

ALASKAN SEABEE SAFARI

BY DON KYTE

During the end of July and first part of August 1969 aviation history was made when eight Republic Seabees made a group flight to Alaska covering nearly 2500 miles. Now this may not sound like aviation history unless you understand something about Seabees.

The Seabee was manufactured over 21 years ago and thus meets the requirements to be considered an "antique" by the Antique Aircraft Association. Even though most of us don't think of our waterbirds as antiques, unlike a lot of antique aircraft, our Seabees are powered by the same Franklin 500 engine it was produced with. Not having the advantage of continued production to incorporate new advances in the industry, the Franklin 500 is somewhat primitive and not as reliable as its modern counterparts. There are very few shops in the country that will work on them and even less that are knowledgeable enough about the Franklin engine to do a passable job of maintenance or overhaul. Fortunately, one of these men, Walt Winesman, lives in the Seattle area. Walt works for Kenmore Air Harbor which, in the not too distant past, owned a fleet of Seabees.

For the most part, however, the Seabee is kept flying by the perseverance and ingenuity of its owner. Most new Seabee owners must rely heavily on advice, help, and spare parts supplied by old time Seabee owners. For this reason a number of Seabee Clubs have sprang up around the country. Our Seattle Seabee Club is one such group and we hold regular dinner-meetings and "splash-ins", the seaplane version of "fly-ins" for land-plane aircraft.

It was at one of these regular dinner-meetings in the winter of 1968 which we held jointly with the Vancouver B.C. Seabee Club that the idea for an Alaskan trip was born. A passing remark by one of us that he would like to make a flight to Alaska sometime, perhaps the next summer, quickly made the rounds of the group and before the evening was over, there were a total of eight Seabee owners who indicated they would like to make the trip. During the intervening months some dropped out, but others decided to go so the number stayed fairly constant.

Thus it was on a Saturday late in July that seven heavily laden Seabees fired up in front of the Vancouver B.C. Seabee Club parking area at the International airport at Vancouver B.C. - - - and just as quickly shut down again! Trouble was starting already as one Seabee, CF-FRX had a bad miss and vibration. This was soon traced to some fouled spark-plugs which were rapidly replaced and we were really on our way this time.

The weather was beautiful and spirits high as we passed familiar scenery heading up the Georgia Straits en route to our first stop at Alert Bay. Most of the 'Bees made a stop here to do some sight-seeing, but two of us continued to Port Moody to join up with Bill McClure in his fire-engine red Seabee, 95K. Bill and Joan had preceded us by several days in order to join friends on a boat at Port Moody to do some fishing.

Our rendezvous completed, Bill joined Dave and Lis Hazelwood in DKW, and my family in 44K, as we headed for our first overnight stop at Dunc Cameron's CPAL Camp #1, a fish buying camp in Millbrook Cove off Smith Sound. Dunc is an old friend of our gregarious Scotsman, Jack Morgan in GLP (God Loves a Pilot, as Jack likes to say on the radio). Jack had been a commercial fisherman in past years and knew many of the fishermen in the camp. Jack had arranged for our group to tie-up at the fish camp's docks for a two day stay while we fished and relaxed.

We had expected to find the docks clear of boats, but due to the erratic fishing regulations imposed on the commercial fishermen, they wouldn't be allowed on the fishing grounds until the following evening. Most of the boats were already at the docks when we arrived under a low stratus ceiling. This made dock space a bit tight, but we managed to get everybody secured. We had some anxious moments later as more and more boats arrived, passing within inches of our precious aircraft as they found berthing spots here and there wherever they could. We needn't have worried, however. The skill that these fishermen possess in maneuvering their big fishing boats is unbelievable.

We found the fish-camp to be a fascinating place and one few visitors are privileged to see. I don't know who was the most interested in the other, however, the Seabee owners looking over the fishing boats, or the fishermen looking over the Seabees. After all, its not every fish camp that has its own "air force"!

The next day, Dunc took half of our group on his boat for a day of fishing while his brother, Jim, took the rest. This was the first time during the trip when all eight Seabees were together. We had a total of seventeen adults and four children (three of which were mine). The fishing was great and enough fish were caught for a magnificent fish-feed that night. You certainly couldn't get fish any fresher. Dunc and his crew had set up a bunch of tables in one of the floating buildings for our banquet and afterward most of us were offered various rooms in which to spend the night. The Seabee has front seats that open up to make a fairly comfortable bed so some of our group elected to sleep in their airplanes. This has the added advantage of being with your airplane in case a sudden wind-storm or leak should develop.

Bill and Thelma in FRX had developed more plug trouble on the way to the fish-camp. When some of the boats had cleared out, we opened the cowl for a check. The offending plugs were wet once again and these were changed. Several run-ups were made before the engine seemed right again. It was difficult to make a good check because FRX was tied to the floating dock and each run-up caused the docks to swing quite a bit. If you want a thrill, try this when your airplane is one of those tied to the same dock!

The next morning dawned clear and bright as we gathered our gear and stowed it for our trip to Ocean Falls and Prince Rupert. One by one we fired up and milled about the lagoon waiting until everyone was ready for take-off. We always guard 122.9 so as each reported ready we started our runs. Bill Howard in FRX was the third to try, but aborted as he reported a rough engine and power too low to get him airborne before reaching the heavy swells of the Sound. He thought it had smoothed out a little near the end of the last run, though, and wanted to try again since he felt it was caused by loaded plugs again which might have burned clean on the take-off run. On his next run he made it just before the rough water but reported quite a vibration and low power. Since repairs would be very difficult to make at the fish-camp and the fact that he had water under him the whole way to Ocean Falls, Bill elected to go on.

The take-off was further confused when someone else reported mag trouble but before we could determine who it was and if they were going back or not, they reported the trouble had cleared up. This tended to splinter the group somewhat as some were circling around trying to see if everyone had made it off, while others headed out. In a few minutes we had completed our radio "nose-count" and determined that we only had one "sick chick" and everyone started joining up for the one-hour flight to Ocean Falls.

Bill said the roughness didn't seem to be getting any worse and he could keep it within allowable limits at reduced power. 85mph indicated airspeed was about the best he could do, so we formed up around him and slowed up to 85. At one point Dave Hazelwood called Bill and told him that if it was any consolation, he was surrounded by "mother-hens".

Ocean Falls was entirely owned by a large timber company. They had obtained the timber rights to log for miles around. The town had been built from the ground up to house the hundreds of workers needed to log this vast amount of timber-land. This included everything a small isolated town would need. Besides all the housing the families would need there was a clinic, small hotel and places for food and recreation. A dam had also been built to provide hydro-electric power and water for the town and the timber company's needs.

There were enough people living in Ocean Falls for B.C. Airlines to provide scheduled air service from Vancouver in a Grumman Mallard. This required a ramp and some aircraft parking for the Mallard, and a number of other amphibious aircraft who might have reason to be there.

The ramp was in good condition and quite adequate for normal operations, but was never intended to hold eight Seabees, two Widgeons and still have room for the scheduled B.C. Airlines Mallard. Our Seabees were stacked in like fighters on an aircraft-carrier deck, but two of us still had to leave and tie-up at the dock until the Mallard and the two Widgeons had left.

Preliminary probing into FRX's engine indicated major surgery was in order. While most of the boys had a lot of experience working on Seabees and we had a good supply of spare parts with us, when we found that Bill Davies, the aircraft mechanic who serves that area owned a Seabee and made "house-calls", it was decided to give him a call before anything drastic was done.

Bill lived at Bella Coola and said he would be there in about 45 minutes. How many pilots can round up a mechanic to work on their plane in 45 minutes, even on your home airport? True to his word, Bill soon roared up in his immaculate black and yellow Seabee to make NINE on the ramp. Bill had taken out the rear seat of his 'Bee and had his big tool-box in its place - - - a real flying repair station.

When the cylinder was pulled, we found a badly worn valve-guide and a loose valve seat. In addition, some rings were broken which allowed the plugs to foul up. We had a spare cylinder in our spare-parts kit but someone had forgotten to put in rings! A call to Walt Davidson, a Seabee Clubber in Vancouver who had to stay behind, promised to have the needed parts put on the next B.C. Airlines flight due to arrive at noon the next day.

By this time it was late afternoon and we made plans to spend the night in Ocean Falls instead of going on that day. The one cab in town had a field day hauling everyone back and forth to town. We had a very pleasant stay in Ocean Falls and enjoyed the lowest prices of the entire trip.

It turned out that Ocean Falls was nearing the end of its life. The timber was nearly all gone and the company would be moving on. The town went into care-taker status when all the workers left. The company tried in vain to find someone to buy the town and dam, but after not finding anyone, the company was forced to tear down the whole town. The

agreement they had with the B.C. Government called for them to return the area to its former natural state if they couldn't find someone to take it over. This included the DAM!! What a shame to see this delightful, ready-made site for a major resort destroyed. "Given enough time, this might have happened, but Ocean Falls became just a memory within a few short years.

Jack Morgan in GLP and Leo Mehler in 62K decided to stay behind with Bill and Thelma Howard while the rest of us continued on. If FRX could be repaired so it could make the rest of the trip, they would fly up as soon as it was ready. If it couldn't, the loads would be shifted so that Jack and Leo could bring Bill and Thelma with them, leaving FRX behind.

Reluctantly, the rest of us bid goodbye the next morning and headed for Prince Rupert and Ketchikan. About 10 miles from Ocean Falls we ran into some low stratus layers that sent us down to within a few hundred feet of the water. After passing Bella Bella and proceeding 20 or 30 miles north, the stratus lowered to less than 50 feet and the visibility dropped to less than half a mile. We hugged the shoreline and made ready to land the second visibility dropped any further. Fortunately, the stable conditions that cause fog also create flat-water, and a quick, smooth landing could be made instantly. It's times like these that make you glad you're flying an amphibian.

Bill McClure was a long-time UAL captain but a short-time Seabee owner. The tension and uncertainty of flying under these marginal conditions got the better of him and he suddenly decided to climb up through the fog on instruments. We were sure the fog was fairly thin, but there was no way of knowing HOW thin. Most of us hadn't flown up the Inside Passage before and knew nothing about the terrain. We did know that the safest way to handle a situation like this was to put down some flaps and slow up to approach speed and to land the instant you lost sight of the shore-line ahead of you.

We all held our breath and prayed that Bill would make it when he called on the radio that he was leaving our group to climb up through the fog to get on top. No one dared say anything knowing that Bill was committed, and any radio chatter would only distract him from the tough job he had chosen for himself of flying a heavy under-powered Seabee with the most basic blind flying instruments, when he should have known there were steep mountains on both sides of the narrow passage.

It seemed like it took forever before we heard the welcome voice of a shook-up Bill McClure on the radio saying, "I don't advise ANYONE to do what I just did"!! What a shock it must have been for him and his wife, Joan to break on top of the fog (at least 500 to 1000' thick) and see mountains close to him on all sides. The Inside Passage has many turns so you could never be certain that, what you may have thought was a straight water-way ahead of you, didn't make a near 90' degree turn the minute you entered the fog.

Like most airline captains, Bill had a fairly large ego. He didn't say much about his ill-conceived instrument climb, and we didn't ask, but I'm sure he never did that again. And this was a good lesson for all the rest of us, if we should ever be tempted to do this in the future.

It was probably only 15 or 20 minutes longer before light spots appeared ahead and we were soon flying in brilliant sunshine and some of the most beautiful scenery we had ever seen. Bill McClure and Joan saw us below and descended to join us again. Our spirits lifted with the fog and the radio was soon chattering with good-natured bantering as we pointed out eagles nesting in the trees, waterfalls and other tidbits to one another as we winged north.

This was flying at its best. Smooth air, warm sunshine, good companionship, fabulous scenery and the special feeling you get from doing things with a group. I felt like I was living a scene from "Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines" (which had had its premier shortly before our flight). I think more than one of our pilots was humming that theme-song to himself as he looked from Bee to Bee around him.

Landing at the island airport at serves Prince Rupert, we took only time enough to fuel, eat and phone ahead to Pat Moore in Ketchikan advising her of our intended arrival time so she could meet us with the official greeting committee. My wife, Maxine, had been born and raised in Ketchikan and knew most of the people living there. She had called on Pat, her good friend, to inform her about our plans for this group flight, and Pat had enlisted the eager help of this seaplane-loving town to set up a memorable visit for us.

As we neared Ketchikan our 5 Seabees joined up in close formation for our aerial salute to the city before landing in the bay and taxiing out of the water at the seaplane ramp at Peninsula Point north of town. Formation flying by the Vancouver Seabee Club had been developed into a practiced art. They were always requested to do formation flying for civic functions. This was especially spectacular because their group of 6 to 9 Seabees would take-off and land in formation as well as the normal formation fly-bys. Large crowds gathered at the shore of the beach where it had been announced that the Seabees would be taking-off and landing in formation, since it was such an unusual sight. After I had formed the Seattle Seabee Club a few years earlier, we had been invited to join them for an even bigger formation one year during Dominion Day, July 1st. On that occasion we had 4 groups of 3 Seabees each for a total of 12. Such fun!

Pat Moore and the official Chamber of Commerce greeting committee were on hand to bid us "Welcome" and pass out "Visitor" buttons and brochures on Ketchikan. Pat had done a fine job of seeing to our needs and had even printed up mimeographed pages for each of us with the names, addresses and phone numbers of the local citizens who were putting us up, along with a suggested itinerary. This way all of us knew where each other was staying and how to reach them.

The rest of the day was spent in getting settled and ready for our banquet that night at the Ketchikan Elks Club. Pat had invited a number of local pilots to join us at the banquet. Since Ketchikan had no airport on its Island, every local pilot is a seaplane or amphibian pilot so there was never a lull in the conversation as our two groups got acquainted with each other and talked about Alaskan flying.

We had hoped that our three missing Seabees would arrive in time for dinner, since at that latitude it doesn't get dark until nearly 10PM. In spite of the wonderful cooperation from the local FAA people, we could not get any definite word about them that night. The next morning we were able to contact them by phone through a new friend we had met in Ocean Falls. Jack Morgan said they had had some trouble with the repair, but that FRX was now running fine and they would be in during the early afternoon.

The rest of us took a tour of the huge Ketchikan Pulp Mill and totem poles, and were back in town in time to see our 3 "tail-end charleys" fly over in formation. It was a great sight, but I think we enjoyed it more than the local citizens because we were now all together again. The party that night at Pat's house was one to remember.

The following morning all eight of us roared out for Juneau (after a pass by town). On the way we planned to make a side trip to LeConte Glacier. Dennis Lund, one of our hosts and an Alaska Airlines Pilot had mentioned at the party that this was one of the few glaciers that was "calving" icebergs into the ocean and was worth seeing. How right he was! This was the scenic high-light of our entire trip.

Finding LeConte Glacier was very easy because miles from the mouth of its inlet we could see the icebergs. The first many of us had ever seen. As we drew closer we could see the delicate shades of blue in the bergs. Turning up the channel the sides of the rocky cliffs grew higher and the bergs became thicker. "Even before we could catch sight of the glacier itself, the channel was so tightly packed with ice that you couldn't find any clear water at all. There wasn't any place for a safe forced landing. Since the Seabee engine isn't the most reliable in the world, I think we all felt apprehension as we pressed on to the face of the glacier. As we rounded the last bend, there it was in all its magnificence. In spite of its great beauty, I had a strong desire to turn tail and head back for clear water. Others must have felt this urge also for some were already turning to leave. Bill McClure in 95K, in the lead, had reached the face and dove down across its entire width. Those of us that were left, followed, and then headed back to the safety of the open waters outside the channel. Our excitement stayed at a high level as we continued on to Juneau because we were soon spotting Orcas, better known as Killer Whales, leaping out of the water.

Landing at the Juneau airport, we had an airport bus all to ourselves for the trip into town. We didn't know anyone in Juneau so the driver took us to a hotel that served an early breakfast as we wanted to get to Skagway in time to take the Yukon and White Pass excursion train to Lake Bennett and back.

The driver said he would take all of us back to the airport if we were ready by 5:30AM. "And I don't mean 5:31!" he said as we left the bus. He meant what he said and my son, Larry, and I had to leave two orders of toast and cold cereal that we had waited nearly 30 minutes to get, and only had time to gulp several spoonfuls before sprinting down the street to make the deadline. The order had cost us the outrages price of \$2.86. The hotel had cost us a whopping \$28.50 for a very austere double. We had planned to return to Juneau to spend another night after taking the excursion train, but the Juneau prices ended that idea! (... Remember, this was in 1970!...)

The Yukon and White Pass excursion train followed one of the famous routes the early gold prospectors took to the Yukon. The train tracks that had many high trestles and sharp turns was an engineering marvel. We all agreed it was a special treat to see this famous pass that had cost so many lives and great hardships to the prospectors.

Skagway was a delight and proof that prices don't necessarily have to go up just because your going further north. The food and service was very good, and again, we had a bus to ourselves and even waiting for us. The local operator was most accommodating and had plenty of 80 octane gas at a reasonable price where Juneau had none. The gravel strip was smooth, but even the Bees threw lots of rocks on take-off. The local FBO told me they would have a seal-coat on the runway in a few days as the material had just arrived.

The weather was ideal as we lifted off Skagway and headed non-stop to Petersburg. We planned to land on the runway, but found the center of it full of gravel piles, road-graders and trucks. In line astern fashion we circled the harbor, but couldn't find a ramp that might take all of us. Returning to the airport we decided we could probably land on the side of the runway after all and made it just fine.

Our aerial antics attracted quite a bit of attention. By the time we had pulled in a good share of the town had turned out to see the flying circus. New friendships were formed on the spot and the local cab-driver lost a few fares as some of the local residents offered our group rides into town.

Everyone planned to spend the night here except Leo Mehler and me. We had our hearts set on some Alaskan lake fishing and decided to press on to Ketchikan so we could squeeze in a day of fishing before joining the main group in Prince Rupert the following day..

Our rendezvous in Prince Rupert was accomplished on time, in spite of a large fog bank that forced Leo and me to fly over the top from the U.S. Border to the edge of town. All airborne again, we had another day of fine weather as we flew to Bella Coola to visit Bill Davies and camp on the airport.

We each landed and pulled off to wait for the next. Leo was the last to land and probably made the shortest landing ever made on that airstrip, probably no more than 100 feet! Apparently his gear had not completely locked down (in spite of the green light) and his gear flipped up on landing causing the Bee to come to a sliding stop on its belly.

The next plane to land was Bill Davies in his flying repair-shop Seabee. We like Bill so much we not only drop in whenever we are near (Leo dropped in a little harder than the rest of us), but we like to turn a little business his way too! Bill wasted no time hauling out the jacks and timbers and had Leo back on his landing gear and taxiing within minutes.

Since it was Sunday, Leo had to wait until the next day for a part. The local machine-shop went to work making him a clevis bolt the first thing in the morning and had it in Bill's hands by 9am. Bill had it in and the gear checked, ready to leave by 10am when the rest of us were planning to leave. Total bill: . . . \$10. (Canadian! Leo is now planning to have all his work done in Bella Coola.

On the way past the Fish Camp in Millbrook Cove, Leo asked Bill Howard if it wasn't a nicer trip this time than before when his engine was sick. Bill said, "Well, as a matter of fact, I just started noticing that vibration again and my RPMs have started falling off - - - just like last time!" . . . Leo had to ask!

Bill nursed it as he had before and made it to Port Hardy. Plugs were again changed which helped some, but within 30 minutes the vibration and RPM drop were back. As before, it was intermittent and since a safe landing could be made at any time, Bill decided to bore on to Vancouver and made it Okay.

There was a dinner meeting at the El Nido restaurant next to the Bellevue Airfield on Friday September 12th 1970. It was well attended by both the Seattle and Vancouver B.C. clubs. Since Kodak probably made more money off this group flight than Standard Oil, the bulk of the program were selected slides and home-movies.

All during the trip, Jack Morgan had been mooching 8mm film from Bill Howard. When it came time to see Jack's movie, all of us gave our undivided attention. Jack had added lettering to his movie. First the title appeared, "THE GREAT ALASKA SEABEE FLIGHT." The screen faded into the next lettering, "FILMED BY JACK MORGAN" followed by, "EDITED BY JACK MORGAN" and then the clincher, "FINANCED BY BILL HOWARD!" This brought down the house!

We had a lot of fun, met a lot of new friends, and saw a lot of beautiful country, but the best part of the whole trip was that eight Seabees left and eight Seabees came home.