

## SKI PLANE FLYING in ALASKA

### Where a ten minute flight is a seven day walk

My winter Alaska adventure started on April 11, 2010 but of course to the Talkeetnans, minus 3 degrees centigrade and blowing huge snow flakes sideways in April is SPRING, but at last I was in the home of my hero, Don Sheldon. "Wager the Wind" is a must read book before an actual real life view of Denali. Don Sheldon was married to Roberta, Bob Reeves' daughter. Both these men were among the first and most successful in landing on glaciers. Don was the pilot that is famous for carrying the climbers and multitudes of gear to his established glacier landing site at 7,200 feet before these climbers from all over the world start their ascent to 20,300 feet. Ninety six or so climbers have died on Denali (Mt. McKinley), the highest mountain in North America where the temperatures have been recorded minus 50 degrees and below and Mother Nature has unscheduled winds of 100 mph or more.

I arrived at Alaska Floats and Skis on Christiansen Lake Lodge [www.alaskafloats.com](http://www.alaskafloats.com) just in time for Don Lee's birthday party. I joined Don and his wife Lanette, their friends and family- or at least a part of their family which after two days, I was to feel very much a part of. Don built their beautiful home and lodge with very little help in one of the prettiest settings I have ever seen on a lovely lake called Christiansen with the snow covered sharply rising peaks of the Talkeetna range to the east. Seven aircraft on skis were lined in a row on pristine snow in front of where apparently a summer dock sits on the 60 foot deep clear, non glacier lake filled with trout, minus one that we actually caught ice fishing several days later. The group that evening at the birthday party consisted of Tinker, the Dutch artist, Don's sister Jody and her son Patrick, Tilley and her mother Holly, Dave who is Holly's husband and Don's brother from Wasilla and Louisville, Kentucky raised delightful Ester, my Ski Plane flight instructor for the week. Joining us off and on during the evening was Bella the three legged golden retriever that was to become my pal and maybe life saver for the week. Also, sort of surveying the party with her superior attitude was the largest cat I have ever seen.

After the enjoyable party disbanded around dark at 10:30 PM (this part of Alaska was now enjoying around 15 hours of light), I asked if Roberta Sheldon, the wife

of the now deceased Don, was still living. “Oh yes, we see her all the time, Holly is her daughter and Tilley the granddaughter” Wow- the trip was already a success.

Next morning was my first flight in 4852A. Don is partial to the PA 22s (the ole milk stool), Tri Pacer, converted to PA 20 with the nose wheel exchanged for a tail wheel and 135 hp Lycoming, vortex generators and probably a lot more modifications including the three skis. The preflight was extensive after a two hour heat with hair dryers; wings, cowling and tail feather covers removed and the entire back seat and luggage compartment filled with arctic gear- two 40 below sleeping bags, two sets of snow shoes and poles, six days of dried food for two, flares, cook stoves, snow pants, etc. The aircraft was rocked back and forth to break it loose from the snow and ice and then we strapped in. The warm up was extensive as it may require full power to taxi. The PA 20 was fairly easy to taxi on this day to the end of the lake, nose into the wind, 10 degree flaps and full power and then we were airborne-awesome-never have I flown in such beauty. We went south to Rocky Lake and Fish Lake to “lay tracks”. “Flat Light” was a term that I was to learn that day and experience several more times that week. A fairly low overcast, made it almost impossible to see any definition on circling the area to land and on approach. After crossing over our “last visual reference”, to me it was a complete white out trying to descend at 200 feet or less per minute, full flaps, carburetor heat off before touch down and smooth application of as much power as it took to “lay tracks” and keep from settling in. Many passes to lay tracks were required, “to build our runway”, a skill that takes a lot of practice to master and then even experienced ski plane operators get stuck out, thus the arctic gear and flight plan with every flight in Don’s school and hopefully in all operations. The snow to the north had me a little nervous, however Ester, being an expert on the lay of the land, judged our flight to a beautiful landing on Christiansen Lake just in time to put 4852A under cloth covers before the heavy snow began to fall.

The afternoon was spent with Don. He introduced me to some of his multitudes of friends. We drove to the Flight Service Station, also met Larry the pilot with the 31 inch Tundra tires, the oil distributor, the interesting pilots at the “real” Talkeetna Airport with pavement and an instrument approach. It was snowing big time by then so the search for a lost Alaskan ski mobiler was called off. Lunch of Reindeer Sausage and an Alaskan dark beer at the Latitude was such a treat. Then

back to the lodge and I to venture timidly out on my own in the rental car to Cubby's, a real grocery store at the Y of highway A3 and the Talkeetna Spur.

To bed with it still light at 10PM and my head spinning from such beauty, excitement, adventure and challenge. The electricity went off at some point during the night, so I donned my 5 winter shirts. Fortunately the electricity came back on and the 5 AM light showed a foot of new fallen snow, overcast, spitting snow and gusts to 35kts and turbulent above- a no fly day for me. I visited the Flight Service Station where Jeff and Ken chuckled that I had phoned in for a "Standard VFR Weather Briefing". There is no such thing in Alaska as Mother Nature guarantees nothing, changes her mind frequently, rapidly and unpredictably. Both Ken and Jeff had previously been a part of my favorite of all Flight Service Stations in Anderson, SC! With the consolidation of FSS several years ago, they headed north to Alaska.

Back at the lodge Don checked me out on the Ski Mobile and then Don, Bella and I went Ice Fishing-fascinating process of auguring a round hole thru 2 to 3 feet of ice. Somehow the fish knew that the juicy morsel of fish eggs was attached to a line and pole which I was holding and therefore I only caught one small fish-which would have made a nice meal for me but Don made me throw it back as it was not big enough for Alaskan standards. He caught a nice trout which he said I could cook. I kindly said I didn't cook on vacation and he smiled and asked if I knew how to cook at all- said I used to. Bella and I then took off, me on the ski mobile and my new friend right beside me.

Lanette, Don and I then went to Talkeetna for a delightful car tour with me taking pictures of the Fairview Hotel at the end of Don Sheldon's snow covered grass strip which is right in the middle of town. I also got pictures of his hangar, his house and all the adorable looking shops which were mostly not open yet for the season. The only shop I really cared about, the chocolate shop also had a closed sign on the door-another reason to return to Alaska. Later I investigated the night life of Talkeetna and was charmed by the locals, most working tourist service jobs to support their passions of dog sledding, hunting, fishing, flying or just living in the most beautiful area of the US. Amanda and Nick bar tend at the Fairview so they and the Arts Council can establish the local theater in the Don Sheldon's Hangar, which has been generously donated by Roberta, Don's wife.

Wednesday was another day of snow and low ceiling however I had fun with Lanette and Don as we went to the Flying Squirrel for lunch and a showing of Tinker's art work. Her art is very interesting. I liked best the one at the lodge of a float plane shimmering in the water.

Thursday I had two spectacular flights. The first flight was over Larson Lake which from 500 feet appeared to be too rough for landing. We continued up Sheep River and to spectacular views and my first sighting of Denali. I was reminded that a 10 minute flight is a 7 day walk in this area. We "laid tracks" on Rainbow Lake several times but the snow was too deep for a full stop landing-which was OK with me because the fun of it all was setting up for the landing, laying tracks and the flying. We flew the gorgeous gorge back to Christensen Lake and that afternoon flew up the Susitna and northwest to Spink Lake. Each time we descended for laying tracks, a nice little downdraft from the right would catch my right wing so did my laying tracks fairly long but ample room. I also got to practice the use of flaps for more packing of the snow. It is going to take a lot of practice for me to develop the skill but what fun practicing.

The most gorgeous flight of my life was to follow. We flew up the Ruth Glacier- awesome. We listened on the radio to what I think was a single engine Otter that had landed at the 7,200 foot landing sight and found it to NOT be advisable yet- too much snow so another day delay for the climbers that were arriving in Talkeetna from all over the world. With the radio chatter from the Otter and the layers of fog and cloud we turned back to Swan Lake for more laying of tracks. The day before at the Registration Parks Service Building in Talkeetna, I saw a film of the climbers on Denali that showed the procedures, trash removal etc. All the climbers must be experienced and be in a group, roped together. On the last several days of the climb, the oxygen is so thin that the climbers struggle to accomplish 400 feet per HOUR!

It was a fantastic day followed by a delightful evening walk with Bella- she just laughs when I call her Bellaroo. She reminds me of a Kangaroo as she hops along faster than I can go. No one really knows what happened to her right side back leg. She has been known to go after Moose fearlessly. She is patient with me as I try to negotiate the snow, being slightly pigeon toed is not an advantage when wearing snow shoes. One morning when Bella came to a slide and skid to a stop, nose in the air, roughed neck hairs and starred into the woods, I halted. In less

than a minute she high tailed it past me whining and I was in hot pursuit for home after her. Whatever she saw or smelled was not friendly-thank you Bella, my best friend.

Friday was another flat light day but Ester and I took to the sky for one last flight to lay tracks and enjoy the beauty. We flew south to Fish Lake and had to do two go arounds to avoid a beautiful Trumpeter Swan that was either being very protective of his lake or having fun showing us he was almost as fast as 4852.

That evening I ventured out one last night for a “Burger and Brew Special” at the bar across from the Fairview. Heather, the attractive blonde bar tender, was quite busy with the Friday night locals, knowing everyone’s name and she mostly got it right on their beverage preferences. She works as a bar tender to support her 30 sled dogs and for her four attempts to win the Iditarod!

After an interesting dinner listening to the climbers and locals, I went to The Roadhouse for a most fascinating and humorous slide / video show presentation by Laura Wright. She described her recent skijoring where she and two sled dogs, 84 pounds of arctic gear on a sled which was tied to her and drug on a rope behind her. She traveled alone with this set up on skis for 150 or more miles in 20 below freezing along the Iditarod trail. She had to camp out several times, other times staying in the school houses. I remember Martha Bell Debroekert telling me of being dropped off at northern villages, where there were no roads, to do her work as an RN. Martha also stayed in the school houses alone in her 50 below freezing sleeping bag. Laura’s sense of humor was as good as any Australians, telling us of her failed burner, her frost bitten nose, her loss of shipped food for herself and her dogs, her extra day in a school house so her entire heel could recover somewhat from a blister and the efforts to accomplish a feat that I can not even imagine. Alaskans are such unbelievably tough people and I have such admiration for them.

In the room packed wall to wall, I sat next to Andy, the owner of the red and white PA12 of which I had taken several pictures. It had more modifications than original PA12 parts! He will take it off skis soon and put it on I think he said 28 inch tundra tires as the break up is coming soon. We saw many “spider holes” on the smaller lakes and the rivers are now showing currents of water. I went “home” to the lodge after the most ghastly performance of what was billed as

comedy at the Tee Pee-ah well, they weren't Alaskans. One in the audience was so inebriated, he almost fell off his stool several times and I thought he was more entertaining than the performers, except for Nick that is with the Art Council and working on the Talkeetna play. He read his rap, which was funny and descent enough for most audiences.

I was very sad the next morning to leave this wonderful place and its people. To delay my departure to Anchorage, I stopped at an art gallery owned by David Totten. Wonderful Alaskan wildlife art, and although I have no space left on my tininsy apartment walls, I purchased a small print of his water color of a Trumpeter Swan. Hopefully his print will remind me every day of the beautiful flight beside "my" Trumpeter Swan on Fish Lake.

I proceeded leisurely on down the road stopping at the airports in Willow, Wasilla and Palmer- amazing. I have never seen so may aircraft in one place except for Oshkosh and Sun& Fun and yet I don't recall seeing one in Alaska with a nose wheel! I try to always go to the local library upon first arriving in a town. The front lobby of the Wasilla library had a sale of books by the "Friends of the Library". On the shelf at eye level was Nevil Shute's book "Most Secret" for sale for .25cents. I bought it for Ed. Humph, and he says I 'm cheap!

Anchorage and the Millenium Hotel, although providing all the amenities and lots of modern things still has an Alaskan feel- like it is the best of a 30 years ago lower 48 city. I like that feel. The Millenium has very gracious employees. The hotel overlooks the Ski Plane tracks on the snow covered lakes of Hood and Spenard- supposedly more aircraft on this lake than anywhere else in the world.

It was nice to be back at the Millenium but I missed having Kim, Kathy and Margaret. We had stayed there on our previous trips- such memories of our fun in getting our seaplane ratings at Moose Pass, of my favorite flight instructor/ bush pilot Charles and then our return the next year for Margaret's last seaplane flight and to celebrate her life. I feel Margaret's presence often when I am flying Samantha the Swan, my amphibian and I know she would have loved the ski plane flights and the winter beauty of Denali.

And now I have more memories. Alaska, I will be back and hopefully to take Don's Tundra Tire Course- the fall would be perfect although after 3 trips to Alaska, any time there is light, it will be perfect, challenging and fun!