
SCENE**23**

CGAS ELIZABETH CITY—1949-1953 (INTERNATIONAL ICE PATROL)

The three-thousand-mile move from Washington State to North Carolina was far more complicated than the earlier ones. Now, besides Mary and me, we had two children, a newly acquired puppy dachshund we named “Biddie,” a house to rent or sell, a house full of furniture to ship, a big new car, and a vacation trailer. Everything fell into place and we started our cross-country journey using the trailer as our mobile home.

I took my allowed proceed time, plus mileage driving time, plus a little accumulated earned leave, and had over a month for the trip. We made it into a great vacation. I had learned how to locate national parks, forest camps, recreation areas, state parks, and highway overlooks.

We spent one night at Mt. Baker in an alpine campground. As the sun went down, the mosquitoes came out. The tenting campers had to break camp and leave, it was so bad. We just went inside our screened trailer and had a good night’s sleep.

A nice quiet spot overlooking the Platte River turned out to be Lover’s Lane, so there were creepy cars and radio all night. At another stop, we let Biddie out for a run. She followed her nose into tall grass and wouldn’t come when called. With two thousand miles yet to go, we darn near left her.

Incidentally, after a pit stop we would count off to make sure all were accounted for. I called: “One,” Mary: “Two,” Terry: “Three,” Chris: “Four,” and Biddie we sighted and “barked”!

One night in Yellowstone, we were in a lonely spot, a turn-out with no other cars in sight. It was a cold night, and the moon was peeking out from behind clouds. From afar came the howling of a wolf! Then two!! And finally a chorus!!!! What an *eerie feeling!*

On arrival in Elizabeth City, we didn't know where to stay, but somehow we found a woman who would rent us space in her backyard. We could use her water and electricity and a bathroom just inside the back porch. The Air Station Supply Officer was leaving and his house was for sale for \$9,000. We grabbed it. It was on William's Circle where most of the aviators lived. It served us well for four years and when we left we rented it for several years to other officers, then sold it for \$16,000.

My orders directed me to report to the Commanding Officer of the Coast Guard Air Station, Elizabeth City, North Carolina, for assignment in charge of a detachment consisting of three B-17 Flying Fortresses and crews for seasonal searching for



My little detachment of International Ice Patrol aircraft consisted of three B-17 Flying Fortresses, heavy bombers stripped of armament. One was in reserve at Elizabeth City and two were on the line with me, operating out of Naval Station Argentia, Newfoundland.

We usually flew at eight thousand feet, above the overcast. Upon picking up a likely radar target, we would drop down to identify it as an iceberg or friendly vessel. Berg positions went through my boss to an international commission that ordered insured shipping to take a safe southerly route.

It was a thrill to fly these bombers of World War II fame. The pilot had power in his hands as he pressed the four throttles forward with his right hand and turned on the superchargers! Experiments were conducted with fully equipped lifeboats droppable over water on a cluster of huge parachutes. It worked, but was never implemented.

icebergs as directed by the Commanding Officer of the **International Ice Patrol**.

The primary objective of these patrols was to observe ice floating in the vicinity of the Grand Banks, so that shipping in that well traveled area can be advised of current conditions throughout the iceberg season. This was, and still is, an international treaty program established in 1914 as a result of the sinking of the **RMS Titanic** caused by collision with an iceberg. The patrolling has been a Coast Guard responsibility from the beginning.

The largest bergs calf off glaciers of northwest Greenland and travel first north and west then south with the Labrador Current. The majority melt or are trapped along the Labrador and Newfoundland coasts but some make it into the commercial shipping lanes that traverse between America and Europe. Our aircraft patrols made visual sightings (necessary to distinguish bergs from fishing vessels). The Ice Patrol Commander kept running plots and warned shipping through radio reports.

The season for search patrols was from the first of the year until about the first of June, depending on whether it was a heavy or light ice year. There was plenty of bad weather, but we had several alternate airfields with some sure to be open when others closed. We could normally climb to eight thousand feet and fly in beautiful sunny conditions, but we would have to descend to verify a sighting. That was scary in fog with bergs towering a hundred feet or more.

Our base of operation was at the Coast Guard Air Station located on the Naval Base Argentia, Newfoundland. It was a full service base but with only Coast Guard aircraft based there. We left one of our three B-17s in reserve at Elizabeth City, where it was also available for long-range search-and-rescue. Of extreme importance was the Navy **ground control approach (GCA)** team that talked inbound planes down a radar glide path to a landing.

Our arrival to start the iceberg season was sensational! And I don't know whether to be proud or ashamed, as I will explain. Captain Graves was the Ice Patrol Commander. He arranged for a Coast Guard **C-54 Skymaster** cargo plane to transport his office supplies, engineering parts for our aircraft, three ice observers, and his personal effects. I would fly one of the B-17s accompanying the C-54. He chose to fly in my plane. The second B-17 would come later.

The weather had a little of everything in it as we came north from Elizabeth City for a stop in Boston to pick up Captain Graves and the equipment mentioned. Since the weather forecast was good at Argentia, our two planes, the B-17 and the C-54, departed together for Argentia. The C-54 was a little faster and arrived first. We monitored the radio instructions being given by GCA as they picked them up and conned them onto the glide path. Passing snow showers were reported but everything was going smoothly. However, part way down the glide path, the C-54 aborted the approach. Still under GCA control, we heard them start the second glide path approach. Again we heard them say they were going around again.

On the third approach, we heard nothing for an agonizing minute, then the report "C-54 safely landed." Now it was our turn!!

I had the controls (left seat). Lieutenant Fred Raumer was copilot. GCA picked us up and talked us onto the glide path. We were in and out of snow showers and couldn't see a thing. But the reassuring voice gave us confidence as we started down the approach. Suddenly we entered turbulence, and we bounced around quite a bit. The minimum altitude was three hundred feet. If you aren't out of the soup by then you must take a wave off and go around again. At four hundred feet, we were still in snow with zero visibility. We could try again or fly to our alternate airport (with Captain Graves aboard and his personal gear aboard the other plane). Fred, an excellent and conservative pilot, favored another try, so I asked GCA to give us another approach.

On our second approach, we started down the glide easily with no turbulence. As we continued down it was solid as a rock. Still smooth. Passing four hundred feet. Fred said, "Keep going" and I did. It was still smooth as I looked up and saw one line of



B-17 Bomber—the "Flying Fortress"—equipped with an experimental droppable lifeboat

runway lights. I didn't know which side of the runway I was seeing. Anxious to get down, I cut the power and straddled the one line of lights! We were down!!! We stopped in the middle of the runway. The tower asked our position and sent a jeep to find us and lead us in. It was snowing quite heavily. When we reached the hangar and rounded one end of the open hangar door, we couldn't even see the other end of the door. There was a large gathering awaiting the Ice Patrol Commander, and with cheers for us making it in such a heavy snowfall.

For many nights, I lay in a cold sweat thinking about what I had done. Did I show great skill and judgment or was I stupid and too daring? I still have bad thoughts of what could have been.

Fortunately, we had very good weather as we flew orientation flights, standardized search procedures, and developed in-

flight team work with the ice observers assigned to fly patrols with us. But about a month into patrolling, the weather caused a problem. A series of heavy snow showers descended from the north. One of our aircraft was caught on patrol when *Argentia*, our home base, shut down. Gander, in Labrador, opened and our plane diverted to there. No visibility problem. Since there was snow on the runway, our pilot planned to land short at the beginning of the runway. What he didn't know, and should have been told by the control tower, was that snowplows had cleared the runway by pushing the snow off the runway and piled it at the end. The result was that the plane hit the snow mound and "pancaked" on the runway. No one was hurt but the aircraft was "totaled"! (Time to call in the spare.)

By May, the bergs were no longer a hazard. They were trapped or grounded along the Labrador and Newfoundland shores. It was time for Captain Graves to end the Ice Patrol and send us home. But first, he was itching to fly "upstream" to where the biggest icebergs are calved and, in so doing, we would circumnavigate the whole of Baffin Bay on a sightseeing flight.

From our base at *Argentia*, we first flew to **Bluie West One** on southwest Greenland. I saw this base being constructed on the moraine of the *Narsarsuaq* Glacier when I was on the CGC *Mohawk* convoying cargo ships and engineers to build what would be the busiest airport for ferrying warplanes to Europe in World War II.

From there, we flew north to **Bluie West Eight** built on the moraine at *Sondrestrom Fjord*, and which is almost exactly on the Arctic Circle. The approach to land is a tricky one. You must land (and take off) to the west. The base leg is to the north, but straight ahead is an intimidating mountain! Nevertheless, this base became the major stop for commercial flights between the U.S. and Europe, with full accommodations for passengers and food services. We spent the night there in full comfort.

On our way to the U.S. Air Force Base at *Thule*, about six hundred sixty miles north of the Arctic Circle, we over-flew the village of *Jakobshavn* on *Disko Bugt* (Bay). The glacier there calves off the largest icebergs in the world. They can weight up to ten million tons!! Some of these same bergs may transit *Baffin Bay* counterclockwise all the way south to *Cape Race* and enter the shipping lanes between America and Europe, where the RMS *Titanic* met her fate.

Navigating from *Jakobshavn* to *Thule* was a unique first and last experience for me. We normally steer by magnetic compass, and we have a gyro compass we can set to help us stay on course. But the earth's magnetic pole towards which the magnetic compass points is located in northern Canada and was due west of us. In other words, it was useless. The north point on our compass was pointing west! Again, GCA took control of our flight pattern. They vectored us around with us setting the gyro compass as directed and using only it for our headings. They talked us right into the final approach for landing.

Thule Air Force Base is constructed to cope with the Arctic freezing weather. All the buildings are built like inside-out refrigerators (*i.e.*, warm air is kept in and the cold kept

out). You pass through airlock doors to enter or leave. Even plumbing like head and septic tanks are in the warm zone. The buildings are built on stilts to keep the heat of the buildings from reaching and melting the permafrost on which they are built. Again, we had a comfortable night, Air Force-style.

Now it was time to head south. Apparently the weather had been bad, for planes were stacked up to get out of there. We joined the others and found that the problem was a strong crosswind for takeoff. When the wind moderated, planes were given departure clearance. For our turn, everything looked good except that two-thirds down the runway a breeze crossed from behind a little hill. Our B-17 had a vertical tail shaped like a weathervane. It depended on our takeoff speed at that point whether we would go or abort.

I used a short takeoff procedure of holding the brakes and revving up to full, then going for it. When the cross-wind hit us, the plane tried to turn to the right and run off the side of the runway. I called for *flaps!* The copilot said, “*What?*”

I said, “**FLAPS!!!**” We ballooned off the runway, picked up speed, and were out of there!

Going south, we went sightseeing along the east coast of Baffin Island, an area where the Coast Guard had built a chain of LORAN stations known as the Crystals. Captain Graves had been on that construction program. For support by water, the Coast Guard acquired a number of Grand Banks trawlers. Junior officers were given command, supported by Quartermasters. When I was on the *Mohawk*, we lost two Ensigns and one Quartermaster to the program. And I became master of mascot Rickey because we deemed the trawler life would be too hard for him.

Continuing southbound, we landed at Frobisher Bay, where Captain Graves met with the Canadians in charge of the Crystals. After a short stay, we were off for home base, and the end of a most interesting flight. We saw no threat to shipping as almost all areas were ice free. Captain Graves terminated the International Ice Patrol for the season, and we returned to CGAS Elizabeth City.

Since patrolling for icebergs was seasonal, we only worked as a team for about half of the year. For the rest of the year, we stood watches and integrated into the Air Station organization. I worked in operations—training pilots and crews and making my planes available for long-range searches. As it turned out, there was not enough ice to warrant patrolling by air, and we were never again activated. As a result, I was assigned permanent duty as Air Station Elizabeth City Executive Officer.

But first, I was sent to **Key West** for Anti-Submarine Warfare training. The family went with me. Biddie met her mate, as we found out some months later.

Elizabeth City was located just south of Norfolk and the Great Dismal Swamp, surrounded by cabbage and tobacco fields. We white folks were greatly outnumbered by the blacks. Beet tops and collard greens were favorites there. Displayed under glass at the market meat counter were pickled pigs feet, snouts, and ears.

We found a great weekend retreat for summer months with our little trailer—Nags Head Beach, next to where the Wright Brothers made the first powered flight. The men at our Coast Guard Surf Station there gladly hauled our trailer to the top of the sandy beach, positioned to open to the sea. The Chief-in-Charge went home weekends, and we had use of his quarters for the toilet facilities. It was GREAT! Terry, Christy, and Biddie loved to run on the private beach, chasing sand crabs.

With limited recreational temptations and a long tour of duty, it was an ideal time to complete our family. Thus, daughter **Karen** (b. August 5, 1951) and son **Scott** (b. January 14, 1953) were born at the Albemarle Hospital, Elizabeth City. To add to the fun, Biddie had eight pups!

We no longer fit in the little trailer in which we had had wonderful times. We sold it to the Public Health doctor. His family had four children too! No, he wouldn't take the other pups. We kept one and found good homes for the others, amid tears.

Now we were getting ready for our next transfer: Dave, Mary, Terry, Christine, Karen, Scott, Biddie, and puppy Pretzel. Destination: San Diego, California. (Coast-to-coast, of



Bayou Belle seaplane and crew. I'm in the back row, third from the right

course). One change was to trade-in the Oldsmobile for a Ford station wagon. The Olds engine was acting up, and it only had the front seats and the rear seat. The station wagon, though smaller, had three rows of seats and a useful tailgate. We could all fit in (with the help of a shoehorn). Pretzel, who we thought was an awfully dumb dog, ran in front of the school bus and was killed. That was sad, but we hardly knew the pup, so we got over that quickly.

The driving plan was to go first to Mary's home in Abingdon, Illinois. There we would split up. I would take Terry, Christy, and Biddie with me in the Ford driving to my brother's home in Newport Beach, California. Mary would fly from Galesburg to Los Angeles with Karen and Scott. Families would help by putting them on and off at both ends.

The plan worked! With my charges, we stayed in motels. I remember an early morning start when I carried Christy from the bed to the car, and she never woke up until fifty miles down the road. We took a mini-vacation in Zion National Park, where we were treated royally.

As we left Ice Patrol behind us, it seemed as though I could hear my crew in the Officers' Club bar at the Naval Base Argentia, singing, as we often did, an ode to the great ship RMS *Titanic*:

It was *sad*...yes, it was *sad*.
It was *sad* when that great ship went down.
There were husbands and wives,
Little children lost their lives.
It was *sad* when that Great Ship went down.