

Memories from my Logbook



A BUSH PILOT'S STORY

Lynn Wyatt

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Chapter 19

A Nasty Day

Having recently relocated to Sitka from Anchorage, I purchased a three-story log house in an area called Halibut Point on Baranof Island. Located about 50 feet from the water's edge, the house sat on a bank about 30 feet above sea level. The view was fantastic, looking out across the bay directly at Mt. Edgecombe, a semi-active volcano that occasionally spewed out smoke.

Hired by Mountain Aviation, a small air taxi operator, I flew out of Sitka airport. We operated two aircraft, a Cessna 185 and de Havilland Beaver, both on amphibious floats.

The amphibious floats gave us the option to land on water with the wheels retracted while also being able to use runways, gravel strips, and beaches. After the last flight of the day, on the way home, we landed in a freshwater lake and cycled the landing gear a few times to wash out the salt water. Back at the airport, we made one final wash-down with fresh water, spraying the wings, tail section, fuselage, and floats, to prevent salt water corrosion.

The following summer months I flew with Steve, the owner of the company. He sat in the right seat, teaching me my way around the area, using forest service maps and channel markers, positioned for ship navigation. Having no GPS back then, and the aircraft with only the basic instruments, we had to be thoroughly familiar with the channels, passes, canyons, and mountains.

Steve constantly asked me “Where are we? Show me on the chart.”

Steve was a good teacher, and I quickly learned my way around. Although the summer weather was very mild, I couldn't understand why Steve insisted that I never fly more than 100 feet above the water, paying strict attention to the numbered channel markers.

He had me fly to channel marker number 15, then turn forty-five degrees right and start timing myself to marker 16, then turn right another fifteen degrees, hit the timer until reaching 17. Even though I could see the turns and knew where we were, he insisted on these procedures until I had it all down to memory. I also had to mark my forest service maps with the times, just in case. *I should have known what was coming.*

Winter approached, and the weather changed dramatically. Strong winds and rain developed with fog and low cloud ceilings. Occasionally, we had days of clear calm that were wonderful until interrupted by severe clear-air turbulence. I figured if it got too bad, we wouldn't fly. Was I ever wrong!

When the big Alaska Airlines 727 couldn't get into Juneau due to weather, they diverted to Sitka. A number of the passengers asked us to fly them to Juneau, under the ceiling at tree-top level through the passes, which got extremely exciting at times.

One time, BB King the blues singer, came off the 727 and someone brought him to our office for the continued flight to Juneau. He took one look at our airplane sitting on the ramp, and said, "No f...king way am I getting on that!"

He went back to the terminal to wait out the weather for the Alaska Airlines flight.

There was never a day when we didn't fly.

Walking out to the kitchen early one morning to get my coffee, I looked out the window and couldn't believe how bad the weather was. *No way, no one can fly in that.* Directly across the bay, the wind blew about 50 knots, and rain, with whitecaps, and blowing spray on the surface. Low clouds hung just above the sea—it was a nasty day!

Figuring this was going to be an easy day, I strolled into the office to relax with a cup of coffee, read the paper; maybe pull one of the airplanes into the hanger for some routine maintenance. In my dreams.

The minute I walked through the door, Steve told me “Get the Beaver fueled up; you have a pickup at Kake Village and then on to Angoon.”

I pointed out the window. “Are you serious?”

“What? —a little rain and wind never hurt anyone.” *Steve is obviously mentally unstable.*

The West side of Baranof Island, where we were located in Sitka, faces directly out to the Gulf of Alaska. Most of the villages where we flew were scattered throughout the myriad of islands and the mainland East of Baranof Island. If we had flights to the northeast of Baranof, we had to use the bays, inlets, and straits that separated Baranof from Chichagof Island. This was the Alaska Marine Highway with channel markers for navigation.

On flights southeast of Baranof, we had to use one of the passes through the mountains. We rarely had enough ceiling to fly directly over the 3,000 to 4,000 ft. mountains that blocked the center of the island. In all my time there I was able to fly over the top just once.

Kake was southeast, so I had to use the pass, which could be scary on a nasty day like this. It felt like I would be blown over just taxiing out to the runway. I did all my preflight run checks, hoping to find something wrong with the airplane so I wouldn't have to go. *Bummer—everything checks out okay.*

Roaring down the runway about 30 feet, I was airborne but flying sideways. Gear up flaps, up, prop and manifold pressure back to 20/20 as I headed out into the Gulf along the west, (windward side), of Baranof. I managed to get up to about 100 ft. before finding the solid cloud ceiling and had to drop down.

The plane was being tossed all over the place by the wind, the sea below me a maelstrom of waves, spray and, roiling water. The shoreline was nothing but jagged cliffs and rocks. *If the engine fails now, I will be history.* I headed south, keeping the Baranof shoreline off to my left, watching for the entrance to Whale Bay, which was about 40 miles south of Sitka. The rain poured so hard I could barely see past the prop.

The pass I looked for is called Whale Bay/Gut Bay. Whale Bay is several miles wide at the mouth and runs back about five miles into the mountains. It then funnels down to about one-half mile wide for another several miles and stops. At this point, I had to find the low pass through the mountains. This pass narrows down to barely two wingspans and runs for about five miles. Vertical cliffs soar up several thousand feet on both sides; then it opens up to Gut Bay, then to Chatham Strait.

Wide Whale Bay narrows down to a mountain pass, then opens to wide Gut Bay—a perfect venturi—like the carburetor on an engine that is designed to accelerate the air flow. The wind blew about 40 to 50 knots when I entered Whale Bay. This meant it was blowing probably 60 to 80 knots in the pass. It made for an extremely exciting ride.

Entering the narrow section, I always tried to stay to the right, as there was barely enough room for two aircraft to pass in opposite directions. Keeping to the extreme right also gave me a look down the pass to see if it was weathered in. If I couldn't see through the pass, I continued the turn, with just enough room to turn around at this spot only. Once into the pass, I was committed.

Turning into the narrow section, I could see through the pass. All was clear, so I continued. Suddenly, it felt like a giant hand grabbed the airplane, shaking it like a rag doll. It tossed me around so violently I could hardly keep my eyes in focus. My seat belt strapped me tight to the seat, but my upper body was slammed into the side door, then into the control yoke so hard I feared I would break something. It was all I could do to keep the top of the glare shield level with the horizon. The roll rate of the winds and turbulence exceeded the roll rate of the flight controls, and I was just along for the ride. *This shit is scary! It feels like the plane will start coming apart.*

I was being tossed up, rolled over to where the wing tip was pointing ninety degrees straight down, then hammered from below—then kicked in the side. *This is it. I will become a splat on the face of the cliffs.* And then I was out of it, into Gut Bay.

Flying into Chatham Straight, I turned north. The wind died down, and the ceiling lowered to about 50 feet, with the rain coming down in sheets. I dropped down to just above the water, continuing north, looking for the channel marker for Fredrick Sound.

The ceiling continued to lower down to the water. I pulled back the power and landed on the relatively smooth sea. I kept enough power to keep the airplane on the step, maintaining about 40 knots airspeed. I followed my compass heading for several miles until the ceiling lifted enough for me to take-off again. I flew

very low above the water, when directly ahead of me, out of the rain and fog, materialized a fishing boat with a tall mast—*Oh shit!*

I pulled back hard on the control wheel and shot up into the clouds, just clearing the mast. That woke me up!

In the clouds with zero visibility, I slightly recovered my senses. Although I had an instrument rating, the airplane didn't. I tried to keep the wings level with my artificial horizon indicator while descending to where I could see again.

I found the channel marker, flew around the corner and landed at Kake. As I picked up my passengers, they asked, "How was the weather coming over?"—"Oh, nothing unusual," I told them. "Just another nasty day."

Then we had to fly back through it all.