



Flight to Alaska

Dear Reader,

This report has nothing to do with Mozart. Since I first wrote it some years ago, it has gained a much larger circulation than ever anticipated. Originally, I sent it to my brothers, both pilots, and some other family members. They in turn mentioned it to friends, who asked for copies. And then friends of friends learned of it and requested copies. . . With the Apropos Mozart website in operation these last few years, it has occurred to me that I might exercise Editorial license and put the report here for any who found it of interest to read or download. Enjoy!

Flight to Alaska

<u>Day 1 -- 8 July:</u>	Leesburg - Martinsburg, WVa	1.2 hours
	Martinsburg - Zanesville, Ohio	2.5
	Zanesville - Valparaiso, Ind.	3.5
		<u>7.2 hours</u>

As you would expect, it was hot and humid in northern Virginia as the weekend of 8-9 July approached. The forecast for the weather on Saturday was good, so Chuck and I agreed we would take off from Leesburg airport as soon after 8 in the morning as we could. At home, I filed our flight plan for a flight from Leesburg to Zanesville and my wife drove me to the airport. Chuck and his wife arrived shortly afterwards. Adieu, adieu, we'll call, we'll write, see you in a couple weeks.

At 0845, we took off, heading first for the Martinsburg VOR some 20 miles away. There we turned west for Morgantown, on our way to Zanesville. Only one small problem: as we flew past the Martinsburg airport into the hills of West Virginia, we were confronted with the warm, early morning mountain haze of July, a haze so opaque that it obscured the sky and obliterated the horizon. After staring at the increasing nothingness that loomed ahead, I decided this was not exercising the "care" that was supposed to characterize my approach to making the trip; a tactical retreat was called for. I turned around and flew back to the airport at Martinsburg.

There is a Flight Service Station at Martinsburg and, after landing, I went in to talk with the weather briefer. She suggested we wait an hour or so, to give the haze time to burn off as it normally did. By this time it was after 10 o'clock and we had covered some 20 miles. I said to Chuck, "If we keep this up, it'll take us two months to reach Fairbanks." Chuck said: "It's a good thing we're not in a hurry."

By 11 o'clock, the haze had indeed burned off and we were airborne at 6,500 feet to cross the mountains. Once on the other side, we dropped down to 4,500 feet. The sky was clear, with little puffs of cumulus clouds just above us, as we flew into Zanesville. There we had lunch, refuelled, filed our flight plan for Madison, Wisconsin, and took off. "Why Madison?" you ask. Well, you see, Chuck had this friend in Madison. When he told him that we were headed for

North America



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Alaska, the friend offered us bed and breakfast and a steak dinner if we would go by way of Madison. It was a slight detour from the original plan, but not much of one, and so the ultimate destination for the first day became Madison.

Because of the two hours or so lost waiting for the haze to lift, it was on towards 3 o'clock as we left Zanesville. The forecast was for an increasing likelihood of thundershowers in the area south and west of Chicago. Certainly the cumulus clouds we had experienced into Zanesville had grown in size and intensity as we flew west towards the VOR at Joliet where we would turn north for Madison. Furthermore, the winds were right on our nose and we were making less headway than I had planned on.

I decided to land at the next likely airfield, to refuel and check the weather with the Chicago FSS. That airfield turned out to be Porter County Municipal at Valparaiso. While I supervised the refuelling of the plane, Chuck talked with his friend in Madison, who reported the weather there was fine. The Chicago FSS said the weather up to Madison was also good, except for one caveat: a line of thunderstorms was marching slowly in the direction of the Chicago area. But if we get moving fast enough, we can probably get by before they reach the area.

So we got moving pretty fast. We were soon flying west at 4,500 feet, headed for Joliet, with the radio tuned to monitor the FSS weather reporting. The reporting did not sound good. And at a distance, the sky was starting to darken and there was an occasional flash of lightning. Concerned, I called the FSS, told them where we were and where we were headed. Reply: the storm line is moving into the Chicago area faster than expected. Whereupon I cancelled the flight plan, turned around, and for the second time that day, flew back to an airport and landed. Not Madison, but Valparaiso; not bed and breakfast and a steak dinner, but the airport motel and supper at a Valparaiso restaurant whose specialty was turkey, in every form you can imagine (Valparaiso being the self-styled "Turkey Capital of the World").

We had flown more than seven hours and seen the landforms below us change slowly from West Virginia mountains to Ohio hills to Indiana fields. It was not quite the first day we had planned and we were a little behind our scheduled itinerary, but we had made it from Leesburg to Valparaiso in one piece, and the forecast for Sunday was good.

<u>Day 2 -- 9 July:</u>	Valparaiso – Rockford, Ill.	1.6 hours
	Rockford – Mason City, Iowa	2.6
	Mason City – Fargo, ND	3.3
		<u>7.5 hours</u>

At Valparaiso, Chuck and I inaugurated the division of labor that was to hold throughout the trip: while I took care of the airplane – refuelling, making the tie-down for the night, checking the next day's weather – Chuck was tracking down a place to sleep, transportation to and from, the best place to go for a meal. At Valparaiso, the motel was right on the edge of the airport, not elegant, but comfortable enough. At Valparaiso, we also fell naturally into another pattern that would mark the trip: at some time between 4 and 5 in the morning, we would wake up, check the weather, and decide what to do. If the weather was good, we flew.

Shortly after 5, we left the motel, walked the hundred yards or so to the airplane, and got it ready to go. I called the FSS – the weather reported for the Madison area was not good. So we decided to head for Minot in North Dakota, our point of exit into Canada. I filed a flight plan for Rockford and shortly after 6 o'clock, we were on our way. Early morning clouds kept us low, but underneath them it was clear enough and we had a pretty flight all the way to the Rockford airport. And with this, another pattern had emerged: we would fly the first leg in the morning before eating breakfast. Nothing like it to make ham and eggs with toast and coffee taste good!

From Rockford, we elected to fly to Mason City and refuel there, before turning north for Minot, the final destination for the second day according to the original plan. The weather was sunny and clear, hot but not so humid, and thunderstorms were not predicted for the area to the north.

We reached Mason City shortly after noon. It was a beautiful day to fly and, at 4,500 feet with that propeller turning in front of you, cool and pleasant. On the ground in Mason City, it was 110°F. in the shade – and no shade. The line boy came out to refuel the plane while Chuck and I fled to the air-conditioned comfort of the small terminal. I consulted with the people at the FSS and filed a flight plan for Minot.

(At this point, let me make a brief digression to remark on how pleasant it is to be able to do business face-to-face with the people at the Flight Service Stations. If you live in the Washington area, they are only voices on the phone and, while helpful enough, it is not like being able to talk with them while they pull out the maps and reports and you discuss together the problems of the next flight.)

A sandwich and a glass of milk out of the slot machine and we marched out into the heat to take off for Minot. And now, another lesson learned: I had not watched while the line boy refuelled the plane, as I normally did. Moreover, it was hot and I was inclined to make fast work of checking the plane before starting. I was just about to climb into the cockpit when that inner voice spoke up and asked, have you checked the fuel caps on the gas tanks. No, I hadn't. Of course, with a high wing plane, it is something of a nuisance to have to climb up there, but "care" is called for. So I got out my little folding step stool and reached up for the gas cap – and it was loose! Whether the line boy did not know how to secure such a gas cap, or whether it was just too damn hot, I'll never know. At any rate, I made very sure both of the caps were firmly in place, started the engine, and off we went for Minot, North Dakota!

Only we didn't get there. The flying was enjoyable, the scenery interesting, the weather hot but no problem, and I stayed low, about 3,000 feet, to minimize the effect of the headwinds, but they cut down our speed nevertheless. By the time we were coming up on Fargo we had been flying for more than three hours and Minot was still far away. I asked Chuck how he felt about spending the night in Fargo, North Dakota, and he confessed that all his life it had been a secret wish of his to spend a night in Fargo, North Dakota. So after three hours and a quarter, we landed at the attractive little airport of Fargo. I secured the plane for the night while Chuck booked us in at a

downtown hotel. There was one restaurant open in Fargo on a Sunday evening. The food was not bad, but don't ask for a beer. Not on a Sunday night in Fargo.

<u>Day 3 -- 10 July:</u>	Fargo – Minot, ND	2.5 hours
	Minot – Regina, Saskatchewan	2.6
	Regina – Saskatoon	2.1
		<u>7.2 hours</u>

At 6 a.m., we were at the Fargo airport. As I was checking the plane, I noticed an instructor getting ready to make a training flight with a student. I thought it might be a good idea to talk to a local person about flying to Minot. I had laid out a flight plan based on going due north to the Grand Forks VOR before turning west to Minot – in short, good standard electronic-assisted VFR navigation. "How do you go when you fly to Minot?" I asked him. "Well, round here we usually just cruise up the railroad." And looking again at the chart, I realized that there is a railroad that runs in a straight line from Fargo in the SE corner of the state to Minot in the NW corner. Couldn't be simpler. The only thing, my friend said, is to be sure you pick the right railroad where it forks to the west of Fargo.

So Chuck and I were off and flying IFR ("I follow railroads") across North Dakota. The weather was clear and there was a strong wind coming directly at us. We stayed low, about 1,200 feet. This gave us a great close-up view of the farms and fields, making it easy to see how the farm buildings were laid out, each with a tall, thick planting of trees directly to the west and north of the compound to provide a break against the constant north-westerly winds. And this strong steady wind out of the NW was slowing us down considerably. We were two and a half hours reaching Minot. It's a good thing we had elected to stop at Fargo the night before.

Minot meant breakfast and talking to the FSS about the formalities for leaving the US of A and entering Canada. The American customs people were helpful and the paperwork quickly done. We filed our plan alerting the Canadian authorities that we would be landing in Regina and, at 10 o'clock, we were on our way again.

By now we were in the middle of the North American continent, crossing into Canada. It is a long ways north in July, which means the days get very long indeed. The sun rises early and goes late to bed. The land is flat and the horizon reaches out forever in all directions. And the remarkable thing, at least to a pilot trained in the perpetual humid haze that passes for a clear day on the Eastern Seaboard, is that the atmosphere is so wonderfully clear. When the weather briefer tells you the visibility is "unlimited," he means just that: there is no limit to how far you can see except that of eyesight and the curvature of the earth. Moreover, the fact that the land here is flat, flat, flat, means that the winds blow unhindered across the plains, little slowed by the friction of earth. Now put these two things together – a pellucid atmosphere and a strong, steady wind out of the NW – and you radically affect the perceptions that help the Virginia-based VFR pilot to gauge his progress over ground.

Flying to Regina from Minot is another IFR proposition: we flew up the highway and railroad that connect the two cities like an arrow shot. I could see we were going faster than the trucks under our left wing as I flew along the highway, but not much. And after an hour or so, it seemed to me that I could easily see Regina up ahead. I had the Regina tower tuned in on the radio and was listening to the young lady in the tower expertly directing traffic. When we reached a point where we were (I thought) about 15 minutes flying time away based on how it looked to me, I called the tower to let the lady know that N1413F would be landing in 15 minutes and requested landing instructions. She told me the active runway was 310 and to report when five minutes out. And then we flew...and we flew...and we flew. And it was soon obvious to me that we had been much more than 15 minutes away when I first made radio contact with the tower. After 20 minutes or so, the young lady inquired (a bit plaintively, I thought): "1413F, where are you?" Abashed, I told her I thought that now we really were about 15 minutes out and I would call as soon as I was near the traffic pattern. Which I did and, because the runway was laid out exactly as the wind was blowing, it was a 190-mile, straight-in approach to runway 310, all the way from liftoff in Minot to touchdown in Regina.

We were on the ground in Regina only long enough to go through Canadian customs (two minutes), refuel, file our flight plan, and take off for Saskatoon in south-central Saskatchewan. Again we followed the road and the railroad and enjoyed the fields-and-lakes landscape from our vantage point of 2,500 feet above the ground.

The airport at Saskatoon is some distance outside the city. By the time I had the plane taken care of, Chuck had found a hotel room in town and commandeered a taxi. We had been up since shortly before 5, we had flown three more legs of the journey, we had been more than seven hours in the air – and we were in the middle of Canada headed for Alaska. We felt pretty pleased with ourselves. A dollop of bourbon and water while we relaxed before dinner. Then a walk around the clean, broadly laid-out city of Saskatoon in quest of some place to eat. There, not far from the hotel, was a small, attractive Chinese restaurant: four tables, father and son sitting outside the counter, mother and daughter in the kitchen behind. What do you eat in Saskatoon, Canada? Chinese food, of course.

<u>Day 4 -- 11 July:</u>	Saskatoon - Lloydminster, Alb.	2.0 hours
	Lloydminster - Edmonton	1.7
	Edmonton - Fort St. John, B.C.	3.6
		<u>7.3</u> hours

The destination for the fourth day was the southern end of the Alcan Highway. We had had good weather the last two days and if we could make it to Dawson Creek (where the Highway begins) or to Fort St. John (a little farther on), we would be right back on schedule. But first we had to reach Edmonton, the capital of Alberta, same 400 miles to our west.

After computing the expected winds and the distance, I concluded it was just possible we could reach Edmonton from Saskatoon without stopping to refuel, but it would be close. The airplane's tanks gave it the theoretical capacity to fly some four hours-plus and that meant we should be able to cover more than 400 miles in average winds. And so I filed a flight plan to Edmonton and we took off at 7 o'clock (after a leisurely breakfast at the hotel, for a change).

Flying almost due west, we soon left the plains of Saskatchewan behind and were flying over the endless forests of Alberta. I kept checking our progress against the slowly falling levels of the gas gauges and began to doubt that we could reach Edmonton in one hop. I talked with the FSS man at Saskatoon, told him I thought it would be advisable to refuel en route, and asked him his recommendation for an intermediate airport with refuelling facilities. He figured I ought to be coming up to Lloydminster shortly and we could refuel there.

So we started looking for a small town with an airport and soon Lloydminster appeared out of a cut in the forests. I called for landing instructions but got no answer. Circling the field, it appeared deserted – a few light planes sitting around, not a soul in sight. We landed and walked into the empty operations shack. Standing on the porch and hallooing, we heard an airplane overhead and then a Beechcraft Bonanza landed, taxied up to where we were parked, and two ladies got out. The one was the owner, operator, and chief instructor of the Lloydminster airport; the other, a lady who lived on a spread of several thousand acres to the north and used the Bonanza to go to town and do her shopping. With Lloydminster's chief instructor, she was working on her IFR ticket.

The lady airport manager refuelled the Skyhawk and gave us tips on how to fly the approach to Edmonton, a large and busy airport. While this was going on, a man landed in a Super Cub. He had just come from Edmonton and was headed for Regina. He needed two things: gas and an aerochart for Saskatchewan; even the Esso road map he had been using up to that point didn't take him any farther than Alberta. As it happened, I had picked up a copy of the Saskatchewan provincial aerochart in Saskatoon, for use on the trip back. But we had our other charts, so I made him a present of the chart in the interests of Canadian-American friendship. And with that, we were off to Edmonton.

The flight from Lloydminster to Edmonton took almost two hours and we would indeed have been stretching it if we had not stopped to refuel. After the series of small airports we had been landing at ever since leaving Leesburg, Edmonton was like landing at Washington National, with runways and taxiways in all directions and a steady stream of planes landing and taking off.

After landing, we taxied slowly along the perimeter, looking for a place to park and refuel. A young man appeared at one of the stations and waved us in. As we got out and I told him to top off the tanks, he asked, "You one of them flying doctors?" No, I said, just a flying civil servant out of Washington, D.C. "Yeah, I didn't figure you were. This is just an old Skyhawk. Them doctors don't fly nothing but Barons and Bonanzas." And talking with him, it turned out "them doctors" don't tip good either. Thus we became aware for the first time that the Flying Doctors Association was sponsoring a mass flight out of the US headed – as luck would have it – for Fairbanks. It would not be the last we heard of the Flying Doctors.

After lunch in the handsome terminal at Edmonton, we checked the weather with the meteorologist. It was good and promised to remain so for the rest of the day. So we elected to make the longer flight to Fort St. John

and to let that be our first stop on the Alcan Highway. Besides, there is a VOR at Fort St. John, which makes finding it relatively easy. It was a long flight, though; as it turned out, it was the longest single leg (3.6 hours) of the entire trip.

Leaving Edmonton, we had the feeling that we were leaving civilization as well. There were no roads or railroads to follow as we flew north and west, only forests and rolling hills and the occasional stream with the occasional settlement. The VOR network took care of the navigational needs and the countervailing winds were relatively light. We passed by Dawson Creek, sighted the Alcan Highway for the first time, and flew on to Fort St. John.

It was late afternoon when we landed there. We had flown more than seven hours every day for the last four days. So, in addition to refuelling the plane, it was time to change the oil and the oil filter. I set about doing that while Chuck organized a place for the night (the range of choice in Fort St. John is not great). I was in the middle of the oil change when a young couple with backpacks came up to me and asked where we were headed. Fairbanks. Could they hitch a ride to Alaska with us? Sorry, no room in the Skyhawk for two more. Turns out they were from Seattle, wanted to go to Anchorage, and had managed so far to hitch plane rides from Seattle to Vancouver and on to Fort St. John. I wished them well. The oil change finished and the plane tied down for the night, we went into the down-on-its-luck, seen-better-days frontier town of Fort St. John, walked around what little of it there was, had supper, and went early to bed. Which turned out to be the right thing to do.

<u>Day 5 -- 12 July:</u>	Fort St. John - Fort Nelson	2.0 hours
	Fort Nelson - Watson Lake	2.1
	Watson Lake - Whitehorse	1.9
		<u>6.0 hours</u>

We were getting well north now and the day dawned ever earlier. I awoke at 4 in the morning, remarked how light it was, and thought it must be 6 or 7 o'clock. Being awake, I thought I might as well check the weather, so I called the FSS. When the young man answered, I told him that we were in Fort St. John and headed up the Highway; how did the weather look for the day? Well, he said, there is a big system moving in from the west and in a couple of hours he expected the area to be shut down so far as VFR flying is concerned. How does it look north to Fort Nelson? If you get moving right away, you should be able to make it. So we got moving right away.

I shook Chuck and told him, let's go, otherwise we may be spending days in beautiful, downtown Fort St. John. Without a word, Chuck was up and packing. In 15 minutes we were down in the lobby paying the sleepy clerk and calling a sleepy taxi driver. Twenty minutes later, we were at the airport and getting the plane ready to go. That done, we taxied out for takeoff. Once we were airborne, I called the FSS on the radio and filed my flight plan.

The early morning sky was an eerie metal-grey, particularly to the west, as we flew – lonely and apprehensive – north along the Highway. This long, thin strip of unpaved road was the sole sign of civilization. As far as the eye

could see in the still, clear atmosphere, there was nothing but forest, nothing but black, impenetrable forests, reaching to some hills vaguely seen and only hinted at on the horizon.

Fortunately, as we flew north towards Fort Nelson, the sky lightened and we left the lowering clouds behind. After two hours, we landed in the sunshine at the big, old (World War II) airport at Fort Nelson. The meteorologist congratulated us on getting out of Fort St. John just in time ("Since you left, it's been closed to VFR traffic"), and he promised us good weather for our onward flight up the Highway.

With that promise in hand, Chuck and I took our time eating breakfast and chatting with the people. One of them was an American who had flown in the night before from Alaska. He had taken a friend to Anchorage in his Super Cub and now was making his lonely way back to Idaho. I asked him about flying the Highway and he pulled out his chart to show me the one place, west of Watson Lake, where there is a fork in the road. There, he said, be sure you take the road leading to the right with the more northerly heading. Otherwise, it is just a matter of keeping the road under the left wing all the way. And watching out for the weather.

Advised and fortified, we took off from Fort Nelson, put the highway under the left wing, and flew to Watson Lake. The landscape was getting a bit wilder, there were numerous lakes, and the forests which covered the land like a blanket to the south were sparser now. The VOR was no longer of any use, but it was a sunny day and we had the never-ending road to follow. I kept the radios tuned to the place we had left and to the place we were headed for, but there was not much to hear. We were alone in the sky, or so it seemed. (Indeed, on the entire trip, we seldom saw other airplanes except in the immediate vicinity of airports.)

After two hours, we were circling Watson Lake airport, following the instructions of the lady on the radio, and coming in over the water to land at what must be one of the loveliest little airports in one of the loveliest settings in the world. The airport buildings are log-cabin style, and the emerald green lake seems to surround the airport on three sides. We refuelled, and it was time for lunch.

Now we had a decision to make: it was theoretically possible to reach Alaska today, at least as far as Northway, if we pushed it. Or we could make the two-hour flight up to Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory and spend the night there. We asked the lady who made our lunch and served it to us (the same one on the radio, giving landing instructions) what she would suggest. "Well," she said, "there's nothing at Northway." That did it. We would fly to Whitehorse and call it a day.

It was on the flight from Watson Lake to Whitehorse that we finally reached the Canadian Rockies. After carefully selecting the right road to follow at the fork west of Watson Lake, we followed the Highway on its more northerly heading and gradually the mountains appeared on the horizon. We were flying higher now, at 10,500 feet, and the panoramic view we had was filled with mountain peaks and ridges for as far as we could see, to the left, to the right, and straight ahead. Soon we were in the mountains and we went up higher still, so that we stayed just above the highest points in the

immediate vicinity of the road. This way we could keep the road under the left wing (The First Commandment) and still have a feeling for the horizon and where the road was leading. There were occasional bends in the Highway and we would cut across them, rather than flying exactly along the winding road. When we did, we would often see small, remote lakes in the wilds, only a few miles perhaps from the Highway itself but invisible to it, and we would wonder if man had ever set foot there.

Drawing near Whitehorse, we saw a glacier-filled valley off to our left. It seemed too good to pass up, so we turned and flew several minutes up the valley with the glacier below us, awestruck by the wildness and beauty of it. Then back to the Highway and on to Whitehorse.

Whitehorse is the capital of the Yukon Territory. With some 11,000 souls, obviously the biggest place we had seen since Edmonton. It is a raw place to walk around and not much imagination is required to picture how things must have been here at the turn of the century when gold fever gripped the Klondike and people poured in to make it rich. There is a little local museum dedicated to preserving the memory of Dangerous Dan McGrew, and we wouldn't have missed it for the world.

<u>Day 6 -- 13 July:</u>	Whitehorse - Northway, Alaska	2.8 hours
	Northway - Fairbanks	2.0
		<u>4.8 hours</u>

It was about 6:30 when we took off from Whitehorse, before breakfast, as usual. The weather was overcast, with the clouds resting on the tops of the mountains, but the weatherman at the airport said visibilities under the clouds were good and the weather shouldn't bother us flying up the Highway. Moreover, the weather should improve towards the north. We climbed as high as we could go, staying out of the clouds and getting a bit rained on at first, with the Highway below us and seeing more cars and trucks on it now than we had before. Slowly we left the mountains behind and the landscape turned to rolling hills, dotted with innumerable small lakes and open, mixed forests.

We were about 15 minutes away from Northway by my reckoning when I called the FSS there and told them 1413F would be landing soon. The man who answered very thoughtfully pointed out that if we touched down even one minute before 8 o'clock, it would cost us a juicy overtime fee with the Customs people. Because we had left Whitehorse at 6:30 and been flying for two-plus hours, I didn't see at first how it could not be 8 o'clock in Northway. Then I realized there must be a change in time zone between Canada and Alaska. So I thanked him for the tip and told him we would do some sightseeing in the area before landing at Northway. First we found the airport and then, keeping its location in mind, Chuck and I went down low and looked at the lakes and the moose and enjoyed the scenery until it showed exactly 08:00 on my watch. We landed shortly afterwards, money saved thanks to the FSS, and had a stack of buckwheats with bacon. We were back in the United States!

One more leg and then The Great Leesburg-to-Fairbanks Adventure would be history! (Well, at least half of it would be.) The weather forecast was good, with sunny skies and unlimited visibilities all the way to Fairbanks. We were back in the world of VORs for navigating, so we did not have to keep the Highway under the left wing (although we did). And wild as the land is between Northway and Fairbanks, it is nothing like the unbroken emptiness that reaches from Fort St. John to Whitehorse.

About 9:30 we took off for the flight to Fairbanks. About 11:30, we were in the pattern for landing on Runway 01 at Fairbanks International. We parked in front and went into the terminal. First question: "Are you with the Flying Doctors?" Answer: "No." "Then you will just have to find a place in the back for transient aircraft. The spaces in front are all reserved for the Flying Doctors." I was beginning to have reservations about doctors who fly. But as it turned out, the place in back was right next to the building with the Flight Service Station, and that would be an advantage when it came time to leave Fairbanks.

We had made it! After six days and exactly 40.0 flying hours, Chuck and I were in Fairbanks, Alaska, just as we had planned. It was only a bit later, after lunch and stretched out on the bed in the fine hotel that Chuck had conjured up, that the thought hit me: we have to do it all over again, only in the other direction! I had been so fixed for so long on getting to Alaska, I had not given the return trip any thought. Well, one airport at a time. . . Right now, it was a matter of resting from the trip north and enjoying the sights of Fairbanks and environs. We rented a car and visited the university, we drove around to see what life is like for people who live in Fairbanks (doesn't look much different from McLean, Virginia), and we found a rustic restaurant on the outskirts that made a fine steak dinner. And of course, out of sheer habit, we checked the weather forecast for the next couple days. It was good. So we decided we would fly to the Arctic Circle the next day. It was waiting for us.

<u>Day 7 -- 14 July:</u>	Fairbanks - Fort Yukon	1.4 hours
	Fort Yukon – Fairbanks	1.7
		<u>3.1 hours</u>

If there are at least some signs of civilization between Northway and Fairbanks, there are none, absolutely none, from Fairbanks north to the little settlement of Fort Yukon, just north of the Arctic Circle. There is a VOR at Fort Yukon, which made finding it no problem. But I would not want to try to locate it without electronic help. The land north to Fort Yukon is nothing but gentle hills and endless forests dotted with 10,000 little lakes, each one looking like the next one. Not a road, not a railroad, nothing whatsoever to orient yourself on, until you come to the Yukon River on whose northern banks the little settlement sits.

We landed on the gravel strip at the edge of town, parked the airplane, and walked into town. Even if you have never been there, you have seen Fort Yukon. It looks like every run-down cowtown you have ever seen in a cheap Hollywood western. Only with this difference: there are no cows and everywhere you look, there are empty gas drums standing at the sides, in front and in back of all the woodframe houses and stores. And as the sun hits them and they expand after the cold of the night before, they belch and burp.

We had originally thought we might spend a couple hours in and around Fort Yukon and have lunch there, but twenty minutes is about all it takes to see all there is to see, so we congratulated one another on having made it north of the Arctic Circle, certainly something to tell the grandchildren one day, and with that, we got back in the plane and headed south across the featureless forests. There was quite a build-up of cumulus clouds around Fairbanks when we arrived and it was a bit sporty getting through them into the pattern. But finally we were down and parked. In back, of course, away from all the Barons and Bonanzas parked in front.

Chuck and I decided that, if the weather was right the next day, we might as well go on to Anchorage. And at the FSS, they said the prospects were good.

Day 8 -- 15 July: Fairbanks – Anchorage 3.0 hours

We were in the FSS at the Fairbanks airport at 6 in the morning. The briefer said the weather predicted for the trip to Anchorage was good, but he had had no reports on the situation at Windy Pass, a cut through the mountains of about eight miles in length through which we had to go on the way down to Anchorage. "It's probably okay, but you never know." With that encouraging word, we filed our flight plan for Anchorage and walked the short distance to the airplane (thanks to the Flying Doctors).

As soon as we were airborne, I opened the flight plan by radio. The man at the FSS came back with "One three fox, would you mind filing a pilot's report on the weather at Windy Pass when you get there? The Flying Doctors are all headed for Anchorage later on today and I'd like to tell them what to expect." "Roger," I said, anything for the Flying Doctors.

Flying south to Anchorage, we were headed into the mountain range that cuts across Alaska and includes Mount McKinley. It was beautiful scenery and we sighted Mount McKinley when it must have been more than a hundred miles away. Our VOR path took us right to Windy Pass and it was indeed a spectacular flight through the twisting pass, with the mountain walls towering high above us on either side. We stayed right to avoid any traffic that might be flying north, but we saw no other airplanes. There were no problems with either clouds or winds in Windy Pass this morning, and I duly reported this by radio to the Fairbanks FSS.

On the other side of the pass, we were getting closer to Mount McKinley and its solitary majesty was thrilling to behold. But first we had to concentrate on surmounting the problem of getting safely on the ground at Anchorage, a place with four airports and four control towers, all within seven miles of each other, and airplanes flying all over the place.

As I reached the initial reporting point, I contacted the Anchorage FSS, told him where Cessna 1413F was and that we wanted to land at Merrill Field. He gave me a heading to fly and an altitude to reach and hold. In acknowledging his instructions, I added, "By the way, this is my first flight into Anchorage and I'll appreciate all the help you can give me." "Okay, one three fox, I'll take care of you." And he did.

Guided by the approach controller, we ended up at pattern altitude with Merrill Field right ahead of us. There were three or four other planes in the pattern and the man in the tower assigned us our slot. I was flying a base leg and would have to turn right on short final to land. What I had not reckoned with was that Merrill Field is right in the middle of a residential area, with houses on all sides. They seemed awfully close to me and I stayed high, not to end up in someone's backyard. Too high, as it turned out, for I realized on turning on final that I could never get the plane on the ground and stopped before running out of runway. I told the tower I was going to go around again. "Okay, 13 Foxtrot, report turning base." The next time around, I eased down a bit lower, determined to land on the next pass. And land we did – with three big bounces after I flared too high before touching down. Not an elegant arrival in Anchorage, but we walked away and nothing got broke. And after three hours of flying, we were in Anchorage!

Day 9 -- 16 July: No flying!

Instead we rented a car and drove around Anchorage and out into the countryside. Parts of the city still showed signs of the earthquake that had hit some years before. The city was fairly large and the construction of the buildings downtown and in the housing areas were modern. When you drove out of town, the suburbs stopped abruptly and the wilderness began. Driving along the banks of a large lake, we came upon a sign by the side of the road. It said: "No Shooting in the Area!" It was riddled with bullet holes.

Our luck with the weather was holding and we decided to make a flight the next day. We would head back in the direction we had come from, to take a closer look at Mount McKinley.

Day 10 -- 17 July: From Anchorage to the vicinity
of Mount McKinley and back 2.1 hours

One of the advantages of being at Merrill Field and not at one of the other airfields was the presence of the Anchorage FSS in the ops building there. Going to and from the plane, it was easy to drop by the station and talk with the people on duty. And in this way we came to know some of them by name. Which would prove to be a good thing the next day.

But today was sunny with only little breeze and from the porch of the hotel, it looked like a good day to fly north to take a better look at the mountain. We took a taxi to the field, went in to check with the FSS, filed our flight plan, and took off. In an hour or so, we were over the airport at Talkeetna and had all of Mount McKinley filling the windshield of the airplane as we flew toward it at 9,500 feet. Circling slowly so Chuck could film the sight, we passed over Talkeetna again and headed back to Anchorage. This time we fitted in with the circulation of air traffic like old veterans and came in low over the houses, landing at Merrill without a bounce. On our way out, we passed by the people at the FSS. "What are you doing tomorrow, Mr. Clarke?" "Don't know yet, Dave. How does the weather look?" "Hard to tell. We're about due for a change." "I'll give you a call." And off Chuck and I went to do some shopping in Anchorage. We hadn't really made up our minds when to head for home, but the adventure was fast coming to an end, or so we thought.

<u>Day 11 -- 18 July:</u>	Anchorage - Northway	2.5 hours
	Northway – Whitehorse	2.5
		<u>5.0 hours</u>

In the middle of July in Anchorage, the night is very short and the day is very long. Somewhere around 4 o'clock, I woke up, looked at the light of day and checked my clock to see if it had stopped. Nope, it sure was 4 o'clock and I was wide awake. I might as well call the FSS to see what they have to say about the weather. Dave answered the phone. "You planning to stay long in Anchorage, Mr. Clarke?" "No, Dave, why?" "Well, we've got a large weather system moving in here from the Aleutians and I wouldn't be surprised if it shut us down for a number of days." "How much time do we have?" "Oh, it won't be here much before 8." "See you in 30 minutes."

And with that, Chuck and I were off and running again – packed, paid, taxied, and in the Flight Service Station to check the weather to Northway and file our flight plan. It was about 5:30 when we took off from Merrill Field and headed east along the mountains behind the coast for the airport at Northway, almost 300 miles distant. The cloud-free, sunny days of the past week were over. Instead, we had a high, thin overcast. The visibility was good, however, and for the first time (or so it seemed), the wind was behind us pushing and not in front, slowing us down.

After two and a half hours, we were maneuvering for a landing at Northway. It hadn't changed much in five days. After refuelling the plane, we went in for breakfast. There in front of the building was a Piper Cub with the fuselage aft of the cockpit badly crumpled in. A man at the table next to ours proved to be the owner of the plane. Seems the day before, he had flown to one of the numerous remote airstrips by a lake to do some fishing. He had made the mistake of leaving food in the plane when he tented for the night. About midnight, a bear came looking for something to eat. He had made an earnest effort to get at the food in the plane before the owner was able to scare him away.

After breakfast, we headed down the Highway to Whitehorse. We were entering Canada and had to clear through customs there. The Canadian weatherman suggested that the afternoon weather probably meant a trip on to Watson Lake was not advisable. The weather was always better in the morning, before the clouds built up in the heat of the day. Why not spend the night in Whitehorse and go on tomorrow?

So that's what we did. But later I came to wonder if that really had been such a good idea.

<u>Day 12 -- 19 July:</u>	Whitehorse - Watson Lake	2.0 hours
	Watson Lake - Fort Nelson	2.4
	Fort Nelson - Dawson Creek	2.0
		<u>6.4 hours</u>

Our plan was to get to the southern end of the Highway today. Instead of stopping at Fort St. John, whose faded rustic charms we already knew, we would go down to Dawson Creek. So we were up at our usual bright and early time of shortly after 4 o'clock, at the airport a bit before 5, and already looking forward

to breakfast at Watson Lake in a couple hours. The weather briefer said it looked like clear sailing all the way. The weather briefer was wrong.

It was indeed clear and sunny enough as we took off and headed south, flying now on the other side of the road (still with the road under the left wing). As we neared the area where the road reaches its highest elevation and the mountains on either side reach their highest elevation, we could see a towering build-up of cumulus clouds that reached down to the ridges. I had been flying at 11,500 feet, but I had to duck down to get under the clouds. The visibility below the clouds was good and we could see the road like a yellow ribbon in the middle of the valley ahead. The clouds thickened and went lower, and we had to go lower to stay out of them. And then suddenly, from one minute to the next, it began to rain. And then it began to rain very hard. And I thought to myself, "Either we turn around or we go down and land on the Highway." And now it was really pouring down. I didn't know the airplane could fly in so much water. Chuck was watching me, calmly and quietly, and I was intently watching the Highway below. For despite the heavy rain, the forward visibility was not bad and the road stayed constantly in view. If I stayed right over it, I couldn't run into a mountain. I decided that as long as I had the road ahead in view, I would continue to fly down it. This must surely be a very local bit of weather. With all this water, this was definitely "clear sailing all the way." As the man said.

The rain thundered on. The minutes passed. . .very, very slowly. And as suddenly as it had begun, the rain stopped! Once again we were flying down the Alcan Highway in brilliant sunshine.

We made the left turn at the fork, told Watson Lake we would be there in 15 minutes, and went once around the lake to enjoy its rare beauty before landing. At breakfast, we thanked the lady for her suggestion that we stop at Whitehorse and told her about the weather we had just flown through. She was amazed. There was no rain in the forecast and it was too early in the morning for that kind of a build-up. Not on 19 July, between Whitehorse and Watson Lake, it wasn't.

After that pre-breakfast adventure, the next two legs down a road we had travelled up only a week before was just routine stuff. And we did stop at Dawson Creek as planned, a pretty little country town with a neat, well-kept airport. Like horses headed for the barn, now that we had our adventures behind us (we thought), we were eager to get moving. Moreover, we were flying with the winds behind us and the flying time per leg was shorter. So we planned to make it all the way to Regina the next day.

<u>Day 13 -- 20 July:</u>	Dawson Creek – Edmonton	2.8 hours
	Edmonton - Saskatoon	2.7
	Saskatoon – Regina	1.4
		<u>6.9</u> hours

Flying today was sheer pleasure. The weather was sunny and mild. The winds were right behind us, giving us a lift. We were flying a route we knew and landing at airfields we had been to before. Just how much of a difference a tailwind can make is shown by the fact that the flight from Edmonton to

Saskatoon took only 2.7 hours; the flight the week before in the other direction took 3.7 hours, albeit with some maneuvering to land and take off at Lloydminster. At this rate, we might even make it back to Leesburg in a couple of days.

Might. Didn't.

<u>Day 14 -- 21 July:</u>	Regina – Minot	2.6 hours
	Minot - Larimore, ND	2.3
		<u>4.9</u> hours

What we didn't know then was that, while we were making our way east and south in Canada, a large weather front in the center of America was making its way east and north.

We had some early intimations of this as we made the usual pre-prandial flight, from Regina to Minot. There was a bit of choppy weather and some rain to fly through. It did not last long and it did nothing to mar the clear-to-the-horizon visibility we had come to know and love. The winds gave us a push and we landed in Minot some 20 minutes ahead of the ETA in our flight plan (with the result that we had to sit in the plane in the middle of the field until the customs lady showed up from home to clear us in; she had arrived right on time, but we were early).

After breakfast, we went to talk to the weatherman and file our flight plan. There we learned for the first time that going in the direction we were headed was not going to be simple. After considering alternative routes, we elected to head due east across the top of North Dakota and land at Grand Forks, where we could check the weather again and decide on the next leg. It was 10:45. We could be on the ground in Grand Forks by 13:00 and the front was not expected to reach the Grand Forks area before 15:00.

It was 11:00 on the dot as we lifted off from the runway at Minot and set course for Grand Forks. I went up to 7,500 feet for whatever boost we might get from stronger tailwinds up high. From that vantage point, we had a good view of the frontal weather to the south of us. We were about half way to Grand Forks when thin layers of cloud started appearing at our altitude and below. We went down to stay out of them. And then down again. And down once more. Finally, to stay clear of the clouds, we were flying at 1,000 feet. Looking for an alternative in case we couldn't make it to Grand Forks, I noticed that Larimore, slightly to the south of our route, had an airfield. As we passed Larimore, I told Chuck to keep in mind what time it was so we would have some idea how long it would take if we had to fly back to it. Still I thought we probably could make it to Grand Forks. And indeed we were flying directly over Grand Forks Air Force Base when the clouds hit the ground. Reversing course in the clouds, I headed back where we had come from. Larimore was still clear and we curved sharply around the field and landed before the eyes of a surprised airport operator.

Once on the ground, I let the FSS at Grand Forks know they should cancel our flight plan. And I asked what the prospects were for the weather. Not good. The front looked like it was slowing down and it would probably be in the area for a couple days. Lovely Larimore was to be home for most of the next two days and nights.

Day 15 -- 22 July: Bingo!

It's pretty quiet in Larimore. Most folks work at the Grand Forks AFB or in Grand Forks itself and just come home to sleep in Larimore. But there is an American Legion hall and they make a good hamburger there. And if you're lucky, you hit Larimore on a Saturday when, from 7 p.m. to midnight, it's Bingo! at full blast in the American Legion hall. So Chuck and I, being nothing if not lucky, found ourselves in Larimore on a Saturday night and we sat down at one of the many tables, each as long as a football field, and joined the citizens, old and young, in filling up the little squares with pieces of dried corn. It was evident from the start that we were neophytes. We each had only four cards in front of us, but the pros surrounding us on every side had at least 10, if not 12. We didn't win a thing, but we had lots of fun talking to the people. And besides, the forecast for tomorrow's weather was looking up.

<u>Day 16 -- 23 July:</u>	Larimore - Mason City	3.0 hours
	Mason City - Ottumwa, Iowa	1.8
	Ottumwa - Champaign, Ill.	2.6
		<u>7.4 hours</u>

We planned our customary early getaway and the lady who ran the motel said Gramps, her father, would drive us over to the airfield at 6 in the morning. We had seen Gramps lurking about during our stay and this was not an offer to inspire great confidence, but we thanked her and paid our bill. At 6 o'clock, we were packed and standing around in the front of the motel, waiting for Gramps to show up with the car. Instead a state trooper drove smartly up, got out, saluted, looked us over, and asked to see some identification. Seems he had been told there were some mighty suspicious-looking characters who had been hanging around Larimore for the last couple days, probably smugglers or something. Chuck and I quickly convinced the young man that we were just a couple of honest gents trying to make it back to Washington after a grand flying adventure to Alaska. The trooper said jump in, I'll drive you to the airfield. Chuck noticed Gramps peeking out a window and gave him the finger as we drove off in state-trooper style.

At Mason City, we were faced again with the question, which way from here. The front lay somewhere to the east of us. The briefer suggested we might end-run it by going south before we turned east. So we decided to head for Macomb in Illinois.

It was now going on towards 11 o'clock and the day was hot, very hot. We were doing all our navigation by VOR now, which meant we left on a bearing from the Mason City VOR and headed for the VOR at Ottumwa. There we turned to the southeast for Macomb. But the front dropped all the way down to this area and, flying towards it now, it did not look friendly. It was 13:00 and the large airport at Ottumwa was only minutes behind us. Let's land there, have some lunch, and talk to the weatherman.

I cancelled the flight plan to Macomb and called the Ottumwa tower to tell them we were landing there. Fifteen minutes later, we were on the ground. As we looked around, there was not a soul to see, nothing and no one was moving. "On the Beach." We taxied slowly towards a hangar with a refuelling station outside, cut the engine, and got out – into the searing heat. No wonder there was nobody outside. A line boy with a large straw hat emerged, reluctantly, and refuelled the airplane while we took refuge in the terminal building. There, thank God, it was air-conditioned. After lunch, we consulted the weatherman, who said the front was continuing slowly to move east. He thought we could make it to Champaign this afternoon without any trouble. That was a good 300 miles in the right direction, so we filed and flew.

It was late afternoon in Champaign when we landed at the airport. There had been a little weather as we flew through the southern end of the front but it was not bad. While I took care of the airplane, Chuck found a motel not far away, one with a swimming pool! We took a swim and talked about the trip, knowing that tomorrow we would be home. Then into the restaurant at this very nice motel for a celebratory final supper on the road. "That calls for a beer," Chuck said to the waitress. He should have known better. Because you can't get a beer in Champaign on a Sunday. (Can't get champagne either.)

<u>Day 17 -- 24 July:</u>	Champaign – Zanesville	2.8 hours
	Zanesville – Leesburg	2.0
		<u>4.8 hours</u>

Today, for the final time, Chuck and I rolled out of bed and did our early-morning, fly-before-breakfast number. The world was still asleep when we took off from the Champaign airport in the clear light of dawn. It was a long straight flight back to Zanesville, right over the city of Columbus. We filled the tanks and had our scrambled eggs and bacon and got set for the last leg – the 36th – of the flight to Alaska and back. There were clouds up to about 8,000 feet in the mountains east of Morgantown and thunderstorms were predicted for the afternoon. As for the Washington area, it was baking in the usual cloudless, July murk; visibility, 3 to 5 miles. Welcome home!

We climbed up into the clear at 11,500 feet, flew past Morgantown (mostly lost in the clouds below us) to the Martinsburg VOR, turned on the bearing to Leesburg airport, and slowly, slowly let ourselves down into the Washington haze. Leesburg emerged into view right where it had been when we left. We had the airport to ourselves as we landed, taxied up to the refuelling station, got out, all grins, and hugged each other in congratulations.

The time was shortly before noon on a Monday and there were not many people at the field. But a man happened to walk by at that moment and said, sure, he'd take our picture when Chuck pressed the camera in his hand.

We had made it! With planning and care, and not a little luck, even we could do it: 17 days, 36 takeoffs and landings, 83.6 flying hours, and 8,000 miles later,

we had been to Alaska and we were back in Leesburg!



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