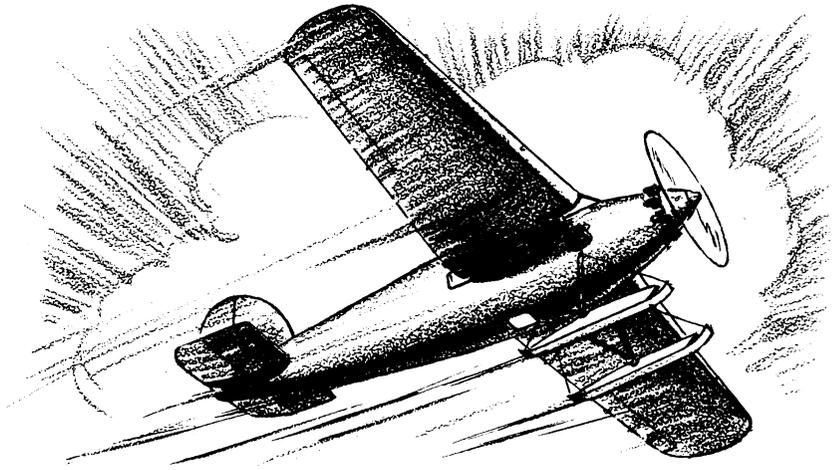


ALASKA BUSH PILOT



by Charles Coombs



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BY CHARLES COOMBS

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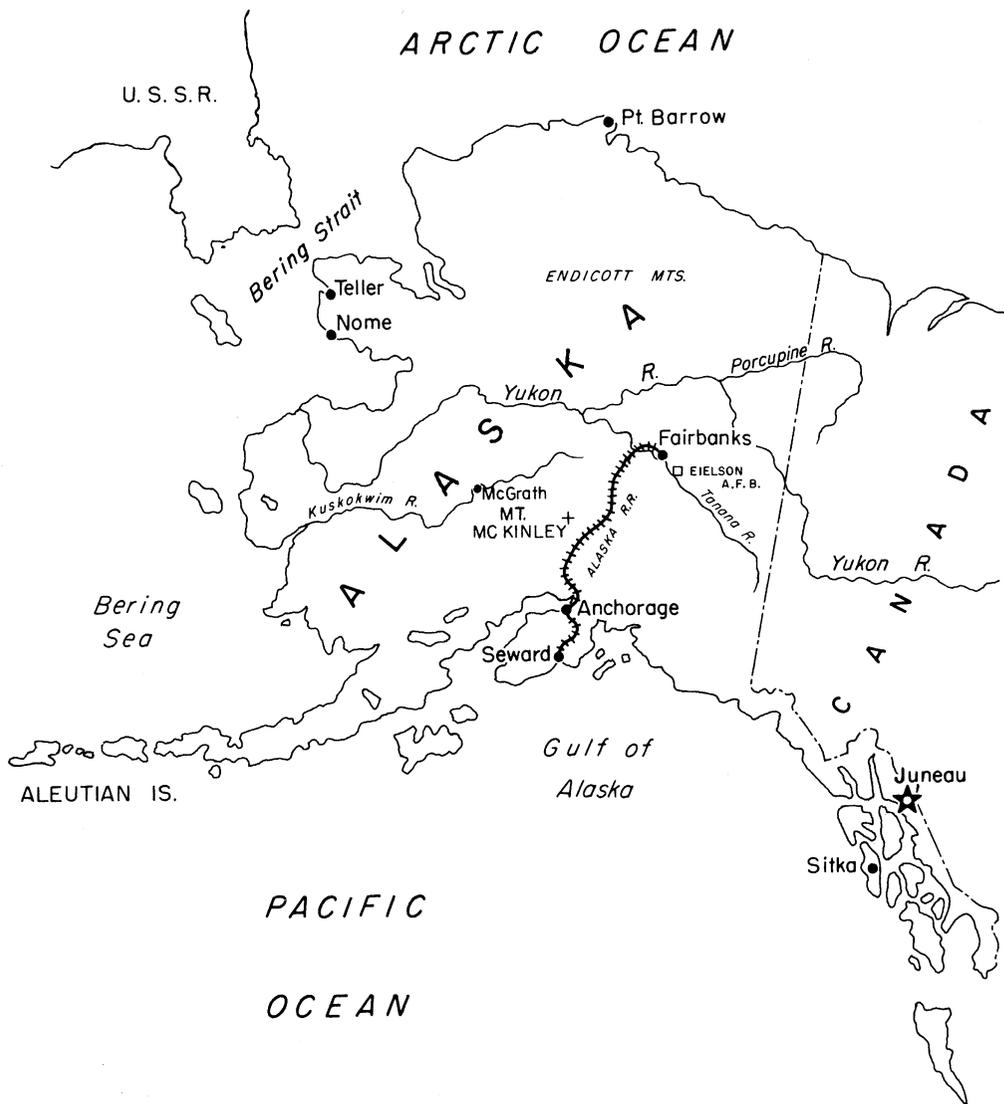
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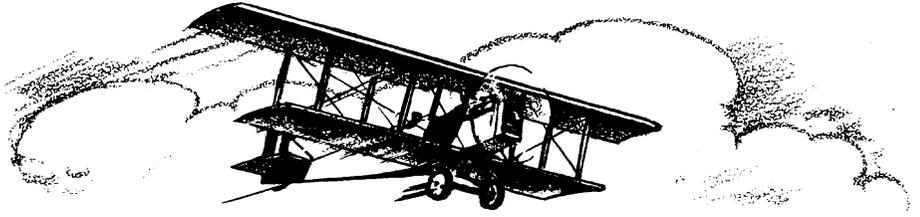
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AIR CADET

CHAPTER 1

THE ENGINE hummed as the airplane flew through the clear California sky. Air Cadet Carl Ben Eielson held the control stick between his long legs. He reached down, picked up a folded map, and spread it open on his lap. The wind from the spinning propeller blew into the open cockpit and nearly tore the map from his hands.

Young Ben looked out over the edge of the cockpit. His blue eyes peered through his goggles, searching the ground far below. It spread out like a giant colored map. There were green hills, silver streams, wide grassy valleys, and tiny farmhouses. It was a pretty sight to look upon from his high flying airplane.

But something was wrong!

Nothing that he saw on the ground matched the markings on his map. Suddenly Ben knew what had

gone wrong. He bit his lower lip until he nearly cried out with pain.

“I’ve done it again,” he yelled into the wind. “I’m lost!”

Ben glanced at the instrument panel in front of him. The compass showed he was flying south.

“So what?” he thought. “If I don’t know where I am, what difference does it make whether I am going south or north or east or west?”

West? That was it. If he flew west, he should come to the wide Sacramento River.

Ben wiped a drop of engine oil from his broad, slightly flat nose. He smiled, but it was a grim smile which hid his white even teeth.

“Even a fellow who has trouble finding his way out of a telephone booth should be able to find something as big and long as the Sacramento River,” he said to himself. “If I can find the river, I can follow it to the city of Sacramento. From there I can fly along the highway to Mather Field. If I am really lucky, my instructor will never know that I got lost again on this cross-country training flight. If he does find out, he may wash me out as a cadet.”

Luck did not seem to be on Ben’s side. He flew west all right, and he came to the Sacramento River. He had just started to follow it north toward the city when the engine of his airplane began to sputter.

Ben glanced quickly at his gas gauge. His heart beat faster. The gauge read EMPTY.

“Oh, no!” Ben yelled. “What else can go wrong?”

He soon found out. The engine sputtered for the last time and died. The propeller stopped spinning. Ben looked down again. Below him thick woods lined the banks of the river.

“I can’t land in those trees,” he told himself. “I will crack up for sure. Maybe I will even get killed.”

He looked down at the ground. It seemed very close.

“I can’t be more than five hundred feet up!” Ben exclaimed. “If I don’t find a clear place to land in a hurry, I’m done for!”

Then he saw a short strip of light-colored earth sticking up in the middle of the river,

“A sandbar,” Ben thought. “It’s not very long and not very big, but maybe it is big enough to land this plane on. I’ll have to try. At least there are no trees on the sandbar to crash into.”

He fastened his safety belt and glided down over the river. The wind whistled through the wire braces of the Curtiss JN-4 “Jenny” training plane.

“Easy now,” Ben told himself. “Easy, boy! Do it right or you’ll land in the water. Then you will be washed out and washed up.” He braced his body against the back rest.

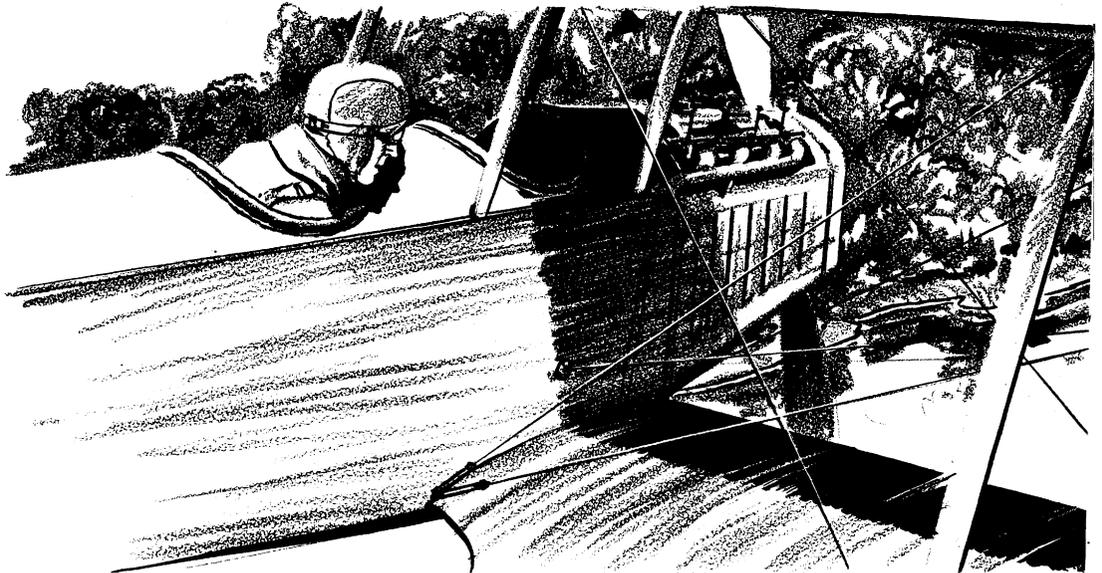
The Jenny's wheels skimmed the water and touched down on the sandbar. The plane hit hard, bouncing back into the air. It hit again, then started to roll.

Luckily the sand was solid enough so that the wheels did not sink in. Slowly the plane came to a stop at the far end of the sandbar,

Ben climbed out of the cockpit. "Well, at least I didn't crack up. But it's almost as bad. Here I am stuck in the middle of a river. How can I ever get the airplane off this sandbar?"

He looked around. A road ran along the near bank of the river. Several automobiles had stopped. People now stood at the edge of the water, staring at the strange sight of an air plane parked on a sandbar out in the middle of the river.

One man shouted, "Need any help out there?"



Ben smiled to himself. "I need help, all right," he thought. "Lots of help. What a mess I got myself into this time!"

There was only one thing to do. He took off his goggles, leather helmet, and heavy flying coat. He dived into the water and swam to shore.

As he climbed out of the water, the people crowded around him.

"You all right?"

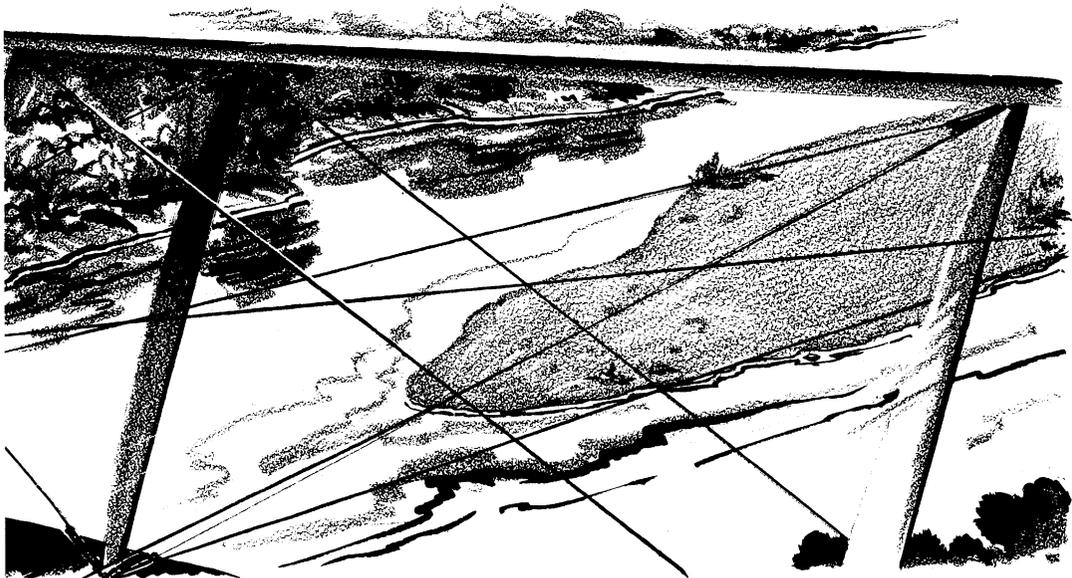
"Here, put on my coat. You'll catch cold."

"You sure picked a funny place to land your airplane, young fellow."

"It was the best I could do," Ben said. "When my engine quit, I didn't have much time to choose."

"Say, you're a United States Army flier, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir. I'm an air cadet from Mather Field."



“How come you’re not in France fighting the war?”

“That’s what I’m training for,” Ben said. “But after this—well, I’ve had trouble before getting lost. They may wash me out of my class.”

One man looked at Ben standing there dripping wet. He laughed. “You look pretty well washed right now, young fellow.”

It was not funny to Ben. He was worried. He looked back at the army Jenny parked out in the middle of the river. Even if he could get more gasoline, he would never be able to take off from that small sandbar. Much as he hated the idea, he knew what he had to do.

“Is there a telephone around here?” he asked.

“There’s one about two miles down the road,” one man said. “Hop in my automobile and I’ll drive you.”

On the telephone Ben asked for Mather Field, the army training base near Sacramento.

“Hello,” a voice said over the telephone.

“Hello,” Ben answered. “This is Cadet Eielson. I have had a bit of trouble, and—”

“Eielson!” the voice yelled. “Eielson, where in the world are you? You were due back here at the field an hour ago!”

Ben took a deep breath and told his flying instructor what had happened. When he had finished, there

was a long silence at the other end of the line. Then the telephone nearly jerked out of Ben's fingers as his instructor shouted over the wire, "Stay where you are. Don't touch that airplane! Hear me? Don't touch it! Eielson, you can get into more trouble with an airplane than—than—oh, forget it! We'll be there as soon as we can make it."

There was a sharp click in Ben's ear as the instructor hung up the telephone.