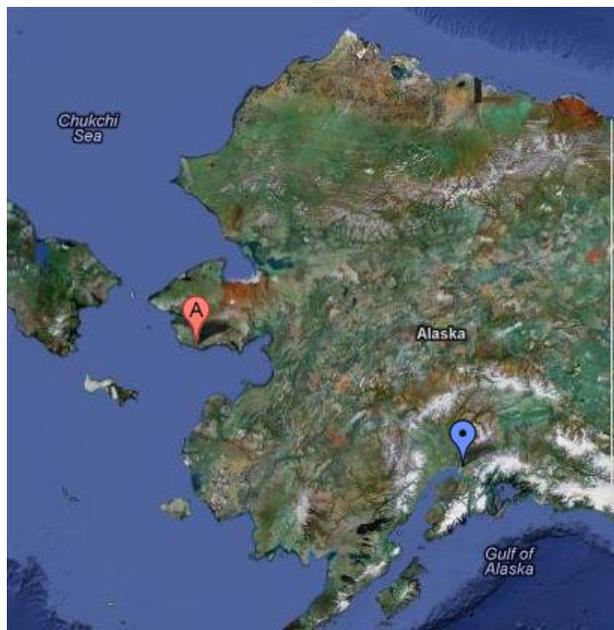


Member Story - Art Lewis - Of Props and Docs

February, 2013



Exercise King Crab X did not get off to an auspicious start. The trip to Alaska was nominal, three long days of flying with two RONS and three refueling stops, but even the much talked about problems of delays in fueling at Annette Island had not materialized. The weather at Elmendorf had cooperated, clear and bitterly cold, near zero, when we landed, but we were all excited about our arrival in Alaska. The fact that the club was undergoing renovation and the main kitchen was closed did not disturb us that much, but the announcement that due to the extreme weather over the Bering Sea so far that month, the king crab season was late and there would be no king crab for dinner that night, the one thing we had talked about for the entire trip up, was crushing. The steaks, served on paper plates with plastic dinnerware, just did not get the mission off on the right foot.



Exercise King Crab X, the Army's Artic training exercise, was held near Nome, Alaska, the last two weeks of October in 1966. This was back in the days when Air Route Traffic Control would set aside a flight corridor for the Air Force and the aircrews were responsible for maintaining separation within the corridor; this was the manner in which 12 C-119s would fly to and from Nome every time we went there. We entered the corridor at a point near Elmendorf and exited it at Unalakleet, a radio fix and flight service station on the south side of Norton Sound, an inlet from the Bering Sea, and across the sound from Nome. The station attendant, the same voice every time we talked to Unalakleet so I wondered if he kept the radio next to his bed, gave us the current weather observation at Nome and told us to contact Nome Radar, an Air Force non-precision radar flown in just for the exercise, for landing at Nome.

Until our last two trips to Nome, the Nome weather was the same. "Nome weather: Special observation, ceiling 400 feet, visibility ½ mile in light blowing snow. Wind 250° at 12 knots. Runway braking action reported nil." Those familiar with flying can

quickly guess our landing minimums were 400 feet/ ½ mile visibility and that the real numbers were much closer to 360 feet and 3/8 of a mile. “Braking action nil” means the runway is covered with ice. The runway, by the way, for the non-precision approach was 28 (280°) so we had a cross-wind trying to blow us off the runway on landing. As I said, 12 aircraft departed Elmendorf, 12 landed safely at Nome, off-loaded the men, equipment, and supplies they were assigned to airlift, then returned to Elmendorf.



I believe it was our departure from Nome on the third day of the exercise that the problem occurred. I was flying left seat with Tom Lenze in the right seat and Bob Holloway at the navigator table. We were about to enter the corridor for Elmendorf at Unalakleet, when I heard Frank Hamilton’s voice on guard channel, the emergency frequency, advising Nome Radar he was in descent returning to Nome with an uncontrollable propeller, and requesting radar vectors to the runway. I knew if Frank was on the radio, it meant Bob Stebbins was in the left seat

flying and Bob had much less flying time than I did, had not yet up-graded to aircraft commander, and was going to have to make a “no-go-around” descent below normal landing minimums, landing on an icy runway with a cross-wind, and only one engine to use for reverse thrust, the only braking action available to him. It scared me.

We did not know they had landed safely until we were back at Elmendorf. A maintenance crew went up on one of the flights the next day to repair the propeller. After a night in the “hotel” at Nome, Frank, Bob, and crew returned to Elmendorf late in the afternoon. Frank purchased an oosik in Nome as a souvenir of their night there. If you don’t know, an oosik is the native Alaskan name for a baculum, or the penis bone of the walrus. As you might suspect, it is quite large.



Tom, Bob, and I had a day off and another trip to Nome and were due to stand down another day when Tom woke me up early saying Bill Bassnett, our operations officer for the exercise, wanted to see us at operations. Frank Hamilton’s aircraft had been repaired and Bill wanted Tom, Bob Holloway, and Louie Winter, the chief of our flight engineers at the time, and me to ride up on another aircraft that day and bring Frank’s aircraft back to Elmendorf. Those who know about airplanes probably remember that when maintenance has been done on a propeller, the aircraft must have a functional test flight flown by a qualified functional test pilot; that had not been done. Further, although Tom was qualified to perform the test flight, it must be done under

visual flight conditions something which was not available at Nome. So we were to accept the aircraft for a one-time flight and bring it back to Elmendorf. As it turned out, the crew to fly us up to Nome was a 356th crew; I have never been a good passenger under the best of conditions, and flying into Nome with another crew did not help. Further, once I got there I'd be taking off an icy runway with a propeller of unknown condition to fly some 600 miles across snow and ice covered mountains back to Elmendorf, which did not make me any more comfortable. It was late afternoon when we arrived at Nome; Tom, Bob, and I went to the Army mess tent and had some dinner, while Louie went to inspect our C-119. When he was finished with his inspection, he had the tower call the mess tent for me come out and start the engines. For those who don't know, the oil in big radial engines has to be diluted with aviation gasoline in extremely cold weather to make it thin enough for starting the engines. But that gasoline must be vaporized before take-off to insure the oil is again thick enough to lubricate the system; this requires engine oil temperatures of about 40° C (remember, the free air temperature at Nome that night was about -12°C! The details are not important, but we were more than 30 minutes getting the aircraft ready for departure. Tom and Bob came out, we got our clearance, and taxied out for take-off.



Most readers will know that big radials engines have to have a “run-up” before flight to check proper operation of the propellers and engines. That was impossible at Nome, we simply checked to see the temperatures were in limits and started down the runway. At about the 2000 foot marker, Louis shouted, “Abort! Abort! Abort!” I pulled the throttles into the full reverse range and slipped and skidded 2500 more feet down the runway before we stopped. Tom asked Louie what was wrong, he said I was beyond the maximum allowable manifold pressure, but we were only getting about 2/3 the required take-off power. That meant we had spark plugs which were not firing correctly, almost certainly because of all the low-power running I had done to get the gasoline out of the oil had fouled the plugs. Louie was a stickler for doing things by the book and said we had to run the engines at a high power setting to clean the plugs; at any power setting above 1000 rpm (a very, very low setting) the aircraft simply slid across the ice. As we slipped and slid like a drunken sailor on shore leave back to the end of the runway for another try, Tom asked what type of plugs we had (we used both “massive electrode” and “fine-wire” plugs); I don't recall which we had, but Tom was satisfied and when we were in position at the end of the runway, said, “watch me,” and proceeded to lean out the right engine. “That's not approved!” said Louie, “you can't

do that.” “Watch me,” said Tom. “Sir, that is not an approved procedure!” Louie was insistent. “Just watch me!” The same pattern was repeated for the left engine. “Now,” said Tom, “we’re very light. If we have 160 psi torque at 62 inches of manifold, we’re going to fly.” We should normally have had over 212 psi torque at that manifold pressure for take-off. I could tell Louie was not happy



with the idea, but he had now given up on Tom. Civil twilight was almost over so it was almost dark as we headed down the runway, and as I passed 60 inches of manifold, I saw the torque was already at 165 psi, so I knew we were going to fly. The torque was still improving as we went through 8,000 feet on our climb-out and the plugs cleaned themselves up. I was so fixed on the torque problem; we were at cruise altitude before I realized both propellers had functioned properly. As we settled down for the flight back to Elmendorf, Tom commented, “By the way, there was an Army doctor who wanted to get back to Fort Richardson tonight, so I told him to hop in the back of the aircraft and ride back with us.” I was stunned; we had no load master, so he was all alone in the dark, and probably cold, cargo compartment because we had not put the heat on back there. I had Louie get a heater going for him and turn on the lights in the cargo compartment; I wished Tom had told him to come sit in the jump seat on the flight deck, rather than be alone in the back.

After that the trip back to Elmendorf was uneventful and by the time I got off the flight deck, the doctor was gone. The next time I went to Nome, the low had finally drifted south and the sky was partly cloudy and winds much lower. I believe it was our last night in Alaska when we finally got king crab legs, on paper plates of course. And then there was the trip back to Clinton County, but that is another story.



There is an epilog to this story. In 1970 we went home to Mississippi for Christmas. At dinner the first night we were home, my Mother commented, “By the way, son, we sold a lot on Lewis Lane to a surgeon who has moved here to work in the new North Mississippi Baptist Hospital. Of course I checked up on his background before we sold the lot and he was an Army doctor at a base in Alaska. I told him you had flown in Alaska and he tells the wildest story about flying out of Nome one night with a crew of reservists.” After dinner I called him, and on his invitation went down and we shared a scotch over the “wild flight out of Nome.”