

A wild Goose chase: Alaska and the USA, 2015

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In 2009, while attending the National Test Pilot School in California, I had the opportunity to fly a Lake Buccaneer, a cross between a Piper Arrow and a rowboat. I was intrigued by the wooden interior and the anchor and the lifevests. The water flying required me to use all the tricks I'd learned in a quarter century of flying, and they worked. Although there wasn't enough time to complete the Airplane Single-Engine Sea rating, a new item had definitely been added to my wish list.

Five years later, in 2014, I obtained a seaplane rating at Twitchell's in Maine. Again, basic attitude flying skills and a lot of theoretical preparation won the day, and I was able to complete my rating within a day.

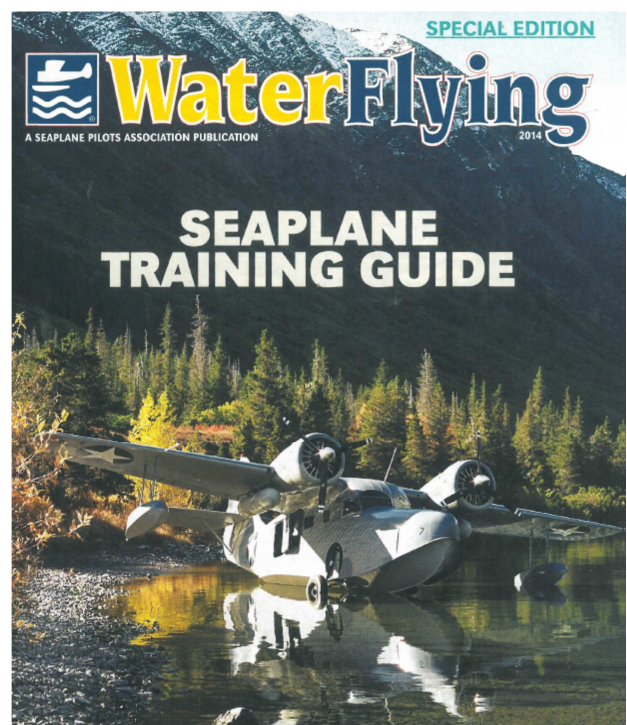
The Seaplane Pilots' Association sent me their annual Training Guide and a few complimentary copies of *Water Flying*, their monthly magazine. Due to the protracted postal strike, they all arrived together around the end of the year. I immersed myself in the content. Water flying definitely opens up options that mere mortals do not enjoy, and there were numerous tales of wild places and outdoor adventures.

One image haunted me. On the cover of the Training Guide was a Grumman Goose, parked on the shores of a crystal-clear lake with a snow-covered mountain towering in the background. Could this be Alaska?

Google unearthed more facts on the aircraft. It was indeed in Alaska, one of those destinations that I've always wanted to see.

The Grumman G-21 Goose was produced from 1937 to 1945. N703¹ is a 1944 model, with a history in the military and the Coast Guard. It is now owned by John Pletcher, a retired lawyer and wheeler-dealer in Anchorage. It is essentially original, with only a few modern radios added.

Negotiations with Burke Mees, the instructor on the aircraft, regular contributor to *Water Flying* and Alaskan Airlines B737 captain looked promising. However, I would first have to add an Airplane Multi-Engine Sea (AMES) rating to my American ATP². Under American rules, no type-specific training is required for light aircraft once you have the relevant class rating.



The picture that started it all.

¹ goosehangar.com

² Airline Transport Pilot certificate.

There are not many options for AMES training. I could only find a TwinBee (a conversion of the 70-year-old SeaBee) and a Grumman Widgeon in Florida, and a Beech 18 in Arizona. I preferred the Widgeon, as it appeared to offer a natural growth path to the Goose.

Early in 2015 my circumstances changed on several fronts, and I started thinking that it was now or never. In May, I started making arrangements for a trip in July. First get the AMES rating. Then fly the Goose, with possible side trips into Yukon and north of the polar circle. Finally, visit Oshkosh to see the mother of all airshows, with side trips into three adjacent states. This trip looked like the aviation outing of a lifetime.

Timing was critical, as I had to fit everything into my available vacation leave, catch favourable weather in Alaska and arrive in time for the Apollo 13 reunion at Oshkosh—something I did not want to miss under any circumstances.

Preparation in Florida

My Widgeon training would be with Chester Lawson, the owner of the immaculate Widgeon N86638³. Chester is a retired FBO owner from New England who lives in Spruce Creek, near Orlando, Florida. Spruce Creek is a fly-in community built around an abandoned military runway. Lush vegetation, luxury homes and a good runway conspire to provide a perfect environment for an aviation nut. Over 400 aircraft are based there, including warbirds, business jets and helicopters. Around 25 000 movements are recorded annually. Most residents will tell you that they expect going to heaven to be a lateral move.

Chester expected that we could complete the training in “two to four days”, depending on weather, and on my background. I would have about six days available, but I was keen to visit the nearby Kennedy Space Centre to see the relics of the space programme for myself. I was also hoping to work in a visit to the Florida Keys.

Being an eternal optimist, I was hoping that I might finish the rating soon, and have some time to spare. I started wondering whether this would not be my opportunity to add a helicopter rating to my American ATP too.



Chester and his Widgeon



Tony Crawford

After a detour or two, I found a helicopter instructor in Spruce Creek. Tony Crawford is a retired veterinary surgeon from New York who owns a Robinson R22 instrument trainer, N7188N. Tony flies a meticulously-prepared Questair Venture named “Chick’s Delight” in the National Championship Air Races series.

³ h2oflight.com

Tony could help me to get a helicopter rating, also in two to four days. Some training and a two-hour night navigation flight would be required. The night nav could be a challenge, due to the nightly thunderstorms at that time of year. It would be a challenge to fit everything into the five available days!



Chick's Delight

The AMES rating would definitely be my priority. However, to ensure that we made good use of any breaks in the weather, I agreed with Tony and Chester that we would conduct the navigation flight on the first night with suitable weather, even if I was still busy with the seaplane training.

The trip was preceded by the usual hustle to prepare for a few weeks away. I had some tight deadlines to meet, lots of arrangements to take care of and a lot of money to get into the right accounts. The flight from Johannesburg to Atlanta on Delta Airlines is a real test of endurance. It is the world's longest non-stop commercial flight. The westbound journey involves almost 17 hours in the cattle-class seat. I followed it with an airport transfer and another one-hour flight to Orlando.



Chris Plumblee at N4WW

After booking into my motel and doing some essential shopping, my first evening in Florida was spent at the station of a long-time amateur radio acquaintance, Austin Regal⁴. Although Doc was out of town, I was shown around by one of his regular contest guest operators, Chris Plumblee⁵. Chris and I then had dinner at a nearby buffet restaurant, exchanging notes about amateur radio contesting.

The training on the Widgeon started on Monday morning. Our training sorties were all similar. We would take off on the runway, then head to some nearby lakes. We would splash around for an hour or so, then change seats for the return journey. Chester didn't want to take any chances with his baby, and there were no brakes on the right pedals. At least I did some of the runway landings from the right seat.

The Widgeon handles very nicely. It is light on the controls, and at the weights we flew at, has plenty of power. It is less inclined than a floatplane to put its nose into the water, so it is perhaps a little more forgiving than the average single. I found it amusing that alligators were often peering at us on the surface, hastily submerging a few seconds before we got to them.

We covered the syllabus on Monday. On Monday night, I drove to Lakeland for an amateur radio get-together. The legendary Ellen White⁶ was the guest presenter, entertaining the audience with tales of her illustrious history in the American Radio Relay League. Her husband Bob⁷ had a huge impact on my amateur radio career, as he was the one that made the DX Century Club what it is today. Ellen is an entertaining speaker and a true ham radio celebrity. I also enjoyed the opportunity to meet a few long-time radio acquaintances in person, and to touch base with fellow contester Dan Street⁸. Chris from Sunday night was also there. The night ended up being an ordeal, as I had to refuel shortly after departure. My foreign credit card resulted in problems, and was swallowed by the card reader. Management was not sympathetic, and insisted that I had to come back the next day and pay for the recovery of the card. I was not happy, as I could not possibly repeat the five-hour drive on top of my

⁴ Amateur radio callsign N4WW.

⁵ Amateur radio callsign WF3C.

⁶ Amateur radio callsign W1YL/4.

⁷ Amateur radio callsign W1CW.

⁸ Amateur radio callsign K1TO.

training schedule and the problem had been caused by a software glitch in their system! Dan undertook to return the following day and recover the card. I arrived back at my motel well after midnight.

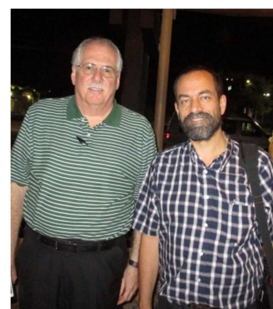
On Tuesday morning, we did two revision sessions that went well enough, and the examiner arrived on Tuesday afternoon. I didn't cover myself in glory in the test flight, but the examiner felt that it was good enough and signed the paper. Chapter one was complete.

Tuesday night featured clear weather, after intense night-long thunderstorms on Sunday and Monday. Tony and I decided to tackle the navigation flight. I hadn't flown helicopters in several years, and only four hours in the past decade, so I impressed upon Tony that he had to watch me like a hawk. He responded that his policy was not to allow a new student access to the controls below 500 feet. We definitely agreed that some circumspection was required!

Around sunset, we took off from Spruce Creek and headed east to the coast. We then turned left and followed the coastline towards St Augustine. I was pleased to note that I had no difficulty controlling the helicopter, and soaked in the ambience. The glow of sunset to the west and the crystal-clear air created a fairytale scene of pitch-black ocean to our right and tinsel to our left and fireworks from the numerous holiday resorts below us. It really was quite magic. This is the stuff that drives grown men to poetry.

Wednesday and Thursday were spent with Tony, scratching the rust off my helicopter skills. It was my first opportunity to handle the R22 extensively at sea level. It really is a delightful machine under those conditions, especially for someone who was once used to the marginal performance at Gauteng's high altitudes.

Wednesday night included another radio-related trip, when I met another long-time radio buddy in person for the first time. Bill Poellnitz⁹ was very active in the Seventies and early Eighties, after which he disappeared to pursue a real career in the mobile phone industry. We met at an Orlando restaurant for a weekly quiz game. We quickly assembled Team ZS6EZ¹⁰ with two young women who together nicely matched our age. The team worked well. Neither Bill nor I could cope with the showbiz questions, and the two young ladies could. We ended up placing a close second out of about a dozen teams.



Bill and Chris



AA4HP antennas

I took late Thursday afternoon off, and took a detour to Titusville where I had been invited for a radio contest on the weekend. There, I met Hank and Stephanie Phillips¹¹, my hosts for the weekend. After a short visit, I returned to my motel for a vigorous run around Daytona Beach. I had been suffering from the aftermath to a cold for some weeks, and was finally getting to the point where I could start running again. The town has definitely lost some of its lustre as a prime holiday destination, but it was interesting to view the rows of cheap motels and the inland waterway up close at a leisurely pace.

⁹ Amateur radio callsign K1MM.

¹⁰ ZS6EZ is my own amateur radio callsign.

¹¹ Amateur radio callsigns AA4HP and K4MVO.

Thursday night I spent some time packing and getting my radio equipment ready for the following chapters of my trip. I did the necessary wiring to the battery pack, made a portable wire antenna, programmed the memory keyer and generally got myself up to speed on the technicalities of operating the unfamiliar radio.

Although the training went exactly according to plan, my finances didn't. As is its custom, Standard Bank left me in the lurch by stopping my credit card—despite the fact that I had advised them that I would be out of the country. I had a hard time raising the cash needed to pay for all this flying, and wasted at least a full day of my time making up for my bank's ineptitude.

The practical test happened on Friday morning. The examiner is an airline captain, and we spent some time discussing the Florida flight training scene. It is not a pretty picture, and I had clearly been unusually fortunate to end up with two responsible, adult instructors. The test went mostly well, and I ended the day with the helicopter rating in my pocket.



Evidence at Kennedy Space Centre of fresh action by a former Pretoria guy.

After the paperwork was complete, I headed to the Kennedy Space Centre. I had checked out of the motel early and now headed to Cape Canaveral. I spent a most enjoyable day seeing first-hand what all these toys look like. I'm familiar with most of them from a lifetime of reading, but there really is something special about seeing all of it in real life. I was also interested to see the modern developments, including the huge SpaceX building. One of their rockets had gone up in smoke earlier in that week.

When the museum closed, I headed to the Phillips home to get ready for the contest. I was briefed very clearly that the contest would be a leisurely affair, and that a high priority would be afforded to relaxed meals and friendly interaction. The first meal was typical of what was to come; very tasty and very lavish, with good company thrown in.

Saturday morning I was up in time for the 08:00 start of the contest. Chris Plumblee was there again. I wondered whether his wife would still recognise him when he got home. He explained that this was his ZS6EZ Week. We started the contest together, with Chris operating and me helping to pull whole callsigns out of the pileup. It was my first opportunity to operate a contest as a vanilla Mericun, and I was pleasantly surprised at how we were able to keep a run going. I later had the opportunity to operate solo, both on Phone and Code, and really enjoyed the high-rate operating for the first time in many years. What was even nicer was the complete absence of paperwork, as Hank would take care of the logs and the QSL cards afterwards. There's something to be said for the lifestyle of a hired gun!

I took a break on Saturday afternoon for some shopping and a visit to the Astronaut Hall of Fame. I then headed to Orlando for yet another radio-related rendezvous. I met Trey Garlough¹² with his wife Julie and their son Brady for dinner. I'd met Julie briefly before, but this was our first opportunity to spend a great evening chatting together.

We're hoping to do so again soon, as the family is planning a holiday in South Africa later in 2015.



Trey and Chris (photo by the Garloughs).

¹² Amateur radio callsign N5KO, once also HC8N.

I left Hank's place after the contest on Saturday, and headed to the airport for my flight to Alaska. I spent the morning in the airport, working on a job assignment that I hadn't managed to complete before my departure. The two flights occupied most of the afternoon and evening, depositing me in Anchorage after midnight. After a short taxi ride to the hostel, I crashed into bed.

Anchorage

Most of Monday was taken up with laundry and doing the tourist thing. I took a leisurely ninety-minute walk to downtown Anchorage. Although the tourist information centre was not helpful, they did point me to someone who was. Russ Reno of Anchorage Downtown Tour Group¹³ provided me with all the answers, including two invaluable pieces of advice. His recommendations lead to my two best adventures: An affordable way to make my planned side trip to Barrow and a glacier that I could clamber up.

Russ also sold me a ticket to a city tour, which I enjoyed. The guide intimated that Alaska had a high preponderance of pilots, and claimed that many Alaskans fly unlicensed too. She related tales of twelve-year-olds commuting to school and back by aircraft in thinly-populated areas. I did verify later that Alaska has around 1,2% of licensed pilots in its population, about three times as high a percentage as any other state.

I also took a walk around Lake Hood, the local seaplane base. That evening, Carole Holley collected me for a vegetable dinner and some great conversation. I'd met Carole years before during an ultra-marathon, during which we spent about an hour running together. It would have been even longer if I could have kept up...

Tuesday morning, instructor Burke Mees collected me from the hostel around 08:00.



Goose N703: Clearly both boat and aircraft. Owner John is sitting below the left wing.

The Goose is based at Lake Hood, the world's biggest seaplane base. Locals claim that a quarter of the world's seaplanes are based there. The lake and its adjacent runway are situated right next to Anchorage's Ted Stevens International Airport. The surrounding mountains form an impressive backdrop. If you know what to look for, Denali is just visible to the north, 200 km away.

We spent most of the day flying the Goose. N703 was built in 1944 for the US Marine Corps. It later saw service with US Fish and Wildlife. It was restored fully in 1996. Its gunmetal grey paint job is truly immaculate.

We splashed around two lakes near Anchorage for most of the day, stopping only for a lunch break on the water. I got to see a glacier and some of the mountains up close, and flew for more than four hours. Flying a unique machine like the Goose in a picture-perfect environment like the Alaskan lakes and mountains was an utterly memorable experience for an aviation geek. I've written a separate story for others of the same



Is this water glassy enough for you? Beluga lake with the glacier dead ahead.

¹³ downtownourgroupp.com 907 748 0192

ilk¹⁴. Suffice here to say that it was probably my second most memorable flight in more than three decades of flying.



The mark of a great instructor: Burke Mees looks utterly relaxed in the right seat, while ready to intervene at a split-second's notice.

I also exchanged some notes with Burke about our experiences of publishing books through ASA¹⁵. Both of us had written books for flight training, mostly for our own use, that were later published by ASA for more general consumption. Burke also undertook to send me a copy of his book, as well as information about airspaces around Anchorage.

I returned to the hostel for a run around Lake Hood. I then bought tickets for a trip to Barrow on Thursday and booked a rental car from Friday for side trips into Yukon and

Kenai. To my amazement, the receptionist was wearing a UCT¹⁶ sweater. I also got involved in a discussion about rugby with three regular players. I'm not a rugby fan, but I guess as a South African I shouldn't be too surprised if I get pushed in that direction. However, this discussion was different. It was surprising enough that the three players were all Americans. What was more surprising to me, though, was that KK and Rachael were women!

Wednesday, I visited the Alaskan Aviation Museum at Lake Hood and took another run. Apart from extensive displays on Alaskan aviation history, the museum featured an interesting simulator, spoofing several WW-II fighters with VR stereo glasses. In case you're wondering: Yes, a P-38 can half-loop directly from takeoff, with a straight roll at the top! I also spent some time re-packing my belongings for the trip and half a day completing my work assignment. Having sent it to my boss, I was immensely relieved and looked forward to nothing but relaxation for the next week or so. That afternoon, Carole showed me around the foothills of the Chugach mountains before another great vegetable dinner.

Barrow

My Thursday flight to Barrow left early, and after a stop in Deadhorse, we arrived before noon. I had my computer bag on my back, my rollaboard case in my one hand and my duffel bag with camping gear under my other arm. Less than two minutes after leaving the terminal building, I realised that I was in big trouble. With near-freezing temperatures, a howling wind and light drizzle, I was actually going to be dead within hours. My planning for a mid-summer trip into southern Alaska had not included enough cold-weather gear for what I now encountered at 71° North. Some re-thinking was required.

A car rental office offered a way out. I was not impressed by the quotation: \$ 165 per day, including compulsory insurance and various other fees. I had no choice, really, as I'd already ascertained that the cheapest hotel in town would be over \$ 300 per night. I rented a beat-up old truck with lots of miles on the clock. The office also handed me a threatening note from UIC, the Ukpeaġvik Iñupiat Corporation¹⁷, which owns most of the land around Barrow. Anyone found trespassing on UIC land

¹⁴ Submitted for publication in World Airnews. May appear on b.org.za/stories too.

¹⁵ asa2fly.com

¹⁶ University of Cape Town, South Africa.

¹⁷ ukpik.com

would be severely dealt with. The note made it sound like UIC owned all the land in the Barrow vicinity.



Welcome to Barrow!

My next stop was the UIC office, where I was dealt with in a way commensurate with the wording of the note. I was given application forms to complete. For a mere \$ 150 in application fees, I could apply for a land use permit to allow me to pitch my tent. No other suggestions were offered.

Instead of paying the fee, I decided to make one further stop. I visited the City of Barrow's offices. The reception could not have been more different. Several staff members (including the mayor!) seemed surprised by my request, but were most helpful in formulating a solution. They informed me that there was no objection to me camping on City land, and showed me a map with suitable areas.

With an accommodation solution in hand, I did some shopping. I cringed at the thought of paying \$ 11 for a gallon of drinking water, which I could have bought in Florida for 89 c, but there was no choice. I bought a very limited food supply and some essential protective gear: a woollen hat and some gloves. I then visited the Iñupiat Heritage Centre, displaying a range of local exhibits and some tourist brochures.

I took a drive up and down the coast, getting as close as I could to Point Barrow before being warned off by UIC notices. I also explored as far east and south as I could without passing those same dreaded red markers. Barrow is basically a desert town, with most of the green being associated with soggy marshes. Options for camp sites were severely limited. I could choose the beach, which was reasonably level but with sharp stones and an icy breeze coming off the Arctic Ocean, or an inland marsh, which would involve walking in knee-deep slush and probably sinking into oblivion during the night.

Southwest of Barrow, I noticed a number of large microwave dishes pointed at the horizon. I was surprised, as I didn't expect point-to-point links from a location this isolated. I was on the right track, but the full answer didn't present itself until much later.

It was now time for my next project: Swimming in the Arctic Ocean. After all, I couldn't come all the way to the ocean and not enjoy the beach! I found a piece of shoreline north of the town that seemed suitable and was within City limits. I didn't want to incur the wrath of the UIC. I stepped onto the gravelly beach and gingerly made my way to the water. Ice blocks were floating in the water nearby. My feet hurt on the sharp and uneven gravel. A large truck stopped on the road and hooted. I waved at the driver, and he waved back. Clearly, he didn't seem to think that my swim constituted normal behaviour. He is wrong, of course. I personally met a young couple from the mainland US who also swam that day.



Whale bones on the gravel beach with ice in the water.

The beach sloped very gently into the water, and I had to walk some distance before the water was knee deep. By this time, I could no longer feel my feet. I dove into the water, and swam through a wide arc, back to the beach. By the time I was back on my feet, the sharp gravel was no longer a problem. I could not feel any of it. The truck driver waved again and drove off, gently shaking his head as he did. At least he kept his fingers on the steering wheel.



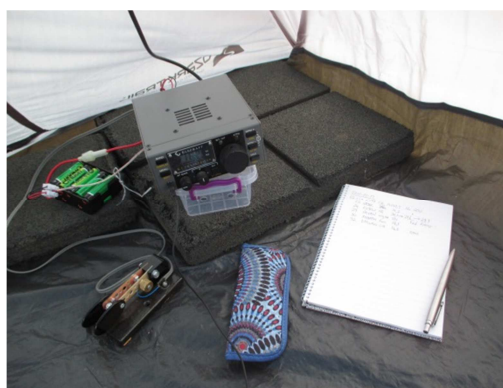
The tent flapping in the wind.

The rental car proved itself a good investment, as I used the heater and blower to thaw. I then visited a piece of land next to the City offices where they had told me that there was a wooden gazebo. It seemed like the gazebo would offer a solution, as it had a wooden floor and a wooden roof. The gazebo had tilted well away from the vertical, due to the marshy ground below. The roof also caused the wind to speed up noticeably inside the gazebo, relative to the surrounds. I pitched my tent and erected an antenna off the highest point of the gazebo that I could reach. If anyone ever asks me, I will admit that pitching a brand-new tent solo for the first time in a howling gale is not recommended. The open zip, for starters, was a bad idea. The tent billowed into a perfect

sphere which defied all my attempts at control. I eventually tamed the tent with the help of several pieces of building rubble that I fetched from an adjacent sports field. I tied the upwind side to the gazebo framework with string and used the rubble to weigh down the upwind side. The rest of the tent fluttered well off the ground like a flag. I eventually unfurled my sleeping bags inside the tent and settled down for the night.

Although it was now late evening, it was still broad daylight through the low cloud cover. Fully dressed, I held my head inside the sleeping bag most of the time, simply to try and stave off the bitter cold. I must admit that I had some misgivings about the choice of sleeping bag and tent at this time. Maybe I wouldn't have bought the \$ 12 tent and the \$ 15 sleeping bag if I'd anticipated these conditions...

Even at midnight, there was enough light inside the sleeping bag to allow me to read my wristwatch. I donned my woollen hat and drew it down across my eyes to provide some darkness. I spent a very restive night, due to the discomfort and the cold. Occasionally, passers-by would speculate loudly about the purpose of the tent, even allowing their dogs to mark the tent as their own. All through the night, the drizzle continued to wet the tent while the wind buffeted it and caused a racket. However, it wasn't all negative. I had set up my little HF radio next to my pillow, and intermittently played with it throughout the night. I was fascinated by a plethora of signals, mostly from Europe and west Asia, mostly sporting the flutter that is characteristic of trans-polar signals. Despite many attempts, I could not get anyone to respond to my calls. Only one European station sent something that indicated that he had at least heard part of my callsign¹⁸, but he couldn't pull me through.



The mighty N3EZ/KL7.

When my alarm clock announced on Friday that it was time to pack up and return to the airport, I was greatly relieved. Refuelling at almost \$ 8 per gallon (about three times the going rate in the Lower 48), I handed back the rental car and walked back to the terminal, looking forward to my return to Anchorage.

I was not the only one in the terminal to find the announcement very disturbing. Alaskan Airlines regretted to announce that Flight 55 could not make it in because of the poor visibility, and was

¹⁸ N3EZ/KL7.

returning to Anchorage. Passengers were all placed on standby for two flights later in the day. I stayed in the terminal building to write a magazine article and waited. The two late flights suffered the same fate, and I eventually realised that I would face another night in Barrow. I was not impressed, especially when Alaskan Airlines indicated that they were not responsible for weather-related delays, and that we would not be able to leave any luggage in their care.

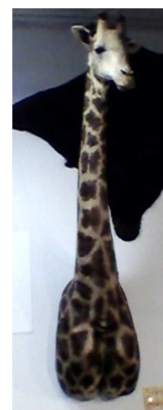
This time, I made my way to the same area I'd been the night before, but used a more sheltered location that I'd seen while re-loading the rental car. I spent a comfortable but long night. Again, passers-by caused the odd disturbance late into the night.

I was back in the terminal early on Saturday. The day proved a repetition of the previous one, except that the 18:00 flight did make it in this time. I was the last standby passenger to be called, and I was on board in a flash. I had mixed feelings, as an email exchange with the only radio ham in town had left me with the prospect of dinner with him and a friend. He sounded like a very interesting character, and I had a feeling we could have had a lot of fun, but I wasn't going to pass up the opportunity of getting out of there. I'd already lost almost two days from my southern Alaska trip. The flight was excruciatingly uncomfortable. The ample body of the passenger next to me spilled well over the armrest, causing my hips to rotate through about 30°, whether I liked it or not. I spent most of the flight doing circuit exercises in the galley, occasionally stopping to chat with the flight attendant when she collected stock.

I arrived in Anchorage sans my luggage. All the airline's attempts at communicating with Barrow failed. I assumed correctly that my luggage would be on the later flight, and spent about three hours waiting. I finally got into my rental car at midnight and headed east. I found a place to stay in Palmer and settled down for the night.

South-Central Alaska

During Saturday evening and first thing on Sunday morning, I tried to contact a ham radio acquaintance in Wasilla. We'd made an appointment for two days before, which we'd missed because of my delay in Barrow. I couldn't reach him, and had to give up on meeting him in person. I spent some time trying to find ice cleats, which Russ had warned me I would need on the glacier. I also needed protective gear against mosquitos. I had been warned that the State Bird would become a real problem where I was going. The normal sources did not carry ice cleats in summer, so I spent some time searching. I finally found what I was looking for in an outdoor store in Wasilla. I was amazed to see stuffed giraffe, lion, zebra and gnu against the walls. Presumably they hadn't been shot in that neighbourhood!



Far from home!



Mike Dillon

As I was leaving Wasilla, I noticed a ham radio antenna against the skyline. Finding it wasn't easy, as I had to traverse several streets to find it among the trees. I knocked at the front door and introduced myself to Mike Dillon¹⁹. We chatted for a few minutes about ham radio and our other mutual interest—flying. Mike had an aircraft parked in the back yard, and I suggested that he might want to share my day trip into Yukon, but Mike indicated that he hadn't been flying recently and the aircraft was no longer airworthy.

¹⁹ Amateur radio callsign KL7QOW.

I finally headed east on Highway 1. The next stop was Matanuska Glacier. I paid the entry fee and then headed up the glacier. It was a completely new experience to me. I was very happy that I had the cleats, as bare shoes provided almost no traction on the glacier. I spent almost two hours clambering up the glacier before turning around and skirting the ice on the western moraine for an exhilarating twenty-minute run back to the car.



A guided tour group coming down the Matanuska Glacier at a snail's pace.



Another seven hours on the road took me to Beaver Creek, Yukon. I had originally planned to visit Jay Allen²⁰ in Whitehorse, but I could not find a way to get there by public transport and the two-day delay in Barrow had left insufficient time for the road trip. The landscape was fascinating to this denizen of tropical climes. The low speed limit allowed plenty of time to soak everything in. For starters, all the conifers were of equal height due to the permafrost. As I was passing the old HAARP²¹ location, I noticed an amateur radio station by the roadside. I made a note to visit the location on the return journey. The Alaskan Highway was an interesting experience. I have seldom traversed such featureless terrain. National Public Radio made a great contribution to staving off the boredom. I learned lots about subjects as varied as car manufacturing, French rap and shark attacks in Johannesburg.

²⁰ Amateur radio callsign VY1JA.

²¹ High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program, the subject of many conspiracy theories.

The border passage into Canada was probably the easiest I've ever had by road²², with a single stop at a drive-through facility. Other nations who demand leaving the vehicle at up to four locations can learn a thing or two!

I camped for the night at Snag Junction campground. I was amused by the self-service registration, something I hadn't anticipated. The downside was that I had to scramble around for Canadian cash, as I needed exact change. In talking to other campers, I came across Keys to Freeze²³, a bunch of cyclists travelling from the Florida Keys to Prudhoe Bay over six months. They had been on the road for five months, planning to complete the ride early in August. They were expecting to enter Alaska the following day.

I did find the stern reminders at the registration desk a little disconcerting. Why were they so adamant that all garbage had to be deposited in the armoured bear-proof bins, to avoid having their contents strewn to the wind? What made my \$ 12 tent any different to a garbage bag? I really didn't particularly want to be strewn to the wind, and there wasn't enough space for me in the armoured bins!

I'd learned a lot about bears in Alaska. Brochures indicated that the way to deal with a bear depended on the type of bear. Brown bears refuse to scavenge, so if you played dead, the brown bear would leave you alone. Black bears, on the other hand, are scavengers, and will eat you if you play dead. The best strategy is to fight back. I had two questions. For starters, there is no easy way to tell the difference. Even after extensive training, I only got 80% on the official exam. I cannot imagine fighting back while appearing dead, so there are definitely some difficult choices to be made. Secondly, no-one could suggest a good strategy for dealing with polar bears. Locals seem to think that they are much more aggressive and much bigger than other bears, so I guess the optimal strategy is to lie back and enjoy the once-in-a-lifetime experience.



VY1/ZS6EZ produced the biggest log of the entire trip.

I again hung my antenna off a conifer. This time, I played with my radio for an hour or so and then retired to the tent. At least this time I made a contact with Hawaii almost immediately, proving that the radio did indeed work²⁴.

Early on Monday morning, I hit the road back to Alaska. Again, crossing the border involved a single brief stop. I visited the amateur radio station I'd seen on the way in, but it appeared unoccupied. There were also stern notices warning off intruders, so I didn't stay. I made my way straight down to Kenai Peninsula, taking only a single break to refuel and clean up. I didn't want my hosts to smell me before they saw me! I was planning to make two stops at long-time radio acquaintances that night, and had advised both of them accordingly. Obviously, my plans had shifted by two days because of the unexpected sojourn in Barrow, but I had kept them advised of my plans. One responded—the other did not.

After a great dinner with Rich Strand²⁵ and his family, during which he showed me his impressive radio station and told me about an upcoming visit to my part of the world, I spent a few minutes operating his station²⁶. Rich also pointed out that his



Rich Strand

²² I'm not counting the Schengen states, where there are no formalities at all.

²³ keystofreeze.com

²⁴ VY1/ZS6EZ.

²⁵ Amateur radio callsign KL7RA.

satellite dish was pointed almost at the horizon. I remembered those dishes from Barrow, and suddenly realised that I really was farther from the equator than usual!

I then set off for the other visit. I was really looking forward to it, not only because I was hoping to meet a thirty-year acquaintance in person, but also because I had been told about the salmon run. I would finally have the opportunity to see this phenomenon in real life. Unfortunately, throughout the day I had been unable to contact my would-be host. I kept trying. After sitting in front of his gate for some hours, I left a message on his phone and tackled the trip to Anchorage around 23:00.

It was still reasonably light and I was still reasonably fresh, despite having spent 17 hours on the road that day. Everything changed when I was stopped at a road construction site after dark. Sitting still in a stationary car just caused my eyelids to drop. I soon found a parking spot by the roadside and got some sleep. Around 01:30, my phone rang. It was my would-be host for the night, who had just returned home from a successful fishing expedition. He hadn't heard my calls or seen my text message, and had left home almost exactly at the time when I arrived in front of his gate. So near and yet so far! I declined his invitation to return, as I just wasn't sure that I could make the return trip and still be in time for my flight out of Anchorage.

I noticed with some amusement that the rental car had accumulated over 4000 km in less than three days.

My checkin and flight were uneventful. I arrived in Minneapolis late at night and collected my rental car. A late-night sightseeing tour of St Paul was interesting, revealing numerous examples of kitch pseudo-European architecture. The first order of business at the hotel was the laundromat, as the Barrow trip had severely depleted my stocks of clean clothing.

Oshkosh

The next morning involved an early sightseeing trip in Minneapolis, followed by a drive to Waupaca, Wisconsin. I wanted to see the birthplace of my long-time friend Hal Lund²⁷. The nineteenth-century house is now a Bed and Breakfast establishment²⁸. No-one was home, but the grounds were worth patrolling. There is lush vegetation with a river, featuring a

number of benches where one can sit and enjoy the solitude.



Apple Tree Lane Bed & Breakfast.

Getting out of the car at the guest house had more than just passing significance for me. Wisconsin was the 25th state in which I had set foot, marking the half-way mark in my quest for all states.

After a quick stop to refuel and do some minor shopping, the short trip to Oshkosh took less than an hour.

If you're an aviation aficionado, the name Oshkosh must certainly ring a bell. It is the venue for the Experimental Aircraft Association's annual AirVenture²⁹. Around 750 000 spectators and 10 000 aircraft arrive at the world's largest airshow for a week of uninterrupted aviation. Day and night

²⁶ N3EZ/KL7.

²⁷ Amateur radio callsign ZS6WB.

²⁸ appletreelanebb.com

²⁹ airventure.org

aerobatic displays are in abundance. The fleamarket sports everything you need to build an aircraft, and a lot of stuff you don't need at all. The EAA workshops can teach you or your children anything you want to know about building and maintaining aircraft. And, of course, at night you can exchange lies with a multitude of other aviation nuts. Sometimes, those discussions even revolve around aviation.

My personal objective for wanting to be there on Wednesday was the Apollo 13 reunion. I have always been interested in space exploration, and even came close to getting involved at one stage. I really wanted to use the opportunity to hear the story first hand. The story happened 35 years ago, and the players are not getting any younger. The time will come when the story is but a memory, and I didn't want to miss this piece of history in action.

Things worked well. The registration process was efficient, and finding a camping spot was not too hard. It helped, of course, that both the rental car and the tent were probably the smallest on the premises. All the preparations were complete about an hour before the evening presentation was due to start.

The best available seat was in the second row, but way off to the side. I wasn't too concerned, as I'm a hearing person. I was far more interested in hearing them than seeing them, and I was sure that I would at least catch a glimpse of all the role players.

The interviewer asked the right questions, and a fascinating tale unfolded. Most of it has been well recorded, but hearing it first hand from the main players was quite an experience. Jim Lovell and Fred Haise were there, as were two of the mission controllers, Bill Reeve and Milton Winkler. Gene Kranz was advertised on the programme, but unfortunately wasn't there.

One of the topics that kept cropping up in the discussion was the movie. It turned out that the movie was reasonably realistic, but that some poetic licence was definitely taken. Several of the participants had been consulted during the making of the movie, and they were able to explain in great detail why some of the deviations from reality took place.

Afterwards, I snuck around the back of the stage to join the other groupies. The audience had been asked to refrain from interaction with them, but I was within 2 m of them as they got onto the golf cart to be taken to privacy. Seeing the main role players up close in real life was quite an experience.



Chris and Mark, with Mark's companion on the cart behind.

After the presentation, I tried to find the amateur radio station³⁰. There were over 100 meat bombs³¹ in the air, after having just formed a record formation. I had trouble interpreting the map, and wandered past the correct site. A couple on a golf cart arrived and offered assistance. After a "Hold on tight!" admonition, the cart pulled away and made good time across dips and bumps. It was clear that the driver was having fun. He mentioned that he had some good customers in Johannesburg. I asked which company he was with, and the response was Boeing. In Denver. When I asked what they were doing in Denver, he



Jim Lovell joining Fred Haise on the cart.

³⁰ Amateur radio callsign W9ZL.

³¹ I believe the official term is "skydivers".

mentioned Jeppesen. I remembered then that Jeppesen had been acquired by Boeing around the turn of the century, and asked him what his specialty was. He casually replied that he was the CEO. The driver was Mark van Tine, vice president of Boeing for digital aviation and recent Aviation Industry Leader of the Year. As time passed, I became aware that Oshkosh is run by volunteers, most of whom work without compensation, and all of whom offer friendly and enthusiastic support to the more than half a million visitors.



The South African outpost in Oshkosh.

The evening was mostly spent with the South African contingent in Camp Scholler. The organised group had set up a tent village, and offered catering and facilities for their guests. I spent several hours chatting to long-time friends and brand-new acquaintances with the night airshow in the background. We even talked about aviation sometimes. The scented and decorated ladies' toilet was a feature of the camp, as was a prominent South

African flag and a name shield redubbing the street to Mandela Boulevard.

The following day started with a visit to the floatplane base. Oshkosh features regular buses to all the points of interest, mostly for free. After getting off the bus, we watched more than half of the world's SeaBees landing in a row, celebrating the 70th anniversary of this model. A boat ride in the harbour could be had for \$ 3, and proved to be good value. The



Bill the Boatman

boat pilot, Bill, showed us around the base and explained how the logistics worked. He sells medical prostheses in Texas, and flew his personal Cirrus up to Chicago before riding a rented Harley to Oshkosh. He was also working as a regular volunteer, showing visitors the ropes in the seaplane base year after year.

After taking in a few minutes of the repetitive aerobatic displays, the rest of the day was consumed by patrolling the exhibits, visiting the EAA museum and viewing some of the many workshops. One day is not enough to see all of Oshkosh, but at least it was possible to get a good sample of everything on offer. I also enjoyed seeing one of my books on the shelves at the AEA stand, and meeting some of the staff members of my publishers in person.

That evening, there was another opportunity to hang out with our fellow South Africans, before making an early exit and getting ready for the early-morning departure. The facilities were amazing, featuring even wi-fi and the opportunity to charge computer, phone and camera batteries.

The checkout was handled by an attendant who was very efficient and exceptionally cheerful. I asked her what she did for a living. She is an occupational therapist, working at Oshkosh as a volunteer for the week.

Michigan

The drive to Munising, Michigan is about 350 km. At the modest speed limits in the USA, an early start would be required. After getting a refund for unused camp fees, the first stop was at a municipal beach in Appleton for the compulsory swim in Lake Winnebago. The next stop was at Marinette, just inside Michigan, to do Lake Michigan.

After buying boat tickets in Munising to view the Pictured Rocks³², the next order of business was to try the highly recommended local pasty. The vegetable version was not too bad, but don't mark it as highly recommended in my book.



The three-hour boat trip was memorable. Lake Superior is quite a lake, second only to Lake Baikal in terms of volume. The Painted Rocks are formidable, featuring both grotesque sandstone structures and strange colour patterns, mostly because of mineral seepage. In the mean time, the captain regaled us with his standup routine. It was painful to realise that this *was* his day job. Mercifully, I nodded off on the return journey to accumulate some reserves for the next stage.

Then started the 300 km drive to Ironwood, where my friend Hal had grown up. On the way I just had to get a picture of Sidnaw Airfield, where he had his first flying lessons all those years ago.

Unfortunately, the weather there was nasty, with the windshield wipers going full blast and not having

much effect. Camping would be no fun under these conditions. Fortunately, things cleared up somewhat

before arrival at Little Girls' Point, and the camp site was mostly dry. I had another item on the agenda here: I wanted to play with my amateur radio equipment. I had to rig an antenna from some of the surrounding trees. To the north, the antenna looked straight onto the water. Pity that the water was fresh! After an early start, I spent about half an hour trying to raise some interest with the radio. I was



N3EZ/8 on the shores of Lake Superior.

³² [nps.org/piro](https://www.nps.org/piro)

able to make several contacts³³, with high activity levels from a radio contest. The radio really was working!

It goes without saying that the compulsory swim in Lake Superior had to take place before tackling the next 700 km stage to eastern Iowa.

Iowa



Until I started preparing for this trip, I'd never heard of the Amana Colonies³⁴. This five-village community in eastern Iowa was established in 1855 as a communal farming and industrial operation. It remained in operation until the 1930s, at which time property was divided among members, but a form of communal operation was retained. The Amana household appliances, also made in the villages, acquired a name for quality and innovation. The brand is now part of Whirlpool, and this company continues to operate a factory there. The community is interesting to view. It is pristine, with neatly decorated houses surrounded by immaculate gardens and fields. The vision is somewhat marred by the far less conservative music and behaviour of the tourists, but being a tourist myself I guess I wasn't supposed to complain.

A side trip to Shiloh, the headquarters of the church I was in during the 1980s, provided me with a nostalgic view of a facility that many of my friends had been to. Today, there seems to be very little activity, although everything is neatly maintained.

That night, camping was a lot less pleasant than it had been for the previous week. Apart from the rain that drenched everything, there was also a troupe of at least 50 mosquitos that snuck into the tent. A midnight session to attract them with a torch and then flatten them against the canvas provided relief. Except, of course, for the itching from dozens of bites.

As had become the custom, there was another early-morning start, this time for a 200 km trip to my friend Glenn Johnson's place³⁵. On passing through Cedar Rapids, I noticed a Collins Road exit. I was reminded of the illustrious history of Art Collins and his radios. To this day, many collectors specialise in Collins equipment, and the company continues to flourish in the guise of the Rockwell Collins avionics company³⁶, still headquartered in this rural town.

Eastern Iowa is very different to what I had envisaged. The classic image is of endless maize fields with undulating terrain. What I found was bright green foliage and steep rolling hills, with lots of water in evidence. The little rental car's engine had a hard time even maintaining the modest speed limit.

³³ Using N3EZ/8.

³⁴ amanacolonyes.com

³⁵ Amateur radio callsign W0GJ.

³⁶ rockwellcollins.com

Glenn is a stalwart in amateur radio. He is the brain behind several recent high-profile DXpeditions, including the most recent K1N expedition to Navassa. He is also a highly-regarded orthopaedic surgeon, specialising in joint replacement. He has made several humanitarian trips to the Kingdom of Bhutan, sharing his skills with locals and helping to re-establish amateur radio in that country.



Chris and Glenn strapping in to take to the skies.

Glenn provided a guided tour of the farm. In addition to the antennas, which I'd seen written up in the amateur radio press, there is an impressive solar power array that feeds energy back into the grid, as well as a modest vegetable farm and two horses. Glenn has an elaborate woodworking shop, and maintains both a sleigh and a horse cart for ceremonial purposes. He showed us some of his woodwork. Several very pleasant hours were spent with the family, including his wife Vivien³⁷ and her mother, as well as visitors from Switzerland.

After lunch, Glenn led the way to Calmar airport for some flying in his Piper Super Cub with tundra tyres. We flew around the airfield a few times before hitting the road back towards Wisconsin.

In the excitement, I clean forgot that I still wanted to visit nearby Spillville, where Antonín Dvořák spent many of his summers and where he composed his famous Ninth symphony "From the New World". By the time I remembered, turning back would have been too time-consuming.

Back to Wisconsin

The next stage was the 225 km drive to Paul Bittner's place³⁸. Paul is a legend in amateur radio contesting. He owns one of the world's biggest stations. My records show 78 contacts with his station, starting in 1983. What interested me most, though, is that Paul's station is not like most, that rely on ready-made equipment from commercial sources. Paul has a workshop and the ability to improvise, and most of his hardware was scrounged over decades. Paul has taken down many commercial towers in exchange for retaining the hardware, which then springs up on his hilltop later. Paul is a retired Lutheran minister, and

most of his antenna work is done with the aid of his wife Mary. Mary is a radio amateur in her own right, too³⁹.



Paul and Chris halfway up one of the towers, discussing construction details.

Unfortunately, the email in which I'd confirmed the final schedule with Paul had apparently gone astray, turning the visit into a surprise. Nevertheless, Paul showed me around the house and the station. We soon climbed one of the towers to discuss his rotating rings. I had to exhibit some determination to keep up with this octogenarian! I admired the simplicity of his design. He says that

³⁷ Amateur radio callsign KL7YL.

³⁸ Amateur radio callsign W0AIH.

³⁹ Amateur radio callsign WB0PXM.

the design has been criticised as being inadequate, but to my mind the 25 year clean record in that harsh weather speaks for itself.

Paul has a collection of international flags that he hoists during contests, and had mentioned in email correspondence that he would be keen to get a South African addition to his collection. I obliged, and he was visibly pleased. We chatted into the late evening hours, then settled down to a night's rest before another early departure. This time, considerable time would be required to re-pack. The tent, sleeping bags and mattresses required some persuasion to fit into their respective bags, and everything required some persuasion to fit into the baggage and then into the car. However, soon the little rental car was making its way on the 200 km trip back to Minneapolis.



Paul, Chris and Mary celebrating the latest addition to the flag collection.

There was one more stop. I went to see Wipaire⁴⁰ at South St Paul airport, the manufacturers of light aircraft floats. I'm still wondering how feasible it would be to put a pair of floats on a light aircraft and splash around the dams of Gauteng occasionally. We'll see.

Going home

The flight home via Atlanta was uneventful but unbelievably tedious. Apart from the first two-hour flight and a stop in Atlanta, there was the interminable 16-hour flight back to Johannesburg. The Delta aircraft now feature a gap between the window seat and the wall, and I simply could not find a comfortable sleeping position. In the end, I did manage to get a few hours of sleep, but actually chafed my skin to shreds on the seat. A lot can happen in 16 hours!

As always, the few days after my return were taken up by picking up the loose ends of my life after an absence of more than three weeks. I was soon back in the swing of things, and as this story is being written, I'm still trying to unravel the mess that resulted from my credit card adventures.

⁴⁰ wipaire.com

This trip was memorable from several points of view.

I finally got the chance to get my multi-engine seaplane rating. I finally added helicopters to my USA pilot certificate. I got to see the Kennedy Space Centre. I met half a dozen long-time radio acquaintances in person. I learned a lot about avionics and about seaplane operations, hoping to establish some activity locally.

Flying the Goose was a very special experience. It was unlike anything I'd flown before. My few hours of Goose flying are one of the highlights of my 33-year flying career. I can think of only one other flight that probably surpasses it, also in a Grumman, up the Nile valley and across the Mediterranean at night. That flight actually drove me to poetry—literally⁴¹.

Alaska was a long-term goal, and met all my expectations. Although I certainly didn't plan to get stuck in Barrow, doing so was an adventure that I will never forget. Who would ever have thought that this boy from sunny climes would ever have the opportunity to swim in the Arctic Ocean, freeze in a tent in a howling blizzard and clamber up and down a glacier with cleated shoes?

I also handsomely added to my totals of places visited. Florida, Alaska, Yukon, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois and Iowa (in that order) added in various ways to my records, and I passed the half-way mark with 27 states visited.

I learned some new things about Mericun culture too. We all know about the sugar-laden food and the loud voices and the general civil obedience and other obvious stuff, but despite having visited the USA dozens of times and spent many months there, I always encounter new surprises. I was, for example, previously unaware of the significance that Mericuns attach to shoes. It borders on fetishism. Being seen in public without shoes is completely taboo. When quizzed, Mericuns will explain that it is a safety measure. Yet, they will unflinchingly accept someone whose shoes barely meet the definition, with invisible straps holding a paper-thin sole under very soft feet. I also noticed that Mericun windpumps consistently have taller towers and smaller heads than ours. Maybe the boundary layer is thicker than what I'm used to, or does Freud have something to say on the topic?

There were disappointments too. My camera lost some pictures that I distinctly remember taking, but that were not available for download. I didn't get to the Florida Keys, electing to play radio instead. I didn't fly in every state as I was hoping to—it just wasn't that easy to line up flying in most of the states at rates that I could afford. I didn't operate my radio from Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin as I was hoping to. I didn't see Spillville. And, of course, I now have to open business accounts at a new bank so that I can prevent a recurrence of the Standard Bank nightmare.

I have wondered whether the major expense was worth it. I guess I won't know until after retirement whether I actually could afford it, but at least I have done the groundwork for operating a seaplane in South Africa one day. Who knows—maybe that project will make it all worth while.

The inevitable question arises: Where do I go next? I'm not sure yet, but I'm looking at various options. All I can say for sure is that whatever the choice is, it will have a hard time living up to the standard of adventure that I set on this one. I started off chasing a Goose, and it really was wild enough for me.

⁴¹ b.org.za/stories/Vlug-Flight.pdf