

**Flying the An-2 in Guatemala and El Salvador, 2005
and throwing in Alaska and
The Iditarod® Trail Sled Dog Race just for fun**

by

Matthew A. Nelson



Flying the An-2 in Guatemala and El Salvador, 2005 and throwing in Alaska and The Iditarod® Trail Sled Dog Race just for fun

by

Matthew A. Nelson

PRELUDE

*From: Catherine Chandler Hamilton (September, 2003)
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....

Those of you that recognize the preceding e-mail from Catherine Chandler Hamilton will probably remember that I used these words in the final pages of my story, "Flying The Antonov An-2 In Alaska, 2003". As much as I would like to be the historian for this airplane, at this time I can only add one more chapter in the life of N87AN, but hopefully, will add many more in the future.

About a year-and-a-half had passed since I had last seen Neal Oppen, Douglas Fulton, and his wife Jeanne Passin after our little adventure of flying the An-2 around in Alaska. In September, 2003, they flew their plane to California. Later, they took the Antonov to Central America, flying and camping around Mexico, Belize, Costa Rica, Panama, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Perhaps they went to other countries, but I don't know for sure. I was invited to join them on that trip, but didn't. They left the plane at the Guatemala City airport in March, 2004 and went back to Valdez, Alaska for the Summer. We kept in touch, and by Thanksgiving time, I had bought an airline ticket to Guatemala, with an "open-jaw" return from El Salvador. In the past few years there has been an air show in El Salvador during the last weekend of January, so our intentions were to fly the Antonov to the air show, and then after the show I would leave El Salvador to come back to Houston. Things pretty much worked out that way, except there was no air show in El Salvador.

So what does the trip in the An-2 have to do with the Iditarod® Trail Sled Dog Race? Really not much, except the race came up while I was writing the story about flying in the An-2 in Guatemala and El Salvador, so I just decided to combine the stories, much like I did last year when I wrote the story, "West

Texas, Steinway Pianos, & The Explorers Club”. Somehow there just has to be a connection about flying in Central America in a plane with “Alaska” painted on its tail and going to Alaska to watch the Iditarod! Besides, the first day in Guatemala I met Nancy Johnson, the sister of Douglas, and I ate dinner at her house the last night in Alaska, so the connection isn’t too far-fetched.



EA-3B at Ft. Meade, Maryland on July 13, 2004. Center, left to right: Craig Loe, Jack Clodfelter, & Matthew Nelson

New Subject: In July of last year, I attended the dedication of an aircraft, the Navy EA-3B, at Ft. Meade, Maryland. By now, people familiar with my stories will probably recognize that I flew on a similar airplane in 1968. Lt. Col. (Ret) Elton Loe and SFC Jackson Clodfelter, two men whom I served under, were with me at the dedication at Ft. Meade, along with Jack’s friend (now my friend) Gary Auerswald. On January 18th of this year, my friend Jackson passed away. He always wanted to hear about my travels and we became pretty good friends over the past several months. Although over the years I have lost many good friends and relatives, for some reason it just seemed like the natural thing to do of giving him the title of my “Guardian Angel”. In July of this year, I plan on flying my 1947 Stinson to Alaska. As I told Gary and Jack’s wife Louise, when I make that flight, I want to think that Jackson will be flying with me as my Guardian Angel. But just as I don’t want to go flying off to Alaska without having more flights in my airplane between now and then, Jackson needs to transition into his new role gradually; therefore, I used the these trips to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Alaska to let him learn the ropes of what it’s like being a Guardian Angel for a traveler like Matt Nelson. This story is dedicated to the memory of my friend, SFC Jackson Clodfelter.

Part 1 – Guatemala and El Salvador

Wednesday, January 26th

A few minutes after takeoff from Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport, the Continental Airlines Boeing 737 crossed over Galveston Island and then the deep blue waters of the Gulf of Mexico came into view. Occasionally, I saw a freighter. As we approached the Yucatan Peninsula, the color of the water became more of a greenish-blue. As we flew over Mexico, I could see the many small farms and villages, where people are just trying to make a living. Gradually, the farms disappeared into the green foliage of a jungle. Off to the West I could see several volcanoes. Some had the classic conic shape, while others now look tired after millions of years of surrendering to the forces of nature and gravity and erosion. In their younger years, they too had proudly once roared like dragons, with their breath of rotten eggs and their mouths spitting molten fire. Now they are like old drunken men, collapsed, sunken, wrapped with blankets of trees and rocks to keep warm as they bask in the sun, because they long ago spewed their fiery innards from deep within the earth, as I did once spewed my fiery innards from deep within after a bottle of rum. They called me the Volcan Mateo!

Had I been sitting on the left side of the 737 during the landing, I would have seen the An-2 when we taxied to the terminal building. Momentary glancing at my passport, the immigration official smiled and waved me through; likewise, the customs official just collected my form and welcomed me to Guatemala. Douglas told me to meet him on the second floor of the terminal building; as I headed up the stairs he was walking down. I converted some US dollars to Quetzales; we grabbed a bite to eat and walked to the airplane. We walked through a security check point, shortly thereafter turned right, and there it was, parked so that it faced the hangars and in such a position that it could see me when I came into view, almost as if it was waiting for me to show up. Antonov An-2, tail number N87AN, looked majestic as it welcomed me back. Was that my imagination, or did it really smile when it saw me? I know I smiled when I saw it.

It is of Russian design, built in Poland, and now owned by a couple of Americans. I never did like the Russian politics and the bad things they did to people and their rotten Commie philosophy, but I have to admit they know how to build a good airplane. I spent my military years in the Sixties silently fighting the Cold War, so I have it ingrained in my system. I even feel somewhat guilty about wanting to fly on a Russian airplane, but not any more than I did while visiting the Soviet launch complex in Baikonur in 1992 to see the launch of the Soyuz TM-15 spacecraft. NASA is now in partnership with the Russians on the International Space Station. My cameras are made in Japan and have German designed lenses; I drove my parents Volkswagen to the New York World's Fair in 1964; Karoline drives a Honda Pilot. Times change, and old adversaries now have mutual business dealings, even if the trust between each other is not so mutual.

So, while my loyalties are very strongly American, I appreciate good engineering, and the chance to have another good adventure flying in such a well built plane like the An-2.

For three or four hours Douglas and I worked to make the plane ready to fly. I transferred oil from quart bottles into gallon jugs. I wiped up oil off the plane. I transferred oil from the plane and the gallon jugs to the shirt and jeans and boots and Mountain Lakes Seaplane Training hat that I wore. We stayed busy, and I know I did more things than transfer oil, but now I don't remember what they were, nor do I remember much of what Douglas did. Airplanes with names on their sides, such as United, Delta, Continental, COPA, TACA, and DHL, taxied by us. DHL uses older 727s that have ear-shattering jet engines. When the 757s taxied by, it looked as if their wingtips might strike the An-2's tail, for it was parked on the grass next to the taxiway. Several general aviation airplanes landed and took off; I liked seeing the DC-3s still in service. One pilot came up in a Cessna 206 or 210 that had a red cross painted on its tail. He said that the plane had been donated by "Wings of Hope" and he uses it to fly medical supplies to the remote villages in Guatemala. I'm sure he has a bunch of stories to tell. Bored young soldiers or policemen carrying 12-gauge shotguns, spaced about 100 meters apart, guarded the airport, standing for hours on end, except when a plane needed to have access to or from the taxiway, when they would move orange safety cones.

Around 4 PM Douglas and I were given a ride in a minivan to the town of Antigua, approximately 50 miles away. The cost: \$5.00 a piece. Douglas had made the arrangements, and the driver and his friend waited for us near the plane while we finished up for the day. It took a little while to leave the big city traffic, but the driver did a good job of dodging most of the black smoke clouds emitting from the diesel buses and trucks. Once we were on a major highway the traffic thinned; about an hour later the driver turned off the highway into the cobblestone streets of Antigua. We drove through several narrow streets, lined with multi-colored pastel stucco walls. Occasionally, I could see nice courtyards hiding behind some ornately carved doors. A huge conic volcano overlooks the town. The driver dropped us off near the Aurora Hotel, where we eventually caught up with Jeanne, and Nancy Johnson. Nancy is Douglas's sister and lives in Anchorage, where she works in the sales department of the KTUU TV station.

The two women had been out shopping. They weren't at the hotel, but the lady that works there told us that they had found another hotel because the Aurora didn't have reservations for them that night. We had an hour to wait, so Douglas and I went into a cantina, where we ordered a mixed drink: Papaya and pineapple juice. I generally don't care for pineapple, but the mixture was just right. I was a little concerned about this guy Montezuma, but during my stay in Central America I never had to endure his revenge. The water for the drink came out of a five gallon jug, so I just had to take it on faith that it was good drinking water. After the drink we went looking for a hardware store, and sure enough we

found one. Douglas needed a wire brush; a lady tried to help us; we pointed to one on the wall about the time a man who spoke English walked up. He brought out a whole basket full, so Douglas paid the required 35 cents or so. Then we went into a small grocery store to buy some paper towels. The brush had to be worth more than the paper towels, but the three-roll package cost about the equivalent of \$6.00. We figured out later the American brand name might have something to do with it.



On one side of the city square there is a very wide white Catholic Church. It makes for some good night time photos. I guess Antigua has been discovered by retired Americans and the younger backpackers. I can see the why of the attraction, but at the same time, hope that the city can retain its charm and not turn into the box that has to be checked for the “You just gotta see it – It’s Awesome!” type of places.

Left: The Cathedral in Antigua

Douglas and I walked back to the Aurora Hotel and found Jeanne and Nancy waiting for us. We found a taxi and went to their new hotel to drop off luggage. It is located about three blocks from the town square, and I don’t remember the name of it. It wasn’t as nice as the Aurora, but it certainly was better than the place where Douglas, Neal, and I stayed. Nancy and Jeanne had a room that I think cost about \$10 -12 a person, as opposed to the \$4 per person that we guys paid. The four of us (Neal hadn’t arrived yet) went out to dinner and I had fajitas, which were very similar to the ones I eat in Texas. Jeanne and Nancy talked about their visit to the church, and to a museum next door. They marveled how the priest had encouraged them to touch books that were over 400 years old. Jeanne speaks Spanish quite well, so I imagine that had something to do with the kindness of the priest. After a dinner that lasted about two hours, we all walked to the hotel where we men were staying. They were showing some movie on TV that I had no desire to see but Jeanne and Nancy and Douglas decided to watch, so I went to the room with three single beds, one lone ceiling light, and an open wall that looked down onto a veranda. And I do mean open, as

in outside. I huddled on my bed wearing my light jacket that I almost left behind in my truck at the Houston airport, and started reading Fate is the Hunter. Earlier, Douglas showed me the shower down the hall, and told me not to touch the shower head, since the electric wire running near it from the electric water heater at the top of the shower carried 220 volts - enough said - I decided not to shower the next morning. He had stayed in the hotel the night before, and the room in which he had stayed was open, so he showed all of us the pillow he didn't sleep on - it felt like it had been packed with a bunch of wooden blocks. After I had gone to bed Douglas came into the room with Neal. He had flown in that night, having just arrived back in the States a couple days earlier after a two-week visit to Thailand. Antigua is at an elevation of about 8000 feet, there was no heat in the room, and the one thin blanket didn't do much to keep me warm that night. Neal and Douglas had sleeping bags and/or thermal pads on their beds, so I think they slept warmer than I did. At least I slept some of the time. Neal's bio-clock was still ticking Thailand time - the next morning he said he had been wide awake since 2 AM.

Thursday, January 27th

About 6:30 AM, the pastel colored walls that line the nearly empty streets glowed as the morning sun lit them up with that "sweet" light produced by low sun angles. Neal, Douglas, and I headed for a Bagel Bar, which obviously has some out-of-town influence. The bagel I ordered was actually better than most of the ones I have eaten in the States. The driver of the same van we had used the previous evening came during my second cup of very good coffee. The waitress gave me a paper cup and a lid that did little to keep the coffee contained while we drove on the cobblestones towards the highway.



Early morning in Antigua

Often, during the drive back to Guatemala City I saw Indian women walking with various cargo (pots and pans, baskets of fruit, five gallon pottery jugs, etc.) on top of their heads. Generally, they had their hands down by their sides, although there was one lady with a child under each arm and whatever she carried on her head. Always, these ladies walked with their backs straight, almost an advertisement for perfect posture. Sometimes they wore tennis shoes, sometimes they had sandals on, and often they were barefoot. Likewise, many wore hand-woven dresses of many colors and designs; others wore jeans. Most had a purposeful stride, looking very comfortable wearing their "hats". Sometimes they were alone and sometimes they had their families with them. A few even had smiles on their faces, faces that mirrored a hard-working life.

Vehicles of every description filled the streets of Guatemala City. Between the fog and the smog of bad smelling black diesel fumes and leaded gasoline, my eyes and my lungs burned slightly. Entire families of ten or twelve people would be huddled together in the back of small pickup trucks. Teenagers rode with one leg over the tailgates. Grandchildren rode in the laps of their grandparents. We passed or were passed by many trucks and buses. Every day people commute to work on the most colorful buses, but once again their faces and calloused hands and sun-wrinkled faces indicated that they work much harder than I do. Since I was riding shotgun I didn't have to concentrate on driving, so I had a chance to observe people. But what caught my attention most about these hardworking people were their smiles and laughs while talking to their friends or family members. This morning I didn't have my cameras with me, which is probably just as well, as each person is worthy of having his or her photograph taken, but there is not enough film available for me to take all of their photographs. Each has his or her own story; they all have their own dreams and wishes. All God's people.

Maybe the Antonov realized that this was the day to fly; maybe it was just tired of sitting on the grass. At any rate, after Neal removed and cleaned and reinserted all eighteen spark plugs on the 1000-hp 9 cylinder radial engine, added new oil, and I did odd jobs, including turning the prop several times to redistribute the oil that pools at the bottom of the lower cylinders, and Douglas made official visits to the Guatemala equivalent of the FAA, there came a time when we were all ready to start the engine. New batteries fully charged did their thing; Douglas and Neal did theirs, and the engine started after two or three turns of the prop, like it had last flown that same morning, and not ten months earlier. Oh, sure, there were some big puffs of white smoke, but nothing unexpected, as the radial engine roared back to life. As we taxied towards the end of the runway, I brought in the ladder and closed the door; the man in the tower gave us permission to take off. So we did! That day was extremely hazy; we turned left after leaving the runway and flew over the city heading roughly southwest. About eight miles out Douglas requested a termination of the flight plan and permission to return to the airport; this was planned in advance. It had been six or seven months since Douglas had last flown an An-2; his landing matched the plane's

eagerness to fly – nearly perfect! We came back and put 100 gallons of fuel into the Antonov and then Douglas took it back over to the grass, only this time he parked it so it was facing the taxiway and runway, and not the hangars. That pleased the Antonov, for it could hardly conceal its anticipation of flying the next day. Happily, it watched the air traffic land and take-off, knowing that in less than 24 hours it too would be airborne.

Our van driver was back about 3:30 PM, so we all loaded up again and headed back to Antigua. He took us to the hotel where Jeanne and Nancy were staying; I didn't mind paying the extra eight dollars for the room that Neal, Douglas, and I stayed in – especially by the next morning, because my bed had thicker blankets. The five of us walked back to the town square, stopping along the way to say hello to an elderly couple that Jeanne and Douglas knew. This couple owned a macadamia nut farm; I would have really liked to have gone there and enjoyed some free samples. Nancy and I walked by the big cathedral near the town square and I managed to take a couple of good photos, as dusk sought to obscure the magnificent looking Volcan Agua. By six PM the sun had disappeared and darkness had made its presence known. As we walked towards the place where we all agreed to eat dinner, I made the mistake of taking a photograph of three Indian women sitting on the street. It was more like swatting a hive of wasps. All three women wanted for me to buy necklaces and table cloths and other things they had made, and they followed Nancy and me to a restaurant that we were going to. I did end up buying a nice woven table cloth for Karoline. Once inside the Middle-East restaurant we told Jeanne, Douglas, and Neal about the incident, and then I realized I wasn't going to have a chance to buy any souvenirs for my family. Nancy told me about a place we had just passed, so she showed me where it was and then went back to eat while I did a little shopping and bought wooden puzzle boxes shaped like birds. At the restaurant we only ate appetizers because we were told by somebody that the regular dinners didn't taste good; soon we departed and went to another one.

We all made it back to the hotel; I walked out of my room and saw Jeanne and Douglas dancing under the moonlight – she was on her way to play scrabble with an American older woman who lived there. Nancy had a fire going in her room, so for awhile Douglas, Nancy, Neal, and I sat by the fire and they drank rum. Neal told stories about the tsunami that had recently hit Thailand. On one island, the chief recognized what was happening and ordered everyone to higher ground; nobody was lost. Apparently, no land animals died as a result of the storm, because they all left the beach areas. Neal told another story of elephants leaving, and one grabbed a person out of a river by his trunk and placed the person on his back and continued out of the storm's destructive path. By ten PM, everyone was tired and headed to their respective rooms and beds. All of us are near or over 50, and past the time of our lives where we waited until ten PM to start the evening. I noticed near the shower of our room a big black spider with a body the size of a quarter, so I placed my boots on the mantle of the fireplace in my room.

Friday, January 28th

Early morning in Antigua is my favorite time to observe the town, before the workers fill the cobblestone streets, before merchants open their doors, before the buildings lose their soft glow from the sunrise, before the rush of everyday living. I am not the only one that enjoys early morning Antigua: While flying on Continental Airlines to Alaska in March, I saw an interesting story in that month's issue of "Continental" magazine (published by Pohly & Partners, Inc.) written by Gracie Cavnar on Antigua called "Dream Weavers". Exquisitely capturing the flavor of Antigua, Ms. Cavnar wrote,

"I enjoy waking up early; it seems to add so much to the day, which is why I'm on the rooftop terrace of Casa Encantada in the Guatemalan highlands, witnessing a Technicolor Antigua dawn, a cup of coffee warming my hands.

I look down on brilliant bougainvilleas carpeting the adobe walls that envelop colonial homes. A calico cat creeps across a sea of red-tiled rooftops that crown the walled compounds, baroque churches, and stately official buildings. White, flaking paint is punctuated with riotous terra cotta, pink, turquoise, and violet blue – the colors that paint the sky and surrounding ring of mountains as the morning sun breaks over the horizon. It's a magical morning."

Used by permission granted by Mr. Andrew Eitelbach, a staff member of Pohly & Partners, Inc.



Volcan Agua, as seen from one of the streets in Antigua

All of us - Jeanne, Douglas, Nancy, Neal, and me - ordered our bagels and coffee by 6:30 AM; just before our minivan driver arrived at 7 AM, Nathan Burke greeted us; as we climbed into the van I heard Anita Ibarguen say something about needing to pick up her passport. We drove to the hotel to pick

up our gear and then we drove to Nathan's house to pick up his wife Annette. Nathan and Annette own their own chiropractic clinic and Anita works at the clinic as an acupuncture specialist. Douglas, Jeanne, and Neal had met these people in 2004. Jeanne had spent part of her life in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and it turns out that Anita had gone to school there. Nathan and Annette attended a chiropractic school in Dallas two years ago and bought the clinic after their graduation. They are two of the four licensed chiropractors in the entire country of Guatemala. I think Annette is about 29, and Nathan is about 33. Anita is in her mid-thirties, I think. I detected Annette having a slight accent and found out that she is from Holland. Anita grew up in Guatemala. The three of them were flying with the rest of us to El Salvador on this day.



"Chicken bus" in Antigua. Notice the cobblestone street.

Our drive into Guatemala City on this day seemed less hectic than the day before. This time I had my camera with me, so I opened the lens all the way and let the camera select the highest shutter speed for the available light. It is an auto-focus camera, so effectively I had a controllable point-and-shoot, which I found to be useful in the continuous subject and traffic changing conditions. Although not magazine quality, some of my photos came out reasonably well.

Once at the airport, Neal and I started preparing the Antonov for take off, and Nathan and I shared in turning the monstrous-sized prop several times. Douglas took off to file the flight plan and fill out the always present bureaucratic forms. An hour or so later he came back and asked for my pilot's license. He had listed me as part of the flight crew, with my title being the "Navigator"! This saved me from paying the \$30 departure tax. During the flight I did monitor our flight path and watch it being plotted and displayed on the GPS receiver.

Anita's brother is a Guatemalan pilot and a member of the private aero club near where the Antonov was parked. She spoke to the person at the desk and he allowed us to go upstairs where members have their own dining area. We weren't there very long before Douglas came back ready to fly. Our flight plan called for us leaving either at 11 AM or at Noon, and we had to be airborne within one hour of the planned departure, or Douglas would have to re-file the flight plan.

It wasn't long before we were taxiing towards the end of the runway, and I had the duty of bringing in the ladder and closing the door. A few minutes after climbing out, Jeanne asked me to open the door. When Douglas gave the go-ahead, I opened it, and all of us in back managed to watch the landscape and local volcanoes go beneath us. I listened to the ground-to-air radio traffic at the headphone jack just aft of the co-pilot's bulkhead. Finally, after a year-and-a-half, the moment I had been waiting for came: Neal stepped out of the co-pilot's seat and let me sit there. Our flight to San Salvador only lasted a little over an hour, so my time in the cockpit only lasted about ten or fifteen minutes, because it was only fair to share that seat with the others. I have to admit (surprise! surprise!) that even with the five hours of previous time I have flying the Antonov, I would like to add some zeros after that number five. Although I actually had the controls when I flew the plane in Alaska, on this trip to El Salvador I only sat in the right seat but did not take the controls.

We landed at a military airfield West of San Salvador, which is the same airfield where the air show had been held when Douglas, Jeanne, and Neal first visited last year. Clearing immigration and customs made me wish that the same tasks could be accomplished as easily in the United States. We ate our lunch and bought some liquid lunch for the big airplane and took off again, perhaps only spending one hour on the ground. Twenty minutes later, after heading west towards the coast and flying about 1500 feet, Douglas banked the plane left, landed on the best grass strip I have ever seen, and everyone but myself headed for the swimming pool of the private and exclusive Barillas Marina. I took photographs of some of the flowers and the local area; everyone told me to come on in, but I said Hermann Melville wrote a book about me, and Jeanne quickly responded, "You mean, the Great White Whale?"



Grass airstrip near Barillas Marina, El Salvador



Barillas Marina swimming pool area



Barillas Marina pool. L-R: Nancy, Douglas, Anita, Neal, Jeanne (in pool), Nathan, and Annette

A couple of hours later we all made our way back to the Antonov, where some of the people set up tents. Nancy had rented a bungalow for her and Jeanne, and there was another one available this night that I rented for myself. As the dinner time approached, we all lazily walked about a kilometer through a bunch of coconut, banana, and cocoa trees to the marina's open air dining area. Anchored perhaps two hundred meters away from the dock, a sail boat with twin masts pointing towards the full moon gently swayed back and forth. As I ate my steak in these peaceful surroundings, laughing with my friends, I thought that having Karoline eating dinner with me would add the finishing touch to this micro-vision of paradise.



Coconut tree at Barillas Marina



Barillas Marina

Telephone cards could be purchased for \$5.00, and it only cost ten cents a minute to call Karoline. While I talked to her, the others went back to the plane. By the time I arrived, Douglas had the Honda generator generating, the CD player playing, and Christmas tree lights strung around the plane. During the evening, I think Douglas and Jeanne danced in the moonlight again, as did Nathan and Annette. Bottles of very good smelling rum tempted me but it has been many years since I have indulged in alcohol beverages, and many more years since I drank that bottle of rum that turned me into Volcan Mateo, so I savored the smell and woke up the next morning with no headache or hangover and happy that I did not yield into the temptation.



Friday night party back at the Antonov. L-R: Nathan, Jeanne, Annette, and Douglas

At 11 PM, I walked from the plane to the marina with Nancy, Jeanne, and Annette. Annette said, "Imagine going to work on Monday morning like any other Monday and receiving a phone call that Jeanne, Douglas, and Neal are in town and want you to fly with them this weekend to El Salvador in the An-2", or words to that affect. So after careful but quick consideration, they closed the clinic and four days later traveled with us to El Salvador, then took the following Monday off as well. Nathan, Annette, and Anita are good traveling companions, and very likable people. For that matter, so are Jeanne, Douglas, Nancy, and Neal.

Saturday, January 29th

Coconut trees, photos, breakfast at plane, hot coffee. Wander to concrete swimming hole, more photos, sit at round picnic tables, read, eat lunch, swap stories, make Kodak happy once again, talk to owners of twin-masted sailboat sailing from Oregon and dreaming of docking in Ireland and drinking at local

pubs. Drink a cold coke, fill up water bottles from five-gallon bottle away from cantina to avoid one dollar charge for a new bottle from marina's store, watch others drink beverages stronger than my coke, living life of leisure today but bored, want to fly big Russian bi-plane, want to buy big Russian fly plane, stay that way until four o'clock when all eight of us board a motor boat for a ride to nearby island through channels cutting away at the roots of mangrove trees, walk down another grass runway towards the ocean while eating the mouth-drying and burning fruit that hides cashew nuts, stop at an abandoned resort that a hurricane proved mother nature has been around many more years than man and has the power to destroy what man builds, go two – three hundred meters to Pacific Ocean, Nathan and Annette swim, we all watch sunset and drink fresh coconut milk chopped open by boat driver's machete, ride in back of wagon pulled by old tractor back to boat, full speed ahead back to marina, Neal remarks area just like Thailand, dinner with owners of twin-masted sailboat, stories again, Jeanne and Douglas tell about rescuing fuel-soaked baby and the pilot with compound fracture and two other people out of a plane crash in Alaska on New Year's day – plane had hit power lines which sliced it open like sardine can – Douglas out in cold for three hours with no jacket but helping others live longer and all survived, giving real meaning to overused word "hero", we go to Antonov and entertained by sailboat owner playing Italian-made accordion, Douglas gives me an empty Mexican cigarette pack that has a bi-plane on the package, and afterwards I find a bunk house to sleep in.



More coconut trees



Pacific Ocean



Barillas Marina, again



Sailboat owner playing his accordion and Douglas loving the music back at the Antonov



At the beach: L-R: Nancy, Anita, Neal, Jeanne, Douglas, Annette, and Nathan

Sunday, January 30th

“PEDRO! MARIA” yelled the man at the end of the road, about a mile away from the plane, past the sugar cane fields, past the red ants nearly an inch long, past the cashew tree, past the glassy-water pond disturbed only by the ripples created by a cruising alligator (or croc) silently looking for breakfast. As we waited a moment while he gathered a half dozen bananas, his little girl and little boy snuck shy looks at us, the older kids ignored us, roosters wandered around his ramshackle house, and swinging out of the trees came the monkeys, Pedro and Maria and their family and friends. Perhaps there were ten all total, ranging from ten months to thirty-five years old. Two others monkeys wistfully looked at the free monkeys from their cages; we strangers gave the bananas to the other monkeys scampering over the branches above us, then we watched them and laughed at their antics of turning upside down, grabbing bananas, swinging from branch to branch, peeling the bananas and throwing the peelings to the ground as they held on to a branch with one hand and ate with the other. From Annette’s bag, one gleefully stole an apple that she had brought as a snack for herself, and all of a sudden this monkey was like a five-year old kid going into a candy store for the first time. After I ran out of film, the fur of one of the monkeys sitting on a branch exploded into a halo of golden sunlight, each hair illuminated by the early morning sun, letting me witness perhaps the most beautiful view of a monkey I have ever seen in my life. To the many young men carrying machetes arriving in a pickup truck, we were just touristas, but they smiled anyway, as they prepared to cut tree branches to build a room near the

owner's home, and after we started walking back to the Antonov, one of them showed us the track of the gator on the road near the pond and a couple of laughing girls in the ten-to-twelve age group cut sugar cane with their own machetes and loaded the stalks onto a handmade cart with wooden wheels. Their father told them to cut the sugar cane and they instantly complied with no back talk; while walking away from the house, they looked back and smiled at us.



Pedro!

“Now it’s time to say goodbye to all our company. M-I-C – see you real soon – K-E-Y – why, because we like you – M-O-U-S-E!”©. Remember that song that other Annette sang so many years ago? Ten o’clock arrived all too soon, and I had to say goodbye to Nathan, Annette, Anita, Jeanne, and Neal. I threw my cell phone, some post cards, and my shaving kit behind the front seat of the van taking me to the airport, rode back to the plane to grab my suitcase, and hopped in the front seat for the ride to the airport. Nancy has friends living in San Salvador whom she made arrangements to visit; she and Douglas sat in the backseat of the van that Se_or Salvador Bonilla drove. As I watched the traffic and road conditions, once again in my life the thoughts and dreams of driving my Ford F-250 4X4 diesel truck through Central and South America surfaced. Salvador used to live in Austin, Texas for a couple of years and spoke good English. He told me that it had taken him four days to drive between Austin and San Salvador. Drivers have to be alert for local conditions. He tells me to park at all night gas stations to avoid the banditos. Over there is a woman herding goats, watch out for the Mercedes that doesn’t slow down to pass her; another woman

carries her infant in one arm, holds the hand of her little boy, as she walks barefoot, head and shoulders erect so she can carry the large blue pot on top of her head. We pass some vendors selling American soft drinks and other vendors selling cashew nuts or coconuts. Horse drawn wagons and Toyota's park side-by-side at a small church.

At the airport I jump out of the van, shake hands with Se_or Salvador and Douglas; Nancy gives me a sisterly hug. They drive off and soon afterwards I have my boarding pass and go upstairs to have a bite to eat. Oh, No! I left my cell phone, post cards, and shaving kit in the van, but I use the phone card to call Se_or Heriberto Pineda, the manager at Barillas Marina, and ask that he check with Salvador about these things. Se_or Pineda (I used to work with a Joe Pineda in Houston) tells me to call him back about 45-minutes later. What happened to my passport? The frantic button is hammered, how will I pass through security; how long will it take me to receive another passport? Where is it? Not in my camera case, not in my pockets, not in the restaurant, not by the telephone. Soon it's time to call Se_or Pineda again. My stuff has been found, and I told him to give it all to Nancy, since she would be passing through Houston two days later. But where is my passport? At the Continental counter, the ticket agents help me look through my camera case, where I spot the passport hiding by itself in a side pocket. It's time to pass through the security checkpoint, run to the gate, and board the plane with about five minutes to spare. Whew!

Ten minutes after takeoff, the mountains and the coast line have been chopped up and swallowed by the clouds, which last all the way to Houston. Rain washes the plane as we disembark. Ever since my spur-of-the-moment weekend trip to Mexico City in 1988, without any luggage, I expect to be singled out by the customs personnel, and sure enough, they looked at their computer monitors and singled me out. Take my luggage into this room. (Not the search room, fortunately, but just the luggage inspection room). An agent that must have been full-back for the Dallas Cowboys in his previous life wanted to know where I have been, the purpose of my trip, if I have anything to declare. I told him about the wooden puzzle boxes. He expertly opened and looked into each one, sniffed the doll I brought for my granddaughter Camyrn, walked back to his computer machine, and told me to have a nice day. As I have mentioned before, I wish they would profile me as a guy that just likes to travel to off-the-wall places, but has absolutely no desire to do anything wrong because he is not smarter than trained custom agents nor is stupid enough to try sneaking anything illegal into the country.

To top off the day of loosing stuff and leaving my cell phone in El Salvador, I left my bank debit card in the pay phone that would not take coins, when I called Karoline to let her know I was back in the country. Still, I had a good trip!

Part 2 – La Porte, Texas

Three weeks after I left the Antonov gang in El Salvador, I saw Jeanne, Douglas, and Neal again in the Houston area. They had flown the An-2 to have the FAA required annual inspection in La Porte, Texas, which is about 20 miles from my home. They arrived on a Friday night; briefly I saw them and picked up my cell phone and the post cards that I had left in El Salvador (It was easier for Nancy to leave them on the An-2 than meet me at the Houston airport). Since I went to Dallas for the weekend, I didn't see the An-2 people again until Sunday evening, when they came to my house. They told me about one not-so-great experience they had when they landed their plane at a closed military airport in Mexico. From the air, the indications of the closed runway looked different than closed runways in the States. The younger guards packing all kinds of weapons were confused and handed the matter over to their supervisors. Jeanne and Douglas had five guards holding assault weapons on them while they rode in the back of a pickup to discuss the problem. Jeanne came through again with her excellent Spanish, so that probably helped. Everybody on the plane profusely apologized, but Douglas was worried that the plane was going to be confiscated. Finally, a grueling three hours later, they all flew the An-2 away from the airport.

The previous year they had a passenger from California with them that stopped taking his medicine and became very erratic and angry. Finally, out of desperation, Douglas informed the guy he would have to leave. The man's wealth of many millions did not stop his wife from shooting him very dead four or five days later after he arrived home in California. Douglas, Jeanne, and Neal need to write their own book about their adventures in the Antonov!

On Monday morning, I flew my Stinson over to La Porte airport where Neal took the following photos:



Matt and Douglas at the Stinson – photo by Neal Oppen



Stinson and An-2 and Yak-52 at La Porte Airport – photo by Neal Oppen

During the next several days I showed several friends the plane, and we were just a few of the many people who stopped by after seeing the plane from the road adjacent to the airport. In the process, I met Bob Wagstaff, owner of K & W Aviation; in his hangar there is another An-2 being restored. The wings are off of this one, and it is far from the pristine condition of N87AN, but Bob hopes to have it flying in the next several months. What I found interesting about this plane is that Russian markings are still visible in several places, and one can vaguely see the old USSR flag and the letters “СССР”, the Russian letters for “USSR”. Bob told me to come early on weekends and work late and help with that plane. One of these days I just might do that.

A few days after the An-2 arrived in La Porte, I took Karoline to see it, and afterwards we took Neal, Douglas, and Jeanne to dinner at the Aquarium Restaurant in Kemah. Impressive as the restaurant is with sharks and stingrays and eels and tuna fish swimming around, Neal confirmed my suspicions that they had seen even more impressive restaurants with more sea life in other parts of the world, but everyone seemed to enjoy the meal anyway.

The next day Douglas took Jeanne and Neal to the commercial airport – Jeanne headed out to Phoenix to pick up her motor home and Neal took off to go to Thailand. He is scheduled to be back in Alaska around March 20th to take a camera crew from National Geographic on a charter cruise for a few days. He is quite a well-known charter captain. Douglas stayed at our house for the next several nights, until it came time for me to depart to Alaska on March 2nd to watch the Iditarod Race begin, something I had wanted to do for a long time.

Part 3 – Alaska and the Iditarod® Trail Sled Dog Race

Thursday, March 3rd

It doesn't cost much more to have a stop in Seattle when flying Continental Airlines between Houston and Anchorage, since they stop there anyway for fuel. And I have a reason to stop: Seattle Seaplanes. I stayed the previous night at the Lake Union Silver Cloud Inn, which overlooks Lake Union and it is just a couple of blocks from Seattle Seaplanes. As I ate breakfast in the motel I watched several men at a yacht repair shop show up for work; most carried a thermos bottle and a lunch. A few minutes later, one of the workers skillfully unloaded a huge diesel engine off a flatbed truck with a forklift. It always amazes me to see the number of things people do to make a living, and how professional and easy they make it seem. In years past I have operated a forklift, but I never developed the skill to do it as well as the man I watched. For him, it was just another day at work.



Seattle Seaplanes Cessna 172

From the breakfast area I watched a couple of Kenmore Air seaplanes take off, and then I saw a black Cessna 172 take off. I thought it might be one of Jim Chrysler's planes; I was right - he cut off the engine and floated to the dock just as I walked down the ramp to his Seattle Seaplanes office. This was the fifth time I have flown with Jim. The first three times were in his Stinson; the last two in the 172 with a 180-hp engine and a constant speed prop. In the short hour that we flew together, I took-off and landed at Lake Union, Lake Washington, and at a

third lake east of Lake Washington. In all cases, we did glassy water take-offs and landings and Jim had me land and do step turns. We didn't have to contend with much boat traffic; our flight path took us between Mt. Baker to the north and Mt. Rainer to the south. Mt. Baker glistened in the sunlight, its snowcap a brilliant white against the cloudless blue sky. We didn't fly by the Space Needle this trip; on previous flights we could see people waving at us. It had been five months since I last flew any float planes, at that time I flew two on two consecutive days; the first day had been with Jim and the second day was with Mike Kincaid, whom I did my final training for my seaplane rating. Flying is about constantly improving proficiency and one must never become complacent. If I flew these planes often I would be a better pilot, but on the other hand, I hadn't forgotten everything I had previously been taught. For not flying seaplanes for several months, I think I did reasonably well. Hopefully, I will have many more chances in the future to fly with Jim, Mike, and some of my other float plane instructors. They are fun to fly with, and I always enjoy their company. Had I not been heading "North to Alaska", I could have easily spent every day of the weekend flying with Seattle Seaplanes.



My friend Jim Chrysler, owner of Seattle Seaplanes

But I was heading to Alaska, and I knew the Continental jet would leave for Anchorage with or without me, and I guess I wanted to be in Alaska more than I wanted to fly float planes, because I wandered on out to the Sea-Tac airport. Seattle – Tacoma airport. Tacoma – the city of my birth. Every time I pass through this area, I wonder what would have been different in my life had I been raised here instead of in Wyoming. But I am not sorry that I lived in Wyoming for most of my younger years, and I still have dreams of moving back.

Shortly before I arrived at gate B-11, low and behold, if that ain't "Pat" Patrick, my friend and co-worker for many years at the space center! Turns out

that he had just flown in from Houston and we both were on the same plane going to Anchorage to watch the Iditarod race. So much for a chance meeting in an airport – we had planned this for a couple of months. When I called him on his birthday in December he asked if I had any trips planned; I mentioned that I was going to see the Iditarod, and that's all it took. We were on the same planes arriving and leaving Alaska, but I spent the longer time in the state: on the way up I sat one row ahead of him; on the way back to Houston he sat four rows ahead of me, so I had the advantage of arriving a few microseconds before he did, and lagging behind a few more microseconds on the way home.

An Isuzu Trooper with 4-wheel drive awaited us at Empire Rental. This is the third time that Andy has provided me transportation in Alaska. His rates are lower than the major car rental places at the Anchorage airport. I could not be within a mile of Lake Hood airport and not drive around it. Many of the planes that bob up-and-down on the water during the summer time now had skis instead of floats; other planes covered with snow eagerly waited for spring thaw. Two months from now hibernation will be over and the busiest float plane base in the world will once again live up to its reputation. Our next stop was at Ace Hangars on Merrill Field, to check into our hotel rooms. Austin Engebretson, the young airplane fuel attendant, checked us in. During our conversation I asked him if he knew my friend Marc Paine, a local pilot who buys gas from Ace Hangars. When he said he did, I told him I had flown with Marc in his Decathlon to Valdez to fly in the Antonov in 2003. Austin then told me that Jeanne Passin had been his computer teacher in Valdez. Another small world story.

Patrick and I then drove south on the Seward highway, passing Turnagain Arm. I now regretted leaving my cameras in my hotel room, because some very good mountain reflections begged me to take their photographs. Sorry, mountains, that I disappointed you. Sorry, Matt, that I disappointed you! After driving about thirty minutes we “turnagain” and managed to reach town before the curtain of darkness suddenly engulfed us as if the big switch in the sky had gone to the Off position. The three hour time difference between Houston and Anchorage caught up with us – after a quick supper we drove back to our rooms. I stayed awake for a couple more hours watching a movie on TV, but it really must have made an impression, because now as I write this story ten days later I can't even remember what I watched.

Friday, March 4th

On this morning I started the Isuzu and let it warm up enough to melt the ice on the windshield. We drove out the back side of Merrill Field, past all the many tail draggers that keep telling me my Stinson is welcome to join them, turned right on 15th Street, drove west to Minnesota, and then turned right on Spenard to go to Gwinnies, the famous restaurant located almost across the street from Empire Rental. I guess because the Fur Rendezvous was ending and the Iditarod was just starting, the waitresses were dressed up in fancy dresses as

if they worked at a 19th Century saloon. Patrick asked for a half order of biscuits and gravy and he was glad that he hadn't asked for the full order, because the two biscuits that he received covered an entire plate. My own order of eggs and reindeer sausage was every bit as big.

When we left the restaurant we stopped at KTUU, the local NBC TV station, to see Nancy Johnson. I had brought with me the photos of the Central American trip that I wanted show her, and my first story about flying the Antonov in Alaska, and a copy of the "Continental" magazine that had the article on Antigua. Nancy wasn't at the station, so I left this stuff with the receptionist to give to her.

Downtown Anchorage became our next destination to look for souvenir stuff, and Patrick wanted to look for some kind of gold necklace mount. We parked the Isuzu, walked up-and-down 4th Street, headed back towards the vehicle, and saw the gold store right where we had parked. Pat found something close to what he wanted, and when I saw a float plane carved out of ivory or walrus tusk or whatever, I asked the clerk what it cost and she said "Three forty-five". I joked and asked her, "Three dollars and forty-five cents"? She smiled and said, "No, that's why it is still here". That's why I didn't buy it.

Although the souvenir shops had tee-shirts showing dog teams, they didn't sell anything with the name "Iditarod" on them, since it is a registered name, but one salesclerk told us to go to the Millennium Hotel, since this was the Anchorage headquarters for the race. One more time that morning we drove back to Spenard Street. Lady luck smiled upon us. We had a front row parking spot and Colonel Norman Vaughan was walking in the door just as we were. In previous stories I have written about meeting him. In his twenties he was one of the dog sled mushers for Admiral Byrd on Byrd's first trip to Antarctica in 1929; three days before Col. Vaughan turned 89 he climbed Mt. Vaughan in Antarctica, the same mountain that Admiral Byrd named after him; now he is planning on going back and climbing the same mountain when on his 100th birthday in December of this year. He has entered the Iditarod race thirteen times, the first time when he was in his early 70's! I told him who I was, that we had met a few times before, the first time when I visited him at his cabin at Trapper Creek prior to my Wintering-over in Antarctica. I think he remembers meeting me, but he meets many people all the time, so I don't know for sure. I told him about my friend Hawks Abbott giving me Admiral Byrd's signature, and that I was going to make a collage of items relative to both Admiral Byrd and himself. He told me that he would give me a signature himself if I needed one. Right now I don't, but perhaps I might when the times come for me to finish the collage. Then I told Col. Vaughan that I had ordered off of eBay a used copy of his book, My Life of Adventure to give to Hawks for his birthday of February 17th, and it so happened that he had signed the book on February 17th, 2000 (with his customary motto, "Dream Big and Dare to Fail!") We had a nice chat for a minute or two, and I introduced Patrick to him. He may or may not remember me, but I can't forget

Colonel Norman Vaughan, because there are few people I admire and respect as much as I do him.

We bought a few souvenirs and then went to the hangar where Marc Paine keeps his Decathlon. I wasn't sure that he would be there, but thought I would take the chance that he would be, and sure enough, we were engaged in a conversation a few minutes later. Marc had just arrived back from Africa a couple days earlier, where he had spent a month with the world famous lady aerobatic pilot, Patty Wagstaff, teaching bush flying techniques to people in Kenya. That gives you an idea of Marc's flying abilities as well. I was kind of hoping to fly with Marc to Denali, but it would have been too expensive from Anchorage, so he suggested we go to Vernair to see if we could work something out, or drive to Talkeetna, which is located much closer to the highest mountain in North America. Hopefully, Marc and I can go flying together in my Stinson this summer.

Vernair was closed for the day, so Patrick and I pointed the Trooper towards Wasilla, Willow, and Talkeetna. Along the way roadside signs gave the mileage to Cantwell and Fairbanks, giving me cause to remember the day in 2003 when the An-2 Colt bucked its way through Windy Pass, located between Fairbanks and Cantwell, and the weather forced us to leave the plane in Cantwell (which I wrote about in my story, "Flying The Antonov An-2 In Alaska, 2003"). Somewhere, we saw a cow moose struggling in the snow.



Denali, as seen from road into Talkeetna. Photo by "Pat" Patrick

We stopped at two different places at the Talkeetna airport looking for a flight to Denali, but those people weren't interested in flying unless we wanted to charter a plane at a high rate. Geri Denkwalter, the lady running Talkeetna Aero Services, recognized a tourist wanting a ride but at the same time she didn't act

like she felt the need to scalp me of all the money I had with me. A DeHavilland Beaver with both wheels and skis sat on the ramp outside her office. She said that a group of four people were going to fly in it to Denali; it would hold six but one seat would be very uncomfortable. She thought a minute, and said if I wanted to go for \$150, which is the bottom line pricing for just touring the South side of the Mountain, I could, and she wouldn't charge me any more if the plane went all the way around. I told Patrick of the seating arrangements, and he told me to go. I initially felt bad about it, but in all honesty he did not want to go, but he would have done so I could fly. It all worked out – I had my flight and Pat was able to stay on the ground. Four people walked in as I told lady I would fly, and shortly, Don Lee, the pilot, showed up. As we walked towards the plane, I asked him if I could sit in the co-pilot's seat and he said I could. WOW!

In the previous Antonov story, I also wrote about flying in a Taylorcraft floatplane with a lady instructor outside of Talkeetna. Don owns Alaska Floats & Skis, the same company that owned the Taylorcraft. (Don has since traded the plane.) I recognized the name on his jacket, so when I told him I had flown in his airplane with one of his instructors. I think I started off on the right foot with him. As we flew around the mountain, he gave me some verbal instructions about flying along mountain ridges. And flying around the mountain is what we did – all the way around. At one point he said we were twenty-five miles away; it looked like only a mile away. Clear visibility, low turbulence. We flew over the ridges at eleven thousand feet; the top of Denali towered over us another nine thousand.



DeHavilland Beaver, located at Talkeetna Aero Services, that Don Lee flew around Denali with me in co-pilot seat

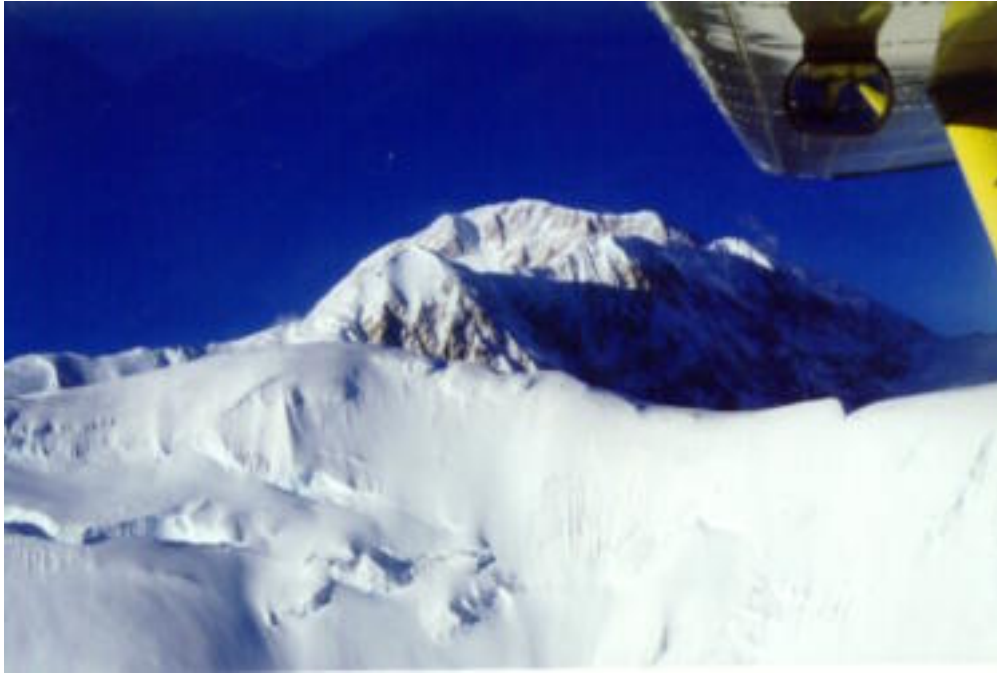


Denali

Our flight path took us up the Ruth Glacier, around the mountain, over Shelton's Amphitheater, over Shelton's cabin, the only private cabin on the mountain. Don Shelton is probably the best known pilot that flew around Denali. He is famous for delivering climbers to-and-from their starting points, rescuing stranded climbers, making numerous glacier landings, and being a good guy on top of it all. Don Shelton has been dead for many years, but his legend lives on. Don Lee seems to have inherited the Denali flying skills of Don Shelton. The photos I took of the trip can never do justice to what I saw flying around the mountain, but instead of filling the page with a lot of superlatives, I'm just going to include a few photos anyway. After we landed I told Don that I was planning on bringing the Stinson up in July, and if I land in Talkeetna, I will let him fly it. Then when I said I might come back next year around Iditarod time and take some glacier landing lessons from him in ski-equipped planes, he grinned and said, "Put some skis on your Stinson and fly along the Iditarod Trail all the way to Nome"! I must admit, I like that idea!



Denali, as viewed from co-pilot seat of DeHavilland Beaver



Another great view of Denali, from the DeHavilland co-pilot seat

At Willow, Pat and I stopped to eat at the Speedway Restaurant. On weekend nights in the summer, this place is busy as people come from many miles to race their stock cars. We were the only people in the café, so the woman owner and her teenage granddaughter chatted with us, asking the usual questions of where were we from, etc. She told us that she and her husband had been there for about twenty-seven years (the same length of time that Karoline and I have been in Texas), and I think they built the race track and restaurant. I always find it interesting to hear about the different backgrounds people have.

Saturday, March 5th

Across the highway from Merrill Field there is a good café named Peggy's where probably half the pilots in Alaska have drunk hot coffee with their plate-sized pancakes or grabbed a hamburger between flights. It's a good place to go for breakfast, so that's where Patrick and I chowed down before going to downtown Anchorage to watch the start of the Iditarod. Arriving two hours before the race began, we picked out what seemed like a good place, close to the starting line, with a reasonably decent view and within earshot of the loud speakers. Trouble is, by 10 AM, when the race started, camera crews and people impressed with their own worthiness to wear security armbands and the authority to demand the crowds step back blocked many good potential photographs. Eventually, one seasoned veteran of crowds told the armbanders to squat down when the dogs came by, so we mortals in the crowds could have the opportunity to see the race.

Higher up in the food chain are those people wealthy enough to be able to bid for the right to ride one of the sleds during the ceremonial start in Anchorage. With network TV cameras focused on each dog team and musher, those that paid the high dollars could go home that evening and watch themselves on the news riding with one of the well-known mushers. But there was one honored position, that of riding on the sled of the first team leaving the starting banner, which no amount of money could buy. Mrs. Jirdes Winther Baxter, an eighty-one year old lady, had the number one spot, for she is the last person alive to have received the diphtheria serum in Nome in 1925, when she was eleven months old.



Mrs. Jirdes Winther Baxter riding as honorary guest in Number 1 dog sled in Anchorage

Just before the start of the race, one of the U. S. Senators from Alaska gave a speech about the contributions men and women serving in the military in Alaska had made to the Iditarod. One of the mushers is a military doctor stationed in Alaska, who had served five months in Iraq. Most of the people running I had never heard of, but by the time the race was won, (which happened today, March 16th), I recognized the names of about half of the seventy-nine mushers that started. But the crowd knew the mushers; names like Martin Buser, Ramy Brooks, DeeDee Jonrowe, Rick Swenson, Ray Redington, Jr. (grandson of Iditarod co-founder Joe Redington, Sr. and son of Raymie Redington), and Charlie Boulding, Mitch Seavey, and rookie and legally blind Rachael Scdoris, just to name a few of the mushers, drew the applause and whistles of the well-wishers. Often it seemed just when I going to snap a photograph of the teams running by, somebody would thrust their clapping hands in front of my camera. Actually, most of my photos came out better than I thought they would, but my photography isn't even in the same league as that of the Jeff Schultz, the Iditarod official photographer. Details of the Iditarod and the mushers can be found at www.Iditarod.com. If you go to the web site, look at the outstanding photography

of that race Jeff has posted. When Patrick and I shared photos back in Houston (Texas, not the Houston, Alaska that better fits my personality as a place to live), he told me that our photographs weren't as good as Jeff's, and I told him that we weren't paid the same amount of money that he was, either!

Each musher obviously must love the challenges and thrill of handling the dogs and the exhilaration of seeing the ruggedness and heart of Alaska that most people don't ever experience. Just by reading the short blurb given in their biographic data, though, one can easily see that these hearty people come from all walks of life. I don't know if this person participated this year or not, and I don't know if this is true or not, but one story I heard is that one year the musher sang opera music in Russian to her dogs along the trail during the race. After coming home, I followed the race closely on the web; a few people scratched for various reasons. As far as I am concerned, they have nothing to be ashamed of. I don't ever see myself running and freezing and handling a team of dogs for one hour, much less trying to do it for ten days or more. They are tough, daring, and each musher has my utmost respect.



Ramy Brooks



Ray Redington, Jr.



Cute kid!



Cute dog sled driver!

By noon, the Anchorage start of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race was close to being over. Patrick and I then met my friend Dave Bieganski for lunch at Peggy's. In 1988, I first met Dave at the South Pole; since 1990, none of my many trips to Alaska would have been complete if I hadn't been able to visit with him. Great guy! A couple of years ago he had handled one of the dogs for one of the mushers before the start of the race in Anchorage; he said the man

remembered him. While moose hunting last fall, he found himself right smack in the middle of about twenty of the ornery critters. Dave is also known for his home brew – last year he didn't make the national finals, but did manage to win six ribbons at the Alaska State Fair. At one time Dave had dreams of running the race, but now says that dream has dwindled away. Some of my own dreams have faded, but not the one about going into space. So, Dave, this is for you: After I return from space, I will be in Anchorage to see you start and in Nome to watch you finish. Of course, I admit I will be taking the easy way of flying along the race trail between Anchorage and Nome, and enduring the cold for only a few hours while I watch the start, the restart, the finish, and perhaps stop at a few checkpoints along the way. Then again, Dave if you never run the race, you still have my respect for Wintering at the South Pole, shooting a moose with a bow and arrow, and having such a neat family.

Near Mile 100 on the Glennallen Highway is the Malanuska Glacier. In the previous Antonov story I wrote about going to this glacier. Patrick and I had a few hours to do whatever, so we drove there. As much as I love the Tetons in Wyoming, if they were transported to this section of road in Alaska, they would be just another mountain range. Spectacular, but not alone. Traffic on the road at this time of year sure is better than on July 4th, when construction is causing delays. Patrick had a cup of coffee and I ate some ice cream at the Long Rifle Inn while talking to one of the owners in the bar. I told him that I didn't remember the bar being there, and he said it used to be downstairs, but they tore out the rooms where the bar now lives. That jogged a memory – in September, 1997, I had stayed in one of the rooms that gave up the ghost to make room for the new bar.

That same day in 1997 I had left my friends Dawn and Bill Caswell at their home in Wasilla, whom I had never met before, driven to the Alaska State Fair, visited Norman and Carolyn Vaughan for the second time, after my winter in Antarctica. In 1992, when I went to Russia and Kazakhstan to witness the launch of Soyuz TM-15, I met Ron Caswell. During my winter on the Ice, Ron's mother Dawn started sending me emails. She and Bill had moved to Alaska around 1978, if I remember correctly. If I don't remember correctly, I guess they moved some other time! After I left the State Fair in 1997, I headed east, and it was on that night that I stayed at the Long Rifle Inn. Ironically enough, the next day I drove to Valdez, where Douglas, Jeanne, and Neal live. Almost everything written in this paragraph occurred in the 20th Century – we are now living in the 21st Century, so I guess I will meander on back.

Like Dave Bieganski and Marc Paine are on my wanna see these people list when I go to Alaska, so are Dawn and Bill. Bill is a retired master gardener and an expert fossil finder and likes to match wits against some of those Alaskan King salmon. Dawn ain't no slouch when it comes to fishing, either.



Bill Caswell and his King Salmon



Dawn Caswell and her King Salmon

Dawn had a caribou stew waiting for Patrick and me, and when someone goes to the trouble of cooking a caribou stew for you, well, let's say we didn't disappoint them. We left the Long Rifle, passed a couple of moose on the highway, took some more photographs, and did our best to empty out the stew pot. Before we ate though, Dawn took us across the road and showed us their neighbor's pet reindeer aka caribou that she feeds leaves and after dinner mints. Our trail there took us over the actual trail the mushers of the Iditarod use when the race starts in Wasilla, which occurs most years. However, this year there wasn't enough snow, so the restart was moved to the town of Willow, another forty miles up the Parks Highway. A few years ago I rode with the Caswells on their four-wheelers on the same trail. Just before we arrived back at their house, a papa moose with a rack about six-feet wide blocked the trail, and like a sentry on guard duty, challenged us about our right to be riding on his turf. After a few minutes of him starring us down, he silently gave his approval for us to pass as he disappeared into the trees, although he clearly let us know that the next time he may not be quite as lenient for our trespassing on the land that he had inherited from his father and grandfathers. [Side note: This reminds me of the time I was driving to work near Fairbanks one snowy October morning when the car in front of me suddenly swerved to avoid hitting a mama moose. When I drove by the moose, I could see the breath from her steaming nostrils just one foot away from the passenger side window.]

On one of the walls of the Caswell home is a signed lithograph of four-time Iditarod winner, Susan Butcher. They also have something signed by Martin Buser, another four-time winner. Martin is Dawn's favorite musher. Susan and Joe Redington, Sr. used to train their dogs near where the Caswells live. A few days before the race she sent me this email:

Hi Matt,

Bad news-the Iditarod will not start in Wasilla this year and not come by our house. I am so disappointed. The ceremonial start is in Anchorage on fourth avenue on Saturday and the real start will be in Willow on Sunday the sixth. We just do not have enough snow for 78 teams to go by. I did so want you to meet our friend, David Wartinbee from Soldotna. They always come up for the start when it goes by our home.

David and his wife flew up in their plane today and landed at the Wasilla airport. We go over and pick them up so we have a few hours to visit. They had to push their plane out of the little snow over at the airport. That is our van in the background.

Hope you will have time to come see us sometime during your trip.

Dawn

Well, since airplanes have a way of sneaking into my stories, I figured that this is a good place to insert the photo of David's plane Dawn sent me. Notice the caption! It says, "It takes two men to do the work of one good woman". When I fly my Stinson to Alaska this summer, I plan on landing at the Wasilla airport, which is a mile away from their house, but eighteen miles away by road.



David Wartinbee's Cessna 172

Sunday, March 6th

Before we drove back to Willow to see the official start of the Iditarod® Trail Sled Dog Race, we settled our accounts for the hotel rooms with Dick Armstrong, the owner. He told me that he is going to expand his fuel operations to the Willow airport, proudly (and rightfully so) showing us plans that he himself had drawn. As we left, Patrick told me, "Here's your opportunity Matt. He is going to need someone to watch over that place and I bet if you told him you were the man, you would have the job you want here in Alaska", or words to the affect. I told him that would be like working at a travel office, with me stuck at work and everyone going somewhere. But I must admit, when I saw ski-equipped airplanes flying in and out of the Willow airport later that day, the thoughts of living not far away from Denali and having a place to park the old Stinson flying machine with a view of that great mountain caused me to be once more guilty of the old sin of coveting something not mine.

We then wandered back to the Millennium Hotel so I could buy a T-shirt for Camyrn. Just so happens that today (as I write this on March 21st) is her 2nd birthday. What a fun and precious gift from God she has been! While looking over the souvenirs again, I came across a CD called "Woodsmoke" by the famous Alaskan singer, Hobo Jim. "*Redington's Run*", the song that he is singing on my CD as I hammer-and-bang out these words on my computer machine, has a few lines that go:

*"Here's to Joe and it's off we go in the land of the midnight sun.
They call this race the Iditarod Trail; to me it's Redington's Run.
In my heart it's Redington's Run.*

*From the city lights of Anchorage to the finish line in Nome,
He'd never find a village that he could not call his home".*

*"Redington's Run" © by "Hobo Jim" Varsos;
Used with Hobo Jim's permission via telephone April 20, 2005*

Instead of eating another meal at Peggy's, we chose to eat breakfast at McDonalds. The pancakes that I ate there were more of the size I am used to eating. While having breakfast, my cell phone rang. Nancy Johnson called to invite Patrick and me to her house for dinner that night, since we didn't see each other on Friday at the TV station. I accepted for the both of us; we grabbed our coffee cups, filled up the Trooper, and once again drove to Willow. Arriving in the town two hours before the race started, to waste a little time we went back to the Speedway Restaurant. I really wasn't too hungry, but decided the offer of homemade apple pie was too good to pass up. Even though there was no doubt we were tourists, the local people in the restaurant struck up a conversation about their snowmobiles and their nearby cabin and talked to us like we were acceptable members of the human race. It amuses me that when I go to Alaska or anywhere else, I am considered to be a tourist by the locals, but they seem to forget that they themselves are the tourists when they come to Texas or go to Hawaii to escape the cold winter. Of course, when I see people riding the Space Center Houston trams around the Johnson Space Center, I refer to them as "Tourists". I guess it just depends on where you are whether or not you are called a "tourist".

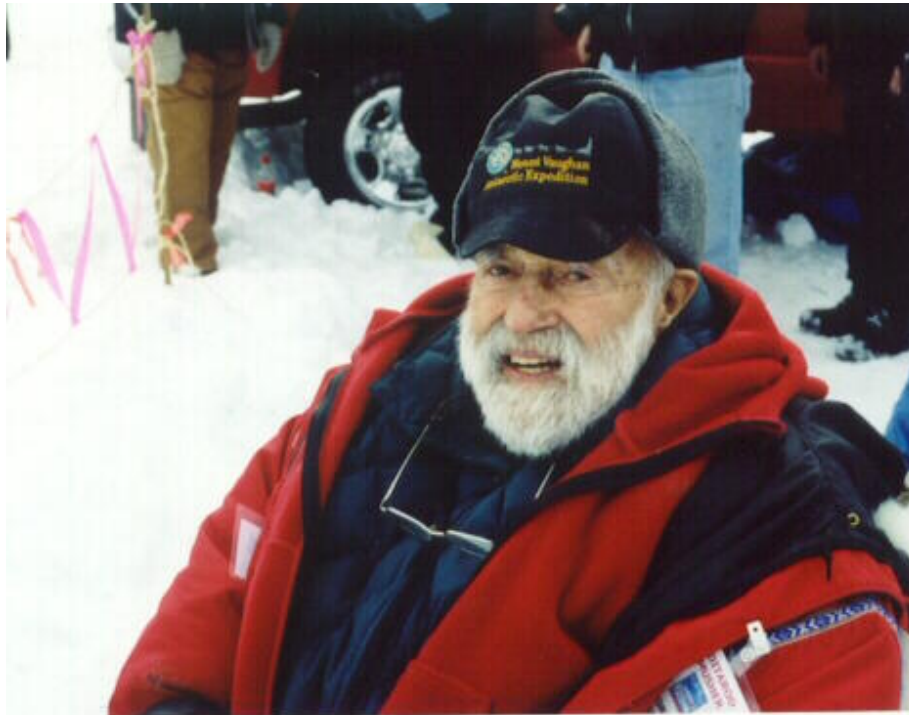
Enough of the editorializing! There is a race that's about to start! Patrick and I drove to the Willow airport to park and then rode a school bus to the race area. Other people, mostly younger, or at least more energetic than Pat and me, walked from the parking area, but we were content to ride the bus, especially once we left the race. We would have made fantastic Iditarod Trail mushers, now wouldn't we?

Roughly a half-hour before the race started, we saw Norman Vaughan sitting by himself in his wheelchair near the starting sign. Where he goes, crowds swarm, but for a minute or so, I had a chance to talk to him again. While driving to Willow, I had decided that if I saw him, I would make a contribution to his

upcoming 100th birthday expedition to Antarctica. Those things are always expensive, even with sponsorship, and he and I both know it. When I opened my wallet and gave him a folded-up green piece of paper printed by the US Mint, his eyes lit up and he profusely thanked me. He took off his glove, shook my hand, and stuck the money back inside his glove. A man standing next to us took our photograph. I have such confidence that he is going to make it to the top of Mt. Vaughan, on December 19th that I want to help, even though I wish my contribution could have been more. I told him that ten years ago when I first met him he said he would be going to Antarctica on his 100th birthday, and so I wanted to make a contribution for the expedition because I believe he is going to astound a lot of people and do it. He grinned and said, "You have been saving your money for me for ten years? Well, save some more money for another ten years so I can go again on my 110th birthday!" What a guy! His wife Carolyn has also ran the Iditarod. I'm impressed!



Matt, Norman Vaughan, Patrick



Colonel Norman Vaughan, 99 years old

For more information, go to www.normanvaughan.com. Dawn Caswell sent me a newspaper article written after the race was over about the upcoming expedition. Experienced mountaineers are training with him, and even have a special designed sled called the “Norm hauler”. If I were an experienced mountain climber, I would try very hard to go with him back to the Ice. The man that took our photograph told Col. Vaughan that meeting him gave him the same pleasure as when he had met Apollo astronauts. I share that sentiment. Last year at the Explorers Club Annual Dinner in New York City, Colonel Vaughan sat on stage with Apollo Astronaut Buzz Aldrin, and Sir Edmund Hillary. While the purpose of my trip to Alaska was to see the start of the Iditarod® Trail Dog Sled Race, seeing Norman Vaughan again at the starting sign, and flying around Denali in the DeHavilland Beaver, stand out as the highlights of the trip. In 1995, when I first met him at Trapper Creek, I remember also seeing Denali. Placing Denali and Iditarod Musher Vaughan in the same sentence can be compared to eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, or dipping Oreo cookies into a glass of cold milk – they just naturally go together.

Not having seen the race before, and not having a line up in front of me, I really didn’t know one musher from another. If I ever watch the race again, I will probably be more selective of whom I take photos. Only by the bib numbers of the mushers in my photos am I now able to discern their names. But on the other hand, even the lesser known mushers are worthy of having their photographs taken, and often, it is one of these mushers that win the race. Training, entering, and running the race takes a great deal of commitment and courage.

Hobo Jim captures the essence of the race in the words of his famous song, “*The Iditarod Trail Song*”; listed below are the first three stanzas:

*“Well, way up in Alaska, the state that stands alone,
there’s a dog race run from Anchorage into Nome.
And it’s a grueling race with the lightning pace where the chilly winds do wail,
beneath the Northern Lights cross snow and ice and it’s called the Iditarod Trail.*

*Well, give me a team and good lead dog and a sled that’s built so fine,
and let me race those miles to Nome one thousand forty-nine,
Then when I get back to my home hey I can tell my tale –
I did, I did, I did the Iditarod Trail.*

*Well, the race it won’t be easy for the masters of the trail
and some of them will make it and some of them will fail,
but just to run that race takes a tough and a hearty breed
and lotta work done by the dogs that run across snow with the whistle and feed.*

...I did, I did, I did the Iditarod Trail.”

“The Iditarod Trail Song” © by “Hobo Jim” Varsos;
Used with Hobo Jim’s permission via telephone April 20, 2005

After Patrick and I left Col. Vaughan, we walked about an eighth-of-a-mile beyond the starting sign to find a spot where we could watch the race. This is now a well-known event; people come from many parts of the world for the chance to watch. Most everyone is in a good mood; the locals are willing to share their knowledge about the mushers. At 2 PM the official race starts; the crowd whistle and yell as the mushers go by; they smile and wave back, anxious to be on their way, probably glad when the well-wishers are not lining the trail for a thousand miles. There aren't any dignitaries riding the well-packed sleds led by a team of sixteen dogs, as opposed to the twelve dogs that started in Anchorage.



Peter Bartlett



Mitch Seavey (I think), winner of 2004 Iditarod



Either Cim Smyth or G. B. Jones



Five-time Iditarod winner, Rick Swenson



DeeDee Jonrowe blows kisses to the crowd



Musher's name unknown (to me)

From the starting sign, the mushers and their dogs run clockwise around the frozen lake; after several had passed by, I decided to walk across the lake to be able to have a full side view of the teams for the National Geographic quality award-winning photographs that I could see in my mind. There was an open area with no people; the edge of a forest would make a good background. Thirty seconds before I trudged to where I wanted to take my award winning photograph when the next team came by, a man and a woman plopped themselves onto the snow, right smack in the middle of the open area, spoiling my award-winning shot. I did not have very kind thoughts for this couple. Other teams came by and I dutifully took their photos, complete with other people who had paid the same amount of money that I paid to enter the race area – nothing! That’s right – no charge! The town of Willow does a great job of providing free parking, free transportation to the race start, and a free entry fee.

Walking back to Patrick, I could feel sweat running down my back; we watched several more mushers go past and I became very chilled. Finally, this guy that spent the Winter in Antarctica had no more desire to stand in the cold. As we retreated towards the bus to take us back to our vehicle, we saw that 99-year old musher, Col. Norman Vaughan, sitting quietly in his wheelchair watching every dog and every team depart. His old body might have been left at the starting line, but his heart and soul mushed with every team each of the thousand miles to Nome.

The last musher I saw leaving the starting line wore bib number 48; we missed seeing the departure of the winner of the race, Robert Sorlie, who wore bib number 50. Leaving the race early also caused us to miss seeing the departure of Martin Buser, number 78, and Rachael Sodoris, who left last. A few days before the race started Martin partially cut off one of his fingers with an electrical saw; even with the extremely sore finger that caused him difficulty running the race, he still came in 13th place. This was Norwegian Robert Sorlie’s third running of the Iditarod; two out of three times he has won it. I think he was first at just about every check point. It is almost like he has the blood and mushing genes of Roald Amundsen, the dog sled driver and leader of the first team to reach the South Pole in 1911, running through his veins. At one time, not far from Nome, Martin was only an hour or two behind Sorlie. Dawn did write me that he had been voted the “Most Inspirational Musher”, which is the same honor given to Norman Vaughan in 1987.

Between waiting for the school bus and waiting in traffic, it took Patrick and me a full hour to start the drive back to Anchorage. Along the way we stopped and Patrick had a beer; while at the bar we met a man who used to be a Navy Seal, and was heading back to his home in Homer. This guy told us that he was one of Martin’s volunteer dog handlers. He also mentioned about Martin cutting his finger. I first heard of the incident while waiting for the plane in Talkeetna. Seems like everyone knows him and had heard about the accident.

On March 20th, Dawn Caswell sent another me email, after the race had been won:

Matt,

I am going to mail you an article from the paper on the Colonel. I know you saw the Norwegian won the Iditarod. Martin Buser (cut off finger and all) was right behind him when he lost a dog. Martin had to go back about an hour until he found him. His finger swelled up to twice its size while he was on the trail. I can't imagine how he did it.

Dawn

Given a chance, I would like to meet some of the different mushers in the coming years, but after all I have heard about Martin Buser, I especially would like to meet him. He is also a member of the Explorers Club, so perhaps our paths will cross somehow sometime in conjunction with that organization.

Once more, I leave my rambling thoughts behind and will make another attempt to continue my story: At 7 PM, Patrick and I drove into Nancy Johnson's driveway. Erin and Steve, Nancy's daughter and son-in-law were there, as well as Douglas's kids: son Justin and his girlfriend ZelJka (pronounced Jaka), son Trevor, and daughter Athena and her son Braedon and her boyfriend Mike. For the first time in my life I ate Alaskan king crab legs. Seafood is not generally my favorite thing to eat, but these didn't taste bad. Even Trevor said they were a special treat. Patrick and I enjoyed everyone's company; they are all good people. Except for Nancy and Douglas's grandson, everyone else is in the age group as Michelle, Cheri, and John, my two daughters and son-in-law. Thank you Nancy for inviting us, because I had a good time meeting and eating dinner with everyone. Next time I see you, perhaps I can meet your husband.

Patrick and I had to turn in our vehicle to Andy by 9 PM, so we were only at Nancy's house for an hour or so. Andy dropped us off at the airport, three hours before our flight. Long wait! Our plane didn't leave until about 1 AM on Monday morning and the security inspection area didn't open until 11 PM. Finally, we passed through security, and only had another hour or so to wait until we could board the plane. By that time, we definitely were bored and sleepy. In the terminal, about fifty feet away, there sat a lady whom was neither bored nor sleepy; with her booming and irritating voice, nobody else could fall asleep, either. I made a comment to Patrick that I wasn't interested in hearing her life story, and then as everyone in the terminal heard her story during the next hour, I felt kind of ashamed of myself for belittling her.

When Robert Sorlie won the Iditarod a few days later, his happiness could not have been any greater than the happiness that this woman expressed. In all my life, I don't think I have ever witnessed anybody as happy as this woman. If NASA called me this very moment and told me to be on the next shuttle flight, I doubt that my own joy could surpass the joy felt by this woman. OK, most people at some time in their lives experience a joy that matches the intensity of this

woman's, but this was her moment. Had she remained silent and not shared her emotions with the entire world, she would have simply exploded, and believe me, as large of a woman as she is, that would not have been a pretty sight! At three o'clock that afternoon, her son called her from Minnesota with the news that she was going to become a grandmother. Her 38th birthday would occur on March 21st, Camyrn's 2nd birthday. The last time she had seen or heard her son was when she was 17 and had been forced to give him up for adoption, right after his birth. She had been messed up on drugs and alcohol, had gone to jail (for how long or what for she didn't say, but I had the impression either she was in jail when her son was born, or went there shortly afterwards, and may have spent several years locked up). He called her on the 11th month anniversary of her being sober; she reiterated the words of AA that miracles in one's life will occur after doing what it takes to become sober. This lady's son expressed disappointment that the woman who raised him did not want him to seek out his biological mother. But she told her son to love this woman, for she had cared and loved him, and obviously he had turned out well. The woman in the airport has an eleven-year old daughter who put a photo album together that afternoon to give her new found brother. Her mother loaned her the money to come up with the plane ticket, and her boss told her to take a week off work. She was flying to Seattle on the same plane that Patrick and I were on, switching airlines and going down to Phoenix and then up to Minnesota, where she going to finally meet her son about 4:30 PM and the crescendo of her ecstasy must have peaked to an even higher level. Quite a story!

Monday, March 7th

As the excited mushers raced to their first check points on the Iditarod, probably already tired and cold and hungry, anticipated another nine or more grueling days ahead of them before reaching Nome, Patrick and I endured the hard and uncomfortable airline seats for eight hours. Our plane stopped in Seattle for an hour for fuel and more passengers, while the two of us drank some hot coffee. After our Seattle departure, the plane banked left between the morning sunlit peaks Mt. Rainer and Mt. St. Helens, later flew over the Rockies and finally, we arrived in Houston at noon – tough, are these spectators of “The Last Great Race” ®, as the Iditarod® Trail Sled Dog Race is also known.

At the Houston airport we met again Douglas's son Trevor, for he flew on another airline with the purpose of traveling around with his dad in the Antonov. We dropped Patrick off at his home, and then drove to the La Porte airport. Trevor, Douglas, and one of Douglas's friends from high school were leaving the next morning towards Florida, for more adventures in the An-2. And I missed their takeoff, because I had to go to work to earn more money for more traveling.

Epilog

On March 16th, the Norwegian Robert Sorlie, won the Iditarod® Trail Sled Dog Race, after running 9 days, 18 hours, 39 minutes, 31 seconds. Here is a web cam photo of him and his team crossing the finish line in Nome:



Winner of the 2005 Iditarod® Trail Dog Sled Race, Robert Sorlie, crossing the finish line in Nome.. Web Cam.

Douglas called me on March 21st from Beaumont, Texas. He had found a hangar to store the Antonov over the next several months, which means in the Fall I may have another chance to fly in it, and write another chapter in its history. The next day he planned of flying commercially to catch up with Jeanne; Trevor had a flight back to Anchorage. In July, I hope they have to chance to fly in the Stinson, either in Anchorage or in Valdez.

Today is Easter Sunday. As I write the final words of this edition of my travels, I must say that I think Jackson has had good training over the last couple of months in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Alaska to keep me safe as I fly my Stinson to Alaska and back in July. Thank you God, and thank you Jack. I am closing this story with some emails I have sent to Louise, and her emails back to me, which make me feel good. She knows me by “Butch”, my nickname.

Hi Butch:

Thanks for the postcard from Guatemala. It's always nice when someone takes the time to remember you. Thanks for taking Jack as your guardian angel - what a tribute!! He would be proud and so am I. Louise

Dear Louise,

Do you know where Jack has been flying lately? He had a chance to fly with me in my airplane, the 1947 Stinson, after it came out of annual inspection last month. Then, yesterday, he went on a float plane ride out of Seattle, taking off and landing on three lakes with a good view of Mt. Rainer and Mt. Baker. Today we flew around Mt. McKinley. I came up on Continental Airlines yesterday from Seattle, having left Houston the day before. Tomorrow, Jack and I are going to see the start of the Iditarod dog race here in Anchorage. He and I are planning on having a lot of adventures together in the next few years, and I will try and keep you posted where we go!

God Bless,

Matthew A. Nelson, Esq., STS-144, Camyrn's plane crazy grandpa flying along with a great guardian angel.

Butch

Thanks for taking Jack. He's travelling high in the sky in more ways than one (ha). I enjoy very much hearing about your adventures. Thank you for including me. Looking forward to hearing about the future trips. Hope the dog race was fun. Sounds cool!! Louise

Hi Louise,

This is the first Easter that Jack will be spending with the Resurrected Lord. We can't even imagine the glorious things that he is experiencing. Miss him, mourn him, cry for him, and know that he is living with the Lord. Butch

Hi Butch: Thank you for the Easter note. Your thoughtfulness never ceases to amaze me. Family here for dinner – was good. Hope your Easter was a good one too. Louise.

