

Part I

Anchorage and Vicinity

Chapter 1

Something New

The ground was moving in rows, as if a rock were thrown into a still pond, creating ripples to its extreme banks; — except, they were two or three feet high, altering anything in their path forever. Houses were falling into voids, some in pieces, others broken apart or standing on their ends, tossing their contents, and their inhabitants, as if they were in a cement mixer. The Turnagain By The Sea section of Anchorage was generally reduced to matchsticks. Sewer and water lines were twisted as if they were pretzels. Streets and roads were split causing landslides, carrying buildings and life as they went. In other areas where the quake might not have destroyed everything, tsunamis (tidal waves) completed the destruction.

At 5:36 p.m. on Good Friday, March 27, 1964, the earthquake struck the Anchorage and south central coast area of Alaska. Ten seismic stations recorded its strength between 8.75 and 8.4 on the Richter scale. By comparison, the strongest earthquake ever recorded measured 8.9 on the Richter scale. The shock was felt over an area of 500,000 square miles, with visible evidence over a 100,000 square mile area. Over 550 aftershocks were recorded through April 7th in the Anchorage area.

This was the event setting in motion a new phase of my life. Permit me a moment to let you become acquainted with who I am, so you will understand the contrast between life in Oklahoma, and the events which took place over the next four years.

I was born in southern Oklahoma and later settled in the northeastern section. My only adventures outside this area and the immediately surrounding states occurred in World War II during a tour of duty in the U.S. Navy. Since then I had stayed at home, worked, went to Church, — and occasionally visited relatives and friends in Texas or Arkansas.

Shortly after discharge from the Navy, I was able to obtain work in the Federal Civil Service System — later with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. I was Purchasing Agent and Assistant Administrative Chief at the Fort Gibson/Tenkiller Area Office of the Tulsa District, at the time of the Alaska earthquake.

The Alaska District, Corps of Engineers was the government agency primarily responsible for the saving of life and property, cleaning up of the area, and restoring public services. They were continually seeking government employees in certain fields — including contracting — from all over the world to perform temporary duty in Anchorage and other affected locations, to assist in these enormous tasks throughout the area. Public utilities, including water, sewer, power, transportation (including roads and bridges), were all gone, or severely damaged. Many areas were only accessible by air or boat — others were cut off completely.

In the latter part of July, our Area Engineer at the Fort Gibson/Tenkiller Area Office, approached employees with the TDY request from the Alaska District, seeking anyone who would like a 90-day tour of duty in Alaska. I did not respond that day, but a couple of days later asked that my name be submitted. Two days later, a telegram was received in our Tulsa District Office requesting me. Five days later, I started the rest of my life. Two other employees of the Tulsa District, whom I did not know at that time, also responded to the request. We later got together in Seattle.

I had never flown before, and Anchorage was some 4,000 miles away. I must say there was some apprehension — perhaps I should say there was a lot of apprehension — to undertake this adventure. I reasoned that they could not stop the plane in mid-air and let me off; furthermore it would be a long way to fall if anything happened. Once my travel orders were written and my ticket purchased, I was gone.

I boarded a DC-6 at the Tulsa International Airport, thinking I would be by myself, but almost at once I saw a fellow employee of the Tulsa District whom I knew slightly. He was going as far as Wichita, Kansas on TDY. I joined him, hoping it would help to have someone to talk with on my first airplane journey. Actually, the other two Tulsa District employees going to Anchorage were also on this flight, but I didn't know them as yet.

We had a pretty good flight to start, and by the time we reached Wichita I was beginning to feel a little more comfortable. My friend left, and I was alone again. Next stop Denver, Colorado.

As we were taxiing for take-off, I noticed a very ominous bank of clouds to the west-southwest, moving rapidly in our direction. It seemed they just suddenly appeared from nowhere. Having been born and raised in Oklahoma, I knew severe weather when I saw it. I was by then trying to encourage the airplane to take off before it arrived, but lo-and-behold, the pilot turned on another taxiway and returned to the terminal. A lone passenger — an elderly lady — boarded the plane and we started taxiing for take-off again. By this time the cloud bank was practically upon us; but, take-off we did — then the storm hit. This was the first of several storms we would fly through before reaching the west coast.

Lightning was flashing all around us. The clouds were dark and as we entered them, we could hardly see the end of the wings of our airplane. Wind currents were tossing us in every direction — up, down, and sideways. It seemed at any moment the wings of our airplane must be torn off. There was nothing but blackness with lightning flashes to alleviate the total darkness outside. We continued in this for what seemed a lifetime but was probably 30 to 40 minutes — then sunshine, and calm flying again.

Thus, I was introduced to adverse flying conditions. Many times after this I would fly in extreme conditions, but never did I learn to feel comfortable or safe, and always wished I were some other place when things got rough.

We landed at the Denver Airport with no further incidents.

Stapleton International Airport was under construction most everywhere you looked, but I thought it was very beautiful. Flowers of all varieties were in evidence in any area they could be placed, creating a beautiful and colorful picture.

The country from Wichita to Denver was plains, with more breaks to the landscape as we drew nearer to Denver. The backdrop for Denver itself was like a mural — mountains, lakes with a beautiful skyline framed by mountains, which might be entitled "*From Here to Anywhere.*" The climate was cool, even in August, at least it seemed so to me.

After about an hour on the ground in Denver, we took off for Boise, Idaho. It seemed we flew forever in our DC-6 to attain enough altitude to look over the mountains rather than at their sides. I constantly wondered if our pilot was paying attention to where he was going; nevertheless, we missed them all and set a course across Wyoming to reach Boise.

Once again the thunderstorms got us. Our pilot announced over the intercom that we were changing course to try to avoid the billowing thunderheads; however, after altering course several times, it was not possible to evade them any more, — their tops must have been 40 - 50,000 feet. With nowhere else to go, we entered them head-on. Once again the roller coaster ride began. I will forever compliment the Aircraft Manufacturers for building a machine that would take the stress our plane was put through. Had we not been strapped in our seats, I'm sure we would have been flying throughout the cabin of the plane.

There are two ways to come out of thunderstorms — crash or reach the other side. Since I'm now writing this some 31 years later, you were correct to assume we flew through to the other side. Once again, beautiful weather was with us.

Flying at 20,000 feet allows you to have a sight seeing tour. Several formations of the mountain ridges — a line of mountains, a valley, then another line of mountains — were quite interesting. At one place in either northern Colorado or Wyoming, a line of the mountains broke on their south side in a perfectly straight line for several miles, then curled at their western end, looking similar to a low pressure system on a weather map with a long straight cold front. I don't know what caused this formation, perhaps a fault line from long ago, but it was the most unusual formation I have ever seen, to this date.

Our pilot for this leg of our journey seemed to enjoy being a tour guide. His next announcement — in some detail I might add — was the location of the battleground where General Custer and his troops were defeated by Chief Sitting Bull. We were flying directly over the battlefield, and from the air the land appeared smooth, with no depressions to hide in for ambush or attack; however, through travelogues and historical pictures we have seen, we know cover was there, and Chief Sitting Bull used what little there was, to completely surprise General Custer.

Shortly after passing over this historical landmark, we flew to the side of the Grand Teton Mountains. They were snow capped, and stood alone it seemed as a geological mystery in the area. They were very beautiful. I have wanted to visit them since that day, but the occasion has never arisen to permit me to do so.

Next stop, Boise, Idaho.

Boise, Idaho was practically treeless, with a very dinky Air Terminal. The one point of interest at this stop was the wild pheasants — thousands of them — all over the runways and the entire area. You could see movement all over the grassy areas of the airport, but their camouflage made them almost invisible. Our pilot told us a pheasant had flown into a jet engine on an airplane, wiped out the engine, and almost caused a crash, sometime in the not too distant past.

Next stop, Pendleton, Oregon.

After taking off from Boise, our pilot announced we were then flying over Sun Valley, Idaho. You will remember Bing Crosby was featured in a movie filmed on that location. Being in August, there wasn't much to see except treeless mountains.

If Boise was drab and uneventful — Pendleton was even more so. There were few trees, hot temperatures, and dead grass.

Lets move on to Portland, Oregon.

From Pendleton to Portland we followed the Columbia River, picking up beautiful mountains — when not scarred by the timber industry, — and deep valleys. Acres and acres of logs were floating down the river to be sold or processed in Portland. As we lost altitude nearer the Airport, we could see men riding them downstream. It was a mystery to me how the right logs found their right destinations, while free-floating in vast quantities. (We see pictures of this area as it looks today with the timber industries clear-cutting practices, creating patterns which look like a patchwork quilt, and think what a shame. Always before, select cutting fulfilled the requirements of supply and demand, and met the needs for labor in the area.)

A light mist was falling at the Portland Airport, but the scenery, and again the flowers, created a very beautiful area. The skyline of Portland was distinct and from the air, appeared clean and well kept.

Mount Hood, properly formed, standing tall and snow capped, looked to be just a short distance away. I was to learn before this trip was over, that distance can be very misleading in mountainous areas.

After a short stop in Portland, we proceeded to Seattle.

Taking off from Portland was uneventful, and I was beginning to enjoy flying very much. When we attained flying altitude, there were breaks in the clouds. Our pilot pointed out Mt. Hood, Mt. St. Helens, and as we neared Seattle, Mt. Rainier — all snow capped and very beautiful. Everywhere were mountains, though not as tall as these. This was several years before Mt. St. Helens blew her top; however, I understand she is now just as beautiful as then, only in a different way.

It is difficult to describe the beauty of the area as we approached the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. The residential areas — broken by water everywhere; — the mountains to the east, and the ports and shipbuilding industries to the north, with downtown Seattle in the center, was something to behold. During the next few years, I had the privilege of flying in and out of Seattle several times, and each time it grew in beauty.

My daughters, Judy and Chris (Lisa came later), had instructed me that if I wanted to return home; while in Seattle, I must take pictures of the Space Needle — constructed as a part of the World Fair Grounds a few years before, now known as the Seattle Center. There was only a little over an hour between planes, and it was 12 miles to the Space Needle. I was able to catch a cab, take my pictures, and return to the Airport, with a few minutes to spare.

I must tell you that I had never used a movie camera before, so my idea was to cover space as fast as I could; therefore, I wouldn't waste film, getting more pictures. Consequently, I panned the camera up and down the Space Needle several times, always too fast to see much about it. I still laugh every time I see it. Anyway, my daughters were happy and I was allowed to return home again.

After returning to the Air Terminal, it was necessary — and I don't remember how this occurred — to transfer my baggage from one airline to another. When I went to pick up my bags, a group of men were standing around the area. As I approached, they asked if I was on TDY to Alaska, which I acknowledged. There were twelve of us in all, including the other two from the Tulsa District. They had been told I was going to Alaska, though I didn't know who they were. I don't remember but three or four of this group. Most of the group were dispatched to other areas when we reached Anchorage, and I didn't see them again. I became good friends with two of these men and we worked together off and on for the next four years. I shared an apartment with two of them who remained in Anchorage; one of the Tulsa District employees and the other, a gentleman from the Fort Worth District.

So now there were twelve of us preceding to Anchorage.

We boarded a 707 jet in Seattle for our flight to Anchorage. This was my first jet ride. I was sure the angle of take-off was too great and that we must stall and crash at any moment, but we made it. There was a new group of noises this plane made that was different from those I had learned on the DC-6. This worried me somewhat, but by then I was getting used to the unusual.

It seemed we were leaving Seattle behind far too quickly, for just in a few minutes after

take-off the pilot announced we were at our flying altitude of 40,000 feet and passing over Vancouver Island. (This is still the highest altitude I have ever flown, even to this day.)

From here on there was water wherever you looked, with an occasional glimpse of the Canadian or Alaskan coast far to the east.

Some two and one-half hours later we had our first view of the southern Alaskan coast; beautiful mountains, snow, ice fields, and glaciers, then some 30 minutes later we were on our approach to land at the Anchorage International Airport. As we flew in over the Cook Inlet for landing, the wind currents again — as in each time I landed in Anchorage — were quite severe until just before touchdown when they smoothed out.

Alaska at last.