

# **Flying The Antonov An-2 In Alaska, 2003**

**by**

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### Saturday, June 28<sup>th</sup>

Maybe this story starts in 1999, when I was on a fishing trip in Alaska with Hawks Abbott, Brian Collier, and Bob Simle. In my previous story, "My Life Around Airplanes", I wrote about this huge blue bi-wing airplane that Hawks and I saw at the Anchorage airport. He exclaimed, "Look at that An-2 Colt!" Until that day, I had never even heard of it. This particular plane belonged to Ron Sheardown and it is now at the bottom of the ocean near the North Pole, but that's his story, and I'm not going to go into the details in my story. (Reference: <http://www.explorers.org/newsfiles/archivefiles/biplane/index.html>.) At any rate, I knew then that I wanted to fly the Russian-designed Antonov An-2 someday.

Or, this story could start with "Friday, June 20<sup>th</sup>", which is the day I left my home in Texas to fly to Seattle, with the intention of going to Campbell River, B.C. the following day, and then returning to Seattle to go to Alaska for another week. I had signed up with Parallel Aviation in Campbell River to take a mountain flying course that was beginning on June 22<sup>nd</sup>. But I have decided to write about that experience later in a different story, simply because I have already written the words of this story about flying the An-2 from August 7<sup>th</sup> until August 13<sup>th</sup>, and now I am backtracking. To write about the adventures with Parallel Aviation at this time will add more pages than I am willing to hammer and bang out of my computer machine (which happens to be the actual date of November 10<sup>th</sup>). Flying with Parallel Aviation was only one half of my vacation; the next half had something to do with Alaska. I knew not what, but it didn't matter. I arrived back in Seattle on June 27<sup>th</sup>, with another flight scheduled to Anchorage the next evening.

On this date of June 28<sup>th</sup>, my day began with me going to the Boeing Museum of Flight. I wandered around airplanes for four hours. If I posted all the photos that I took there into this story, my old computer would probably scream something about lost memory, or not enough memory, or some other insults that people reading this story would think I was describing myself. But I had a good time, anyway. Then, I took a taxi to Seattle Seaplanes, where I had another flight with Jim Chrysler in his 1946 Stinson. When having a floatplane rating is high enough on my scale of things to do, I may finish with Jim. Since I own a 1947 Stinson, it sort of seems to me the way to go. I have flown with Jim three times, and hope to have him sign more hours in my logbook. Great guy!

Jim drove me to Sea-Tac Airport for my flight to Anchorage. Four hours after takeoff, I saw a bull moose at the end of the runway in Anchorage, as we landed near midnight. One of my favorite places to stay in Anchorage is at Ace Hangars on Merrill Field, and that's where I had the taxi driver take me. Ace Hangars have four hotel rooms that look over the airplane parking area. I have friends living in Anchorage, but don't feel comfortable dropping in at midnight.

## Sunday, June 29<sup>th</sup>

Last year when I came to Alaska I wanted to learn to fly floatplanes. Since most of my flying vacation money this year had been spent at Parallel Aviation, I knew that my flying for this coming week would have to be limited. I had no real destination this year nor any planned activity; I wasn't born in Alaska, and I certainly do not have the navigation skills of a salmon returning to the same stream where she had been hatched. Airplanes, mountains, glaciers, caribou, moose, grizzly bears, bald eagles, salmon, whales, not too many people, Denali. Primordial stirrings, ties, or whatever. I have to answer my own call of the wild. I have to return to Alaska as often as possible.

Andy, owner of Empire Rent A Car, rents useable vehicles for less than the major rental companies. I had rented a van from him last year, and then rented the same van again this year. He brought it out to Ace Hangars. Once I had signed the rental agreement, I just had to eat breakfast at Qwinnies. And if you go to Anchorage, you need to eat breakfast at Qwinnies.

Then, I went to the air show at Elmendorf AFB. While waiting for the USAF Thunderbirds to perform, I wandered around looking at the airplanes in today's Air Force. One of the first planes I saw was the AWACS, the Boeing-built jet with the thirty-foot rotating radome on top. In Seattle, I had walked through the Boeing 707 that became famous as Air Force One when President Kennedy was shot. Touring the AWACS plane gave me nostalgic feelings from the time I served as aircrew on the EA-3B in 1968. Given a choice today, I would much rather be assigned to the AWACS than I would Air Force One, because there are many electronic consoles on the AWACS and there is too much spit and polish on Air Force One.

I walked past the over-priced hamburger and soft-drink booths. I walked past a gray C-130, a gray F-15, a gray B-1B, a gray C-5A yawning, a black-and-orange Goose, and Whoa! Sitting on the tarmac is a white and orange An-2 Colt with "Lithuanian Airlines" painted on its side. Maybe, this is the starting point of the story. But it's time to watch the Thunderbirds fly. Now, everyone's leaving. I walk upstream past the crowds to the Antonov. I meet one of the owners, Douglas Fulton. Reluctantly, he lets me go scope out the cockpit. I ask if it is possible for me to fly it. He tells me yes and what it costs to fly that plane for one hour. I know if I am frugal for the rest of the week that I should be able to afford it. But he lives in Valdez. No problem. There is no way that I am going to go home without flying the An-2. And then Douglas goes fishing:

"We are taking this to Russia next month." The hook is set and the line zings. "Do you have any room for one more person?" "We are looking for three more people to fill the plane." Zing! "What's it going to cost?" "About \$750 per person." (Ended up a little more, but that's OK.) Douglas and his partner Neal can't make any money off the plane, but are allowed to share operating costs

with others. I certainly wanted to share costs. Wow! Right then and there I phoned Hawks to see if he was interested, but couldn't reach him. In 1988, Alaska Airlines flew a 737 from Nome to Provideniya, Siberia on a friendship flight. Since then, tourist ships dock at that port city. Partly through the efforts of the Alaska Airmen's Association, a VFR route had recently been legally opened between those two cities. Initially, the plan was to fly over and back from Nome the same day, but then the talks gyrated towards spending one night in Provideniya.

I have been around military aircraft for years. I have even flown in a few. If I were offered a chance to fly in a F-15 or and F-16, or even an SR-71, I suppose I might even say "Yeah, I guess I'll go for a flight, if no one else wants to". You know, it's a dirty job, but someone has to do it. Turning down a ride in an SR-71 would be like me saying to NASA, "If you want me to fly on STS-123, I guess I'll go, but I was really hoping for a ride on STS-144". I approached the chance to fly in the An-2 with the same half a nanosecond delay – after all, I didn't want to appear over eager! That night, sleep played its elusive game, as if I were a child on Christmas Eve, and not because I had visions of sugarplums dancing in my head.

### **Monday, June 30<sup>th</sup>**

Today began with a visit to the Lake Hook Aviation Museum. One of the two previous owners of my Stinson used to own the Fairchild F-24 that is on display, so I had to take some photos of it. Another plane that caught my interest is the "Duck", the type of which had been in the TV series "Baa, Baa, Black Sheep" for air-sea rescues. Then I had lunch with Marc Paine, a pilot whom I had flown with last year. He has a Decathlon that he uses to teach aerobatic maneuvers and recovery from unusual altitudes. We discussed flying to Valdez in it so I could fly the Antonov.

After lunch, I drove to Wasilla and visited my friends Dawn and Bill Caswell. From there I drove to Talkeetna, stopping along the way to photograph Denali in its splendor. But I have a better photograph of the Grand Old Lady of North America that I took on a previous trip, so I'm going to use it in this story. The airstrip in Talkeetna is near the town. Having read the Wager With The Wind, the Don Shelton story, I just had to walk around the airport to see where his business, Talkeetna Air Service, is located. Before his death, Don had delivered to and rescued many people off Denali. He is one of Alaska's legendary pilots, flying more hours in a month than I do in year.

For either \$23.00 or \$17.00, I found a bunkhouse to stay in Talkeetna. The lodging place had other rooms, but the bunkhouse was the cheapest. On the walls of the "lobby" or living room of this place were several photos of different people and/or teams of Denali climbers. There was nothing fancy about this place at all, but the rooms are much warmer than what the climbers endure on

the Mountain. Climbing to the top of the highest mountains on each of the seven continents is not a dream that I have, but I sure do admire those people whom even make attempts to fulfill their climbing dreams. In the café next to the lodge, I met a woman whom had just finished making the top of Denali. I overheard her telling the waitress about her mighty test of endurance. This made either four or five of the top seven that she had climbed. She said she is writing a book, so I gave her my address and asked her to let me know when it is published, so I can buy it. Now, I don't remember her name.

## **Tuesday, July 1<sup>st</sup>**

Julia Tripp is the flight instructor that gave me another ride in a floatplane. The night before I had checked around at the Talkeetna Airport for somebody to give me a floatplane lesson and was given her name. We made arrangements to meet at the front of the lodge and I followed her to a lake East of Talkeetna where we flew for an hour in a Taylorcraft BC-12 D. The weather wasn't all that great, but I had fun anyway. I haven't flown a floatplane since, but both she and Jim Chrysler told me that it wouldn't take much for me to finish my seaplane rating. Someday...



**Taylorcraft BC-12 D outside of Talkeetna**

After splashing and dashing on the lake, I drove in the pouring rain from Talkeetna back to Anchorage, past the Turnagain Arm of the Cook Inlet, and Westward to the Kenai Peninsula. In Cooper Landing I found a dry cabin to spend the night. Except for flying the Taylorcraft, I didn't do much of anything this day nor the next besides drive in the rain. Dawn and Bill Caswell had given me the name of their friend whom lives in Soldotna and owns a Cessna 172, but good flying weather played hide and seek, so I didn't give him a call. Probably should have anyway.

## Thursday, July 3<sup>rd</sup>

Marc Paine met me in the afternoon at Merrill Field in Anchorage. By 3 PM, the weather had cleared good enough to fly his Decathlon to Valdez. I sat in front of the tandem plane and did some good old stick and rudder flying. We flew on the northeastern side of the Turnagain Arm, crossed over the mountains near Whittier, and then flew over a bunch of islands in Prince William Sound as we headed to Valdez. A rainbow off our port wing enhanced the beauty of this wonderland. Occasionally, we could see the cruise ships. Numerous icebergs the size of houses had calved off glaciers on our left. From the air, they didn't look very big. Marc pointed out the Columbia Glacier and a place where the cruise ships stop. If the passengers on the ships take a helicopter ride over the glaciers, they see what we saw; if not, they only see one wall of this massive glacier that's about 400-feet high. Over the years, I have seen many glaciers, especially in Antarctica, but they never cease to amaze me. It's exhilarating to fly over them, but I always give a sigh of relief when their plane-eating crevasses are behind me. As we approached Valdez Airport, there was no doubt which plane was the Antonov. Actually, there were very few planes in sight, but just like at the air show in Anchorage a few days earlier, I had no problem picking it out. A bi-wing airplane with a 60-foot wingspan and a huge 4-bladed prop is easy to spot!



Antonov An-2 at Valdez Airport

We landed and taxied to the Antonov on the West end of the airport. Douglas told me to give him a call when we landed, and he would come over from his dry wall construction business. While we waited for him, Marc and I just marveled at this gigantic feat of aeronautical engineering. Before we pre-flighted the plane, Douglas took us into his hangar, where he has a Stinson 108 waiting for me to fly sometime, and an upstairs lounge area that he built as a winter project. During the pre-flight, I called Hawks Abbott on my cell phone to tell him

that I was about ready to fly the An-2, but he didn't answer, so I just had to leave an "eat your heart out" message.



**Marc Paine and his Decathlon at Valdez**

As veteran pilots of radial-engine planes know, oil in the bottom cylinders has a tendency to pool, so the prop is turned a few turns to redistribute the oil. Otherwise, a cylinder might crack during startup. At least that is my understanding. "Propping" a 4-bladed prop with each blade as long as I am tall would be a good way to work out, if done for an hour a day. It takes a lot of muscle effort to turn the prop on the Antonov.

I climbed into the co-pilot's seat and read off each item of an extensive checklist as Douglas performed the actual functions. I don't fully understand how the brakes work, but the air-operated system has to be up to the proper pressure. After Douglas stepped his way through the checklist, it was time for him to start the engine. At the right precise moment, Douglas did his magic and there was that rough cough, puffs of smoke, a satisfying roar, and then a smoothing of the engine as all nine cylinders started firing. Douglas taxied the plane to the East end of the runway, pushed the throttle in, and then all of sudden we lifted off.

Twenty-four windows in the cockpit provide almost unlimited visibility. We slowly climbed out between 80 and 100 knots, and once we were above 3000-feet, Douglas gave me the controls. Marc stood in the cabin, just behind the cockpit. We flew West, and banked North, over the Columbia Glacier. When Marc and I flew into Valdez, we could see the glacier a few miles away. Now, we were flying right over it, flying over the moraines, the rivers of ice and rocks that curve like a super highway, and over the crevasses. Turquoise pools of water glistened in the sunlight.



**Columbia Glacier from Antonov**

Flying this plane, as one might guess, gave this pilot one of those smiles that takes forever to evaporate. It mattered not that the yoke felt heavy. So what – the plane responded to the control inputs, perhaps a little sluggishly, but I didn't care as we soared over the glacier. Douglas occasionally talked to the ground using the black solid-looking Russian built radio. Near my left knee an ADF indicator the size of a Frisbee was mounted on the panel. It didn't operate, but I was impressed with it anyway. For about ten minutes I traded places with Marc, to give him a chance to fly this wonderful flying machine. All too soon we had to go back to Valdez. I flew it until we entered the pattern to land. Douglas took over, and made the landing flare way too high, I thought. Then we touched down very smoothly. I had forgotten that one sits much higher off the ground when in the cockpit of this airplane than in any airplane I have ever flown before. Even if I had not flown the An-2 on this trip to Alaska, I still would have signed up to fly it to Russia.

Marc told me on the way back to Anchorage that very seldom had he seen the sky and coastline so clear. We encountered some turbulence as we flew over the mountain bridge just before the Portage Glacier. He told me to keep the wings level. I felt kind of sheepish afterwards that I gave him control, especially since we weren't in the turbulence for very long, but I trusted his flying better than I did my own. Once out of the rough spot, I took over control again. Flying two quite different airplanes on this day for a total of 3.7 hours over some of the most beautiful scenery that God ever made leaves a memory that won't be quickly forgotten.

## Friday, July 4<sup>th</sup>

Independence Day! Temperatures in the 70s. Clear blue sky, but no clear destination. So I drove around Lake Hood to see the floatplanes and by Merrill Field for another look at the taildraggers, and just sort of kept on going down the highway towards Palmer and Glennallen. I even thought about turning South at Glennallen and going to Valdez again just to take another look at the Antonov. Halfway between Anchorage and Glennallen is the Malanuska Glacier. There is a restaurant and lodge overlooking the glacier where I had stayed on a previous trip to Alaska. Why not have a hamburger? So I did. While waiting, I overheard one lady telling her friend that the original owners had bought the property with the idea of putting in restaurant for people travelling down the highway, but they first saw it on a drizzly, rainy day, and did not see the glacier. People travelled that highway for twenty years before the owners made it back again. They were astonished to see this beautiful looking glacier right on their property. I did not know it then, but looking at the Anchorage Sectional, it is obvious that the Malanuska Glacier is a Northern finger of the same ice fields as the Columbia Glacier. A friend of mine in Houston is into trains; while at the gift shop I found a railroad spike with a miniature train attached. I bought it for him and placed it in my camera bag, never giving it another thought until the Anchorage Airport security guys wanted to inspect my bag when I left.



**Mt. Sanford and some flowers, taken at Gulkana Airport near Glennallen**

A few miles down the road at a construction site, somebody in a powered hang glider flew over the snow-capped mountains. East of Glennallen, 14,000 and 16,000-foot peaks of the Wrangell-St. Elias gave me something to ooh-and-ah about as I drove into town. I stopped at the Gukana Airport, just outside of Glennallen, to take this photo of Mt. Sanford. As I headed North on the Richardson Highway, the road ran parallel to the Trans Alaskan Pipeline. I gassed up the van at Paxson, and made a choice to turn west on the gravel road called the Denali Highway, instead of driving North to Delta Junction and Fairbanks. I could have eaten at the restaurant located a few miles West of Paxson, and I had enough money to do so, but wanted to camp somewhere along the way. But I stopped there anyway, to beg for something to boil water in to cook my backpacker stew. I had scrounged some firewood earlier and I had me a plan. But I didn't have any silverware to eat the stew, and I didn't realize

that fact until another mile down the road. I drove back to the restaurant, and begged some more. Disgustedly, the same lady whom had given me the number 10 can to boil water gave me a plastic spoon. So I bought a coke out a machine for a buck and drove about twenty-five more miles until I saw a stream on the South side of the road, and white mountains of the Alaska Range to the North telling me to stop and camp.



Alaska Range overlooking campsite

Ah, the life of a hobo! Well, not really, but cooking stew on a open fire with no one around but the mosquitoes and I can make them disappear by standing in the wood smoke, and drinking hot coffee and admiring beautiful mountains and listening to the popping and crackling of the logs as my Fourth of July fireworks, and watching the sunset near midnight, and thinking of my family and my good friends and the airplanes I have flown and the places I have travelled and my dream of flying in the space shuttle, and then later on, look at all those stars - well, color me content.

### **Saturday, July 5<sup>th</sup>**

There comes a time, no matter how warm the sleeping bag is, or how low the temperature has dropped during the night, you simply have to face a very urgent reality. Once up, I guess I might as well drive to Anchorage, especially since the big airplane will take off whether I am on it or not. Somewhere that had a Supercub on floats also had cabins and a small café that served hot coffee and breakfast. In Cantwell, the Denali Highway dead-ends into the Parks Highway. Turn North, and you go to Fairbanks; turn South if you want to go to Anchorage. Little did I realize that I would be seeing Cantwell again a few weeks later.



Denali from Parks Highway, 1999 trip

Stop and take photos of Denali. Drive through America on the Parks Highway: Colorado, Honolulu, Montana, Houston to go to Houston. I took a shower at a general store, gas station and restaurant in Trapper Creek (the same store from where I had called Norman Vaughan a few years earlier), and later, ate lunch in Talkeetna, even though it's off the main highway. Not necessary in order of the other towns listed, I pass through the towns of Igloo, Hurricane, and Caswell. Is there any connection to Dawn and Bill? Keep on going through Wasilla and Eagle River and drive past Merrill Field again and break the Tenth Commandment by coveting many of those airplanes.

Then, it's time to visit my friend Dave Bieganski one more time. He lives near the Anchorage Zoo, but the animals near his place wouldn't like the sentence of a zoo. Sometimes in the winter moose wander through his yard; in years past he pointed out an eagle nest to me; today, his dog barked excitedly at a bear.

Andy gave me a ride to Anchorage Airport after I returned the van. I told him about the upcoming flight to Russia in the An-2. He told me that he flew the first An-2 from Russia to Alaska about ten years or twelve years ago, and that he offered to let Ron Sheardown borrow his An-2 skis for his ill-fated North Pole

expedition, but Ron declined. We all make mistakes that we regret. I would not hesitate to fly with him to the North Pole in another An-2, given half a chance.

So now, another trip to Alaska has ended, but not without the anticipation of another adventure flying an An-2.

### **Thursday, August 7<sup>th</sup>**

Finally, the day came for me to head “North to Alaska” and on to Provideniya. Numerous telephone calls and creative financing and a rushed visa application were now things of the past. My Continental Airlines One Pass account now read 47,250 miles less than I wanted, but I didn’t have to pay for another plane ticket to Anchorage. Beggars can’t be choosers – it would have been faster to go non-stop from Houston to Anchorage, but having a free ticket made it OK to change planes in Detroit. It took almost as long to fly the Detroit – Anchorage route as the return flight from Anchorage to Houston.

Sitting next to me on the Anchorage flight was Bill Kenaston, a 747-pilot who works for Polar Air Cargo. I told him of my planned excursion to Russia in the An-2. When two or more pilots start talking to each other, you can be sure that somehow, the subjects of flying and flying stories and airplanes may accidentally creep into the conversation. We both kept this tradition alive! Bill came to Lake Hood airport the next morning to watch us depart.

Flying into Anchorage is like going home for me. This journey made my tenth trip to Alaska, and the last seven have occurred since 1995. I am as familiar with this city as I am with Christchurch, New Zealand. I took the Long House Motel shuttle bus, where I stayed the night. After checking in, I contacted Douglas, and he told me to come to the party on the Lake Hood strip. One of his friends agreed to pick me up, but our paths didn’t cross until I reached the An-2, after walking around Lake Hood. Walking for 45 minutes around a bunch of colorful floatplanes and tail-draggers isn’t a bad way to spend an evening.

Douglas introduced me to the other adventurous travelers of our group: His wife Jeanne Passin, their friend Mary Lou Rarra, Neal Oppen, the other owner of the AN-2, and Sonja Sabel, a bush pilot out of Fairbanks who works for Warbelow’s Air Ventures, Inc. Many of their friends had gathered for a giant send-off. I guess this was only proper, since the An-2 is a giant of a single-engine airplane. While in many of the conversations the name Provideniya was mentioned, the item that generated more attention than even perhaps the gargantuan An-2 and its destination was the margarita / mixed drink mixer attached to a gasoline-powered weed-eater engine. Ice, bags of fresh fruit, and rum were all poured into the blender, and then, watch out! I don’t drink anything alcoholic any more, but I enjoyed watching the others as they participated. At 10:30 PM, a friend of Douglas’s gave me a ride back to the Long House. My ragged old body was still on Houston time, and it felt like it was 1:30 AM.

## Friday, August 8<sup>th</sup>

The driver for the Long House took me to the An-2 at 8:30 AM. I was the first one there. A few minutes later, Bill arrived in a taxicab. Eventually, the others arrived. By 10 AM, Neal had the plane loaded, we had a group photo, and then it was time to leave. The lady at Lake Hood tower gave us taxi instructions; we took off from the gravel strip, and shortly after take-off, she radioed, "Beautiful airplane!" I know, because I sat in the cabin behind Douglas and Neal, and had my headphones plugged into the spare headphone jacks located just behind the cockpit. Right after takeoff, Douglas discarded his sandals and operated the rudder pedals with his bare feet.



L-R: Mary Lou, Douglas, Jeanne, Neal, Sonja, Matt

Sonja, Jeanne, and Mary Lou sat in the back of the plane. We weren't airborne more than five minutes before they opened the outside door, which was a little unnerving at first. As we flew along towards Nikolai, Denali could be seen off the right side of the plane. If I remember correctly, we climbed to 8500 feet to clear Rainy Pass, and after that, all of our flights were at a lower altitude. This day was a clear day and we had very little turbulence. Neal stepped out of the co-pilot seat and invited me to take it. No problem! Sonja stood behind Douglas and myself, and after I rode shotgun for a while, I exchanged places with her.

In this Americanized version of the An-2, the pilot's altimeter displays thousands of feet and air speed is read in knots, but the co-pilot's altimeter is in meters and the air speed indicator is in kilometers. It was no trouble for me to make the transition, but you definitely have to be conscious of the difference. This is the first plane I had ever flown with electric trim controls for ailerons, the rudder, and the elevator. Douglas said that there is an onboard electric pump to refuel from 55-gallon (or the metric equivalent) barrels on the ground, since it is

easier to place fuel barrels into remote landing strips than it is a fuel tanker. There is an elaborate checklist that must be meticulously followed to start the engine, including turning the magnetos on at the precise moment when the prop has been cranked four times, or the battery will die. Once the magnetos fire, that wonderful cough and deep roar of the radial engine resonates as white puffs of smoke belches out and reminds me of the bygone days when steam locomotives gave that sweet and mournful sounding whistle that no diesel locomotive can ever hope to imitate.



Some of our greeters at Nikolai



George, and Roger Jenkins

Two-and-a-half hours after take-off, we landed at Nikolai. It seemed like every person living in this town of about 100 people turned out to watch our landing. Even before we landed I saw some people riding on 4-wheelers near the end of the runway. A Russian-designed biplane with a copy of an American Curtis-Wright 1000 HP radial engine that can be heard for miles may have had something to do with our warm reception. The first person that I talked to was George, whom had driven his 4-wheeler up to the plane. His first words to me were, "Are you a tourist?" I stammered out, "Yeah, I guess I am". Then he smiled. He has his own Piper J-3 Cub, and is retired from the Alaskan Department of Transportation. While I chatted with him, City-Councilman Roger Jenkins handed out pens with the words, "City of Nikolai, Alaska On Iditarod Dogsled Trail" written on the barrel. Roger and George stood by the plane so I could take their photograph. We six flying vagabonds had our photos taken by several of the villagers, and the next thing I knew I was riding on the back of a 4-wheeler with Sonja, going down a dusty trail to someplace. It reminded me of being in China when I blindly trusted non-English speaking taxi drivers taking me down roads whose signs I could not read to destinations that I did not know.

I needed not to have worried, for we were dropped at John and Marty Runkle's place. There are some 24-hour periods in one's life that to describe fully, would fill the pages of a book, but not to describe at all would do a great injustice to those people who are right with God and the world. We were welcomed by John and Marty, and their children, Sharon – age 21, Andrew – age 19, and PJ – age 9. Sharon gave me a cup of coffee; we all sat down and chatted, then John and PJ gave us a tour of the place, after telling us that he had been on the Internet trying to buy a church bell from Russia that morning. John

came to Alaska 23 years ago on a construction project for the school. He and Marty had cleared the land, chopping down the trees so not to disturb the undergrowth, built a log cabin and then expanded it over the years, built a smaller cabin for Andrew, a smoke house, a sauna, and John was in the process of constructing a shed for his saw mill, where he debarked the trees and cut them up into lumber. Oh, yeah, although they have indoor plumbing, he also built the outhouse where one can sit with the door open and view a small lake that is often visited by moose and bears. All this was done when he wasn't driving heavy machinery to extend the runway, or remodeling the only church in town, or working on the schoolhouse and serving on the school board, or hunting, fishing, and trapping, or running his own guiding business out of four camps and a lodge that he had built in the mountains. He wore a Tee Shirt that had many different tools on the front, with the saying, "So many tools, so little time!"



**The Runkles**



**Bear skin inside Andrew's cabin**

I didn't have much conversation with Marty, who is a Native-born Athabaskan Indian, and just as nice as she can be. But boy can she and Sharon cook! Sharon was back in Nikolai after going to school in Seattle. Andrew had just been accepted to go to work at Prudhoe Bay up on the North Slope. Apparently, it is quite competitive to work there, and he passed some practical tests well enough in Anchorage to earn the right to go to a three-week training course. He is an excellent hunter and fisherman in his own right – the steaks we ate for dinner were from the 40-pound King Salmon, which he had caught. He told me that he wants to learn to fly, and I can certainly understand that idea.

If I ever had to survive in Alaska, little PJ could certainly be the person helping me stay alive. This kid knows the bush, the plants, what to eat and what not to eat, and said that beaver tastes better than porcupine! Later, when we toured the town riding on the back of the town truck – a Chevy flatbed pickup – PJ scampered about, pointing out berries to us while giving a rundown on the local plants and trails. These kids grew up driving 4-wheelers. On the spur of the moment, several would hop on one and take off to see their friends. I observed no fighting among this close-knit family. They were really a pleasure to be around.

Sometimes our positions altered, but we started touring the town with Sonja, PJ, and myself riding on the back of the truck, with Neal inside the cab, while Douglas, Jeannie, and Mary Lou followed on a 4-wheeler. First we went to a nearby lake, then back to the plane where we ate lunch. Afterwards, John took us through the town along the Kuskokwim River, stopping at an abandoned cabin, then at the school. John showed us a dog sled he had built, and took us through the three classrooms. The upper level class had a computer for each student. Along the main hallway were photos of the "Elders", a glass case that contained various artifacts about Alaskan village life, including an animal skull that PJ had found. Hanging on one of the walls were snowshoes homemade by one of the elders, an art form that is dying. Marty's youngest sister is three years older than Sharon. She had gone to this school and then had gone on to college, graduating with a 4.0 average and then worked for a US Senator, as I recall. We were told that this is typical among the Interior villages.



Graves by Russian Orthodox Church



Inside the Russian Orthodox Church

We stopped next at the Russian Orthodox Church, which is the only church in town. A small ornate cemetery nearby had colorful fences around many of the graves. After we walked around the cemetery for a few minutes, John invited us inside. John told us that he had been working on the floor, so the fact that there were no pews didn't surprise me, but then he mentioned that there aren't any, since the doctrine of the church wants the people to be somewhat uncomfortable during worship. Many icons and paintings adorned the walls. John said that the people do not worship them, but they are simple reminders of the events in the life of Jesus. Candlesticks made from the wax of honeybees are used during the services; these had their own rich aroma, as well as some bottles of incense that we could buy. While the church building is small, I was still impressed with the inside. I had to laugh at PJ when he said he liked it when the priest came to town, because he could have wine and bread.

From the church we walked a small distance to visit Grandpa Bobby Esia, Sr. He is one of the elders of the church and the village. In church, his position is the Reader. It was evident that John respected the old man very much. He said that Grandpa Bob always rode around on his own 4-wheeler, carrying a camera and rifle everywhere he went. When he encountered someone who said that he was trespassing, he acted like he couldn't hear them, then took a photo of that person, and rode off, whether it be on that person's land or not. We all gathered around his kitchen table, and he sat on a well-worn chair in the corner, please to have company. Much of the wall to his left was covered with Russian Orthodox icons.



**Mary Lou, Douglas, & Jeanne**



**Grandpa Bobby Esia, Sr.**

John told us that Bobby was hard of hearing, but loved to tell his many stories. With only a little encouragement, once settled in his chair, he slowly

began one of them. Several hours later, I tried to write as much as I could remember of what he said, but obviously, listening to him was a more rewarding experience than I can convey second-hand. Here is the story he told us, as best as I recall:

*"I am an old man, not to much interesting, not much to tell. I'm almost 85 years old. I used to go camping all over, living off the land and carrying my gear in a burlap bag. Not like the people today with all of their coolers. For 11 years I have lived by myself, since my wife died. We were married for 47 years. I believe in God and I believe in Jesus. When I was 17, I was mushing a team of dogs. We were going through long grasses near the river. The river was iced over. When I was crossing the river the ice gave way and the sled and the dogs fell into the river. It was icy cold. I managed to get the dogs up on the ice, but the sled and me were in the water and I couldn't get out. I cut the dogs reins. I was in the water 1\_ hour to 2 hours. I believe in God and I believe in Jesus (as he clutched the cross that he wore around his neck). When we were young we always carried a picture of Jesus with us. I pulled out my picture of Jesus and prayed. Right after that some people came along. They tied some rope (quarter-inch rope it was) to some long poles. I cut the dogs loose and tied the rope to myself. The people pulled me out of the water. It was very cold, and I was in the water for 1\_ hour to 2 hours." Wow! In the water for 1\_ to 2 hours!*

I don't do justice to his story. We were in his house about 15-20 minutes, maybe a half hour. We took photos of him, and he asked up to sign his guest book. But the one thing that I took home with me is the insight that there are millions of old people in this world who have their own stories to tell. Later that evening, I remarked to Sonja how I would like to return to Alaska and listen to these people tell their stories. She asked me if I had read the book, Shadows on the Koyukuk by Sidney Huntington (as told to Jim Readon). When I said no, Andrew brought me one of his four copies to take with me. (I finally finished reading it in October, glad to have had the chance.) Although I don't know if Sidney and Bobby knew each other, there is a good chance that they did. They certainly had similar life styles of trapping, hunting, fishing, and mushing.

When we left the old man's place, I rode with John in the truck to the lake where several kids were swimming. Along the way, he told me that he and Douglas had been very good friends for over twenty years. I have a few long time and very good friends, so I can understand the mutual respect. I hadn't figured on swimming in Alaska, especially in a cold lake, and I hadn't taken any swimming trunks with me. So I watched the others of our group enter the frigid water and have water splashed onto them by the kids. I remember swimming in lakes in Wyoming as a kid while adults wearing sweaters stood around and watched. PJ put his dog in a canoe and paddled out around the other kids; soon, some of the kids were playing in the canoe. I admire the people who went swimming, but I did note that the kids were still having fun in the water while all the adults came out one-by-one.

Back at the log cabin, John started the bar-b-que for the salmon steaks. Even though fish is not generally a favorite meal of mine, I must admit we all ate a very good dinner. Afterwards, I didn't have any trouble at all eating Marty's

homemade chocolate cake and frosting. After dinner, some people went into the sauna, another result of John's handiwork.

Around 11 PM, we all went back to the plane. I walked behind PJ, Sonja, and Neal, going at my own pace and catching up with them at the plane. Roger Jenkins had told them that there was room available at the town's guesthouse, but nobody wanted to stay there after seeing what a mess the construction workers had made. Jeannie, Mary Lou, Neal, and Sonja pitched tents, and Douglas slept in the back of the plane, where he has built a bed. Earlier, John offered to let me sleep in the cabin where his son Andrew usually stayed, and there were two beds, so I thought I would have the extra bed. As it turned out, Andrew slept in the main house on the couch, saying he does it all the time. Andrew's cabin is definitely not the product of someone brought up on MTV. Several furs hung on the walls, including a black bear skin rug. In all of my travels, I think this is one of the best-decorated rooms I have ever stayed in. Thanks, Andrew, for letting me stay there. Thanks to the people of Nikolai for all of your hospitality. Hopefully, in two years, I will be able to fly the Stinson to Alaska and stop there for a visit.

### **Saturday, August 9<sup>th</sup>**

After a breakfast of fresh coffee and homemade pancakes made with handpicked blueberries, it was time to pack the plane and continue the odyssey to Nome. Once again, many people of the village rode their 4-wheelers to the plane to say goodbye. I looked around to see if PJ was stowing away. He didn't, but Roger Jenkins had decided to hitchhike with us to Nome, wait for us to go to Russia and back, and then fly to Anchorage in the An-2. He is a man whose sense of adventure just naturally fit with the rest of ours. Roger came to Alaska as a young geologist about 40 years ago from Duluth, Minnesota. Along the way he migrated into city engineering and then into politics, at a high enough level to have served in the Alaska Legislature. He has a unique perspective of being an honest politician – he often laughingly said that he would stay in a town until the people ran him off, then come back a few years later and become a councilman again. I told him of my interest in geology and satellite remote sensing, and he told me he could line me up with people who might be able to offer me a job. I have no doubt that he would be true to his word, and who knows, there may be a time that I give him a call.

Our flight to McGrath departed with a good send-off from the people of Nikolai. Since the flight time was only for a few minutes, Neal stayed in the co-pilot seat, and I stood behind him and Douglas. I quickly understood why Andrew said that the air distance between Nikolai and McGrath is about 40 miles, but the river distance is 120 miles. From the air, the Kuskokwim River looks like a piece of Christmas ribbon candy.

About halfway into the flight, Douglas pointed out the area where a Stinson 108 that he piloted had crashed about twenty-five years ago in the winter. The plane started to ice up badly so he chose a place to land; the snow hid the fact that the ground was semi-frosted. After the plane went into a ground loop, it came to a halt upside-down in the trees. Fortunately, none of the four adults and the year-and-a-half old baby on board was injured. Douglas admitted to me that he was much younger and inexperienced than he is now, but I bet he learned some lessons that he will never forget. I learned some lessons that I won't forget. They fed the baby two Granola bars, which was the total food in the plane, and they melted snow in their mouths to give the baby water. Nobody had any matches to start a fire, so they tried to spark the battery against a gasoline soaked rag, but the battery had been damaged in the crash. For two days they hiked for along the river, to find after they were rescued that they had traveled a straight-line distance of only about a quarter-of-a-mile, due to the extensive winding river. Rescue came after people flying in a Cessna saw the wreckage, located Douglas's party, and indicated to them to head back towards the plane. Either the Cessna didn't have room for them, or could not land, but its pilot radioed the Civil Air Patrol to send a plane to pick them up. They were picked up on gravel bar in the Kuskokwim River. In McGrath, they slept on floor of the flight service station operator's house, and flew commercial to Anchorage the next day. Douglas didn't say anything about them eating anything in McGrath, but I reckon they probably did.

Even though the landing at McGrath was only the second of our journey (at least for me), it became readily apparent to me that the giant dragonfly *antonovusrex* attracts wistful onlookers as fast as spawning salmon attract fishermen. Dinosaurs and bumblebees aren't supposed to fly but the Peter Pan that lives in children and pilots and those wishing they could fly know that Puff, the Magic Dragon, of the pterodactyl species, does soar.

As soon as the door of the plane opened, Marty's father welcomed us into McGrath. Roger introduced us to him. This was the first indication that Roger seems to know everyone in the state.



Neal fueling the plane in McGrath



Douglas "Propping" the plane

In McGrath, while Neal and Douglas fueled the plane, Roger managed to acquire a pick-up truck for all of us to tour the town. Our first stop was to check the weather and file a flight plan at the FAA Flight Service Station, the only building in town that has an elevator - your tax dollars at work. Jeanne drove the truck around McGrath, one or two others sat in front, and the rest sat in back on the side of the box for the five or ten minute drive. One of the shops sold large chocolate chip cookies so I bought enough for us to chomp on as we had the grand tour. Our last stop was to the McQuire's Tavern, since Roger told us that this bar had been mentioned in Sue Henry's book, "Murder on the Iditarod Trail". About an hour after landing, we took off for Nome.

Sonja flew in the co-pilot's seat most of the three-hour flight from McGrath to Nome, and I managed to grab one-and-a-half hours in the pilot's seat. Following Douglas's example, she dumped her sandals, while remarking how cool the pedals felt. Her bright red polished toenails contrasted against the dull gray pedals. During the entire trip Neal and Douglas were very good about giving Sonja and me time at the controls. Quite often, she and I sat in the front, and Douglas and Neal were in the back. Sometimes she would be in the left seat and I would be in the right. I imagine that since Sonja has flown quite a bit in Alaska, and is a very experienced and good pilot, is the reason why we were both allowed to be in the pilot and co-pilot seats at the same time. For this segment, I started flying just prior to crossing the wide Yukon River. As we flew towards Nome, Sonja pointed out some of the different towns and areas she had flown to, such as Unalakleet. She is an interesting person. Furloughed from United Airlines after September 11<sup>th</sup>, she went to Alaska looking for a flying job, and found one with Warbelow's Air Ventures in Fairbanks. She has all kinds of experience and ratings, including the floatplane rating I eventually hope to have, and type ratings in Boeing 727s and 737s, which I never expect to have. She rolls her own cigarettes, and for fun, mushes a dog team. One day during the trip she told me that some of her friends have hinted at starting a company with her to fly a DC-3. I told her if that happens to let me know, because I would love to fly one, even if from only the right seat for only an hour or two.

Douglas and Neal took over for the landing at Nome. We sat up tents near the plane, and then caught a ride into town with some other people heading for Russia. Several people planned on making the trip, so there was a coordination dinner and meeting at a restaurant that overlooked the Pacific Ocean. Two pilots from Wasilla, Alaska sat across from me. After telling them that I worked at the space center in Houston, one of the pilots told me that his father had worked for Grumman in Long Island, New York during the Apollo days. Grumman built the lunar lander; after the Apollo 13 near-disastrous mission when the astronauts saved themselves by climbing into the lunar lander, the workers that had worked on the lander were presented mission patches that actually flew on-board Apollo 13. Usually, flown patches are reserved for VIPs, but I would guess that in the minds of the Apollo 13 astronauts, no one was more important than those lunar lander workers. The man telling me the story said that he still has that patch.



Camping at Nome

At the briefing that night assignments were given to the prime pilots of each of the dozen or so aircraft expecting to go to Russia. Each plane had a designated time to take off. I think we were scheduled to go at 10:10 AM the next morning. The An-2 does not have a Type Certification in the United States. In order to do so, each bolt and part would have to have traceability back to the factory, each part would have to meet rigid testing standards, it would cost millions of dollars for a plane that has been flying for over fifty years, and Beechcraft, Cessna, and Piper are being protected by the FAA (in my opinion). As I understand it, for the Antonov to be registered in the U. S., it can only be done as an experimental airplane under very tight restrictions - it can't be utilized to haul cargo or passengers for hire and can only be flown for air shows and special events. The VFR corridor between Nome and Provideniya hasn't been opened long and all flights are heavily scrutinized. The Russians balked at the word, "Experimental", even though it is their design. So at dinner that night, we were told that special permission had to originate in Moscow for the Antonov to fly to Provideniya, and due to the time differences, we would have to wait another 24 hours before we could take off. I guess even the State Department became involved. Had the application been worded slightly different, there probably would not have been a problem. I am an optimist, and having heard the way the Russians typically make people stay in limbo, then grant permission to do something at the last minute, I felt we would be going anyway. I have been wrong before. We did not go.

Perhaps we could have gone on Monday, but by Sunday morning, the weather did not look favorable to wait. As it turned out, some of the people who did make it on Sunday had to stay an extra night in Provideniya due to a huge front that moved from Russia to Alaska.

But I am ahead of the story. After dinner, we all made our way back to the plane. We were sitting around talking when a lady by the name of Susan showed up. She is a dog musher, but is not the Susan Bucher that has won the Iditarod. Several years earlier she had been mushing a team of dogs in Siberia, starting in Provideniya and heading north. After the race, her and her dogs and other teams were to be picked up by the Russians. Usually they used their heavy-lift helicopters, but in this instance two An-2s were sent. Three dog teams were loaded in the plane that Susan flew on. Nobody knows whether it was lack of experience, dumbness, or whatever, but for whatever reason, one of the dog teams was put in the tail section. Apparently, this altered the center of gravity enough to make the plane extremely tail heavy. Upon takeoff, the plane stalled and crashed; one person who was not strapped into his seat was killed. Susan said seeing our An-2 heading on a pleasure flight brought closure. She sure told her story much better than I do.

That night, I spent my first of three sleeping in the plane. I sort of reclined in the seat behind the cockpit, and stretched my legs into it. Not great, but not bad, either.

### **Sunday, August 10<sup>th</sup>**

While waiting final word whether or not we would go to Russia, we were visited at the plane by a uniformed U.S. Customs Officer, Anne Marie Millbrooke. She said she was there unofficially, just wanted to see the Antonov up close. She and I chatted a bit, and I told her that I hoped to see her in her official capacity, which would have meant that we had been successful in traveling to-and-from Russia. The reason I know her full name is that I looked it up on the Internet, under the aviation business name of Jeppesen. Not only does she work for the Customs outfit, she teaches at the local college, and according to what I found on the Internet, she has a PhD, writes for the Nome newspaper, perhaps serves on the city council, and is also a pilot. So why was I curious about this woman? It is because she casually mentioned that she had written a book titled Aviation History that Jeppesen carried. I was actually searching for information on the book and the rest of the stuff popped up. Besides the scenic country, this is what I like about flying in Alaska – you never know whom you will meet nor what they have contributed to mankind.

We watched forlornly as other planes departed from Nome to Provideniya. Even though we all knew that it was bureaucratic nonsense that kept the Antonov from returning to Mother Russia (although this particular plane had actually been built in Poland), we all shared some disappointment. But we couldn't languish long – there are plenty of other places that we could fly to in Alaska. The two things that stuck with me about this gaggle of ragtag vagabonds is that nobody complained during the entire odyssey, and all of us seemed to look forward to whatever adventure each day brought and take everything in stride.

About noon or so we departed northeast to Serpentine Hot Springs. Douglas and Neal did a low pass over the gravel runway, circled the ancient volcanic debris field and landed on the 1000-foot strip. Perfect landing. Not quite such a perfect stop! At the end of the runway near the bathhouse there was a place to turn the plane around. Only problem was, it was spongy tundra. We didn't sink much, just deep enough so that we were stuck. Had I been at the controls, we would probably have been stuck even worse. Then, the work began. All of us pitched in to unload the plane; when everything was piled outside one wondered how it all fit inside. Cooking stuff, the gasoline powered blender and the gasoline powered electric generator and food and beer from the freezer that only required one hour of generator time at night, and camping gear, baggage and sleeping bags, and other junk that people can really do without but don't think so.

We pushed on the wings and the spars and we did it again because the first time and the fifth time the six-ton plane did not budge. And we unloaded some more. Had there been more than ten plastic five-gallon red jerry cans, we would have filled them with the planes fuel. Aviation gas weighs six pounds per gallon; you can do the math and come up with the same three hundred pounds of fuel that we drained. Next to the bathhouse is a large bunkhouse. We scrounged lumber from around the bunkhouse. One piece was about three inches thick, a foot wide, and three feet long. And we dug and dug some more and we built up layers of wooden planks beneath the tires. We could have used a come-along, and two exhausted hikers came along just in time (Sonja's words) to help. What I write in two paragraphs took two or three hours to perform. We all gave our muscles a workout while we raised the wings and pushed with all of our might after Douglas started the engine and opened up the throttle to full power, and the plane moved and Douglas skillfully shut it down before it ran out of boards, and we all cheered, Then we lay down some plywood and pushed the plane backwards onto the runway. And we all cheered. When I take the Stinson to Alaska, the back seats will be out and there will be a plywood floor in the back seat and a hydraulic jack and a come-along in the luggage compartment, because I might not be so lucky to have a ready source of lumber to help me out of some soggy tundra.



Reloading the plane at Serpentine Hot Springs

Roger loaned me a pair of Bermuda shorts and I went into the bathhouse for a little while, and the others did the same. Neal loaded the plane with the skill of NASA packing the shuttle for launch, while Douglas climbed on top of the plane and poured the fuel back into the tanks. The borrowed lumber was returned to the bunkhouse and the tire tracks we left were the only evidence of our journey to the hot springs.

Roughly four or five hours after our stop at the hot springs, we were once again airborne. Douglas set our course for North East to Kotzebue, which is thirty miles north of the Arctic Circle. For this segment of our journey, I logged 0.7 hour of flight time. Sonja sat in the right seat when Douglas landed the plane an hour or two later. The town looks pretty from the air, but I wasn't too impressed after we set down. We parked near the Alaskan Airlines terminal, and a fuel truck drove up. I think this was the most expensive fueling of the entire trip. I forgot how much fuel that we took on, but the \$750 that Douglas was charged worked out to \$3.75 a gallon. However, included in the cost was a \$55 charge to roll the fuel truck. Ouch! While the fueling was going on, Roger talked to some guy who worked with the airport maintenance crews. He offered to take us into town in his car as soon as the Alaskan Airlines jet took off. Some people walked; I rode. We went through the town by a big building that is supposed to be a good museum, but it was closed. Our tour took us by the 22-bed hospital that looked like it could hold 200 people. We went by the pizza place and an old cemetery that also had graves marked with the Russian Orthodox crosses.

We drove by the blue hotel overlooking the gray ocean that I had stayed in when I first visited the town in 1995. Before I Wintered-over in Antarctica, I spent a month in Alaska for training. I took a bump from the airlines, and used the free ticket one weekend to go to Kotzebue, only because it is located north of the Arctic Circle. The Alaskan Airlines 737 had stopped in Nome, and would stop again on the return flight. Before I stepped off the plane I thought I would rather go back to Nome, but the airline said I couldn't do it, unless I wanted to pay an extra charge. I didn't. So, I walked to the blue hotel and ate at the pizza place and watched the young men playing pool laugh and drink beer and then I walked past the graves marked with Russian Orthodox crosses back to the blue hotel overlooking the gray ocean. Snowmobiles abounded. Whalebones could be seen on the beach, if I remember right. I thought, "Why would people want to live here?" And then I thought, "People might say the same thing about Bacliff, Texas". Onboard the flight to Kotzebue a young man sat behind me, handcuffed to a law enforcement officer, who was taking him to prison. I don't know why. Once, during the flight, the young man told the other man about a caribou hunt. I could tell that the kid was scared, and I felt sorry for him. I have often wondered if he has been released, and is caribou hunting again. But he probably can't hunt with a rifle anymore. Back at the blue hotel I almost felt trapped. And I thought of the kid going to prison, and then I realized that I was leaving the next day and it didn't seem so bad. He would not have minded being at the pizza place playing pool and laughing and drinking beer, nor walking past the graves marked with

Russian Orthodox crosses back to the blue hotel that overlooked the gray ocean and whalebones, and hopping on a snowmobile.

Something else happened that night. While watching the gray ocean from the second floor of the blue hotel, I met a man from Dutch Harbor who introduced me to the Holy Spirit. This is the first time I have written about this experience. Maybe this story on the An-2 isn't the right forum to do so, but it is the one I am choosing. I was drinking a cup of hot chocolate when he came in. I don't remember his name. For a while we sat in silence. I even resented having my solitude disturbed. Then he began to talk, and like a man on a mission, he started telling me about how the Holy Spirit is seldom really discussed, but that It is still one side of the Holy Trinity. He said that a person must be receptive to receiving It, and that once It is received, it must be passed on to others. I haven't done a very good job of passing It to others. The discussion went on for perhaps an hour. He asked me if I would like to receive the Gift. So we stood up, he had me hold my palms facing up, and he held his hands facing down about an inch above mine. And he prayed, and asked that the Holy Spirit enter me. He told me that it might take a while for me to notice. A few months after going to Antarctica I was alone and started thinking about this. So I held my hands with palms facing upward, and invited the Holy Spirit in. Several minutes later I felt a jolt of energy surge through my entire body from my hands to my feet, almost as if I had been struck by lightning, and I had such a feeling of overwhelming peace.

I thought about these things after leaving Kotzebue. When we took off, Douglas let me sit in the right seat, and shortly afterwards, Sonja took his place in the left seat. Flying east towards Hughes, we flew over the Kobuk and Hog Rivers and lonely looking cabins and clumps of green marshes and swamps (what's the difference?) that probably had mosquitoes as big as moose. I don't know if we flew for forty miles or for one hundred miles over these wetlands, but I would have hated to land here in an emergency. Sonja gave me some excellent free flight instruction during the half-hour that I flew. The aircraft requires constant attention; I often had to readjust my altitude and/or course, especially after making a slight movement in the seat. Probably, that is a result of my lack of skill in this airplane. There is a Garmin 295 GPS receiver onboard that is coordinated to our sectional charts. It was cloudy out and we had a good tailwind, but the ride seemed smooth. When Douglas took over for the landing, Sonja gave directions around the hills to Hughes. We crossed over the Koyukuk River and flew parallel to it for a while, and then made a long approach to the airport, which lays parallel to the river. Sonja is used to flying the twin-engine Navajo that flies much faster than the An-2. Our hundred-knot airplane lumbered along; Douglas gave it more throttle so we wouldn't land short – good idea! But, I have no doubt that had our landing been left to Sonja, she would have landed that plane probably about as well as she does the Navajo. Hughes is where Sidney Huntington was born in 1915.



My turn!



Parked at Hughes

So instead of sleeping in an expensive ramshackle of a dorm in Provideniya, we pitched camp on the airport at Hughes. While we sat up the tents, Roger introduced himself to the few people around welcoming us at 10 PM. One man came up in a 4-wheeler and told us that he owned the laundromat, and that he would open it so we could take showers in the morning. Usually, it was only opened on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. He sure wanted a ride in the Antonov. He came back a little later with tokens that cost \$2.00 each to activate the showers for eight minutes.

The trouble with writing a story a couple of months after an adventure happens is that details become fuzzy. I don't remember if we just snacked, or if we cooked food that night in the big tent. I guess it doesn't matter. I do remember that Douglas sacked out early in the back of the plane, Mary Lou and Jeanne pitched their own tent and disappeared, and Roger put his tent up away from the plane and disappeared. So, that left Neal, Sonja, and me telling each other stories in the big tent, until the rain came. Neal said that he, Douglas, Jeanne, and Mary Lou had all been friends for many years. The four of them, and some other friends, have discussed growing old together and watching out for each other, with no nursing homes nor assisted living centers. In an old man's creaky voice, he said, "Douglas, let's take the Antonov up one more time again, now that we are 115 years old", or words to that affect. It was either this night or later that Sonja told of flying an Indian woman who delivered a baby during the flight.

Cap'n Neal (Dawg) is about my age, we both like adventure, and we both once lived in New Zealand, but the similarity stops there. He has lived in Africa, owns at least one deep-sea diving boat in Valdez that universities charter for scientific research and Exxon has chartered in conjunction with the Valdez oil spill. He has also participated in studies of octopus, and has been involved with the discovery of new species. From what I understand, there is another boat that he either owns or has access to in the Caribbean. He told me that he could fly the Antonov, but considers it to be more Douglas's toy. I had no doubt from the beginning that he could fly it. He has flown gliders for fifty hours in both New Zealand and in Africa. We have different religious and political opinions but I followed Mark Twain's advice and discussed neither. He treated me well and I would still fly with him again.

When we finally hit the sack, I claimed the same seats behind the cockpit that I had used the previous night, only Neal had taken bags out so I had more room; he slept in a hammock hung from the ceiling of the plane, and Sonja used a cot that Neil set up in the mid-section of the plane near the door. The freezer was behind my two airline seats, but in front of the area where Sonja slept. The small table had to be removed so her cot could be assembled. Just like in a motor home, only this one has a 1000 horsepower motor with a big fan attached. I hung my jacket up by the cockpit entrance to keep out the bright light from an annoying rotating beacon located near the plane.

### **Monday, August 11<sup>th</sup>**

When I woke up, Douglas had the coffee perking and pancakes bubbling on the hot grill. I used my shower token immediately. Roger was in the laundromat drying clothes wet from the rain that leaked into his tent. Jeanne and Mary Lou had had a cold windy night in their tent. These ladies had just completed a ten-day kayaking or canoe trip down the Yukon prior to joining the An-2 trip. They were used to camping out, and found the plane confining. Here I was proud of just flying across the famous river, and they had been riding its waves. Makes my flight across it seem kind of insufficient!

For twenty years Jeanne and Mary Lou had taught together, and had traveled the world together. Jeanne told me that she was born in Greenwich Village, New York, to parents that had been "Beatniks". You don't hear that word much any more. In the Sixties, she lived in a commune in Arkansas, then migrated to Taos, New Mexico. Somewhere along the way she moved to Valdez. She has two master's degrees, one of which is in Computer Science. According to Mary Lou, Jeanne is a gifted teacher that gave all to her students, but Jeanne told me that sometimes the school year seemed like a prison sentence. As soon as they both worked the required twenty years in Alaska, they retired. It was either this Monday, or the following one, that Jeanne felt her retirement kick in, because school started or would start without her. Her next big adventure is to ride a horse on a 500-mile trip in Argentina this fall. When you are only around people for less than a week, you don't hear a lifetime of the stories that made them whom they are. The ones I did hear were fascinating.

Mary Lou lives in Hawaii, has owned at least one charter boat, and has a grandson that is about a month older than my granddaughter Camyrn. You would never know it to look at her. She has a smile that could go on a magazine cover. (In fact, each of the three women on the trip looks younger than their actual ages.) Joe, a friend of hers in Hawaii, encouraged her to go on this trip. Even though the plane didn't make it to Russia, all of us in the group had a lot of fun together flying around Alaska. Next summer, the plane will not be based in Alaska. Who knows if it will ever fly across the Bering Sea?

While we ate breakfast, one of the twin-engine Navajos belonging to Warbelow's Air Ventures flew in on a mail run. Sonja talked to the pilot. He visited the An-2, and took some photos with his digital camera, including the one shown below of me turning the prop. (I'm the little guy on the right!)



I'm "propping" the plane

Around 11 AM we took off to Fairbanks via Tanana. We flew over the Melozina River. For this particular flight segment, Douglas stayed in the pilot's seat, Sonja sat in the co-pilot's seat, and I stood behind them with my headset plugged in. Because Sonja has such an extensive in-depth knowledge of the area and Douglas's thorough familiarity with his airplane, it was a good combination of talent in the cockpit (although I would have been just as comfortable if Neal had been flying instead of Douglas). I am sure I could have handled the flying, just not as proficiently as the other three pilots. West of Tanana we could see the Yukon River in the distance off our right wing. Sonja apologized later for routing us over some hills directly to the East that soon became shrouded in rain clouds, but I don't fault her. We did some scud running (dodging clouds) for a little while before we made a Westbound turn straight into a rainbow, then we banked to the South and intercepted the Yukon River. We followed the Yukon to where the Tanana River flows into it, and then we followed the Tanana to Fairbanks. Shortly after leaving the Tanana town area, the weather cleared up, and I sat down in the pilot's seat.

Sonja asked me if it was OK if she piloted the plane on into Fairbanks, because she was thinking of leaving our group there. An hour later, she banked the plane on final approach to runway 19 Left before Douglas took over. I had flown on four different days with her. There is no doubt in my mind that she is a superb pilot.

There is a camping strip at Fairbanks airport for itinerant airplanes and people that has pavilions with tables and bar-b-que pits and a place to park planes. Douglas taxied the plane the length of the strip and turned it around and went back mid-field. The right wing was about one foot higher than the roof of the pavilion. The only other airplane on the camping strip was a Rockwell Commander that had just flown in from Oshkosh, Wisconsin.



Fairbanks Airpark



Douglas doing something at Fairbanks

After we landed, Sonja met up with her friend Robert, whom she had flown with to Anchorage in his Maule 4, five days earlier. A few days earlier, John Runkle had given some frozen but ungutted whitefish to Douglas that he placed in the freezer. Sonja and Robert took the fish to Robert's place for cleaning, and later brought them back along with salad fixings.

The rest of the day was rather uneventful. Roger left to rent a car and stay with friends or relatives. Tents once again popped up. A year earlier I had flown with Michael Vivion in his C-170 on floats, so I called to see about flying with him again, but he couldn't fly that day. Oh well, hopefully, we can fly another day together. Sometime during the day Jeanne paid me one of the highest compliments I have ever received: She called me a true Alaskan. We had been sitting around the picnic table chatting, and in the conversation I talked about the number of times I had been to the state, and how much I liked it, and how much of it I had seen. It would not bother me at all to actually move there, when the time is right.

While I walked around, a pickup stopped and the driver asked me if he could take me anywhere. I told him that I would like a coke, so he drove me to a pilot's lounge. It turned out that he is manager of the airport, or at least someone high up on the scale. Later, when I talked to Karoline from the payphone located a few pavilions down from ours, I saw an Fairbanks Airport Police SUV driven by

a lady police officer go by, heading for the plane. For the second time in two days a uniformed woman came to the plane. I thought there might be a problem with the plane's wing being over the roof of the pavilion, but found this was not the case.

I don't think she stopped then, but a few hours later she did when I was back at the plane. Prior to her arrival, Neal had asked me if I wanted to take a closer look at that round engine. It's impressive! He had been standing on a ladder next to the open cowling of the huge radial engine while Douglas walked around the upper wings and the top of the fuselage. The lady police officer with razor sharp creases on her uniform stepped out of the SUV about the time Neal went back up the ladder. Her first words surprised me; instead of saying something official, she said that she used to work as an A & P. Her name is Catherine Hamilton. I have to admit I have wondered what events took this woman down her career path to working as an airplane mechanic and then on to an airport police officer. Obviously, over the years she has encountered many different airplanes but this one held a special fascination for her. I wandered off again as she talked to Neal and Douglas. Later, I found out that she had once been in the Bahamas on a boat with a hot tub in the aft section when Neal had been its captain.

During the evening, other people came to admire the plane. The fish were cooked over the bar-b-que grill, and the gasoline-powered blender mixed up a few more drinks. Douglas asked me if I would like to have a non-alcoholic drink, which tasted good. I should have walked past the trees to see the sunset, but managed to photograph the plane at that time, anyway.



**Douglas and Mary Lou with blender that is powered by a weed-eater engine**



**Sunset in Fairbanks**

When the sky became darker and people drifted away, I walked into the plane to find Neal working on the cot so I could have a better place to sleep. He told me that he felt guilty about me sleeping in the plane's front seats, but I told him I had done so by my own choice. Douglas came into the plane and went into his bedroom in the tail section, closing the Japanese-style door behind him. So once again, I had the whole cabin area to myself. I have to admit, sleeping on the

cot was more comfortable than the airplane seats, but I wouldn't have minded using the seats, anyway.

## **Tuesday, August 12<sup>th</sup>**

For the Antonov's size and power, burning fifty gallons of gas an hour probably isn't unreasonable. With a fuel capacity of 317 gallons, the plane can fly for about five-and-a-half hours and still have enough fuel left in the tanks to satisfy the 45-minute reserve required by the FAA. As mentioned earlier, Roger seemed to know everyone. Because of his connections, a fuel truck came to the airpark and the driver pumped 250 gallons into the thirsty An-2 at about 75% of the going rate of \$3.05 per gallon.

Once again, the tents were taken down and everything was loaded back in the plane. Sonja came to say goodbye, as did Catherine, along with Alexander, her son whom is about ten or eleven. He may not realize for a long time the gift of seeing this airplane that his mother gave to him. If I had to guess, she probably did not sleep well the previous night because the emotions of seeing that plane and wanting to fly to the end of the rainbow pounced upon her soul so strongly that she knew she absolutely had to share them with him. I encouraged her to bring him along and join us on our southbound journey. Catherine did not give into the temptation of hopping on an airplane on the spur-of-the-moment, only because real life responsibilities of jobs and family commitments overrode her heart's desire. As I strapped into the co-pilot's seat for takeoff, I saw her drive away. I thought she was going to leave before we started the engine. But she parked her car near the South end of the airpark, and stood with Alexander, waiting for the turning of the prop, the cough of the engine, the puff of white smoke, and then, the throaty roar as all nine cylinders started firing. She waved when we taxied by, longing to be with us, not minding the prop blast blowing her hair.

Once airborne, we followed the Tanana River towards Nenana, then headed South, flying East of the Parks Highway (which is the road between Fairbanks and Anchorage) and staying well away from the radomes of Clear AFB. Before we passed through the mountains near Healy, I turned over the co-pilot's position to Neal. We started to encounter some down drafts; right after Neal took my place, Douglas gave it full throttle to climb, but the vertical speed indicator showed that we were actually descending. The fact that I am writing this story makes it obvious that we cleared the mountains, but in retrospect, I think I should have started increasing the altitude earlier, since I was the one flying before Neal took over. I hope I learned a lesson that I never have to use: Strong head winds, downdrafts, and lack of sufficient altitude and visibility when flying near mountains can kill you. How do I know that we had strong head winds? Well, when the air speed indicator reads about 100 knots, and the GPS receiver shows a ground speed of 32 knots, even this rocket scientist can do the math.

Douglas and Neal flew low along the Parks Highway and the river that runs parallel to it, which I think is the Nenana River. Through the portholes on both sides of the airplane I could see both, as well as peaks of trees higher than the wings of the plane. As mountains go, the peaks we saw on both sides of the road, when we could see them, are only about 8000 feet high, 6000 feet higher than the river and the road. The NATO name for the An-2 is the An-2 Colt; this colt bucked as if it was saddled for the first time. We bounced and we bounced. Not wanting to prove a cartographer wrong, Windy Pass lived up to its name. And we bounced some more. Let's land at that runway that's off to the right. Is this where they named the Wind Mariah? I'm sitting next to Jeanne, facing aft, near the center of the plane. She has her head down on her hands, leaning on the table. Running through my head is the old adage, "It is better to be on the ground wishing you were up in the air, than to be in the air wishing you were on the ground". I wished that I were on the ground. I thought I might have to use my hat, the South Pole cap with all the pins, for another purpose than to cover up my bald spot, because I couldn't reach anything else without unstrapping my seatbelt, and to do that could mean being splattered on the door. How can Douglas and Neal even see anything? I wish we would land. Let's go back to that runway we saw a few miles back. The plane went into a sudden bank. A few minutes later Douglas landed us at the gravel strip at Summit, located just South of Cantwell. We stop, and the prop stopped. I didn't notice the prop stopping, because I was opening the door for Jeanne. Somehow, through all of this past hour, I managed not to share breakfast, and once outside, the cold wind blowing the rain on my face helped. It was probably a good thing that Catherine and Alexander had stayed in Fairbanks.

An hour later the sky had cleared somewhat, the rain had ceased, we were ready to go. I stood behind Douglas and Neal; my thoughts weren't on the unforgettable sound of the radial engine making its dragon roar. As if to prove that it could handle more wind and rain than its human cargo, the Antonov easily lifted off the runway. I don't remember the sequence of whether we tried to go further South, and then turned back and flew to Cantwell airport, or if we went to Cantwell first. I guess it really doesn't matter. When we flew to the Cantwell airport, the conditions just weren't right. Some lady on the ground talked to us on the radio and told us about the landing strip, so we either headed further south or back to Summit. Weather definitely deteriorated to very poor visibility and heavy rain near Igloo, so we turned back North. This time the wind pushed us at a ground speed of 156 knots, as indicated on the GPS display. Once again, we landed at Summit, at approximately 4 PM.

The same massive weather front that we would have had to fight had we gone to Russia was now tearing up the State. For the next four hours, we pretty much stayed inside the plane. For a while, I sat in the cockpit reading Shadows on the Koyukuk. I had left my South Pole hat back on the table. Neal looked at it, and asked me if I had an An-2 pin. Douglas had given me one earlier, but it was still on the hat that my sister's dog had chewed up a couple weeks before. I

mentioned that to Neal, and he told me to grab another pin, so now I have two. One is a spare. We ate some of the candy bars that had been bought to give to the Russians. We started having discussions about where we would all sleep. I opted to go back to the seats behind the cockpit, and was ready to take one of the pilot's seats. Jeanne said she didn't want to sleep in the plane, but I don't think she relished fighting the cold wind again. While these conversations were going on, some guy drove up in a white flatbed truck. He said people in Cantwell had been talking about the An-2 flying over, and they figured we probably were out at Summit. He said that there was a bunkhouse where we could all stay the night. It didn't take long before we all gathered a few items and crowded into the truck.

At the bunkhouse the same lady whom had talked to us on the radio welcomed us. I don't remember her first name, but she and her husband Ray Atkins own the bunkhouse near the Cantwell airport, where they also run their business, Atkins Guiding & Flying Service. They make their living as outfitters, and are used to having several people staying there at a time. The guy who drove us there took us to a local tavern, where supposedly we could have something to eat, but apparently, the food cooking wasn't done there anymore, or it was too late, or something. Anyway, we had to beg for a ride to the "Lazy J" restaurant, about two miles away. Noisy construction workers chatted with us. I asked to use the phone to call the "Lazy J" to see if they were still open. The bartender with a big handlebar mustache pointed to the phone behind the bar. I didn't know that the others had been talking to someone about giving us a ride to the restaurant, so I announced while I was behind the bar that I would buy beer to anyone whom would take us there. The bartender said I ought to buy a round of drinks. I forgot that this is Alaska, where the prices are high. I agreed, but only had \$40.00 that I was willing to spend. I asked him how much a round would cost, and he said, \$70.00. Then he told me I had to leave the area behind the bar. Mary Lou said she laughed when she saw me standing behind it. I asked the others if they would chip in the other \$30.00, and I was told basically to shut up. Someone else had already agreed to give us a ride, and wouldn't accept any beer. So the six of us clamored into the back of a small Japanese import pickup and were on our way.

At the restaurant I ordered a hamburger that tasted very good. While waiting for the food, Neal and I talked about the dangers of mountain flying. He said the two good friends of his, both of whom were excellent pilots, had been killed as a result of severe downdrafts in turbulent weather. They used to work for Alaska Air Taxi, the company that I had flown with four years ago when Brian Collier, Bob Simle, and Hawks Abbott went salmon fishing together. I knew of the people whom Neal had talked about, because the blonde lady pilot was featured in the videotape, "Bush Pilots of Alaska".

We finished our meal near closing time; the owner agreed to give a ride back to the bunkhouse. One more pickup, a lot more fun! Each of us picked out a

bunk and unrolled our sleeping bags. I chose an upper bunk; on the wall above my head somebody had left a dirty baseball cap that had the word "Alaska" and a floatplane embroidered on the front. I hope to find a new one sometime just like it that I can buy. But, like my friend Bob Simle told me about an Alaskan Airlines pilot flying 737s into Dutch Harbor saying that wearing a hat or belt buckle with the words "Bush Pilot" inscribed does not make you a bush pilot. You must be able to read and respond to the weather.

### Wednesday, August 13<sup>th</sup>



"Experimental" 87AN landing at Cantwell

Hot coffee and pancakes awaited us in the Atkins's house. I don't think any of us minded paying the \$20.00 they charged each of us for the room and board. Ray Atkins is a master guide and air taxi operator, and it is obvious that he and his wife have put in many years of hard work building their business. They showed us albums filled with photographs of successful hunters and fishermen (and women). Inside their house is a large room with heads of several animals they have taken in Alaska and in Africa. I was able to use their computer and delete the 250 pieces of junk e-mail spam that had accumulated in the last week. Another pilot and his wife had been stranded by the weather, having flown in from Palmer the day before in their Cessna 170. He flies the big stuff for Northwest Airlines. This guy showed me the satellite image of the weather front that dwarfed Alaska. I had a better understanding why the An-2 Colt had been a bucking bronco the day before. Neal and Douglas had gone back to the plane to check it over. As I finished deleting e-mail, the aviation radio came to life: "Cantwell traffic, Experimental 87AN turning base for runway ..." I grabbed my camera and ran outside to the airstrip, managing to capture the Antonov coming in for a landing. We all gathered our belongings off the plane. My plane back to Houston left later this same evening, so I had made arrangements to catch the 1:30 PM bus from Cantwell to Anchorage. Before long, Neal, Douglas, Jeanne, Mary Lou, and Roger had decided to ride the same bus. Ray and his wife drove us to the gas station where the bus stopped. These are good people, and I really thank them for their hospitality.

The bus driver announced that someone could take the vacant seat in the front, so I grabbed it. Two or three times a week he drove the 350 miles between Fairbanks and Anchorage. He teaches high school in Fairbanks. Neal and Douglas made a good decision not to fly the plane, because we drove through some pretty (or not so pretty) menacing weather. Riding the bus wasn't as much fun as flying the Antonov, but that day it was much safer. We pulled into Anchorage at 6:30 PM. Roger called a friend to take him to a house that he owns in Anchorage, and the rest of us took a cab to the airport. I had about an hour's wait for my flight back to Houston. I arrived home about 9 AM the next morning, slept a couple of hours, and went back to work that afternoon, exhausted but still vividly at the controls of the An-2.

Flying the Antonov in Alaska for five days gave me a microcosm insight to what bush flying is really about. We encountered political boundaries and stormy weather, became stuck in the tundra, saw some magnificent scenery, and met some great people. Even if I go to Alaska and fly for a year or two in the bush, I could never hope to be as good of a pilot as the old time bush pilots. But I can certainly enjoy flying there as much as they do.

## **EPILOG**

Douglas, Jeanne, Neal, and Mary Lou had a car where the An-2 had been parked several days earlier. I think Mary Lou stayed in Anchorage – but Neal,

Douglas, and Jeanne drove to Valdez that night, arriving about 2 AM. Douglas went to work the next morning. I found this out a couple of weeks later, when I called Douglas. He said that it took eight days before the weather cleared good enough for him and Neal to be able to fly their Stinson to Cantwell to retrieve the Antonov. He later faxed me a powerful letter that Catherine Hamilton had e-mailed Neal, which I include in this story. Also, I have included my e-mail to her, and her response to me, of which a part reads, *“It is really neat that you are writing about this adventure - one chapter of many in the life of N87AN but one of a very few, I'm quite sure, that ever makes it to paper. Perhaps they should take you along on all of their trips as their historian....”*

I hope that I have written this chapter on the life of Antonov An-2 N87AN as worthy as she flew. I may not be able to write all of its chapters, but the idea of Douglas and Neal taking me along on all their trips as the An-2 historian – well, I'm not convinced that there won't be another time for me to sit in front of a computer machine and hammer and bang out more episodes.

Next summer, I have plans to go to South Africa, rent a plane, and fly around for a couple of weeks. Had I not gone flying around Alaska in the Antonov, I would have had enough frequent flyer miles for a free round trip to Africa. Now, I will have to pay for a ticket, for at least part of the way. Somewhere during this trip I asked myself whether or not I would have still chosen to fly in the Antonov for five days had I known absolutely before I left Texas that the flight to Russia would not occur. Without any hesitation, my honest answer was and is “Yes”. Of course, I doubt that will surprise anybody.

My thanks go to God for giving me the opportunity to fly the Antonov and the wanderlust disease for which I hope I am never cured, and to Karoline for allowing me to peak over the next hill, and to Douglas and Neal for inviting me along on this trip, and to Jeanne, Mary Lou, Sonja, and Roger for the fun and company during this adventure, and I hope to cross paths again with each of you, and with all the wonderful people whom I met along the way. God Bless.

### **Jeanne's words of the trip**

*“I'm sorry, but your permission to fly to Russia has not yet been granted.” The words echoed and a wave of disappointment resonated before our eyes. We had filled out 80 pages of paperwork, gotten our Visas from the Russian Embassy, faxed in our passenger manifest and traveled.....all the way to Nome.*

*We had a huge going away party in Anchorage, well wishers stopping by the big plane at Lake Hood, hors 'deouvers were served, the blender with the lawn mower engine whipped up delicious drink concoctions and everyone wished us a Bon Voyage. Early the next morning we took off for Nikolai, a native village just this side of McGrath---the first nights stop.*

*At Nikolai we were greeted by the entire village---barefoot kids, teenagers on 4 wheelers, the principal teacher, village elders, and the city manager handling out pens inscribed with “Welcome to the City of Nikolai—enjoy your stay!” We were invited to tour the school---very impressive, visit*

*the Russian Orthodox Church---charming in its rustic beauty, visit the oldest resident of the village and hear his stories of the Old Times, and enjoy a tasty fish fry in our honor.*

*We camped happily that evening, and early the next morning (after a blueberry pancake breakfast) the City Manager, Roger, approached us and asked if there was, perhaps, an extra seat on the plane. Yes, there was, and he scurried home, grabbed his sleeping bag and tent and vowed to continue the journey with us! Us being: Sonja, a former commercial pilot for United Airlines, now living in Fairbanks and flying for an air charter service, Matt, an adventure seeker from Houston (Texas, that is!), Mary Lou from Maui, Hawaii (and a former resident of Valdez), Neal Oppen and Douglas Fulton who co-own the big bird, and me! We took off, waving a very fond farewell to all of the wonderful villagers who came to say goodbye.*

*A brief fuel stop in McGrath was next, and the City Manager proved himself invaluable to our trip--he secured us a truck so that we could all bounce around on the dirt roads and take a tour of McGrath. I must say, they have the nicest espresso stand around that part of the country---and a very famous bar as well.*

*Then on to Nome! That famous gold city by the Sea! The terminus of the Iditarod Dog Sled Race! We got there just in time to have a dinner rendezvous with all the other pilots and passengers getting staged for the air convoy to Russia. Basically, 8 other planes and a total of around 20 people were signed up, paperwork in order, fuel tanks filled, GPS's waypointed, ready to cross the Bearing Straits and eager to complete and celebrate the first opening of the VFR route for private planes to Russia. And, alas, as irony would have it, our plane, a Russian Built Antonov AN-2, the workhorse of the Russian airfleet, was the only airplane not immediately granted permission to land in Russia, because it is, only in the U.S. mind you, considered "experimental".*

*That wave of disappointment that crossed our faces quickly dissipated---there was much to do and see in that part of Alaska, and we were ready!*

*After a celebratory evening in Nome we departed the next morning for the Serpentine Hot Springs---about 100 miles North of Nome. We were forewarned that the runway was short---oh, about 900 feet in length, but we were told that we PROBABLY would be able to land there---just to be really careful! And careful we were, the landing was skillfully executed, and just as we all clapped and shouted hurray, we realized that the pilots had not shared in our joy.....actually they were pretty quiet, because...we were stuck...in the tundra...in the middle of ...nowhere. The pilots had decided to turn the plane around to prepare for take off, and had just barely left the runway and used a wee bit of the tundra to turn on and then, the big plane had sunk, and was still sinking, and not so slowly.*

*Did I mention that we had 7 wonderful people on board? Well, everyone pitched in and emptied the plane, an amazing amount of luggage, food and survival gear (not to mention the chest freezer, microwave, tables, etc. etc.) We even removed as much fuel as we could to lighten up the 6 ton beast. And we dug, and pushed and rocked and just when we were scratching our heads, 2 hikers appeared out of nowhere! With the increase in person power and the Antonov's mighty engine, we were able to get unstuck and finally enjoy the Hot Springs.*

*The Springs flow out of the ground in an area of tors---magna plus from an ancient volcano, at a scorching temperature but when mixed with the cool water from the local stream, make for a very pleasant soak. There is a structure built over pool, as well as a rustic kitchen and a bunkhouse. Certainly one of the nicest, and most remote, hot springs in Alaska.*

*On to Kotzebue and a grand tour of the City. One person we met there told us that the last time he had visited the hot Springs he saw a Cessna 206 flipped over on one end of the runway and a Stinson overturned on the other. Wow---we felt SO lucky!*

*We continued on and that night we landed in the tiny native village of Hughes---a beautiful village of around 60 folks in a pristine setting on the Koyukuk River, surrounded by forested hills. We received a very warm greeting in Hughes and the Washeteria was opened especially for us! I wonder if they were trying to tell us something!*

*Then on to Fairbanks where we camped at the Air Camp Park--what a terrific idea--just like a car camper park, but for Airplanes! A lot of folks stopped by to visit us and take a tour of the plane, help with dinner, and some even came back the next morning to bring us breakfast---ya gotta love that!*

*Trying to beat out the incoming weather we left early and had Talkeetna in our visions, but the weather beat us to it and we were forced to land at Summit Air Strip---about 10 miles south of Cantwell. Stuck, we thought, we are stuck and grounded, but before we knew it, a pickup truck appeared and offered to take us to a hunting lodge where we could stay in the bunkhouse for next to nothing! We didn't have to be invited twice, off we went to Cantwell where we had delightful dinner, a cozy bunkhouse, and even a home cooked breakfast in the morning!*

*The weather report was not looking good for the next 36 hours, so we secured the lane, said goodbye to our generous hosts, and hopped on a bus to Anchorage.*

*And, you may ask---what is the NEXT adventure? Well, beginning Sept. 12 we will be flying the big plane down to California---Lake Tahoe and many points in between. And yes, we DO have some seats available, so if you have the time, and the inkling for adventure---come JOIN us! You can contact Jeanne or Douglas at 835-5150. Happy trails!*

## **E-Mail**

*hey neal,*

*the lumbering antonov and its hugely personable crew and entourage left an enormous vacuum after slowly disappearing into the murky afternoon tuesday. for the next two nights as i patrolled our little airport, my glance down air park avenue revealed a large hole – the space somehow stretched and distorted like a pair of leggings recently vacated by their legs.*

*alexander and i watched the antonov become one with the air without the slightest appearance of effort. as it lifted off in what seemed an impossibly short distance, something stirred in me. it took me the better part of the day to trace the stirrings back to the “supernatural slow-motion takeoff” of donald shimoda’s travel air 4000 in richard bach’s “illusions”. i enjoyed considering a number of other similarities between their story and yours. for example, both stories involve two barnstorming vagabonds who meet...because each is doing what he really wants to do.” and they, like you, share their gifts so that people return home, to their lives, with a wonderful feeling inside. i also noticed that there were no bugs smashed on your propeller...*

*i consider the antonov mission – as i understood it – the jimmy buffet-esque pursuit of enjoying this life and sharing it with all who wish to partake. it dawned on me, in taking stock of the goodness that i felt in the antonov wake (prop wash), that whether you are aware of it or not, your mission is a humanitarian one. or so i think. i would love to hear what your – perceived or realized – goal is in the antonov wanderings. and like the reluctant believer that richard bach is, i am curious: “what’s in it for you?” and, “why do you bother with people like me?”*

*so neal, thanks to you and douglas and jeanne. also to the others on this particular trip who drew me into the antonov adventure. i hope some day to be a part of it.*

*peace, love, light, cc*

*From: Matthew A. Nelson  
Subject: Antonov photos from one of its vagabonds*

*Hi Catherine,*

*Douglas faxed me a copy of the email that you sent Neal about seeing the An-2 in Fairbanks. I am the guy with all the hatpins that tried to get you and your son to come along to Anchorage. I hope you don't mind that I contacted you. I just wanted to share with you some photos of the plane. The landing photos were taken at Cantwell.*

*I am in the process of writing a story about our trip, but it may take two-three more weeks before I finish it. If you want, I will send you a copy of the story, along with some other travel stories that I have written, including one that's 77 pages long about my life around airplanes. Please send me your address if you are interested. I am lucky that Karoline, my wife of 31 years, allows me to pursue my traveling dreams when I can afford it and can manage the time off work. Two days after leaving Fairbanks I was in the hot Houston, Texas area and back at work and seeing my 5-month old granddaughter who is my pride and joy.*

*I admire the fact that you brought your son out to see the plane.*

*Your email to Neal is absolutely fabulous. It is pure poetry. I looked up "Illusions..", and discovered a book that I will have to buy. I hope it's OK with you that Neal forwarded it to Douglas, and that he sent me a copy. I would like to have your permission to include the entire email in my An-2 story. I don't live the vagabond lifestyle, but I had an opportunity to go on that plane, so I took it. No regrets, even though we didn't make it to Russia.*

*I am taking the liberty to try and answer the question, "Why do you bother with people like me?".. It is because you are one in spirit with the rest of us. You wanted so badly to board that airplane. It is only because of your love for your family, your sense of responsibility, and the reality of having bills to pay that you didn't come with us.*

*God Bless,  
Matt Nelson*

*From: Catherine Chandler Hamilton  
Subject: Antonov friendship circle*

*Dear Matt,*

*What a nice surprise to receive your mail with fond reminders of the Antonov visit to Fairbanks. Now, 3 weeks after the fact, our little airpark here still seems forlorn with the collective absence of that grand airplane and its wonderful cast and crew. It is pretty tough to top an act like that. It is really neat that you are writing about this adventure - one chapter of many in the life of N87AN but one of a very few, I'm quite sure, that ever makes it to paper. Perhaps they should take you along on all of their trips as their historian....*

*I thank you for your compliments on my letter including your desire to include it in your manuscript - I will happily give you permission to include my letter and accept your offer to read your story (and your other writings) when you are finished. I thank you too for answering the question about 'why you bother with people like me', I definitely felt like I was with kindred spirits in the short time that I got to spend with you all. Neal kindly answered the question too with much the same gist as your own response.*

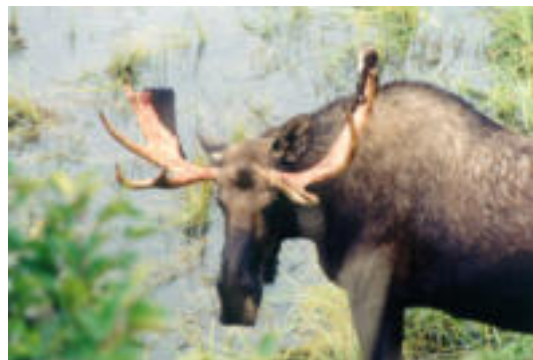
*As you swelter in the Texas heat, we are taking inventory of the signs of fall time - the geese and the cranes flying through in increasingly larger and larger flocks, clumps of leaves turning yellow like lights coming on in the windows of a big building at dusk, children returning to school,*

*the tundra aflame in regal yellows and reds – a lovely contrast to the tenacious greens. Soon, 3 weeks or so, we'll smell the wood smoke from the stoves of cabin dwellers as they melt the cold edges off early mornings and late, cool nights.*

*Thanks again for writing and sharing - greetings to Karoline and a fortunate granddaughter.*



**Floatplane over Denali**



**What's a story about Alaska without some caribou and moose, and another floatplane, even if these photos were taken on previous trips?**