



YARSK

SIA

ARCTIC OCEAN

GREENLAND

R
JEL'KAL

POINT BARROW

NOME

GALENA

FAIRBANKS

BIG DELTA

TANACROSS

NORTHWAY

ALASKA

ANCHORAGE

WHITEHORSE

WATSON LAKE

SMITH RIVER

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

HUDSON BAY

FORT NELSON

BEATON RIVER

FORT ST. JOHN

GRANDE PRAIRIE

CANADA

EDMONTON

B.C.

CALGARY

VANCOUVER

LETHBRIDGE

GREAT FALLS

50°

120°

UNITED STATES



Day's End

*The shadows squeezing up the mountainside
Had left one valley gateway half ajar,
The twilight pushed it open, lunged inside,
And day, surrounded, just before it died,
Summoned its failing strength and lit a star.*

— ROBERT F. AGNE
July 27, 1945



Warpath to Alaska

Into the Twilight

From the cauldron of the Great Depression emerged a generation of young men made tough and resourceful by difficult circumstances, only to be cast into the flames of global war. From boarded-up factory towns and parched-earth farms they streamed, lured by newfound opportunity and adventure's seductive appeal. From all backgrounds they came to serve their country and into an unknown future they ventured.

With America's sudden entry into the Second World War, and faced with the unprecedented growth of air power, demand for pilots was instant and voracious. The Army Air Corps responded with an aggressive program of pilot training; a program streamlined to produce competent pilots within the shortest time possible.¹

The American military was, and still is, divided up into Commands, for example the Air Force has four general categories: the Combat Commands; the Support Commands; the Training Commands; and the Overseas Commands. And among the various Commands competing for pilots was the army's Air Transport Command (ATC), a military airline whose responsibility was to move cargo and personnel worldwide as part of the Support Command. To these duties was added another major role: the delivery, or ferrying, of factory-new aircraft to domestic and overseas destinations. The ATC pioneered many new air routes around the world and greatly expanded the operational efficiency of primitive existing ones, including the Northwest Route to Alaska.

On the morning of August 30, 1942, only three weeks after the formal approval to use the Alaska-Siberia Route, the first flight of Lend-Lease air-



Russia-bound A-20C pictured near Fort St. John. Photo: Rex Tanberg

craft lifted off from Great Falls, Montana, bound for Fairbanks, Alaska. Leading the flight of four Douglas A-20 attack bombers was Lieutenant Al Wickett, followed a half-hour later by a second flight of five A-20s under the leadership of Lieutenant Bud Everman. Clear skies on departure suggested a good flight, but fifteen minutes out scattered clouds developed and these soon gave way to a thickening overcast sky. Bud Everman led his flight below the overcast and discovered that the clouds stair-stepped in layers almost to ground level. When about halfway to Lethbridge, Alberta, Everman passed several A-20s from the earlier first flight heading in the opposite direction; having turned back because of poor weather ahead. One of these planes, piloted by Lieutenant Robert Gustafson, swung around and joined Everman's northbound flight. When the clouds dropped to within 200 feet [62 m] of the ground and faced with a wall of cloud ahead, wingman Lieutenant Lawrence Hughes radioed the flight leader stating he was turning back. With that announcement Everman turned his flight around and headed back to Great Falls. "After flying approximately twenty minutes," reported Lieutenant Hughes of the return flight to Great Falls, "I looked over my shoulder and saw a long streak of dust and then flames leapt from an oil storage tank on the ground. The distance was too great to tell if this was caused by a ship [airplane]; however, I did notice that after this there were only five ships in our formation."² All but one of the nine A-20s returned to a safe landing at Great Falls.



Russian mechanic checks over first A-20s to arrive at Nome. Photo: Louis Klam



The first batch of A-20s to arrive at Nome for onward flight across the Bering Strait was comprised of these "B" models. It was this flight that Lt. Gustafson had been a part when he crashed just north of Great Falls on August 30, 1942. Photo: Louis Klam



The first of many, these A-20Bs pictured at Nome have been signed-off to the Russians and will soon be pressed into battle. Photo: Louis Klam

On the ground that morning herding sheep near Shelby, Montana, was Mrs. Margaret Roberts, who watched as the planes passed directly overhead. Mrs. Roberts reported that one plane followed behind the others but much lower. This plane dipped behind a low hill and when it reappeared it was trailing flames. She then saw it crash on a flat patch of grassland.

Also witnessing the crash was John Campbell of Kevin, Montana, who was driving on a nearby road when he saw a low-flying plane trailing flames and crash a short distance away. Campbell was first to arrive at the demolished plane and discovered the body of the pilot lying on the ground near the burning wreckage.

Killed in the crash was twenty-two-year-old Lieutenant Robert Gustafson of Massachusetts, a recent arrival to the 7th Ferrying Group from Long Beach, California, home of the 6th Ferrying Group. Gustafson's death marked the first Lend-Lease ferrying casualty over the Alaska-Siberia Route. An investigation of the mishap failed to determine the exact cause of the crash, but evidence on the ground suggested the twin-engine bomber struck rising terrain while in full flight.

On September 3, five Douglas A-20s arrived at Fairbanks, a modest beginning but representing the first of an eventual 7,983 aircraft to be delivered to the newly arrived Soviet contingent. By the close of September, thirty P-40 fighters and fifteen more A-20s had winged their way north for handover to the Russians.

Lieutenant E. J. "Bud" Everman, leader of the first flight of Lend-Lease aircraft to Fairbanks, recalls his early flight training and Alaskan assignment:

"I was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and as a young man was accepted to the Aviation Cadet Program in May, 1941. I reported to primary flight school in Jackson, Mississippi, later that month. On my first flight the instructor demonstrated a 'lazy eight' in a PT-13 and I got real sick. When we landed I had to clean out the plane. Between getting sick and the hazing I was secretly hoping I would wash out. Somehow I stuck it out even though about half the class did wash out, which at that time was par for the course. I completed my primary training and went on to basic training at Gunter Field in Montgomery, Alabama. There we trained in AT-6 aircraft along with a group of British students, who for the first time were being trained in the U.S.

"After completing basic training I was assigned to advanced training at Barksdale Field in Shreveport, Louisiana. At the time, this was the only advanced twin-engine training school in the Army Air Corps. On my final overnight cross-country flight we overnighted at Hensley Field, just south of Dallas, Texas. It was the night of December 6, 1941. On Sunday morning, December 7, we had just taken off when we were called on the radio and advised of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Upon arrival back at Barksdale Field we were immediately restricted to base and during the afternoon many of our fighting aircraft were being refueled and sent on their way to the West Coast.

To the ATC

“On January 2, 1942, I graduated as a Second Lieutenant in the Army Air Corps. The following day I received orders to report to Ferry Command at Long Beach, California. I reported for duty the next day and rented a beautiful apartment on the beach for \$57.50 per month. I thought this was great, but it didn’t last very long. The day after making these arrangements I checked out in the British version of a Lockheed Hudson and immediately afterwards received orders to report to the 7th Ferrying Group for temporary duty at the Boeing Factory in Seattle, Washington. Upon arrival in Seattle I was advised that we were to ferry some DB-7 aircraft—a British version of the Douglas A-20—from Seattle to Newark, New Jersey, where the aircraft were to be prepared for shipment overseas.

“We were set up in five flights consisting of three airplanes each with flight leaders who had graduated from flight school just five months before us. Only the flight leader’s plane was equipped with navigational radio equipment, and we were to follow him to the East Coast. As yet we were not ‘instrument rated’ pilots and all our flying was ‘contact,’ and only during daylight-hours. This flight was in the dead of winter.

“All of the flights took off and immediately the weather turned sour and we all landed where we could between McCord Field and Medford, Oregon. We heard that three of the planes had landed at a small airfield somewhere in Oregon and run off the end of the strip. Our three airplanes landed in Medford, Oregon, where we waited for seven days for a break in the weather. In those days weather reports were few and forecasting not very accurate. On the seventh day, a United Airlines DC-3 came through from the south and said the weather was not too bad, so we took off for Sacramento, California. After being in the air about an hour the weather closed in and I lost my flight leader. I soon spotted a small opening in the clouds and climbed up through it. Once on top I had a good look around and realized just how alone I was, and with no navigational radio equipment. I continued on a southerly course and after what seemed an eternity the clouds started to break up and I dropped down to see if I could figure out where I was. I found the Sacramento River and followed it to Sacramento and landed at McClellan Field, much to my surprise I found my flight leader and the other wingman on the ground. Together we continued to Long Beach and then flew the southern route to Newark. We found out later that of all the planes that took off that first day, only our three planes reached their destinations. One of my classmates crashed and was killed on Elk Mountain, near Cheyenne, Wyoming, and was not found for two years. This was my introduction to the reality of flying.

“After this, my temporary duty in Seattle became permanent. I checked out in the Boeing B-17 and we started ferrying B-17s out of the Boeing factory to the East Coast. After a few months of this, the 7th Ferrying Group moved out of Seattle to Great Falls, Montana. This turned out to be a wonderful place. We moved into the civilian airport called Gore Field.

It was then that we were notified that we were going to be ferrying planes to Alaska, this in addition to handling all aircraft deliveries from the Boeing factory.³

To Alaska

During June, 1942, I was sent on an orientation flight to Alaska, it was around then that I was told that we would soon be receiving airplanes for delivery to the Russians in Fairbanks. In early September I was assigned to lead the first flight of A-20s to the Russians. I remember well arriving in Fairbanks and being greeted by three Russian representatives and one Russian-speaking American Air Force officer. The three Russians were very happy to see us and had a big party that evening. The Germans had surrounded Stalingrad and the Russians needed help. The next day, Russian pilots arrived and were checked out on our planes and soon after departed for Russia.

“During my time at Great Falls—June, 1942, through December, 1944,—I checked out on most every airplane the Air Force had, from pursuit aircraft through most twin-engine and four-engine aircraft. I received my first instrument card in February, 1943, and a year later I received a green instrument card that allowed me to sign my own clearances. Meanwhile, Gore Field became a busy staging area for everything going to Alaska and all the Boeing aircraft going to modification centers stateside.

“On one Alaskan flight I was assigned to lead a flight of three P-39s to Fairbanks and when about forty miles [64 km] east of Watson Lake and preparing to land, I looked around for my wingman but he had vanished. I radioed Watson Lake and advised them. When we landed it was reported he had crashed near the Alaska Highway and was badly burned, but alive. An ambulance was dispatched to pick him up and I followed in an army recon car. The Alaska Highway was under construction and the roadway was a rough and bumpy trench. The army recon car I was riding in had coarse canvas seat covers and with all the bouncing up and down my back was bleeding when I arrived back at Watson Lake. I’m happy to say my classmate Frank Calhoun survived.⁴

“Many of our Alaskan trips that first winter of ferrying were into temperatures that dipped to 40° below zero and most of the stops had tents as sleeping quarters and outdoor toilets. By the following winter, conditions had improved and most of the main stops had steam-heated barracks and hot water. We only had four or five hours of daylight during the shortest winter days, and all our flying that first winter was daylight and VFR [Visual Flight Rules]. Our aircraft required engine covers and heaters; otherwise the engines wouldn’t start the next morning.

“Another memorable incident happened when I ferried a P-47 Thunderbolt from Fairbanks to Westover, Massachusetts. I left Fairbanks and landed at Whitehorse where I received a weather report stating that there



Ferry pilots Robert W. Tucker (left) and Leo T. Herman stand next to tents that served as sleeping quarters at Fort St. John during the early winter of 1942-43.

Photo: Leo T. Herman



Lt. Sherwood Holmes (right) pictured at Fort Nelson with P-47 Thunderbolt.

June, 1943. *Photo: Leo T. Herman*



Lt. Robert W. Tucker pictured in a P-38 at Fort Nelson. Tucker was Frank McClure's wingman—though separated at the time—when McClure crash-landed a P-39 on the ice of an unnamed Yukon lake on February 21, 1943.

Photo: Leo T. Herman



Busy flight line at Fort Nelson. "The dog," said Leo Herman, "is an Irish setter that I flew from Great Falls to Fairbanks in a B-25 for a major based at Ladd Field. From the first time I fed him, he would never leave my side. When we arrived at Ladd Field the dog would not get in the major's car without me so I had to jump in, he followed and I slipped out the other door."

Photo: Leo T. Herman



Stan Middleton pictured during his cadet days undergoing flight training.

Photo: Stan Middleton

were numerous forest fires between Whitehorse and Fort St. John. I departed Whitehorse and proceeded due east, climbing to 13,000 feet [4,000 m]. After an hour aloft, the smoke from the fires thickened and developed into a front and I entered the cloud on instruments, confident in the stability of the P-47 and that it would be smooth sailing to Fort St. John. I followed my electric gyrocompass and everything seemed great until I glanced up at the regular compass and noticed a big 'W' staring at me—meaning, of course, that I was heading west instead of east. My electric compass had failed and was stuck in the east position. I didn't know for how long but I had almost certainly circled around and was heading in the wrong direction. Desperate to correct the situation I momentarily panicked and lost control of the airplane. I braced myself, expecting to crash into a mountainside, and tried to regain control. I pulled back on the yoke and broke out on top of the dense smoke at 16,000 feet [4,923 m]. I calmed down and decided I would just have to solve this orientation problem and figure out where I was. At that time the only navigation facilities were the old A & N range stations; I hadn't worked on a problem like this since flying school. I eventually managed to orient myself and figured out where Fort St. John should be. Then I became concerned with my fuel supply. When I finally got over the mountains the weather cleared and I could see Fort St. John in the distance but I had already been flying close to the 2:45-hour range limit of the P-47. When I landed my engine ran out of fuel on the runway and I had to be towed to the ramp. I certainly prayed that day!"²⁵

A Dream to Fly

Another young man whose destiny brought him to the ATC was Stan Middleton. He tells of the path that led him to Alaska:

“Flying and the aviation game were a big part of my life. For my tenth birthday my father bought a ticket for my first airplane ride in an old ‘Jenny’ biplane, used during World War I to train pilots. Planes were a rarity, and a person could easily go a whole year without even seeing one, let alone be thrilled with a ride in one. From that moment on I read every book I could find dealing with aircraft, their construction, engines and controls. I went so far as to build a wooden crate cockpit and outfit it with a joystick, rudder pedals, throttle and some make-believe instruments. I practiced to perfection every instruction offered in ‘How-to-Fly’ books and magazines. Later, when my father started an airplane company and began building small aircraft, I spent every spare moment at the little field just a few miles north of our home in Ottawa, Illinois.

“The little field became a small airport complete with hangar and windsock and was visited by many barnstorming pilots; many stayed around the whole summer with their Jennies, Travel Airs, Bluebirds, Robins and others—open-cockpit planes that made lots of noise. The planes my father built were named LaSalle, a high-wing monoplane with an enclosed cockpit that would carry four people, including the pilot. Its engine was a 5-cylinder, air-cooled radial imported from France. My father was one of the first in the country to construct a fuselage of all-welded steel tubing.

Dan Fowley was my father’s chief pilot, test pilot, sales pilot and only pilot. Dan Fowley was my hero, and he had only to ask and I would do his bidding. I pulled props [to start the engines] and when the weather was cold I drained oil after the day’s flying and put it in cans on top of the stove, so it would be warm enough to flow when next needed. I washed and waxed planes and I kept the stove hot and the hangar clean. I never did get to fly in a LaSalle, but I often froze in those open cockpit planes and finally got to put my wooden-crate-cockpit practice sessions to the real thing, and did pretty well.

“The LaSalle was an advanced airplane that created much interest, and the quantity of orders-pending promised financial success. That was in 1928, and the depression of 1929 brought it to failure. During the depression it was sad to see the hangar deteriorate for lack of upkeep. The windsock became shredded and eventually only the hoop was left. The unprotected doors and windows were eventually broken, and when the depression was over the hangar was torn down and the field plowed for corn.

“Near the end of the depression my father met Bill Vogel who owned a small airport and a couple of Piper Cubs in a small town just west of Ottawa. Bill taught me to fly, and I spent entirely too much of my time—and my father’s money—flying those little planes. I soloed in August, 1940, and accrued twenty-five hours of solo time before I reported for duty as a flying cadet in November, 1941.

“My train ride to cadet training began at Ottawa, Illinois, and ended

at Delano Army supply depot near Bakersfield, California. The depot comprised many large warehouses, a mess hall, a few wooden office structures and lots of open space. We were the first group of enlistees assigned to the depot for initial army training. We were grouped alphabetically, assigned to platoons according to height, organized into army units and then marched to one of the warehouses where we were issued four-man tents and cots. These were quickly set up in line on one of the vacant fields and became our home for the next two months. We were quarantined the whole time while there, but even if we had been allowed to go somewhere, there was no place to go and no transportation. Neither did we have free time. When we weren't getting shots, we marched. When we didn't march, we had ground school. When we didn't have ground school, we had inspections. Mess call was always a welcome relief.

"Ground school covered many military subjects, including lectures complete with training films about the cause and control of venereal disease. There were no aircraft nor did we ever see a plane while at the depot. But we did get classroom work introducing us to meteorology, the Morse code and had many hours practice sending and receiving dots and dashes.

"Friendships were formed and many lasted throughout our cadet training program, some throughout subsequent military assignments, and a few after the war. Names that for special reasons remain forever in my memory are Paul Gill, Darrell Lindsay, Mel Howard, Bob Medearis, Robert Love, Bob Herschede, Vincent Ring, Herschel Patton, Virgil Westling and William Stonebraker. All these men wound up in Great Falls.⁶

"October and November, 1941, were spent at the camp near Bakersfield. We looked and acted much more like soldiers when we marched to the train that was to transport us to our next destination than we did when we arrived. Our next destination was a primary flight-training center located halfway between Visalia and Dinuba, California. It was a brand new facility in every respect. Even our aircraft were brand new.

"Originally, the field was to have received Stearmans, a single-engine biplane with narrow landing gear prone to ground loop at the slightest provocation. They were slow-flying aircraft, excellent for training purposes, but they weren't quite like the planes cadets were expected to soon be flying. The jump from Stearmans to the Vultees [BT-13] was too great a change and a primary trainer more demanding than the Stearman had been requested and provided in the form of a low-wing monoplane built by Ryan. These planes [PT-20, 21, 22 series] were powered by a 5-cylinder, air-cooled, radial engine built by Kinner. Except for the ignition system, our trainers had no electricity. The starter was an inertia-type, cranked manually by a member of the ground crew. The planes we had seen as kids in war movies had those kind of starters and we really felt like we were somebody, especially when we donned our flight gear: leather jacket, long white silk scarf around our neck, leather helmet and goggles.

"The Ryan was fun to fly. It had a wide and stable landing gear, and

we flew it always at full throttle and top speed; full throttle because the Kinner engine developed a damaging engine vibration at cruise RPM.

“Because I had soloed in civilian life, a fact I had never reported but my instructor soon discovered, we had a ball together. His name was ‘Tex’ Hall and he had flown as right wingman for a fellow named Ritter, who owned an aerial circus. Tex and I often screamed along at treetop-level skimming up and down hills and doing all kinds of acrobatics at low level. He taught me four- and eight-point precision rolls and how to do a Cuban Eight. I spent as much time upside down in primary as I did right side up. It was fun, a lot of fun, but acrobatic flight was not for me. It’s fine for fighter pilots, but my first love was commercial flight and the finesse associated with such flight.

“Primary flight training lasted three months and in early March, 1942, I went to basic flight training at Lemoore, California, where in addition to learning how to fly faster, heavier, and bigger planes powered by 450-horsepower engines, we learned formation flying, including formation takeoffs and landings. We learned night flying and even did some formation night cross-countries. We were also introduced to the Link trainer, a blind-flying simulator, and spent sixty hours in the Link learning how to navigate in bad weather. This instruction included air work, and we flew many hours under the hood making cross-countries, instrument letdowns and approaches to landing.

“Our instructor’s name was Skjersaa, and when we saw it on the assignment board the first time we asked one another how to pronounce it. None of us had the slightest idea so I asked him. ‘If you just remember the phrase, “I sure saw a pretty girl,” you will never forget how to pronounce it—sure saw,’ he replied. He was right; I never forgot it. He taught us well, and three months later I was on my way to advanced flight training in Victorville, California, and introduced to twin-engine flight.

“Our training in Victorville was an extension of what we were introduced to at Lemoore, except more demanding. In the twin-engine Curtiss AT-9 we learned about propeller feathering and emergency flight on one engine. Blind flying and formation practice continued except we took off and landed in trail. Each phase of training comprised sixty hours of flight time and an equal number of classroom hours and more Link time. In between we had ground school drill, work duty and inspections.

“Upon graduation from advanced flight training at Victorville I received my wings and commission as a second lieutenant and was then sent to my first assignment at Long Beach Army Air Base.⁷

“The majority of aircraft manufacturers were located in the Los Angeles area: Douglas, North American, Ryan and Lockheed to name a few. The Army Air Corps base at Long Beach, the closest military aviation facility, became the first base to gather a contingent of flying personnel whose sole duty was the delivery of new aircraft to their destination.

“The base was close to Hollywood, film capital of the world, and



Cadet Stan Middleton beams after a flight at Victorville, California.
Photo: Stan Middleton



Stan Middleton in flying gear next to PT-17. *Photo: Stan Middleton*

some of the stars and husbands of famous actresses were ‘officers’ in our squadron. Among the well-known personalities at Long Beach was Douglas Corrigan who lived in the same barracks I had been assigned. Corrigan had earned the nickname ‘Wrong-Way’ for having made a daring solo flight across the Atlantic claiming he had intended to fly west, but his compass must have been faulty.⁸ He was slight of build, a quiet man who kept to himself. Life had been difficult for him, money scarce and he skipped many meals in order to buy things needed for his plane. From habit, he still bought a nickel candy bar for lunch—just enough to appease his appetite. Doug always wore his old, well-worn, leather flight jacket.

“In fact, the dress of this odd accumulation of men was anything but military. Our base commander was star struck and whenever Hollywood dignitaries visited the base, which was too often, the CO would halt operations and hold a military review. I had already become disenchanted with the assignment and was looking for a way to transfer. It wasn’t just the parade bit, and the frequent cancellation of operations, it was the unmilitary conduct of civilian officers and the preferential treatment given Hollywood personalities that soured me.

“Nonetheless, there were good memories of my Long Beach assignment, one of which was receiving orders to report to Lieutenant Kenneth Buis at the Air Corps facility, Miami International Airport. I reported to Lieutenant Buis and learned I was to be his copilot in an A-29 [US Army designation for the Lockheed Hudson] and our mission was to break the East Coast to West Coast cross-country speed record. We left before sunrise, flew with maximum allowed power settings and landed for fuel at Love Field, Dallas. We landed south on the north-south runway, stopped at the fuel trucks waiting for us at the south end of the runway, were refueled, and immediately took off again. It was dark when we landed in Long Beach, but we had set a new record. It was broken two weeks later.

“Shortly after the record-breaking flight, rumors circulated around our squadron in whispers concerning a secret assignment involving four-engine aircraft—volunteers wanted. I volunteered. Within a few days, I received transfer orders to Great Falls, Montana.

“On top of a flat butte five miles west of Great Falls was a small commercial field. The control tower was part of the only hangar on the field that also housed the ticket and baggage area for the only scheduled airline serving the city, Inland Airways. Construction had been started on temporary depot structures made of wooden slats covered with tarpaper; quite unlike the tower and hangar that were brick and concrete built to withstand the winter winds and subzero temperatures. The largest building in town was the Civic Center; a well-planned building that housed two movie theaters, office facilities and a large arena. It, like the airfield, had been taken over by the Army, as had numerous rooms in the Rainbow Hotel—the best in town.

“Upon arrival, we men were transported to the Civic Center where we

met our new commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel LeRoy Ponton de Arce, a retired gentleman, who until recalled to active duty worked for the FAA. He was pleasant, yet all business, and impressed me with his attitude, his bearing and his grasp of the task ahead.

“Under his command the Corps of Engineers was to build a creditable airbase complete with accommodations for enlisted and officer personnel; under his command aircraft maintenance was to establish and maintain the ability to modify military aircraft for Arctic operation. Selected pilots were to survey and establish an inland air route to Fairbanks and determine the equipment, techniques and procedures necessary for survival and safe delivery of aircraft to our Russian allies. Training facilities were to be established to teach incoming pilots about Arctic operation and upgrade pilot capability. This meant the training facility would include attack, bomber, cargo and fighter-types of aircraft for transition purposes and instrument flight instruction. At the time none of those things existed. When not working at the field or in various clerical duties the enlisted men lived, ate and slept at the Civic Center whose arena was filled with mess hall equipment and row after row of cots, each with a locker at the foot of the bed.

“After checking in at the Rainbow Hotel [temporary officer accommodations], we were given a few days to become familiar with the military layout, the personnel and the town. In due time Great Falls became home and well liked. I never met anyone who wasn’t kind, polite, anxious to help and trustworthy. Everyone kept a pot of hot coffee on the stove; no one locked their doors; a request was never ignored and no drunk was ever seen, although the liquor business must have been the biggest enterprise in town outside the military. Liquor stores were state-owned, and although there was just one liquor store downtown, there was an abundance of bars—nice ones, not joints. Regardless of what stores I entered: grocery, restaurant, hardware or clothing, I was treated as a friend and long-time customer. Yes, I liked Great Falls, very much.

“The personnel officer reviewed my records and assigned me to Major Alma G. Winn who was commander of the only squadron in existence at that time: the 7th Squadron. He was a dedicated pilot, a rather serious man, had accrued many hours of worthwhile flying time, and was current on many of the types of military aircraft I wanted to fly—the C-47, B-17 and B-24. He saw to it I was issued all the flying gear and accessories needed: parachute, parachute bag, .45-caliber revolver with belt and holster, a briefcase for navigation material and documents, and winter boots, cap and jacket.⁹ I helped him set up his operation by reviewing personnel records, interviewing arriving pilots, fabricating a status board on which all pilots and their capabilities were identified, establishing a pilot upgrade program, and did everything he asked and I could think of that would be required and helpful. He and I became good friends, but I never took advantage of that friendship, and I’m certain he appreciated my show of



Another view of crash-landed UC-64 Norseman on a frozen lake.
Photo: Ellis Fagan

respect. In private he called me by my first name, but I always called him Major Winn, or just Major.

“When I arrived the base had only one airplane, a DC-3 that had previously been owned by United Airlines. It was in the hangar being winterized and having two large fuel tanks installed in the fuselage. The extra fuel would be needed for the many hours of aerial survey to follow. Prior to its release by the modification crew, the Major sent me over to base operations to gather all available charts for a flight to Edmonton and then northwest across the Yukon Territory and into Alaska. Then together we prepared our first flight plan.

“The charts of the area from Great Falls to Edmonton were as complete in detail as any chart of the United States. From Edmonton on detail diminished until only large white voids marked ‘UNEXPLORED’ were shown. There were landing sites along the way, thanks to a number of construction crews that had been busy felling trees and grading two-directional runways. Workers were also building platforms on which were mounted four-man tents that would serve as accommodation.

“We spent two weeks flying and re-flying the route penciling in significant landmarks, compass headings and details that could be used to upgrade existing charts. The weather was good to us and we had clear blue skies the whole time. I was disappointed to learn when we got back that Bob Medearis, who had come with me from Long Beach, had been transferred north to the Canol project. We never even got to wish one another well.



Norseman crack-up on a frozen lake. *Photo: Ellis Fagan*