

Bush Pilot

I grew up in Canada. It is the North. How could any career pilot miss out on a chance to go breath mosquitoes as a bush pilot? That was sort of my thinking when I applied to a northern airline flying Cessna Caravans. They gave me the job over the phone when they heard I already flew Caravans. I loaded my worldly possessions into my Cessna 150 and flew north for the job.

Even 50 miles out, everybody was friendly to me on the radio when they heard me inbound. In a town of 300 people, a new pilot flying in is something everybody knows about beforehand, it seems. Beside the single runway, the biggest building on the field was the hangar, so it was easy to find.

At the company, the cargo pilots wore blue overalls and were known as "cargo scum". The scheduled passenger-carrying pilots wore white shirts with epaulets. Most cargo scum wanted to work the scheduled side eventually since passengers are self-loading and the work is cleaner. The white-shirt and tie crowd were definitely the upper level of pilot society at the company. The chief pilot threw a pair of blue coveralls at me as I walked towards him on the ramp.

To show me how things were done at the company, my first trip was with the Caravan training pilot. He looked like a tall, thin farm boy from Saskatchewan to me. He would fit right in with a straw hat riding on a tractor. When he leaned back in the pilot seat, I expected him to stick a piece of straw in his mouth. The center of gravity calculation consisted of checking the oleo extension on the nose gear: not sunk or extended, so the load distribution must be all right. However "watch out when maintenance recharges the oleo": then the pressure inside would be different and it would take a few days to figure out the correct extension to be within balance limits. The load of about 4000 lbs put us right at gross, so it was a slow crawl to climb up into the 600 ft overcast in snow. The Caravan tends to pick up ice, so we had to open the engine bypass, wing boots and heaters. The sole source of navigation was the Global Positioning System (GPS).

At destination, there was a gravel runway with no navigation aids. The approach consisted of lining up the Global Positioning System track bar on the Horizontal Situation Indicator to the extended runway centerline and descending as the distance decreased. The runway appeared at about 500 feet and we skidded to a stop on the mud. There was no terminal. Nobody was there to meet us. We found a dry spot to dump the cargo. After skinning our knuckles unloading the 4000 lb of drilling equipment, the airplane climbed like a rocket into the grayness.

Back at home base, the company informed us that the weather had dropped to 200 ft in snow. The farm boy flew a 5 nm arc using GPS distance until the track to the airport was equal to the runway heading, then descended with the reassurance that "we are over the lake, so do not worry about the altitude". At 200 ft on the radio altitude and 1 mile from the threshold, all I could see outside was whiteness. Then a tiny smudge of black appeared to the forward and left. "See that?" he said. "That rock in the lake is a quarter mile off the end of the runway". Sure enough, past the snow-covered ice, there was the runway. The runway looked snow covered, but upon touchdown, we discovered that it was actually slush, causing us to slide sideways in the crosswind. After we slide to a stop and my heart rate returned to normal, I thought to myself "this is a typical flight?"

Actually, the day-to-day flying was not so dangerous, just hard labor. The flights were all under about an hour, except for charters, so four trips a day with 4000 lb of freight each means 16,000 lb of freight to unload. At destination, the community store would generally be waiting to back a pickup truck up to the plane, so it was easy to unload. You just had to push the boxes of soda pop and potato chips to the back door. Although soda pop and potato chips were the most popular foods on the reserves, the cargo could be anything, including ATV's, strawberries, canned milk, diapers, ammunition or kitchen sinks. There were no roads to the reserves except in winter when the lakes froze up and trucks drove over them. Air traffic was so light that one guy used to turn on the autopilot and read novels on his single-pilot cargo flights.

One day, I started a chain reaction. The ceiling at home base was probably 300 feet ragged and everybody was landing, one after the other. Being new, I decided to just go down to minimums and missed the approach—twice! There was a mining camp about a 20-minute flight away. Food was free to anyone who arrived there. I was hungry, so I diverted there. Well, everybody heard on the company frequency that Walter was going to the mine. Once I missed, everyone else started missing approaches and heading for the mine as well. There were a half-dozen company pilots in the cafeteria filling up on free pie by the time the weather improved.

Accidents happened up there. One guy left a 50-passenger Hawker-Siddley 748 in several pieces at the end of a runway. I asked if the stories about brake failures were true. He said "Nope! We were just high, fast and heavy. And that runway is short." Now, there was a gentleman, and a highly experienced Northern pilot. Incidentally, nobody on the reserve wanted even the undamaged cargo since they thought it was bad luck. The company had no such superstitions about using the wreckage as a parts source for the rest of the fleet.

The company next to us had a beautiful turbine Otter on skies. They wanted to operate as long as possible on skies. In spring, there are a few weeks of no revenue while the lakes are too soft for skies, but before float season. One day, they coasted to a stop and both skies dropped through the ice while the propeller turned itself into a candy cane shape hitting the ice. I met the pilots hack-sawing the blades off as souvenirs as the mechanics changed the engine. They said that the first thing the passengers asked was whether they could run a few more trips into the same lake with their other plane.

All the little communities had gravel airstrips. Even a community of 200 people deserved 5000 ft of taxpayer-funded gravel. However, one day, below me was a collection of buildings in the bush—a community—without an airport. Why not? It seems that the government believes in community involvement when building an airport. The local chief was given authority to draw funds from the airport account to hire local workers. There was a few hundred thousand in the account. Nobody knows where the chief went, but there is no money in the account now, and no airport there either.

At one community, the airline did great business hauling in supplies to build a new school. Every nail, board and window came in by air. Did you know that sealed double-paned windows crack from trapped pressure over 8000 ft? Eventually, the school was finished, but then somebody saw a ghost in the town. A couple of families moved a few km away from town. Then everybody else followed. The road from the airport went to the old community, with the new school. The people said to the government "We need a

new school and a new road to the airport." "But we just spent millions on a new school for you!" the government said. "We can not build a new one just because you decided to move!" This exchange went on and on until one night, the new school was burned down. Maybe the ghost set it on fire. Now the community leaders told the government "We have no school. When you build one, you may as well put it in the new community. And you will need a road to haul the supplies from the airport."

Certain native communities had strict rules about alcohol and drugs. The band council kicked violators off the reserves. They had to go somewhere. Certain communities turned into outcast collectors. There would be a "good" community just a few kilometers from a "bad" community, with no road built between them. The suicides always seemed to happen at "bad" communities. Suicides gave my airline company a lot of business. First, the crisis team and relatives would go in, then the body would fly down south for funeral preparations, along with some relatives who combined the trip with a shopping expedition.

One coffin I took had beautiful scenes of wilderness lakes, majestic pines and soaring eagles on a baby blue sky background. These scenes of beauty were juxta-positioned with the reality of the young man's life. In the bush around town, there were little clearings all scattered with bottles and paper bags from the liquor store. Further into the bush, there were many aerosol containers of hair spray, all punctured with a nail. I have my doubts that they were styling their hair. Rather, they were frying their brains inhaling fumes. So, I was feeling sad when I saw the community had come to the airport and formed a semi-circle with their pickup trucks to receive the coffin on the apron. I parked the plane in the middle of the semi-circle and the elders silently approached to unload their son. As I took my place as the only pallbearer dressed in blue overalls, there came a steady moan from the coffin. One of the elders said, "It is just the wind." Actually, it was the coffin, sucking air back in after the flight at altitude. Now you know too: quality coffins are just about airtight.

I do not know much about old-style Northern flying. All I did was "Bush pilot Lite" with GPS, turbine engines and good gravel landing strips. I figured that what I did was safe. Unfortunately, the guy who flew the freighter after me whacked it into the ice so hard that the engine broke off and sank. (He was uninjured and unemployed. Actually, it was like winning the lottery for the company to get insurance for that old freighter.) There is really no need for the kinds of risks that pilots took years ago—unless you are on floats or landing off-strip. These days, you can go up North, breath mosquitoes and go to all the places the old guys did in relative safety, if not in comfort, as you throw those thousands of pounds of freight.