



*A fictional short story  
about a bush pilot in  
Alaska*

## **Flying Slow**

Lloyd Parkhill, bush pilot for Backwoods Flying Service, awakened slowly. He was lying on his side in his sleeping bag and looking at the oversize left tire of his Cessna 185 Skywagon. He propped up on one elbow and tried to see across the airport. It was daylight but he could see only a couple of hundred feet because of fog. It was 4:45 a.m. The

sun had risen at least two hours ago because he was in the middle of Alaska and it was July. He had slept soundly under the wing for six hours. Parkhill zipped the bag open, swung his feet out and sat up. He was fully clothed except for his shoes which were within reach. He put them on then rubbed his eyes and tried to clear the cobwebs. For a few seconds the thought crossed his mind that he might be getting too old for this kind of work. Parkhill had retired from the navy when he was forty eight in 'seventyone and taken the bush pilot job with Backwoods shortly thereafter. He'd be fifty-four next month and had to admit that it took more effort to get moving this early than it used to.

Parkhill rolled up his damp sleeping bag then wrapped a nylon cord tightly around it until it was approximately the shape of a cylinder about two feet long and six inches in diameter. Then he opened the left door of the Cessna 185 and stuffed the roll under the pilot's seat. He felt the two day growth of beard on his face and pondered whether to walk across the airport and use the men's room in the office to shave. He looked toward the northeastern sky where the sun

was trying to penetrate the thin fog, then looked toward the south, in the direction of the gravel runway and where the Tanana River joins the Yukon. He couldn't see a hundred yards in that direction but when he looked straight up he thought he could see blue sky - the fog couldn't be more than two hundred feet thick. The wind was calm and there was a chill in the air but that wouldn't last long on a July morning. By the time he shaved, called in his flight plan from the Tanana Airport's little office and rounded up a cup of coffee, the fog would probably have dissipated. If not, he might get airborne anyway.

Parkhill found a small leather pouch behind his pilot's seat and walked through the fog in the direction of the airport office. He opened the unlocked door and looked around but nobody was in sight. Even Hank, the airport operator, who lived in a tiny room in the back, wasn't up and about. Usually there was a pot of coffee brewing. Hank normally heated the coffee on a pot bellied wood stove. Parkhill found the stove cold and decided not to build a fire. He wasn't going to be here much longer and didn't want to wait. He went to the john, urinated, then removed his shirt and undershirt and used a slightly soiled towel to sponge his underarms and upper body with cold water. He shaved and rinsed in the cold water. That was okay. At least he had a mirror to work with. He put his shirt back on feeling a lot better and more awake than before.

Parkhill used the phone to call Flight Service at Fairbanks. The "weather guesser" there asked him if he knew about the early morning fog. He was more interested in the forecast for later in the day at Anchorage. He couldn't give the briefer an exact time but thought maybe it would be mid-afternoon or so before he got back down there. He gave Flight Service his route - up to Huslia on the Koyukuk River to offload cargo, then on to Allakaket, near the headwaters of the same river, to pick up a hunting party, then back to Anchorage. The briefer said that if he didn't mind some early morning fog in the river valleys the weather was nice in the interior. The briefer didn't have anything good to say about anyplace south of the Alaska Range for later. A slow moving low pressure area near Kodiak Island was pumping up plenty of moisture into Cook Inlet and around the Kenai Peninsula.

Parkhill could see more breaks in the fog walking back to his plane. He took his time getting ready, stalling to let conditions improve even more. He opened the main door on the Skywagon's right side and checked the webbing and lines holding down the thousand pounds or more of cargo to be off loaded at the trading post at Huslia. The rear seats had been removed so most of the hunting

party he picked up later would sit on the floor. Several sacks of coffee beans and flour covered insulated boxes of bacon and margarine. A box containing ten dozen eggs was carefully wedged between the cargo and the aft bulkhead. Another piece of webbing secured boxes stacked in the right front seat and on the floor between the rudder pedals and the seat. One of the boxes contained a new unicom radio receiver for his friend Vic Jordan at Allakaket. Vic had been the navy for two hitches and they always swapped sea stories. The airplane had been loaded with as much as it could carry and maybe a little more.

Parkhill had departed Anchorage yesterday evening with limited fuel in order to keep the airplane below its maximum allowable gross weight. He considered taking on more gas here at Tanana but decided not to because he needed to stay light. He'd left Anchorage with sixty gallons, twenty-four less than the two wing tanks would hold, and had used about twenty-five on the flight here. There should be thirty-five gallons remaining. If the jump across the Kokrine Hills to Huslia took about forty-five minutes, then the hop up to Allakaket took another forty-five, that would use up another twenty to twenty-two gallons. There should be an hour of fuel in the tanks when he picked up the hunting party. His business partner, Jeff Morgan, had dropped the four men off two weeks ago but told Parkhill that, with all their guns and gear, they had topped twelve hundred pounds total. If they each had a grizzly bear hide or Dahl sheep skin that would add another couple of hundred pounds. The gravel strip at Allakaket was listed as being thirty-six hundred feet but he knew better. It wasn't much more than three thousand with some short trees at one end and a low hill on the other. That was enough for the airplane if he kept the fuel load down. He wanted just enough gas left to fly the thirty-five miles over to the hard surfaced strip at Bettles with maybe a half hour reserve. He could tank up there before heading back to Anchorage.

Jeff had provide him with a list of the four hunters in the party to be picked up. One name on the list, a Major Cletus E. Trent (US Army retired), he remembered if he was the same guy. He was pilot on a flight from Travis AFB to Hawaii when the Korean War broke out in 1950 and Captain Trent was looking for a flight to join his outfit in Korea. Trent did not have orders for a military flight because he accidentally missed his assigned flight several days earlier. Parkhill did Trent a favor and loaded him aboard. It had been over 30 years since that flight and he looked forward to flying Trent again.

Parkhill looked the airplane over carefully as usual. He checked the fuel drains, the oil dip stick and looked around the engine compartment for anything loose or dripping. He'd already scrutinized the prop for nicks before he left Anchorage but did so again. The tail wheeled 185's nose sat high above the ground but he flew off gravel so much that the prop still received its share of nicks. Parkhill took a short file from his pocket and touched up an old nick which had been there before. Then he took another look at the sky. Patches of blue were more numerous than before and he could see the sun's disc through the tops of the fog toward the northeast. Parkhill climbed into the pilot's seat, primed the engine and hit the starter. In the prop blast, the moisture on the fogged over windshield beaded up and rolled off the curved surfaces immediately. He taxied past the wind sock which hung limp and decided to take off toward the west. However, he taxied first to the west end of the gravel strip then turned and taxied slowly east looking for animals, primarily moose, which may have wandered onto the airport from the nearby river junction. If he didn't see them the engine noise would scare them back toward the river. Visibility was almost a quarter mile and the fog would be gone within a half hour. Reaching the east end and turning to takeoff position, he wasted no time. He ran the prop control through a couple of cycles, checked the mags and carburetor heat and read through a short check list displayed on the lower left instrument panel. He set the wing flaps to twenty degrees using the long handle between the pilots seats. He noted the time and his heading, then released the toebrakes and advanced the throttle smoothly to full open. The Skywagon felt heavy but accelerated normally into the gloom. Within seconds, visibility was reduced to the point where Parkhill had to transition to his instrument panel. He concentrated on keeping his heading, allowing the airplane to become airborne on its own. It did so at sixty-five knots. Ten seconds later he was on top in the sunshine, retracting the wing flaps and trimming for climb.

Parkhill climbed to 3,500 feet and leveled off. When the airspeed indicator increased to 135 knots, he throttled back, set twenty-two hundred turns on the prop and leaned the mixture. He glanced down at the Yukon River below his left wing. It was visible through breaks in the fog. Looking ahead, he could see the summits of Gold and Wolf mountains in the distance. He made a shallow right turn over Kallands village then rolled wings level with the 5,000 foot peak of Wolf mountain a few degrees left of the nose. Parkhill didn't bother to remove the WAC chart for the area from its place in the door liner. He'd been a bush

pilot in Alaska for more than six years and knew most parts of the state like the back of his hand.

Parkhill felt good this morning. Even though it had been almost thirty-five years since his first time in an airplane that old thrill was still there. There was something about breaking out on top in the sunshine that made it even more special. He couldn't pin the feeling down but right at that instant - when the airplane emerged from the gloom into a clear blue sky - well - he had no words to express it. It was almost like a beautiful song or like being born again. He felt a shiver go up and down his spine and a little lump in his throat then he turned his thoughts back to business.

He and his business partner had been constantly on the go for the last few weeks and it would probably keep up that way until October. Summertime had always been good but seemed to be getting busier every year. The Alaska oil pipeline opened recently and there was no end to the flying business. They were going to have to hire another pilot in order to handle it. He wouldn't hire just anybody though. The guy would have to be sharp. It might even be possible to find one of the guys from his old transport squadrons if he knew where to look. They could also use another airplane. Right now they were operating with two Cessna 185s and two 180s - all tail wheeled airplanes because of the remote landing sites they operated into. The 185s could haul about 500 pounds more. They kept one of the 185's and one of the 180's on floats most of the year but converted one or two to skis for a few months every winter. Backwoods Flying Service was just one of several air taxi companies operating out of Anchorage's downtown Merrill Field. Competition for customers was keen but Backwoods, which specialized in bush flying, had slowly built up its reputation for safety and reliability. Jeff Morgan was an ex-Air Force pilot and half owner with Parkhill and was as good a businessman as Parkhill was a pilot. His connection with local travel agents, airlines and others was directly responsible for Backwoods' growth.

Parkhill hadn't spent much time on the ground in the last couple of days. Yesterday morning, after dropping some people off at Tok Junction, he called in and Muriel had asked him to pick up a family at a place near Big Delta. Muriel had hired on as their secretary and bookkeeper five years ago but she fitted in well and just about ran the place when he and Jeff were both flying. She had told him that the party was made up of two adults and two kids. He hadn't been sure he could get them all in the 180 but didn't want to turn down the business

so he had given her an okay and headed down river. The family was waiting at a little gravel strip near Lake George Lodge about 30 miles southeast of Big Delta. There were two adults and two kids, one ten and one four years old. It was going to be too much for the 180 with only twelve hundred feet of sod so he improvised. He flew them two at a time over to Sparky's Field, which was less than ten miles away. The Continental O-470 provided the horses and the 180 had no trouble lifting them all off Sparky's 3,000 feet for the flight to Anchorage.

Parkhill continued his thoughts about yesterday's flying and his stop at Anchorage International. He almost never spent any time in the big airline terminal. If he flew people in, he usually just dropped them off and got the hell out. It was too crowded and hectic and he didn't like all that noise and jet blast trying to flip his lightplane over. He needed to see one of Backwoods' airline contacts, however, so he had parked the 180 then caught a lift to the terminal with the family he'd just flown in. He was walking through the main concourse when he saw these three pilots walking in the other direction. Two were Oriental but the one with the four captain stripes was Caucasian, a middle aged guy who had started to spread out and lose his hair. Parkhill's mind was somewhere else but after the trio got past him something jolted his memory. He looked back and saw them entering a doorway marked "ORIENTAL INTERNATIONAL." That's when he remembered the guy's face, if it was the same guy - Pappy Brokaw? Parkhill almost asked someone at OIL about it but didn't. He hadn't seen Brokaw for twenty years. It was probably just somebody that looked like him anyway. He remembered Zeke Lang telling him years ago that Brokaw had bellied a navy transport into the Pacific and that the damned thing stayed afloat so long the Navy had to sink it. Pappy Brokaw had a history like himself - an enlisted pilot, or the navy called these guys Naval Aviation Pilots. Pappy, like him, started out an enlisted man. After Pearl Harbor, the navy expanded the program and they started their training in 1942.

Parkhill returned to the present. He'd flown the country so much that it was easy for him to navigate by visual reference. After passing Wolf Mountain, he began descending slowly and left the hills behind. Dropping down to less than a thousand feet, he picked up the Koyukuk River winding its way through the tundra. Two minutes later, he spotted the trading post near the river and about six miles beyond that, a cleared spot he recognized as the Huslia airstrip.

Parkhill dropped lower and slowed the 185 to 100 knots. He circled the trading post once. Karl Jorgenson, who owned the post, was out front lighting a small bonfire to generate some smoke for wind direction. It was the signal that Karl wanted him to land there. He scanned the nearby river bend where a stretch of gravel about forty feet wide and 500 feet long led into a sixty foot wide by four hundred foot long cleared area running alongside the log structure. Total available "runway" was 900 feet. Anything more than four feet tall for a few yards on either side of the strip had been topped for wing clearance. The strip was oriented east/west and a few of the short trees beyond the land end had been topped also. Parkhill had used the makeshift landing site before, when conditions were right, and it appeared that they were right again today. He would have no trouble taking off in 900 feet after they unloaded the cargo. Smoke from the bonfire indicated a few knots of wind nearly down the combination gravel and sod runway for an approach over the river. He had the option of landing at the Huslia strip upriver but Jorgenson would have to transport the cargo ten miles by boat from there. As long as it was safe, he could deliver his cargo right at Karl's front door. Parkhill liked the challenge of landing the fully loaded 185 on the 900 foot makeshift runway. He slowed to 90 knots and came downwind about 300 feet above the ground. He didn't like long straight final approaches but planned to be in a shallow turn nearly all the way because he could judge his height better. It was similar to an aircraft carrier landing. On short final, wheels just a few feet above the river, with full flaps, and "hanging on the prop" at sixty knots, he spoke aloud: "Anybody can fly fast but only a few of us can fly slow."

He chopped the throttle and rolled the 185 onto the gravel, tail wheel first, just ten feet beyond the fast flowing river. He stopped with almost two hundred feet to spare. Karl was standing over by the trading post waving. He put the mixture in idle-cutoff and switched off the ignition.

*Joe Reeves*

*Retired Naval Aviator*