



## Chapter 3

### **Flying or Bust!<sup>1</sup>** **Spring 1956**

*One evening, as my instructor and I taxied from Lake Spenard toward the channel to Lake Hood, I saw a pair of floats bobbing on the waves at one end of the lake. “What are those floats doing over there?” I asked. “And why are they upside down?”*

*“There’s a plane hanging under the water beneath those floats,” my instructor calmly explained. “It belongs to a student of mine. Apparently she relaxed the stick upon landing and the plane flipped.”*

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“Hey, Doc, you’d love flying,” said Wally Zimmer, an enthusiastic friend, as we drove away from Lake Hood, where his four-place Stinson on floats was anchored to barrel tie-downs.

I was a frequent admirer of the planes that lined the lake. In fact, at this time, the great colorful brood represented 20 percent of the nation’s floatplanes, which meant Lake Hood harbored more floatplanes than any other spot in the world.<sup>2</sup> And no wonder, Alaskans flew approximately thirty times more, per capita, than Lower 48 residents.

After less than a year in this Territory, with its oftentimes insurmountable terrain, I could see why. Airplanes meant much more than optional or exotic transportation. Vital supplies were carried via air freight. Emergency aid, more often than not, had to be flown in. The Lower 48 states depended on the nation’s

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<sup>1</sup> This story was first published in *Alaska Flying* in February, 1987.

<sup>2</sup>Alaska has about 8 times as many pilots and 15 times as many private planes per capita as the rest of the United States.

web of roads and coast-to-coast railway system, while Alaska looked to the skies.

“You could really see Alaska if you’d learn to fly!” Wally continued. His voice grew louder, so as to be heard above the clattering gravel on the narrow two-lane road. I agreed. Just living in Anchorage was not enough. Since the main roads out of Anchorage either dead-ended in Homer, on the Kenai Peninsula, Valdez at the end of the Richardson Highway, or in Fairbanks, flying certainly played a major part in seeing the majority of the state.

“You know, Doc, a J-3<sup>3</sup> would be perfect for you! It’s economical, a good plane to train on, you wouldn’t have any trouble selling it — and a good resale price, too. Even if you’d decide to keep it, it would be a great plane for hunting because of its slow speed.” His sales pitch was convincing.

This late autumn conversation echoed in my mind when I returned from Noatak in the middle of a history-making intense winter. I thought of my flight with Tommy and remembered the feeling of independence and the sense of defiance of man against nature.

Yes, it did seem like a sensible thing to do: buy a floatplane and learn to fly. “Alaska or Bust” had become “Flying or Bust.” But, no matter my fervor, Lake Hood was a very large frozen pond at this moment, and no floatplanes would be maneuvering about for quite some months.

The winter-in-waiting was not wasted. I worked on two projects. First, I read everything I could about Alaska aviation.<sup>4</sup> I found out that the first flight in Alaska took place on July 4, 1913, when The Aerial Circus, with James Martin, traveled to the then tiny log-cabin settlement of Fairbanks. At the ballpark, a crowd watched the dusty takeoff of the biplane, a takeoff that stamped a benchmark in Alaska history.

Ten years later, Ben Eielson, a quiet North Dakota

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<sup>3</sup>Two-seater Piper.

<sup>4</sup>A number of early pilots are written about in *Heroes of the Horizon: Flying Adventures of Alaska’s Legendary Bush Pilots*, Jerry Bruder.

school teacher, not only took off from the same ballpark, but broke a trail across the immeasurable skies of the untamed land, penetrating the air with the never-heard-before drone of an aircraft engine. As the first pilot to cross the top of the world, he established airmail service in Alaska and opened the gates of the remote wilderness to commercial and passenger aviation.<sup>5</sup>

Exciting stuff. I wished I could have been there. I just hoped there might be a few adventures left in the sky for me — whenever I got there.

My second project was to persuade my earth-loving wife that I should fly. Speaking to Ruby's feelings of being locked in, I pointed out that the plane offered wings of freedom. "Honey, you wouldn't be cut-off by dead-end roads, dark seashores, and towering mountains."

She wasn't easy to convince, even though she realized Alaskans accepted air travel as a routine means of transportation. I most definitely did not mention the tundra decorated with planes, or the tales of disappearances in the inlet and mountain alleyways – she was well aware of the risks.

No easy win in this discussion. Granted, I couldn't refute her logic about first paying off medical school loans.

I never did persuade her, but in the spring of 1956, I bought a 1947 red, green, and silver J-3 Cub with a 75 hp engine and a controllable-pitch<sup>6</sup> wooden prop. The Christmas-tree-colored plane cost \$1,500 with wheels and skis, and an additional \$1,000 for floats.

Finding the right place to take flying lessons was

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<sup>5</sup> Ben Eielson died in 1929 on a flight to rescue stranded passengers aboard a freight ship stuck in ice off the Siberian coast. He was only 32. To learn more, read *Wings over Alaska: The Story of Ben Eielson*, Edward A. Herron.

<sup>6</sup> Controllable pitch is a manual process. The pitch of the prop can be changed with the motor off, obviously while the plane on the ground. The variable pitch (constant speed) prop will automatically change pitch depending on engine load. Also, the pitch can be adjusted from the cockpit while the engine is running.



*Flying lessons begin with the J-3 on Lake Hood.*

not as easy as I'd anticipated. At the first place I inquired about lessons, I was told I would have to learn on wheels before I could tackle floats. At the next place, Barton Air Service, I asked again if they taught initial flying on floats.

"Certainly," the young attendant answered. I signed up.

"Bring your plane to our dock at 5:00 p.m. tomorrow and you'll have your first lesson," the middle-aged, muscular instructor told me.

Hesitantly, I stammered, "I don't know anything about airplanes — I don't even know how to start mine, let alone taxi it to your dock."

At that point, no one could have told me that someday I'd be taking off and landing on rivers, mud flats, rock-littered beaches, or knobby mountaintops.

For my first lesson, I walked along the docks on the shoreline and brought the instructor over to my plane. We began with the basics: starting the plane.

During the following weeks, I diligently studied my flight instruction book, and, nearly every evening, headed to Lake Hood. I'd splash through the water in my hip boots, hop onto a float, pump out the floats, and check them for leaks. Satisfied with the results, I'd hand-prop the plane and taxi over to my instructor. Starting the plane and taxiing were easy enough, but



*Prescription for Adventure: Bush Pilot Doctor*

braking for the dock was not. Fortunately for everyone and everything in sight, after some very close calls of nearly smashing into the dock, I learned to plan ahead and cut the throttle in time.



I had to give Ruby credit. Even though she didn't endorse my new sport, she and the children often accompanied me to the lake. At the young age of eight months, Mark was intensely fascinated by airplanes. His busy squirming subsided when he watched the planes buzz on takeoffs and splash when landing. Later, after I achieved my license and he'd fly with me, he'd sit on a rolled up sleeping bag, as quiet as a mouse, taking in everything, from the control panel to the cloud formations, to the landscape below.

When I was a kid, a tractor was natural and comfortable to me. There was no distinction between "before I drove tractor" and "after I learned to drive tractor." For Mark, this would be said about airplanes

On warm evenings or "hot" days of 60 degrees, Ruth and Naomi took their shoes off and waded in the clear water. They were sixteen months apart in age and close companions, yet each with her own personality. Ruth



*The Gaede Family takes part in the Flying Adventure.*

was a nurturer and played second mother to Mark, doting on his every need. Naomi was a leader; although when she took the lead, Ruth wouldn't be far behind her. Here at the lake, their toes pressed into the sand as they pulled up water weeds that resembled bamboo fishing poles. "Fishing pole weeds" they called the 12-to-16-inch stalks, which easily pulled apart into shorter segments.

My time spent at Lake Hood was not as tranquil as theirs. One evening, as my instructor and I taxied from Lake Spenard toward the channel to Lake Hood,<sup>7</sup> I saw a pair of floats bobbing on the waves at one end of the lake. "What are those floats doing over there?" I asked. "And why are they upside down?"

"There's a plane hanging under the water beneath those floats," my instructor calmly explained. "It belongs to a student of mine. Apparently she relaxed the stick upon landing and the plane flipped."

"Did she get out?"

"Oh yes, and I think she learned a lesson she'll never forget."

The chilling scene was still vivid in my mind as we docked at Barton's Air Service and my instructor climbed out of the plane. Before bounding off the floats and onto the dock, as he usually did, leaving me to taxi

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<sup>7</sup> In 1934, Wesley Earl Dunkle, a miner and president of Star Air Lines considered the merit of a seaplane harbor in Anchorage, other than landing on the inlet, which was subject to tidal variations, or two smaller lakes near the Anchorage Airport: Hood and Spenard. After much political debate and recruitment of funding, Dunkle achieved this goal and is credited as chief instigator, engineer, and lobbyist for digging a 300-foot ditch between Lake Hood and Lake Spenard, in 1940. (*Wesley Earl Dunkle: Flying Miner* by Charles Caldwell Hawley.) The difference in elevation of the two lakes and complications of drainage added to the feat. "Dunkle's Ditch" created the largest floatplane harbor in the world. (Anchorage Daily News, August 16, 1939.) Since that time, additional canals have been added. Waterstrips in 2007 were: East-West, 4540-ft by 188-ft.; North-South, 1930-ft by 200-ft.; North-west and South-East, 1370-ft. by 150-ft. The state remains the "flyingest" in the United States.

to my tie downs, he casually said, "I'd like you to take the plane up by yourself."

"Solo? No! Not today!" I silently shouted, remembering the plane beneath the water and looking up at a gray, formidable sky.

Sensing my reluctance, he assured me, "You'll do fine."

And then he turned and walked away.

Slowly, I taxied back through the channel to Lake Spenard for takeoff. Even though I knew the seat behind me, where my instructor usually sat, was empty, I found myself talking out loud as I went down my checklist: fuel, oil pressure, magnetos. The instructions were clearly fixed in my mind.

Takeoff was not the difficult part, although a float-plane takeoff requires a different technique than a wheel takeoff. I gave the plane full throttle and pulled back slightly on the stick until, after a few seconds of acceleration, the floats partially lifted out of the water. I could feel them teetering on the surface and eased forward on the stick, allowing the floats to plane out on top of the water like a water ski. Because of their hydrodynamic design, there was now the least amount of drag in the water, and the plane could more easily lift out of the water. This "getting on the step" felt familiar.

The blustery weather actually worked for me, since the rough water prevented the floats from forming suction on the water's surface. On glassy water, I'd learned to tilt the wings slightly and lift one float off the water at a time, breaking the suction and allowing freedom for takeoff.

With waves of apprehension, I climbed out over the lake, almost immediately encountering light rain and chop. I turned to a downwind pattern, visibility rapidly deteriorating as the rain increased. The plane seemed so small and fragile. I was scared! How had I gotten myself into this? My first flight in a barnstorming plane at age 15, over the suntanned Kansas wheat fields, had been fun — just as I thought learning to fly would be. Not death-inviting like this!

As I turned to the crosswind leg, I squinted through my rain-splattered windshield, searching for the green



light from the tower. Only about 10 percent of the planes had radios, so most of our communication was by flashing red or green lights. The controllers in the tower so precisely flashed the lights at the particular air-craft that the solid light chased away any doubts as to the intended message and intended receiver.

At last, the tower flashed the welcoming green light, and I cautiously made my approach.

Just as in takeoff, the water's surface again advised me. At least I didn't have to worry about a mirror-clear lake and lack of depth perception. The stormy waves actually made judging the distance easier.

I glanced over to the shoreline for further reference. Searching for the water's surface, I let the plane settle with its nose up. Even stalling a few feet of the surface would jolt the pilot, since shocks didn't accompany the floats.

To my relief, the floats flawlessly skimmed over the lake. Then, remembering my fellow student's fate, I kept the stick buried in my stomach until I came off the step and the floats settled into the water. I wiped my damp forehead as I taxied back to my instructor.



*With the J-3 on Lake Hood— on the way to becoming a bush pilot.*

*Prescription for Adventure: Bush Pilot Doctor*

“Fine job. I knew you could do it!” my instructor slapped me on the back. “You may practice solo from now on.”

“Not today, thanks,” I sighed.

As I taxied back to my tie-downs, I thought, only two weeks ago, I couldn’t even start this plane. Now I just took off and landed by myself. I couldn’t believe it.

Four weeks later, and with 40 more hours flying time, I went for my ticket, passing the exam with 100 percent.

I had no idea that my soloing experience of soupy weather, fast prayer, trepidation, dry mouth, and damp forehead would typify many of my flying experiences to come, and that someday I would be a real bush pilot with over 3,000 hours. All I knew now was that I’d made it: Flying or Bust!

Now what was that Wally had said about hunting with the J-3?

Years later, Elmer Gaede became a certified Senior Medical Flight Examiner. In the late 1980s, he figured that at least three-fourths of the physicians in the rural parts of Alaska were pilots.

