

## Pilots are Just Plane People

My dad got a new plane last week. A Cessna 206, on 3430s, 750 hours on the engine. A good deal, in other words. He called me up a couple weeks before he bought it and told me he had something to show me.

“Is it at Lake Hood?” I asked. But I had stolen his thunder.

“How did you know? Did Mom tell you?”

“No. I just had a feeling. Planes and fishing are really the only things you get that excited over, Dad, and I figured you weren’t going to take me fishing for my lunch break.”

He took me to see it that day at lunch—not to get my opinion on it, but to share in his excitement. While we were in the yard, a guy dressed in hip boots and aviator glasses came up to take a look at it. A plane with “For Sale” signs draped over the prop blades always draws pilots, whether they’re looking for a plane or not.

“How you doin’?” Dad asked.

“Not too bad. This your plane?”

“Not yet. Thinking about buying it. It’s a pretty good deal. Floats’re 3430s, 750 hours on the engine, 190 on the prop. ‘Parently, the bank repo’d it, so that’s why it’s priced so low.”

“Huh. Interior looks in good shape. You see the radios?”

“Yeah. They got ‘em locked in the hangar there, but they’re good ones, already set up with a Forest Service radio too.”

Dad flew it home last weekend, proud and elated to finally have another plane sitting at his empty dock, and ready for Bear Lake Air and Guide Service to begin another season of flightsees and hunting trips.

I think the thing that drew my dad to Alaska flying was the fact that to see even a little bit of the state, a plane is more necessary than a car. A plane can take him to places that few humans have ever been; he has already seen more of Alaska than most Alaskans will in a lifetime of living here.

Alaskan skies are notoriously difficult to fly in—not really a pilot’s vision of perfect skies: unpredictable weather, violent storms, rugged mountains not always mapped correctly. What makes Alaskan flying perfect is the culture and the landscape. Recent Alaskan history is steeped in aviation lore; I used to love to sit around when my dad’s flying buddies started to tell their stories, tales of adventures only possible in the far north. I was never sure how much of a story was true, but it didn’t matter, because all of it was believable.

Jim stands on the dock, hip waders folded around his ankles, AOPA cap on his head, flight vest, which doubles as a fishing vest, draped over his shoulders. He’s 5'2", in his late sixties, missing some front teeth and full of hugs and smiles every time I see him. In Jim’s hands a plane, even a big plane, is like a toy, light and maneuverable, and his competence more than makes up for his lack of height.

He is talking to my dad, recounting a story I’ve heard before about waking up at his cabin in October and finding his plane frozen in the lake.

“There was only a thin layer out in the middle, so I waited for the day to warm up, figuring I could break ice out to the middle if I went real slow. Well, the wind picked up right as I was ready to go, and all the ice that wasn’t stuck to something drifted into my cove. I was totally iced in, big pancakes of ice that were closing up the lake real fast. Tried using the paddle, but that didn’t work too good—the ice just kept coming. I thought, Well, I might just have to

walk out, but, you know, my cabin's pretty far in, prolly woulda taken days.

“Late afternoon, the wind changed direction, and just before dark there was enough open lake to take off. So there I was flying toward Kenai Lake in the dark, praying I wouldn't hit a mountain before I landed. Fortunately, Cooper Landing has enough lights that I could head for it, and I just figured I had a sixteen-mile runway to play with. So I just set 'er down, nice and easy, musta coasted over the water for a good mile or two before I felt the floats touch. Man was I glad just to trim back power and idle in the rest of the way.”

Even though I've heard it before, I still hold my breath. It is the closeness to disaster, and the reality that every Alaskan pilot is only a couple steps away from catastrophe, that gives the story its power. It turns every flight into an adventure.

Dad's convinced that between my sister and me, someone will be following in his footsteps. And, he's probably right. When I travel, when I consciously and purposely immerse myself in different countries, languages, and cultures, sometimes I get the urge to soar above everything, to locate my pinprick of existence in the vastness of the landscape, and to find that special place that no one else knows about. Perspective—and vision—can only be gained higher than 2500 feet.

“Cessna four two papa descending southbound for landing at Paradise Lake.” The transmission is scratchy through our headsets. Dad looks around for the other plane but he doesn't find it.

“That you Jim? Where you at?”

“Yeah, hey Dennis. Turning left base through the notch at twenty-five hunnerd.”

Dad swivels and immediately spots the plane behind us, about to drop out of sight below the mountains. “Roger, I see you. You goin’ fishin’?”

“Yep. I hear the rainbows are on the nymphs up there like flies on...well, you know. Gonna see if it ain’t true.”

“Well, good luck to ya, Jim.”

We are flying south to Bear Lake. Dad has just taken me on one of his standard flightsee routes: up and over Lost Lake, through the back door to Crescent, over the pass to Kenai Lake, through the valley to Skilak and then straight up the glacier. He likes to fly low over Skilak Lake and then climb suddenly, so his passengers will realize the enormity of their surroundings. It takes a long time, it seems, to reach the top of the glacier, a deep blue labyrinth of cracks and crevasses, dangerous as it is wondrous. We meander through passes and over meadows, looking for wildlife and waterfalls in a constantly changing landscape.

“Cessna four seven Zulu southbound Mile twelve at twenty-five hundred, descending for southbound landing on Bear Lake.”

We are starting our approach. What would take several minutes in a car takes seconds in the plane, and soon we are gliding over the still waters of our home base. We bounce a little on the landing, and Dad grimaces. “Man, I hate it when it’s glassy like this. The lake just turns into a big black hole.”

My sister and I learned early on to assess weather in terms of fly-ability, and it became as easy to look up an aviation forecast as a regular one. When he flew out of Cooper Landing, Dad would often call for an update on the Seward conditions. “Well, Dad,” we’d tell him, “the top of Mt. Tiehacker’s still visible, so the ceiling’s at about 5,000.” Or, “I don’t know Dad—it’s clear,

but the wind waves on Bear Lake look like they're about 2 feet. It's gonna be a rough ride."

We also learned "pilotspeak". We taught our friends the phonetic alphabet and used it to write notes in "code" in school, and we retold, in lay terms, the outrageous stories Dad's buddies had told us. We also spent many an afternoon pumping floats and filling wings with Avgas, maneuvering planes and tying them down on our docks to make room for more. We always resented working for my dad when we weren't getting paid, but in truth, it was much more fun to resent working at an air taxi than in a store or office. This family business meant being outside, and trips out to the fjords or Prince William Sound.

When friends comment on their flights on commercial jets, I tend to scoff. That experience can never be compared with flying over the Alaskan wilderness in a bush plane, with a bush pilot. In an airliner the ground is miles below, seen as if it were a backdrop at a play—believable, but not real. In a bush plane, the land is much closer, the wilderness more tangible. Sometimes I feel as if I can reach my hand through the window and touch the rocky peaks, tear a leaf off a tree, run my fingers through the fur of a Dall sheep perched on a ledge.

My dad's plane has been my access to more than just Alaska. The times I've flown with him have been more than just day trips to interesting places. They were powerful lessons for both my sister and me. Now, the walls of a house or the limits of a city are too confining and we are always looking to adventures beyond. Staying put, settling down, are just not concepts I understand. I have my dad and his plane to thank for that. People often tell me I am just like him; they tell me I am my father's daughter. Really, though, I think they mean I am a pilot's daughter.