

Chapter 15

Shot Time

The camp had filled up — some 500 personnel on the island by now. I have often wondered how many were there for a "joy ride" — you don't think this happens? However, it was time for we who had done most all the work, to return to Anchorage for the duration of the shot time — about a week or so. This was o.k. with me, as I had friends in Anchorage I really hadn't greeted very well when I arrived. I had missed church while on the island, although they had supplied a chaplain, but that wasn't really much like church.

So off we went — we would return after the shot.

I will only spend a little time here about while I was in Anchorage. Hardly anything noteworthy took place, but let me mention a couple of things while on this trip.

One thing I thoroughly enjoyed was a "revival" being held at the First Baptist Church by Tony Fontane — the famous recording artist. He would sing for about thirty minutes or so before preaching. I must mention that while singing, his face became quite distorted. He spoke of this, explaining that he could only attain the sounds he wanted, while using these facial expressions. It worked.

The other incident I will mention, was with my Industrial Property Assistant on the island. He rented a Volkswagen while in Anchorage, and invited me for a ride one afternoon. We

were on official orders to Anchorage, lived in the civilian BOQ on Elmendorf AFB, had access to the PX and cafeterias on the base, so you will understand that we felt quite at ease about driving around over the base. No problem, right?

Then how could we wind up surrounded by five or six airmen with drawn guns *holding* us while a Second Lieutenant called the O.D., or Provost Marshal, or maybe both about what to do with us.

The guns *were* pointed at us, but unlike the wild, wild west; we didn't have to hold up our hands — in fact, we were having a fairly friendly talk with the "boys" while their Louie was gone. They were apologizing to us, saying their Lieutenant was "excitable" — perhaps wanting to make a promotion out of catching some spies — identified as us.

I guess I'd better explain.

This was the time the new B-19s had just come off the classified list, and a few were stashed away on the back side of Elmendorf AFB. We had just seen an article about them — with pictures — in the newspaper, so my friend decided he would like his own picture of one. When we stopped, got out of the car and took the picture — three "jeeps" came at great haste bearing the Lieutenant and his crew with weapons ready.

After about 5 or 10 minutes of being held, the Lieutenant *sent an airman* out to tell the boys to let us go. It seems the least he could have done was come himself — we would have accepted his apology.

We drove around Elmendorf and Ft. Richardson that day and possibly saw some things we probably shouldn't have, but I don't know what they were.

While on Ft. Richardson we saw some moose cows who had come out of the hills for the winter.

On a back road — I don't know if it was Elmendorf or Ft. Richardson, we came upon a giant communications antenna. By giant I mean 50 or 60 feet high by up to perhaps 300 feet long. There were no restricted area signs around it, but *we didn't take pictures*. I later learned this was part of the early warning defense system.

Let's get out of here — I was nervous.

The shot was over, so we were on our way back to Amchitka. Each flight was a different world. We were again on a Reeves Aleutian Airline DC-6 — but made several stops at places we hadn't seen on our first trip. I was flying this time with our Chief of the Engineering Branch on the island. Hang on — this one's a doozie.

We left Anchorage on a bright clear morning, hoping the weather would hold for the entire trip. It did — until we reached Amchitka. We'll come to that when we get there.

Our first stop this time was at Kodiak, the principal city on Kodiak Island. This was one of the places the tsunami played havoc with during the earthquake, though it was one of the farthest Alaskan cities from the Epicenter in Prince William Sound. I believe there were more deaths there than at any other place, and severe damage occurred.

Kodiak was also the outfitting city for bear hunters — BIG BEAR hunters. The Kodiak bear — of the grizzly breed — is noted as being the largest bear in the world. The airport terminal at Anchorage has a stuffed Kodiak bear mounted in a glass showcase. This bear stands over 10 feet tall, however publications indicate the largest of the bears stand over 14 feet tall — their heads measuring up to 3 feet thick. The story goes that in order to kill one, it is necessary that they be shot in the heart.

Kodiak is a pretty good size island — roughly near 100 miles long by some 50 miles wide. It is quite mountainous though not exceptionally tall mountains, — although they were very rugged and always covered with snow. As we flew over the mountains when leaving the city of Kodiak, our pilot pointed out the site of a plane crash near the peak of a mountain. The crashed plane was not found for several years.

On this flight, wind currents both up-drafts and down-drafts were causing extremely rough flying conditions as we flew over the mountains out of Kodiak. However, at a certain elevation — I believe near 20,000 feet, it was like passing from one world to another. All of a sudden it was very smooth. I believe flying in this area was as rough as it was back in the Rocky Mountains on my first flight to Alaska.

I'll skip Cold Bay — what more can I say?

We headed northwest from Cold Bay — destination, St. Paul in the Pribilof Islands. These islands were located 250 to 300 miles from any other land area out in the middle of the Bering Sea. They were not large islands, flat generally and just enough room for what looked like a cinder block airstrip. This is not a scheduled stop for the airline and is only made if a requirement exists. This time one passenger on our flight deplaned.

The island was not impressive, and I believe it was inhabited primarily by native indians. Just a few lonely islands surrounded by miles and miles of water. The highest elevation on St. Paul Island is shown on the map to be about 590 feet.

We didn't stop long enough to get off the plane, then we took off on another wave top flight. I wondered why we were flying so low this time as our next stop was Adak, probably at least 300 or more miles to the southwest.

I was soon to find out, as our pilot was in a guided tour mood this trip. Soon he announced we would fly over Walrus Island at this very low altitude. He said he would bank the plane to the right so we could see the island — covered with walrus.

One problem. I was seated on the left side of the plane with my camera in hand — and probably nothing to take a picture of from that position. Being the genius that I am, a plan took place in my mind to cure this minor obstacle. A DC-6 has two restrooms — neither labeled His nor Hers in the back of the airplane. So to the back of the plane I went. Now not everyone carries a camera to the restroom. Remember, this was not a lounge — just a one holer, and barely room for that.

Arriving at what I thought was perhaps the best "seat" in the plane, totally private, and coming complete with a six or eight inch "port-hole", I was ready — I thought. As Rodney Dangerfield would say, "I got no respect". Our pilot *did* bank to the right — not just a little, but what seemed to me, he stood the plane on its right wing. As you are aware, everyone's center of gravity is guided by the shortest distance to the ground — or in this case the floor or

walls of the airplane. So there I was, flattened out against the window of the restroom with my nose pressed into it, instead of my camera — very awkward. Determined as I was, I figured out a way to trade places between my nose and my camera, and got off one or two pretty good shots.

I was not sorry that I had gone through this, as I'm sure I saw a sight not many people have actually seen. You know the island, *National Geographic* and I believe *Jacques Costeau* have both visited the island and presented articles, and TV presentations of it. Hundreds, or maybe thousands of walrus were all over the island which is probably not much larger than an acre or two (if I could tell from the position I was in). They were constantly crawling over each other and diving in the sea and crawling back out again.

Our pilot made a 360 degree circle of the island to give everyone a good view of it and its inhabitants before levelling the flight out and heading southwest. I once again found out which end was up — then calmly walked back to my seat as if everything was just as I had planned. I got my pictures!

As I have already stated, the weather was clear as a bell this day, and our pilot was a self-appointed tour guide. Our destination wasn't so wonderful that we wanted to get there real fast, so we were glad for the break. Maybe just a little bit out of the way was Korovin Volcano, not too far out from Adak, our next attraction. This time our pilot announced we were coming upon this active volcano and we could see it out of our left window. Now he had the plane on the right side to see it well. Get my trusty camera ready, I did, and worked on getting my eyes focused to where I expected the volcano to appear — maybe twenty-five or thirty miles away. I was ready, but where was the volcano? I was just about to ask the pilot if we were lost, when suddenly this mountain appeared (maybe 3500 to 4000 feet high just outside the window). It stood there, a dull grey — a little darker than battleship grey — with no sign of any vegetation anywhere, seemingly just protruding out of the sea for the sole purpose of letting off smoke and steam. We flew within just a few miles of its vent near the top — I have described it before as close enough to reach out the windows of the plane and

warm your hands. It was not erupting, just venting smoke and steam but still presenting an awesome sight — beautiful in its own way. This I also photographed — one of my cherished pictures of Alaska. There were many volcanoes in Alaska, but throughout all my travels, which criss-crossed almost the entire state of Alaska, this was the only time I flew close up to one.

Adak was uneventful this trip, so let us move on to Amchitka. Adak is only a little over 200 miles or so from Amchitka so it was sometimes hard to comprehend the intense changes in the weather between the two islands. Perhaps it is because Amchitka is the farthest south of any island in the Aleutian Chain — located almost due west of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. This placed Amchitka further in to the warm Pacific Ocean currents.

Not long after our take-off from Adak, a stewardess came to tell us we probably wouldn't be able to land on Amchitka, that a storm was in progress. It was still clear and nice where we were. However, quite soon it clouded up and we started noticing whitecaps on the sea below us. From this point on the weather deteriorated. By the time we reached Amchitka, even while flying the airplane, we could easily tell there was quite a storm going on. Many times during a storm on Amchitka the ceiling would drop almost to the ground, but this time the ceiling was probably 2,000 feet.

As we approached the runway from east to west, you could see the plane was skewed to the south several degrees. In order to fly in the direction the runway ran, the plane had to keep its nose at such an angle that it completely prohibited landing on that runway. We were resigned to the fact that we must spend the night on Shemya (near the end of the Aleutian Island Chain) where accommodations were available.

But low and behold, our pilot would not give up that easily. You remember I mentioned the north/south runway had not been cleaned up and rehabilitated. There was only a cleared, winding path through the rubble sufficient for vehicular traffic (at least that was what we thought) to the old World War II hangar where materials were stored. Even a pickup could not drive in a straight path down this runway because of the rubble. You have probably

figured out my story already, but let me continue anyway.

Having made his pass down the east/west runway, our pilot banked into the wind, circled the island and headed down the north/south runway — with his landing gear up. I know it was up, because we were flying close enough to the runway that if the landing gear had been down, the wheels would have been touching — in a DC-6.

My traveling companion looked at me, shook his head and tried to push deeper into his seat. I knew this wouldn't work because I had already tried it. This was a DC-6 airplane, flying in to, I would guess, at least a 75 mph wind down a runway full of debris — that is, what wasn't on the move at just a few feet off the ground. I was scared — and I don't believe I was alone.

At the end of this runway, he banked into the wind again — I thought I was riding with a "crop duster", circled again, *lowered his landing gear and literally flew the plane onto the runway*. I don't know what the record is, but I'm sure this was the shortest landing ever accomplished in a DC-6. Our crew, who were awaiting our arrival at the rehabbed hangar, couldn't see our actual landing because of a slight rise in the land. They later told us they thought we had crashed and probably lost everyone on board. The word around airports is that anytime you can walk away from a plane, it's a good landing. Ok, I'll accept that however, I would like to be a little more selective.

We turned on the runway and began our taxiing across to the other hangar — about two or two and a half miles away, and over a slight rise from where we were. Upon reaching the debarking spot our pilot turned the plane into the wind, and left his engines running, to hold the plane long enough for us to get off.

When we set foot on the ground, the wind was so strong we could hardly stand while leaning into it. Right then, I was so glad to be on the ground — safely — I would have crawled to camp. This was still not my last close encounter with disaster while flying in Alaska.