



ARE YOU READY?

I'm going to fly along with you as you take your Cessna 206 Stationair II for a flight to pick up a client out in the flat country beyond the Alaska Range. Your client lives in a log cabin along the Kuskokwim River, downstream from the village of Aniak. You've made sure to have the necessary flight charts with you. Before takeoff from Anchorage's Lake Hood seaplane base, you've checked again to verify that you have both the Anchorage and McGrath Sectional Aircraft Charts. You do...

The weather isn't bad, really, with a 3,500-foot ceiling. And though the Alaska Range sticks up there ahead of you between 6,000 and 12,000 feet, you know that Merrill Pass had a floor at around 2,400 feet, so the current ceiling is about 1,100 more than you'll really need.

After we've wiggled through Merrill Pass and descended to the Stony River, you sit back, relax a bit, and settle in for the long flight ahead.

You do have VHF capabilities, including a good VOR head, though the latter won't be of much help out here. You haven't set up Aniak on your ADF, which surprises me. I think that's a bit casual, but I won't take you to task for it. I know that following the

Stony River for a while will put you ahead of the power curve, so to speak.

Coming up on the Lime Hills, I notice you bring up Sparrevohn at 231 MHz on your low frequency radio, shown on your chart as Cairn Mountain. The ADF needle comes to life again and points slightly to the left of dead ahead. The DME gives us the distance to Cairn Mountain, but you seem to pay no attention to that, and that's another surprise for me. I guess you're fixed on the Stony River, but that's okay with me too, for the moment.

Sparrevohn was one of Alaska's Distant Early Warning (DEW) sites, those Dewline radar sites constructed during the heat of our Cold War with Russia. Sparrevohn gave you an update on the weather ahead at Aniak, and you notice that the ceiling has dropped quite a bit to 1,200 feet. Still pretty good for Alaska weather out here, and perfectly fine if you stay over the flatlands around and ahead of us.

Soon, however, you can see that the ceiling is getting still lower out ahead of us. In fact, we're now flying at 300 feet AGL (Above Ground Level). The air around us is still quite smooth because of the low adiabatic lapse rate, which adds a bit to your confidence level at the moment.

Cairn Mountain, itself, at around 3,800 feet MSL (Mean Sea Level), was close off our left wing just before we passed Lime Village, but we couldn't really see either of them with the lowered ceiling. As we passed Lime Village — called Stony River Village when I first flew this area years ago — we were abeam the Lime Hills.

I notice you look a little confused for a moment as we pass abeam Tundra Lake.

Shortly after having passed Tundra, I notice that you have turned slightly left to take up a more westerly heading. I presumed that your intention was to fly direct to Aniak and then downstream along the Kuskokwim River to your destination. I notice, too, that you're now leaning a bit farther forward in your seat, and that your grip on the yoke is a bit firmer. In short, you don't look as sure of yourself, nor as comfortable with the weather, as you were a few miles back.

It wasn't long before we were following a small stream between

the Chuilnuk and the Kiokluk Mountains. These hills poke up at 3,796 and 1,093 feet respectively, the higher one about 1,600 feet above our current altitude. The tops are certainly lost in the overcast above us. I should probably have taken the controls at this point, but I knew the country drained westward from here, so I didn't move. We occasionally chatted on the intercom.

I watched as you turned toward the northwest, apparently looking for the Kuskokwim River and Aniak. That was a bad choice. We'd find the Kuskokwim, of course, but we wouldn't be anywhere near Aniak when we did.

We soon found the Kuskokwim, but Aniak, of course, was not in sight. The river hadn't become really wiggly and braided here, because we were upstream from Aniak. You apparently didn't recognize that and you turned northward to begin following the river upstream. Well, you'd soon figure it out, I was sure, when we found Crooked Creek. We had hit the river close to Napaimiut, so Crooked wouldn't be many flying minutes upstream, perhaps 20 or so.

When we found Crooked, you knew we were too far upstream, and, with a sheepish grin, you turned southward to take up a downstream course.

When we finally found, and had landed, at Aniak, you made arrangements to top the tanks while we took a coffee break and reviewed the flight so far. You quickly admitted that you should have been using the ADF feature for Aniak. With hardly any wind at all, this would simply have been an almost straight-line course, and heading, from Sparrevohn to Aniak. While I didn't belabor that point, I did stress that any long trip to a river, large lake, or certainly the coastline at salt water, should be planned so as to arrive as much as 10 to 20 miles left or right of your intended destination. If you don't hit that spot dead center, at least you will know whether to turn left or right in order to reach your ultimate goal.

We later found your client's little log cabin, right where it was supposed to be, and the day had been saved for you. I'm sure you've learned at least a little something about flying the big Alaska outback.

Here's a little flight that will test both your abilities and your

suitability for a life of flying the very challenging Alaska bush. You're going to fly a standard 150-hp Piper Super Cub for a flight from Anchorage's Merrill Field, through 92-mile long Lake Clark Pass and to the village of Nondalton, on the shore of Alaska's largest fresh water lake, Lake Iliamna. The weather could certainly be better and, in fact, is below even IFR recommended flight. This isn't all that odd during many of Alaska's bush operations. A Zone Departure will get you clear of Anchorage air traffic, whatever that might be on this scabby day.

After all the necessary, and conscientious, preflight activities, you are loaded with your emergency gear, charts, and whatever else you think you may need for this rather routine (for many Alaska pilots) flight. So let's get on with it...

You were cleared for departure from runway 31 with the Chester Creek departure. You'll turn right from the runway heading for a few seconds after liftoff. After crossing the Alaska railroad tracks south of the city, you'll be crossing about three miles of the really unfriendly waters of Knik Arm to Point McKenzie. It is here that the Knik Arm dumps into notorious Cook Inlet. From Point McKenzie, it's an easy leg following the west shore of Cook Inlet. Except, of course, that the ceiling is keeping you below 300 feet AGL. That's no problem because you don't expect any hills to pop up from the surface of that cold and unfriendly water. Nor along the extensive flatlands ahead, either. When you pass Tyonek, about 20 minutes out, you can see neither the village nor its airfield, since both are above you and concealed in the overcast. You remember that the airstrip is located only 87 feet above high tide line, and you're now flying at around 60 feet. It has also begun to snow lightly, but that's not a problem either. Yet...

After you pass the next little curve in the shoreline, you fly past the private strip at Nikolai Creek. That's only 30 feet above the high tide line, but you can't see that one either. You're now down to 20 feet with your cozy little airplane, but forward visibility is still out to about two hazy miles. You recognize the Chakachatna River, which flows easterly from Chakachamna Lake buried 15 miles away in the Chigmit Mountains, a part of the Alaska Range. Then you remember that these mountains rise from the flatlands to above

11,000 feet, and that they're only about nine minutes' flying time away.

When the shoreline turns from southwest to southeast, you know you're coming up on the 2,000-foot strip at West Foreland and Point Kustatan. Your grip on the control stick has become a little firmer now, hasn't it? You're about to turn away from Cook Inlet, and that unfriendly water has been your friend up to this point. Until now, it's been easy to see its dark water through the blowing snow. You're about to turn over a snow-white world with only scattered low willows for a sight picture that tells you up from down. And that will be only a fleeting view.

You turn right at that little cabin on an unnamed creek to take up a heading that is almost due west. You know that you're now flying directly toward the mountains, and that they're only about seven minutes in front of the black circle of the spinning propeller. 420 seconds. A lifetime...

You have added instrument privileges to your pilot ticket, of course, but your little Super Cub isn't really jam-packed with instruments. Your instrument rating makes you feel a little more comfortable, certainly, but it won't really help you very much today. You know that. And you also know that it's begun snowing even harder over the last few minutes.

You've carefully selected a compass heading for this short leg, but the turbulence has now picked up as you get ever nearer to the mountains. It's now somewhere between mild and moderate. Your liquid compass isn't as big a help as you might wish. Moreover, you don't have a gyroscopic compass in your panel. It's those little things that begin to count now. And that little thought reminds you to check again your oil temperature and pressure. Your altimeter now reads about 20 feet, but you can see that by just glancing out the window, can't you?

The scattered and frozen willows that you see zipping past the window are now your only link with the earth hurtling by only a few feet below. Forward visibility is now down to just a shade less than one-quarter mile, which means that whatever you are seeing right now will be history in only a few seconds. You are scooting right along at about 146 feet per second. You can see less than eight

seconds ahead of your hurtling little airplane! Eight seconds to see, evaluate, and react to what you are seeing at any given moment. *You still with me? Still wanna be an Alaska bush pilot?*

You remember now that ahead of your hurtling little airplane are three 90° turns to get you into Lake Clark Pass. First a left, then a quick right, and finally another quick left, this last one right at the foot of a glacier, which you most likely will not be able to see because of the snow you are flying through. It will be just more white scenery on top of the plenty of white you already have around you.

And you also remember that, when you start even a steep turn, the airplane is still going to cover some ground in a forward direction. So an “immediate” turn doesn’t *immediately* change your direction of flight, does it?

It’s just about here that your better judgment overcomes your confidence and what you feel is your skill level. You decide it’s about time to get the hell out of Dodge! But that decision has been made on the spur of the moment. So are you really ready for a course change? Think about it for a moment...

You’ll add power, roll into a shallow, climbing turn, probably to the left because of your habit of flying left turns in standard landing patterns. Besides, left turns seem to be easier, considering the added torque of the power addition. Before you roll into that turn, however, were you sure to mentally note the direction in which you’ve been flying up to this point? Let’s presume that you’ve done that. You have neither an HSI nor an artificial horizon, so you’re going to be flying primary panel — basically needle, ball, airspeed, and altimeter.

You’ve confirmed a positive rate of climb using the altimeter. But, did you note the precise time that you began your turn? Your standard rate of turn, you recall, will be three° per second, which means that your 180° climbing left turn will take 60 seconds. When will that 60 seconds really be over? And, by the way, have you notified Kenai, which, after completing the turn, will be about 30 miles, or about 18 minutes, directly ahead and across 20 miles of flatland and the unfriendly waters of Cook Inlet? You’re going to be about 20 minutes in IMC conditions, with neither the required

instruments nor a filed IFR flight plan. While Alaska's aircraft controllers are as understanding and as helpful as any on earth, you're still going to be tip-toeing through a pretty good scolding, if not a licensing action. And that's presuming you're cool enough to have successfully passed from less than VFR and into full IMC conditions. I hate to admit this, but most true Alaska bush pilots would simply have punched on through Lake Clark Pass and arrived safely at Iliamna. *Still want to be one of those bush pilot guys?*

If you learned to fly in Alaska, VFR into IMC conditions might not scare the pants off you. You'll already have flown in some pretty depressing weather. Which reminds me: when you select your flying sunglasses, please don't get the gray, green, or blue tinted style. Get good brown lenses. You'll find that (a) they cut glare much better, (b) allow a better visual definition of clouds and distances, (c) won't distort colors, and (d) won't give you the blues when flying in really scabby weather. Being mentally depressed while flying, even if you don't consciously know it, will be a bummer. Wear brown glasses! But, back to VFR into IMC.

IMC weather, as defined by the FARs, isn't all that bad, really. Plenty of ceiling, and with more forward visibility than you really need. But when the stratus, snow, or fog really hugs the terrain, you're into seriously bad weather. Still flyable, perhaps, but only marginally. The real danger, to an experienced pilot, is when one of the last two remaining options is lost to you. When you are no longer able to turn around and get the hell out of Dodge, you're so far behind the power curve that your life may then be measured in minutes, or even seconds. That's no place for you to be! Many of us in Alaska have been there a few times, but I can tell you that it's really not a place you will like very much. And that sort of flying has taken the lives of some pretty skookum Alaska pilots. Don't know *skookum*? It's an Alaskan term meaning the person is sharp, confident, capable, experienced, dependable, etc.