

SLED DOGS IN FLIGHT

It's Saturday and I was in Ruby, Alaska as a volunteer with the Iditarod Air Force in my Cessna 180 when all the action for the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog race was in Unalakleet. There were approximately 80 dogs at McGrath that needed rides back to home base before this checkpoint closed on Tuesday, if not before. The determining factor was when we were able to ship the dropped dogs back to Anchorage. But that was the normal routine for shuffling sled dogs and supplies for the mushers and teams, and the race volunteers.

I flew all day the day before to Takotna twice, then to Nulato, Galena, Kaltag, Ruby and then back to McGrath. It was 7.1 hours of flight time. My last trip was to pick up 10 dogs in Ruby and take them to McGrath. It turned out to be a very eventful trip.

I was in Ruby and had 10 dogs to transport back to McGrath. I had two cables attached to the floorboard and several rings to secure each dog inside the airplane. Each dog had an 18 inch cable with a snap hook on each end that is used to tie them down. On this flight I had approximately 500 pounds of dogs that usually settled down fairly quickly in flight, but that was not to be for this flight.

I took off normally and everything was going fine until suddenly one dog got loose. The ring hook had come loose and the dog began running from the front of my 180 to the back and on top and over the other dogs. The loose dog went back and forth several times before starting to scratch at the windows. I grabbed his cable lead and tied him to the seat belt, but he got away. He went to the back and somehow got the cord to one of my headsets wrapped around him and I was afraid he would tear the phone jacks out of the wall. I was solo at cruise altitude of 3,000 feet with no other aircraft in sight. Alone in the air in Alaska with 9 dogs firmly tied down and one crazy dog on the loose. Nuts!

I unhooked my seatbelt and climbed over the seat with all the dogs and quickly unplugged the headset. The 180 went into a climbing left turn as I scrambled back into the front seat. After getting the plane under control, I refastened my seat belt and shoulder straps. The loose dog then climbed over my cargo net and got into my extended baggage compartment all the way to the back. The dog weight of 50 pounds put an extra load on the tail, so I had to push harder on the yoke to compensate. That worked and the dog seemed content to stay put and curled up and went to sleep. Whew. When I thought everything returned to normal, my door popped open as the dogs were leaning hard against it. I couldn't pull it closed with the dogs pressing against it. I was able to pull the nearest dog away from the door, opened the window and with both hands slammed the door shut. Just about that time I thought nothing else could go wrong. That should do it for the rest of the flight with these dogs. What else could possibly go wrong?

Then I smelled it... and I was hoping it was just a dog with lots of gas. I opened the air vents, but it didn't help that much. This was a one hour and six minute flight, and I couldn't address the smell until arrival in McGrath.

I taxied up to the dog drop area and motioned for Jan, another volunteer, to come over and through the open window. I told her one of the dogs was loose. She summoned more help and two others stood at the door as I released the dogs one at a time. After removing nine dogs, I climbed into the back and disconnected the cargo net to get the last dog out of the extended baggage area. Upon closer inspection, it was evident the smell was not merely gas. Explosive diarrhea was all over my engine cover hanging on the back panel, the side walls and even the hinges of the baggage door!

One of the dog handlers came over with spray cleaner and paper towels to mop up the airplane. Jennifer, a Veterinarian working as a dog handler pending the process of becoming licensed in Alaska, cleaned up the entire mess inside the airplane and became my newest hero. I wiped down the engine cover the best I could, but it was impossible to get it out of the Velcro fasteners. Aha, something to always remind me of that great flight when I would be fastening my engine cover onto and off my precious Cessna 180. Oh well, what are volunteers for anyway?

I took the cover to the laundromat, put it into the commercial washer and went to dinner. I came back expecting to find the cover ready for the dryer. But no, the spin cycle did not work so the cover was totally saturated with water and looked like a water balloon when pulled out of the washer. I lugged the cover into the shower, which "out of order", so I hung it there to drip dry.

What else could go wrong? Well, I plugged in the airplane's engine heater overnight to keep heat on it. Unfortunately, one of the plugs was faulty and there was no heat getting to the engine. With no engine cover overnight, and no electric heater, the engine was cold soaked in the morning and it took three hours to get my trusty Cessna 180 started. The good news was the engine cover dripped enough overnight to put it in the dryer and then back into service. Now I was finally ready for my next assignment.

So, how is that for an adventure! It's all true! I couldn't possibly make this kind of stuff up..!

Joe Pendergrass, Pilot
Iditarod Air Force

Date of the flight was March 8, 2008.