

Up North: Chapter Eleven - Egegik: Air Ops

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September 7, 2016



C-119 or Flying Box Car with rear cargo hatch open

Take a look at a map of 'The Last Frontier', a huge landmass with few roads, and it becomes clear why the airplane was made for Alaska. The bush pilot is legendary. On Skis, on floats and on wheels the bush pilots have moved freight, medicine, groceries, dogs, gold, diesel, people and more in ways that make life in the lower forty-eight downright boring. All over the state people hop on planes like people down-below get in taxis, buses or the family car. Private plane ownership in Alaska per capita is more than any other state in the union. Of course, airplanes kill a lot of people. If your car engine quits you coast to the side of the road, put on the emergency blinkers and call AAA. If you are taking off from a frozen lake on a bitter cold winter day and the condensation in the av-gas freezes into ice crystals and blocks the fuel line and the engine dies at 600 feet, so do you.

Over Bristol Bay, the airplane was ubiquitous. They were a lifeline, the air taxi, used for medevacs, a tool in the salmon wars and the reason I was on the beach. I always watched with fascination the small planes that drifted and circled above the fleet like hawks working the flats out in front of ISA. These were fish spotters. In partnership with a drift boat or a group, they spotted fish from the air and radioed the location to their partners on the water who would then be on said fish like a pack of dogs. Problem was a pilot flying around and back and forth, always looking down for fish, had the increased likelihood of meeting up with another guy doing the same thing. Almost every year there were midair collisions with disastrous results.

Moving fresh fish from one place to another by airplane was nothing new but the scale of the ISA Egegik beach operation was unique. Outside of Winky's Flying Circus nobody conceived of flying, let alone actually flying, as many pounds of salmon as we did year after year.

The Alaskan salmon fishery was divided into districts centering on runs in the various river systems. It is a limited entry permit system and is specific as to gear type and boat size. In the Egegik district, 32 foot limit gillnet boats plied the waters. Setnetters anchored one end of a gill net to the beach and extended the other end out across the beach. When the tide came in and covered the net, it brought with it the salmon that became ensnared in the web. Traditionally as the tide ebbed the fisher folk picked the fish out of the muddy net. More aggressive types pick fish in a rubber raft all through the tide increasing the catch and fish quality. Fish picked while the net was still submerged wasn't muddy and didn't require the additional step of washing the fish.

Drift boats had a lot of options when it came to delivering. There were plenty of tender boats and floating processors on station where they could offload and sell the catch. The land bound setnetters had far fewer options and always felt like a stepchild when it came to price and services. When ISA bought out Andy

Heim, he was flying a couple of hundred thousand pounds off the beach every year. For us it became how much could we buy and how much could we fly. Come to find out the logistics were a nightmare.

The flat stretch of beach out front of the plant was our airstrip. At low tide, it was wide and long enough to land four engine aircraft and lift off with as much as 30,000 pounds of chilled salmon in totes onboard. From the beach, it was less than an hour to the Kodiak airport. There, the totes of iced fish were trucked to the ISA plant, blast frozen, cased up and held in cold storage for sale in Japan. Pretty straight forward but of course the devil, as we found out, was in the details.

In order to move a million plus pounds of fish in eight weeks, you gotta have some serious airlift capacity. We employed a bunch of different pieces of equipment, all that could be considered antiques. ISA neither owned nor operated any aircraft but instead signed charter deals with companies that specialized in operating vintage airplanes. They were contracts that specified an aircraft, its weight capacity and a per trip rate in dollars. Winky's boys flew numerous trips in their DC-3s. The DC-3 was rated at 9,000 pounds for flights from the beach into Kodiak. We used these twin-engine taildraggers for flights early and late in the season when we were buying less than 50,000 pounds a day.

At other times we also used the C-46, which was a U.S. Army version of the DC-3 with bigger engines and a beefed up airframe that packed 15,000 pounds. The most interesting plane that hauled for us was the C-119 or Flying Box Car. Another WWII Army workhorse. It had a twin tail construction with clamshell doors and a ramp in the rear to offload over-size freight. One big advantage of using this aircraft was that on back hauls we could get all kinds of oversize stuff, including full sized automobiles, out to the beach. One of the major downsides was that it was seriously underpowered for lifting loads off the beach. To compensate, they were fitted with jet assists for takeoff. These were essentially rockets, looked like oversized vacuum cleaners and were mounted on top of the fuselage between the wings. On takeoff, the pilot would get the old lady rolling as fast as she would go down the beach, pull the stick back and fire the rocket. I never tired of watching a boxcar blasting off. It packed 15,000 pounds.



DC6 flying over Alaska

For the heavy lift during the peak days, we had four engine planes available. An ex-Air America guy named Norman had two DC-4s that needed legitimate work. Well before the Gulf War everybody called him 'Stormin Norman.' He worked pretty steadily for us over the years until one time when he was needed, he had disappeared. It turns out he was on an undocumented flight somewhere off the coast of Washington State when NORAD scrambled a couple of F-16s to force him down. Apparently having been well trained during his years flying for the CIA, he thought fast, set the plane down in the Pacific Ocean and climbed into a life raft. The DC-4 with whatever cargo it was hauling sank to the bottom before the Coast Guard could arrive on the scene. No evidence, no foul. He did lose the remaining DC-4 in his struggle to stay out of the federal hotel and never flew for us again.

The Ball brothers were by far the most stable and reliable airplane guys we had the pleasure to work with. They were a Seventh Day Adventist family out of Dillingham and had a long track record of flying throughout Alaska. North Pacific Transport leased the C-119s and three or four DC-6s. They turned around and contracted with ISA to fly fish off the beach. Jerry was the chief pilot and he and his brother Newt both captained flights off the beach. The heavy lift capacity, 30,000 pounds, of the DC-6 made it an essential part of our plan on the days when we were buying more than half a million pounds in a twelve-hour opening. The mix of aircraft was crucial but only one part of the equation, which also included tide,

weather and emergency openings.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game managed the salmon resource throughout the state using a limited entry permit system and by ensuring that enough fish escaped up the river to spawn and maintain the run. Fish and Game biologists studied the run and set escapement goals for each river system every year. Then they actually counted the fish as they passed a control point and opened and closed the fishing as the escapement kept pace with projections. They were pretty good at it. From mid-June to mid-July the openings were announced on an emergency basis sometimes only six hours before the opening. Emergency openings were short; twelve or twenty-four hours and coincided roughly with the ebb and flow of the tide. When things were hot and heavy we were buying as much as a half a million pounds in a twelve-hour opener. The challenge was to get it all down the beach, iced and or processed into totes and flown off the beach before the fishing opened again and more fish started pouring in. It wasn't uncommon for the fish to start stacking up. We often fell behind in ice production and ran out of totes to hold the salmon. It was a point of pride and a matter of keeping a promise that we never turned down a single fish no matter how plugged we were. As long as we could keep flying, we could keep buying.

We had enough aircraft under contract and standing by to move the fish as long as the weather cooperated. That was a big if. By July, the weather in Bristol Bay was consistently good. Warm days and cool nights were the norm. The difference between the early morning cool temperatures and the warm surface temperatures from the day before often produced morning fog that burned off by noon. The long days were most often bright and sunny sometimes reaching into the low eighties. Of course, if you're holding a half million pounds of expensive salmon with limited ice supplies sunshine wasn't a good thing. Once they reached a certain temperature, they quickly went from number ones to number threes. I prayed for rain or overcast skies.

A much bigger problem was the weather in Kodiak. The ground fog there often lasted all day and was so thick that they closed the airport. Big problem when you absolutely got to move a lot a fish. The pressure was enormous and went on continuously for fourteen or more days. The stress almost killed me. All I could do was deal with every impossible problem, keep buying fish, processing it and flying it.

All things on the beach, the fishing, the hauling, the processing and the flying happened according to the relentless rhythm of the rising and falling of the tide. The differences between the high and low tides in western Alaska were huge. At the low tide, the beach was a wide highway and airfield. At high tide, it all disappeared under the waves crashing against the dunes. In many places the beach was impassable. Nothing could be left on the beach exposed to the corrosive salt water and the raw force of the on rushing tide.

The tide rushed in and ebbed out twice a day in twelve-hour cycles. Calculating and planning for the tide change was an essential life skill for anyone operating on the beach. The pocket size tide book that everybody carried became our bible. Even when all the other conditions lined up, if the tide wasn't right we had to wait.



Ground fog