Chapter 22

Kotzebue

Returning to Anchorage, I was picked up at the airport by either Marty Davoren or John Reynolds – I can't remember which – checked in at the Captain Cook Hotel (I was on TDY at this time), then reported in at the District Office the next morning.

Up until that time I was not aware of just what was in store for me on this trip. It seems that the Project Engineer at the Nome Project Office had a very intense distaste for any administrative duties. This had resulted in several vendors "cutting off" sales to the Corps of Engineers, and were making demands to be paid for past due accounts. A little public relations as well as some plain old bill paying, was in order.

I was also to take a government property audit – to "find" all items of property listed on their books, and to dispose of any items which were unusable or surplus. Nome was a new area of Alaska I had never seen before, so why not?

I flew out of Anchorage the next morning on an Alaska Airline Boeing 727 jet – which happened to be a flight originating in Seattle as an Alaskan tour. This allowed me to fly on past the Arctic Circle to Kotzebue, and see and hear of much more of this state than I had expected. The Captain acted as tour guide, calling our attention to points of interest as we flew. My destination was Nome, but I would not arrive there until later in the afternoon. A free day on tour – I'll take it!

Leaving Anchorage, we flew past the south side of Mt. McKinley, probably within a hundred miles of it. It was a clear day, and the view was quite spectacular. An enormous glacier was seen flowing down its sides for miles and miles. This is the highest point of the North American Continent at 20,320 feet. The Mt. McKinley National Park area is near one hundred miles long by some fifty miles wide – accessible by the Denali Highway from the east or by a highway south out of Fairbanks (a short gap was not completed at the edge of the park at that time, but I assume it has been by now). A highway north from Anchorage was under construction. A lodge and bus tours are available inside the park area. I understand these tours are quite frightening, the route they take is in extremely rugged country.

In the park area also is Mt. Foraker at 17,395 and Mt. Hunter at 16,580 feet elevations which are completely overshadowed by Mt. McKinley. Either of these mountains would hold their own right in history, were they located anywhere else. Perhaps a comparison would help to better understand the heights of these mountains. Mt. Rainier in Washington is 14,410 feet, Mt. Hood in Oregon is 11,235 feet, and Mt. Elbert in Colorado is 14,431 feet elevation. Each of these mountains are the highest elevations in their respective states – but Mt. McKinley is over a mile *higher* than any of these in the lower 48.

From here most of the way on to Norton Sound southeast of Nome was mountainous, though not nearly so high as those. We crossed the Yukon River on this flight before it empties into the Delta area in the vicinity of Bethel.

Then we were flying over Nome – they told me they were going on to Kotzebue for about an hour stopover, then would return to Nome where the tour would spend the night. I never had any problem about seeing more of Alaska, so I certainly offered no objections to this delay. I was their only passenger for Nome.

As we proceeded, our pilot came on the intercom and announced that to our west – some sixty miles from our flight – was Russia. The International Date Line separates Little Diomede Island, U.S. territory; from Big Diomede Island, U.S.S.R. territory – at this point

only some three fourths mile apart. He explained that the natives in this area were related to each other in the two countries and would cross between Russia and the United States unobstructed when they wished. Both nations allowed this, believing that no threat to either's security existed.

A little further up, we passed East Cape, U.S.S.R. – the farthest eastern point of Russia. This point is almost due north of the Pribilof Islands, and some five or six hundred miles farther east than Attu at the end of the Aleutian Islands Chain. This point on the mainland of Russia could be seen on this flight.

Shortly after this, our pilot told us we would be crossing the Arctic Circle very shortly, and that sometimes the airplane would "bump" just a little, so we shouldn't be alarmed if it did. As you might expect, the "bump" came right on schedule, and we were then north of the Arctic Circle. (If you had been watching the spoilers on the airplane as I was, you would have noted a quick flip of them caused the "bump".)

Then we were on approach to the airport at Kotzebue.

The runway at Kotzebue Airport was gravel – and *just* long enough for our jet to land on. Part of it was a causeway that ended just above water level and at the very edge of Hotham Inlet to Seliwak Lake. Much of the western Brooks Range of mountains drains to this vicinity (you probably recognize the name of the Brooks Range as being the mountains crossed with the Alaska Pipe Line from the Point Barrow oil fields).

Our pilot was able to stop our plane short of the water – just – and there at the end of the runway was a large sign with the legend "KOTZEBUE – POLAR BEAR CAPITOL OF THE WORLD". I believe a lot of the revenue of this area is obtained by fees charged hunters as guides for bear hunting in the winter. But this was summer, so I must move on with my story. Of course, if it had been winter, I wouldn't have been Polar Bear hunting either, it just seemed adventurous to state it that way.

Just a few items about Kotzebue before we go on with our story. Kotzebue at that time

had an estimated summer population of about 1,000, although it didn't appear to be that large. The natives hunt whale, walrus, seal, and caribou; ivory carve, and fish for food all within their own seasons. This area north of the Arctic Circle experiences 36 days during the summer when the sun doesn't set at all, and a much longer time when it is daylight all night long. In like manner in the winter, they experience equal amounts of darkness.

Since I was on a tour flight, I had access to all the benefits of the tour – without paying for them. The plane was met at the terminal by a bus to tour the town and surrounding area. I decided I had rather take my own "tour" and get to the places the guided tour probably wouldn't go. I found out we would be there about an hour, so camera in hand, I took off afoot.

The roads were all dirt – mud holes in their proper places – but that could probably be understood, as there were very few cars to be seen. A Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) School was probably the biggest building for maybe hundreds of miles around. Community Activities are a big part of all the native villages and I understand this school was used a lot for community get togethers. I am not acquainted with all the social events the Eskimos participated in.

As I walked further into the community, I noted that the wooden constructed houses – usually only two or three rooms – would have large cracks in their walls. The climate is very cold in the winter, and I believe most of the natives used whale oil for heat. I wondered how they could possibly stay warm. There seemed to be no planning or layout of the community. Each house seemed to be built haphazardly, then a road would run by it. At each house were long lines of fish drying in the sun. As you would imagine, sled dogs (Alaskan Huskies) were at each house, all of them barking and trying to fight each other at once. They never looked like they were fed enough – I would probably bark too.

Then I was at the beach. The houses were built right up to the edge of the thirty or forty feet of sand and gravel beach area adjacent to the water's edge. Apparently they are in a protected area, as the elevation of most of the area around Kotzebue was no more than ten

to twenty feet above sea level – though there were some low hills spotted around in places. The thing about the beach area I will never forget was the odor. Scattered up and down the beach very close to the houses, were rotting carcasses of walruses or sea elephants – I don't know which. (I expect the odor would be about the same.) They were three to four feet thick and appeared to be eight to twelve feet long. They had been disected with desired portions removed, and the remainder of their carcasses left to rot – some within twenty-five or thirty feet of a house – probably a ton or more of rotting meat each. There were carcasses beached every hundred feet or so, the entire length of the village.

The odor throughout the area was almost unbearable – drying fish by the thousands, the rotting carcasses, and the dozens of barking dogs – all made it very hard to imagine how anyone could live here. The Eskimos are very friendly people, but this village leads me to believe perhaps, hygiene is unknown to them.

My hour was up – my pictures taken – then it was time to return to the terminal to catch my plane. I was extremely happy I had been afforded this *free* tour of Kotzebue. I was so enthused with this state, I wanted to see every part of it I could, but now it was time to go on to my next adventure.