

The Expected Stranger

On March 12, 2004 I was flying my Cessna 180 for the Iditarod Air Force as one of several pilots staging out of Unalakleet (Unk) hauling supplies, people and fuel to various checkpoints ahead of the race leaders.

After making two flights to Kaltag, I was dispatched to fly a load to Elim. The cargo for this trip was food for the checkpoint workers and "Heet" for the mushers. Heet is a liquid fuel additive that burns like alcohol and the mushers use it to heat the food for their dogs.

The weather in Unk was windy, as usual, but a storm was moving in. It was late in the day but I thought I'd have enough time to beat the storm and the darkness to Elim and back. The flight was normal and I landed on runway 1 at Elim and unloaded the cargo. The normal route was to follow the coast and cut across the frozen sea ice toward Shaktoolik (Shak) however, time was of the essence so I set the GPS for a direct course to Shak.

Shaktoolik is a Malemiut Eskimo village of about 220 people that sits on the East Coast of Norton Sound. The elevation is about 20 feet above sea level and mostly flat wet lands that has little or no protection from the elements of winter. The wind whips the village on a routine basis. There are no trees or hills close by to serve as a windbreak. The one road that separates the two rows of houses is often drifted with snow and apparently is not plowed in the winter.

The direct route from Elim to Shak is shorter but takes you across 20 miles or so of open water in the Norton Sound. I hate flying over wide bodies of open water, especially in the winter. You become super sensitive to every little sound and vibration when you know there is no place to land if the engine develops a miss your heart skips a beat. If the ski cables set up a vibration, your pulse raises and you tend to hold your breath. Water that you fly over is not your friend.

The sky was dark and menacing but I could see land across the water and continued on. As I approached the land, it began to snow. The GPS indicated I was on a straight course to Shak as I crossed the shoreline and climbed over the low rolling hills but once past the hills, the terrain falls away and the weather forced me lower. The sky was getting darker by the minute as the snowfall increased. As I got closer to the ground I could see small tufts of grass below me, surrounded by only white. It was about 15 more miles to Shak and the visibility continued to diminish.

I was reminded of many similar situations where other pilots found themselves that did not have a positive outcome. Mid-winter Alaskan storms can set in quickly, silently and deadly to the complacent aviator.

As the time and distance dragged by, I strained to see something familiar as I clutched the controls with white knuckles. Now the GPS showed Shak directly in front of me only two miles away.

The altimeter read 100 feet above sea level and there was no village in sight. The falling snow was pelting the windshield with white all around. A nearly complete whiteout as I strained for some hint of the double row of houses that would be the village of Shaktoolik. I knew I was close as the engine droned on and all my senses hit high alert. Suddenly a few dark objects appeared in front of me. As I got closer, I made out some buildings, but there are no lights. Maybe there was a power outage. Had I gone past the village without seeing it? Or maybe I wasn't where I thought!

Suddenly, I realized I was over the old village that is usually abandoned in winter. I banked left for a 180-degree turn keeping the buildings in sight as I descended over the trail and pumped the skis down. Within a minute, the houses of (new) Shak came into view, but now I couldn't see the ground. I kept the buildings on my left in nearly "white out" conditions. I set up a "glassy water" type landing about where I knew the frozen slough should be. I could see the National Guard Armory that serves as the checkpoint but could not see the steep 12-foot bank leading down to the slough. I estimated where it must be and entered a very gradual descent toward the snow-covered ice of the slough. I felt the surface under my skis as the plane slid gently to a stop. WHEW!

I shut off the engine and breathed a huge sigh of relief, for this was not what I set out to do. As I relaxed and my breathing returned to normal, I located my satellite phone and called the (Unk) dispatcher to let her know where I was and that I'd be spending the night in Shaktoolik. After putting the engine cover on, I climbed the bank to the Armory and thought to myself, "I'll be eating emergency rations tonight."

The lights in the Armory were on but it was locked up and no one answered the door. I knew there were people here because we had brought three checkpoint workers here earlier in the day. I decided to go to a neighboring house to inquire as to their whereabouts. The neighbor didn't know but pointed me in the direction of the village store. It was still snowing heavy as I walked down the snow-drifted street. I met a native fellow who was all bundled up walking in the opposite direction. The snow seemed to be falling sideways and I asked if he knew where the checkpoint workers were. He pointed at the house in front of us and said, "They're in there." He further explained that the house belongs to Myron, who is the Mayor of Shaktoolik.

I had never met Myron, so I looked forward to meeting him as I knocked on the door. A small native man opened the door and before I could introduce myself, he said, "Come on in, dinner is ready and Lena has a place set for you". We had never met before but he was implying that I was expected. I was speechless at the thought as I followed him into the house. He introduced himself as Myron and explained his wife was expecting another person for dinner but didn't know who it was. We entered a small and neatly arranged combination kitchen/dining room with the smell of fried chicken lingering in the air. There in front of me, was a table surrounded by our three checkpoint workers, along with Myron and his wife Lena. There was one empty chair with a table setting all prepared for some unknown guest. The checkpoint workers were: Mark

Kelliher, Diane Johnson, and John, who is an ER doctor from Soldotna. Lena, a small native woman with traces of gray in her coal black hair explained these "feelings" came quite often and she has learned to accept them without question. "When she gets these feelings, she's never wrong." Myron said.

We feasted on fried chicken, steamed rice and green vegetables. For dessert, Lena served fresh apple pie and the meal was delicious. It sure beat the emergency rations that I had expected. While sitting there, still puzzled about the evening's events and Lena's premonition, it was easy to count my blessings and realize how fortunate I was.

After filling our bellies and visiting for a while, we thanked our hosts and headed back to the Armory. Mark and I went down to the slough to secure the airplane for the night. While he was putting the cover on the propeller, he discovered a wicked gash near one end of it. Apparently, when I took off from either Unalakleet or Elim, a rock was sucked up from the runway and caused the damage. We continued installing the covers and set up the heater under the cowling. Ice screws were put into the ice to tie the plane down and we headed back to the Armory with my sleeping bag and pad.

The typical checkpoint consists of a building or room that's usually crowded with the items that indicate its normal use. The checkpoint is usually in a fire hall, community center or other facility that a village has at its disposal. It will have a make shift kitchen, some tables for food preparation and a sleeping area for workers and mushers. The checkpoints are sometimes compared to a homeless shelter and in this case, there were army cots provided for sleeping. Each person provides his or her own sleeping bag and pad. It is comfortable for a temporary arrangement and is warm and dry.

The next morning Mark fixed breakfast while I checked the weather and packed my things. The weather had improved significantly and after a hearty meal I headed for the airplane. I pulled out my Leatherman and went to work on the gash in the prop. I filed it down as much as I could and started the engine. There weren't any unusual vibrations and I didn't have to fly over any bodies of water, so I took off for Unk. I followed the Iditarod Trail over the Blueberry Hills, landed on runway 08 and taxied up to the terminal.

Glen Hansen, who is a mechanic as well as an Iditarod pilot, looked at the prop and said "This plane is grounded and the prop has to be sent in for repairs." That's another story...

Although I didn't plan a stop in Shaktoolik, I was expected there and enjoyed my visit very much. Everything worked out just fine and it seems that every day on the Iditarod is another adventure.

Author: Joe Pendergrass, Iditarod pilot