

AN AWESOME ALASKAN ADVENTURE



by DR. WERNER SPIER

Dr. Werner Spier poses with his wife Cheri, who is also a pilot.

Here it was ... Denali, the "Great White One," or Mount McKinley, as it is better known. At 20,320 feet, the highest mountain in North America was out in all its glory, with a halo of puffy clouds near its top. As we approached Windy Pass on our return from the Arctic Circle, and got our first glimpse of Denali, we realized that our "Great Adventure" trip to Alaska had actually come to pass and was now half complete. We were in a loose formation with ten other aircraft, having the time of our lives.

Planning for this trip began about a year ago when we decided that a flight to Alaska would be one of our first trips following my retirement from medical practice. We simply ordered all the pertinent sectional and WAC charts for our route, and began to plot our course.

Then, lo and behold, we saw an article mentioning a group flight sponsored by a company called *Alaska Northwinds Tours, Inc.* The departure date coincided with our plans, so I called for more information. I found out that Jerry and Kathy McCann from Fairbanks lead four groups (each consisting of no more than 10 airplanes) per year to Alaska. They make all the arrangements for hotels, meals, and land transportation, handle the weather briefings, arrange for customs and flight plans, and supply charts, maps, and preferred routes. All we had to supply was the airplane and our own gas — what could be easier than that? We immediately signed up for the last remaining slot, and prepared to meet the group in Great Falls, Montana.

Well, the beginning of our Great Adventure finally came, and we met the group in Montana. That evening we enjoyed a get acquainted dinner with Jerry and his wife Kathy, their assistants, and the remaining group. Naturally, aviation was the main topic of our conversation this evening, and for most

of the next three weeks, much to my pleasure.

Even though I am IFR rated and current, Jerry preferred we not file an IFR flight plan during the trip. I questioned this at first, but I now agree with his policy. First, we came to this country to see the scenery, and we wouldn't see anything at 14,000 feet. Also, there was no radar coverage, we were flying over mountains, icing conditions were frequent, and instrument approach fields were few and far between. One cannot depend on weather advisories, as the mountains and passes create their own weather patterns and can become closed in a very short time. It sure was comforting to be with folks who knew their way around the north country, especially when the weather could turn bad at any moment.

The second day out is when we really got into the scenic part of the trip, when we picked up the Alaska Highway at Dawson Creek. We flew along the highway and rivers to Fort Nelson, and then to Watson Lake. We followed the Liard River through Hellsgate Canyon, over Teslin Lake to Whitehorse.

This was a beautiful canyon flight over a very remote wilderness area with many rivers and glacial lakes. Most of this portion was flown at around 1,000 feet AGL, allowing us to watch for wildlife and better see the waterfalls and glacial outflows.

The airport at Watson Lake, Yukon Territory, is one of the most scenic airports in the country, as it is situated between two mountain lakes, and the log terminal and control tower were built in 1942.

Whitehorse, the capitol of the Yukon Territory, is located on the upper reaches of the Yukon River at milepost 918 on the Alaska Highway. In the late 1800's, miners thought that the nearby rapids resembled a white horse's mane and, thereby, the city was named. Until the highway was built in 1942, the

only way to access the city was by the Yukon River. Whitehorse's airport is on a high embankment on the city's west side, located on a bend in the Yukon River in a picturesque mountain valley. The airstrip was originally cleared in 1920, to accommodate a test of four U.S. Army planes flying from New York to Nome, Alaska. It was improved in 1942 as part of the Northwest Staging Route. The world's largest weather vane, a DC-3, is located at the airport. This plane, registration number CF-CPY, flew from 1946 until 1970, when it blew an engine and crashed during takeoff. It's now mounted on a pedestal and will turn with a 5 knot wind.

Our first non-flying day began with a drive from Whitehorse to Skagway, on a beautiful sunny day. Although Skagway has an airport within walking distance of town, it's located at the end of the Lynn Canal, which means it is plagued by rapidly changing weather. For this reason Jerry finds it more prudent to drive down rather than fly. The drive along the Klondike Highway to Skagway is 110 miles, and takes about three hours. It follows the Skagway River gorge, through White Pass Summit, and along the Sawtooth Range. The scenery is spectacular, as the highway traverses both British Columbia and Alaska.

After a few days of exploring Whitehorse, Skagway, and the surrounding area, it was off to Fairbanks, with a U.S. Customs stop in Northway. Jerry held a flight briefing at every leg, reviewing the proposed route, weather conditions, and "Plan B," including emergency or alternate routes. We generally were cleared as a "Flight of 10," and each had our own flight number. Usually, the faster planes completed each leg only 15 or 20 minutes ahead of us — just enough time to refuel, and move out of the way of the fuel tanks for the rest of us. We were all on the same radio frequency, chattering like a flock of geese, and Jerry was always monitoring his flock of airplanes.

The route from Whitehorse to Northway was one of the many scenic highlights of the trip. To the west were the snow-covered, towering peaks of the Wrangell and St. Elias mountain ranges, featuring peaks as high as 19,000 feet. We flew along the Kluane River and crossed the braided Donjek River parallel to the Donjek Range and the Kluane National Park. Numerous glaciers and lakes dot the area, which is virtually



uninhabited by man. When we reached the south shore of Kluane lake, we made a scenic detour across the Kaskawulsh Glacier, which is in the heart of the National Park. Jerry scouted the route for the rest of us, and gave us the OK to follow him through the canyon, which was surrounded by peaks that reached 11,000 feet in altitude. We followed the Jarvis River and rejoined the Alaska Highway at Kloo Lake. Then, after a quick customs and fuel stop at Northway, it was on to Fairbanks.

While in Fairbanks, we took a cruise on the sternwheeler "Discovery III." We traveled down the Chena and Tanana Rivers, stopping at various places along the way. We met Mary Shields and Susan Butcher, both champion dog mushers who have participated in the Iditorod sled races. They even





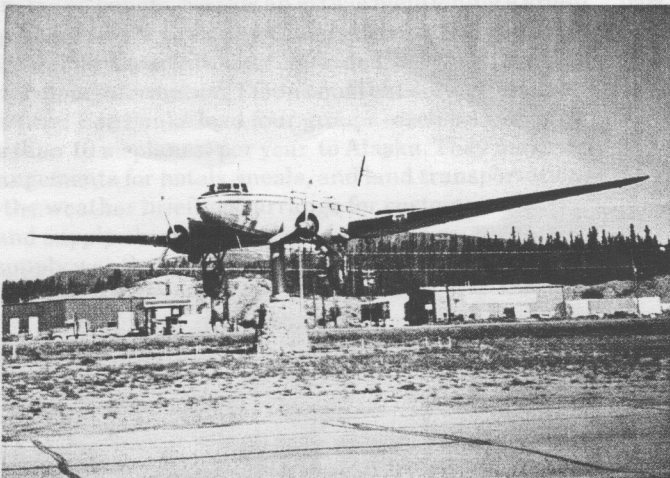
Alaska is home to many canyons that are beautiful, yet potentially dangerous.

showed us some of the methods and equipment used in sled dog training. We also stopped at a replicated native Alaskan village, where we learned about various Indian, Athabascan, and Inuit cultures. Residents demonstrated the traditional methods of catching and preserving salmon, tanning and preserving skins, and building shelters. There is even a small herd of reindeer, which was imported from Lapland, that the natives hope to introduce to their country.

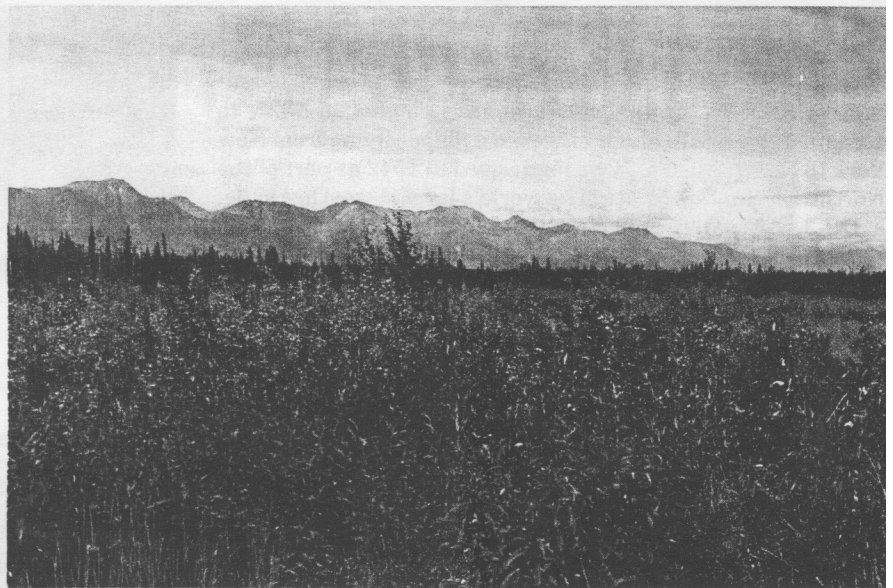
Another side trip we made was a group flight to Bettles, which lies 35 miles north of the Arctic Circle. Bettles is a small settlement with a gravel airstrip, general store, lodge, cafe and trading post. This city serves as the entry way to the Arctic National Park and Preserve, and outfitters will meet you at the airstrip to take you fishing, hiking, or canoeing. We returned to Fairbanks by flying parallel to the Brooks Range, along the Koyukok River, and following the Alaska Pipeline.

The next day we awoke to a gorgeous, sunny, and clear day, and we were in for a real treat. The route from

Perhaps the world's largest "weather vane" is located at the airport in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. This DC-3 will turn with a wind of just five knots.



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If you are a nature lover, you'll definitely want to visit Alaska. Whether you are in the air or on the ground, you'll have the opportunity to view some of the most breathtaking country that exists anywhere.

Fairbanks to Anchorage, via Denali Park, is a pilot's dream come true (in good weather). We departed Fairbanks and followed the Tanana River to its junction with the Nenana River. About 75 miles south of Fairbanks, at Healy, the surrounding terrain narrowed as we entered Windy Pass and flew directly over Denali National Park. The visibility was over 100 miles, so Mt. McKinley (Denali), the highest and most spectacular mountain in North America, was out in its full glory.

Winds can become intense in these narrow mountain passes, so can the development of fog, clouds and rain, but none of these events transpired on this day. We were told that the weather and visibility we experienced happened one day out of 40. Weren't we lucky?

At Cantwell the pass opened up and we flew along the river, over Talkeetna, Big Lake Knik Arm, and into Merrill Field.

Merrill Field is on the outskirts of Anchorage and is the primary general aviation airport for the area, lying between Elmendorf Air Force Base and Anchorage International Airport. Merrill Field is one of the busi-

est airports in the nation, but the controllers are very courteous and efficient in keeping the little planes clear of the commercial and military jets.

Anchorage International, called the "Air Crossroads of the World," is adjacent to the Lake Hood Float Plane Base, the largest seaplane base in the world. One tower controls the main airport traffic, the Lake Hood traffic, and a short gravel strip for bush and ski planes. The automobile access to the strip is the taxiway for the amphibian and tundra tire planes, and it is an unusual feeling to have to give the right-of-way to a taxiing amphibian aircraft.

Because of the scarcity of highways in Alaska, airplanes are used as we would use cars and buses. There are over 11,000 registered pilots in Alaska, which is one out of every 50 residents.

After spending a day in Anchorage doing some well-overdue chores, it was off to the Kenai Peninsula for two days of "flightseeing."

We flew over the wildlife refuge, spotting moose, then along Cook Inlet to the town of Homer, located at the southern terminus of the Sterling Highway. We flew over many acres of wild flowers, and fireweed with its purple flowers in full bloom. We hitched a ride to the tip of the Spit, and passed many charter fishing outfits and an extremely crowded campground along the beach. After a delightful lunch on the verandah of Land's End, it was off to Seward, which required flying over the Harding Ice Fields. This is a remnant of the Ice Age that caps a section of the Kenai Mountains and is part of the Kenai Fjords



Here a Cessna 340 cruises over a mountainous region of Alaska.

National Park. We skimmed over the glacial ice, through the canyons, and over Seward and Resurrection Bay. We were continuously shooting our cameras during this unforgettable flight.

The next day's flight was another scenic one to Dawson, in the Yukon Territory. We flew over scenic rivers, lakes, glaciers, fishing camps, and the timberline before landing at Dawson. There is an excellent 5,000 foot gravel

strip on Rock Creek, 12 miles east of town, with a friendly Canadian customs officer working at the field.

Dawson City, with a population of 1,800, is located at the junction of the Yukon and Klondike Rivers. The town dates from the discovery of gold on the Klondike in 1896, and in 1900 was home to 30,000 people.

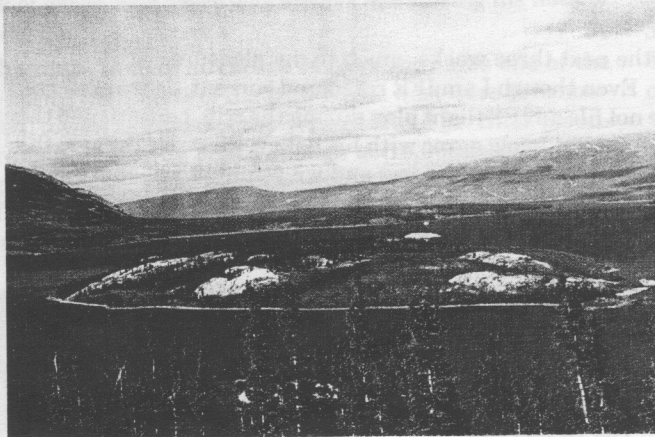
Dawson still has a boom town flavor, featuring many historic buildings, boardwalks, and the SS Keno (the last river steamer to run the Yukon River). "Ladies of the Evening" were even legally permitted until the mid 1970's — Dawson was the last Canadian city to close its brothels. However, Dawson is home to Canada's only legal gam-

bling hall, called "Diamond Tooth Gerties," which is operated by the Klondike Visitors Association.

Reluctantly, we left Dawson, but anticipated the flight across the Yukon to Watson Lake. We followed the Klondike River and saw the ghosts of the large dredges and tailings left behind by modern miners. We then flew along the Klondike Highway, over Stewart's Crossing and Pelly's Crossing, until we picked up the Yukon River. Passing the community of Carmacks, we followed the Noredenskold River to Lake Labarge and then into Whitehorse for fuel. After that, we flew south to Calgary.

In the beginning, we had mixed emotions about joining the Alaska Northwinds flying tour, as we have always traveled by ourselves without advance reservations. But, after becoming acquainted with the 15 wonderful folks and having the benefit of Jerry's and Kathy's experience flying this route, we realized that we had made the right decision. Plus, the hassle-free, pre-arranged accommodations (hotel, food, and ground transportation) really made the trip.

We felt as if we saw more, and used our time and resources more efficiently, by traveling with the group as opposed to going by ourselves. Indeed, our Great Adventure was even more than we had anticipated — it was a dream come true.



Perhaps the most appealing aspect of flying to Alaska is the beautiful scenery you get to experience.



TO CONTACT ALASKA NORTHWINDS TOURS, INC., WRITE 3630 S. UNIVERSITY AVE., P.O. BOX 83096, FAIRBANKS, AK 99708. TELEPHONE 800-828-7017.