as proud to be able to show his mom where he worked as he was that his mother had made the trip to visit.

So I did visit. I spent a long weekend with Scott at the "Pilot Lodge." I flew with him to Katmai Lodge, whose dirt strip resembles an arm bent at the elbow 10 degrees. Scott described it by saying, "Some people say that this runway has a bend in it. I say that it's two runways joined at an intersection." He took everything in good-natured stride.

On our approach back into King Salmon, he chose a runway centerline stripe and said, "O.K., third stripe after the intersection, and we'll make that first turn-off." We touched down on the stripe and exited the runway at the first turn-off. He was a pro.

Over breakfast, he went on and on about the economic potential for Yute Air in King Salmon. He couldn't stop talking about it. He knew about the next big cannery that was going to open and

had thought out how we should approach them. He was adamant about Yute having a presence in Pilot Point, the next major town down the Alaska Peninsula. He proudly told the story of being thrown off our competitor's portion of the Pilot Point ramp by their owner. He joked that he always wanted to have a plaque engraved to commemorate the occasion:

TO SCOTT BURNS:
IN HONOR OF BEING THROWN OFF THE PILOT POINT RAMP
BY ORIN SEYBERT HIMSELF.

Scott was a tireless entrepreneur. He proudly told me about his long battles to build his own company. Yet in the relatively short time he had been with Yute, he had completely transferred this intense entrepreneurial zeal from his own aspirations onto Yute. Yute's dreams had become his dreams. Scott had taken ownership.

Although he had loved living and flying in Texas for so many years, Alaska eventually beckoned. He confided in me, "I had only one fear if I moved to Alaska: I might love it so much that I might not come back." He loved Alaska.

Scott was Yute's ambassador to every village he flew to. He knew his village agents by name. He nurtured our relationship with Katmai Lodge, whose staff all knew him by name. He contributed tirelessly to the running of our station, being a perfect teammate with our station manager Sue Horton, and sensitively and successfully assuaging whatever tensions arose between fellow employees. He cared about people, and I looked forward to my next visit with him.

Scott Burns was my friend. And I will miss him.

Pilot Survey

One day I come back from a flight in a 207 and find a 6-inch wide oil slick running down the left side of the bright yellow fuselage. When I have mechanics look at it, they discover that during the last maintenance inspection a mechanic had neglected to re-attach the dip-stick holder to the engine. As a result, oil was flowing out of it throughout my flight. Despite re-assurances from the head of maintenance that I hadn't lost enough oil to cause a problem, it makes me wonder what else is being missed.

When I share this incident with another pilot who's been there longer than I have, he relates an incident that happened to another pilot. After an aircraft inspection, one Yute mechanic neglected to re-attach the brake lines to the airplane's brakes. As a result, when the pilot tried the brakes the first time, brake-fluid spurted out on the ground. I confess I find it hard to believe. I don't want to believe it.

Then on another day after I've come back from a flight, mechanics remove the cowl of my engine to inspect something. There, sitting on top of the battery box, is a full-sized claw hammer, completely loose in the engine compartment. The only reason it hadn't fallen off the battery box was that it was backed-up against the rear of the engine compartment. Who knows what would have happened if it had gotten stuck near the engine controls. Upon seeing it, the embarrassed mechanic exclaimed, "So ... that's where my hammer went!"

As I watch the high rate of pilot turn-over and mull-over these maintenance lapses, I begin to lose faith in Yute Air. When I screw-up the courage to confront the owner about it, he is shocked at my reports and expresses disappointment in me for considering being "a quitter".

Then I have an idea.

Having spent the better part of a year with other pilots who have had similar concerns, I propose to him that I take a month-off from flying and conduct a pilot survey, asking for feedback from all of Yute's pilots on their experience working at Yute. To his credit, he enthusiastically agrees to let me do this.

Here is the survey I design:

Yute Air Alaska Pilot Survey

DIRECTIONS: Please circle the letter of the best response. Feel free to add comments to clarify your responses.

1. Rate the quality of flight training you have received at Yute Air:

- a) outstanding b) very good c) satisfactory d) less than satisfactory e) completely unsatisfactory

2. Rate your level of job satisfaction:

- a) outstanding b) very good c) satisfactory d) less than satisfactory e) completely unsatisfactory

3. Rate the overall quality of Yute Air's maintenance program:

- a) outstanding b) very good c) satisfactory d) less than satisfactory e) completely unsatisfactory

4. I feel pressure to fly against my better judgement

- a) never b) rarely c) sometimes d) frequently e) all the time

5. Rate the overall quality of Yute Air dispatching:

- a) outstanding b) very good c) satisfactory d) less than satisfactory e) completely unsatisfactory

6. Rate the overall quality of Yute Air rampers with whom you have worked:

- a) outstanding b) very good c) satisfactory d) less than satisfactory e) completely unsatisfactory

7. Rate the overall quality of Yute Air ticket agents with whom you have worked:

- a) outstanding b) very good c) satisfactory d) less than satisfactory e) completely unsatisfactory

8. Rate how appreciated you feel as an employee of Yute Air:

- a) outstanding b) very good c) satisfactory d) less than satisfactory e) completely unsatisfactory

9. What's the most enjoyable part of your job?

10. If you feel that Yute's flight training could be improved, suggest one way of doing so:

11. If you feel that your job satisfaction could be improved, suggest one change that would accomplish this:

12. What is the primary reason that you are working for Yute Air as opposed to any other airline?

13. What is the most important safety issue that you face and what could be done about it?

14. If you ever feel pressure to fly against your better judgement, what is the most frequent source of this pressure?

15. If you feel that Yute's maintenance program could be improved, suggest one change that would accomplish this:

16. If you feel that Yute's dispatching could be improved, suggest one change that would do so:

17. Optional: Think of a question that should have been on this form but wasn't and answer it.

18. Any additional comments?

The results are fairly damning.

Yute pilots rate their overall job satisfaction as “satisfactory” and maintenance as “less than satisfactory”. More than a third say they feel pressured to fly against their judgment either “sometimes” or “frequently”.

When asked about the most important safety issue they face, many say maintenance:

- Maintenance of aircraft. Mechanics and management need to take write-ups more seriously. Limited funds have trickled down and maintenance uses it as an excuse for not getting parts or completing a task.
- Management being pushy towards pilots and trying to rush.
- Mechanics are great, but they need more resources.
- The field mechanics are awesome, but can only do so much with limited resources.
- Mechanics do the minimum necessary to sign it off and do not care how it looks, how long it will last or have any pride in their craftsmanship.
- Hire more mechanics.
- No more of this “Ops check OK” shit. If something is written up, fix the damn thing.
- Hire enough people to do the work. Do not expect 1 person to accomplish the work of 3.

I appreciate the pilots’ awareness that it wasn’t the mechanics’ fault. The picture that is being painted is of upper management in Anchorage not listening to the needs of their employees out in the bush stations. This came out in pilots’ critiques of management’s relationship with bush employees:

- The attitude of most Anchorage positions is, “This would be so much less hassle if we could just get rid of those annoying bush employees.”
- More visits by upper management.
- Make management less than 500 miles away.
- Q: When was the last time you saw a ANC management person in the bush?
A: Never.

If we use the metaphor of the entire organization as being like an airliner with management being the captain and bush employees being the copilot, the captain was not listening to the copilot. It was the opposite of Colonel Sample’s edict of cultivating a loyal opposition. Positions of power were dominating decision-making.

As I sift through the out-pouring of comments from my peers and put together an executive summary for management, I find it harder and harder to justify staying at Yute. Apart from my own personal safety, I just can’t see a reason to risk a maintenance-related accident on my permanent record.

If my career is a flight in an airplane, and the culture of Yute Air is the current weather, that little voice that I relied on to know when to turn around in bad weather is now telling me, “It’s time to go.”

It’s gut-wrenching.

Alaskan Sunset

I pack all my possessions into my four-wheel-drive station wagon and begin the long drive from Anchorage to a flying job promised for me in Boulder City, Nevada.

It’s a bright cloudless morning. Reaching the Alaskan-Canadian border at the edge of a pine forest, I pull over. A huge swath of the trees has been cut down as far as the eye can see to the left

and right of the road to mark the border. I get out of my car and walk over to a placard marking the spot. No one else is here. I look up at the towering evergreens and take-in the border extending to infinity towards each horizon. It's quiet.

I've been here once before: on my drive to Alaska two-and-a-half years ago. I reflect on that journey and why I came. I think about the professional goal of not leaving until I'd earned my Airline Transport Rating, and how that was cut short by my still-raw, abrupt departure from Yute. I think about all the places I've flown here, the professional experiences as well as the spiritual ones. I think about all the people—flight instructors, fellow pilots, staff, friends—who were all a part of that. I feel like I've lost a family, an entire world that I painstakingly crafted over that time.

It feels like failure.

A flood of emotion unexpectedly overwhelms me. Spontaneously I drop to my knees, put my head in my hands, and start to sob. Overhead, the evergreens bare silent witness.

My Alaskan dream is over.

Postscript

A few months after I leave Alaska, I find out that Yute has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, allowing them to negotiate with creditors to pay off their debts. Within a year, they file for the more serious Chapter 7, requiring them to sell off their assets.



Figure 26: Mount Susitna, often called “The Sleeping Lady,” as seen across the Knik Arm of Cook Inlet from Point Woronzof in Anchorage during one of the prolonged twilights of winter.

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