

YAKUTAT PATROL

Our patrols out of Yakutat on the coast of Alaska were long, tedious, hours of flying low over the ocean, dodging snow squalls, straining our eyes in hopes of catching an enemy (Japanese) sub surfaced recharging their batteries. Our flight of three aircraft covered the shipping lanes from just north of Juneau to Prince Rupert Sound where the freighters with strategic supplies unloaded at Valdez. The spring days were very long and our last patrol plane got in around 9:30 P.M. and the crew enjoyed a solitary late supper while the sun still illuminated the incredible inverted snow cones of Mt. Logan and Mt. St. Elias, piercing the heavens with their rose tinted peaks at nearly 12,000 feet.

It was on such a late patrol ^{there} that I found myself following our normal routine returning to our home base on the inshore leg of our patrol from near Valdez down the coast to Yakutat. There were no alternate airports available in case of trouble and we were always side glances at our fuel gauges as evening approached and we neared our base. We were alerted by a radio message which my radio operator decoded and handed to me to the effect that our field was beginning to fog in and that we should return without delay. I advanced throttles modestly, aware of the need for husbanding our dwindling supply of fuel and yet trying for a few additional knots of airspeed.

After anxious minutes ticked by, we began seeing familiar landmarks and knew that our runway at Yakutat was not too far away. Our base, as we had been advised, was obscured in fog but a portion of runway on the high bluffs above the ocean was still visible and we all sighed with relief. Wasting no time we went through the before landing checklist and started a straight-in approach. Just as I called for a "wheels down" the voice of our control tower operator screamed in my headphone, "pull up! Go around! Continental Airlines is coming in under you!". There was nothing to do but ~~but~~ follow directions, pull up our gear, pour on full throttle and execute a "go-around" procedure. Our problem was, of course, the commercial airliner from Seattle to Anchorage making their refueling stop at Yakutat had come straight in too, not thinking that there might be other aircraft in the pattern and had come in low because of the fog. In good weather the entire operation would have been quite simple but with just a few short minutes left before the entire runway shrouded in fog, time was of the essence. To make matters worse, my left engine started cutting out as I jammed on full throttle for our "pull up and go around" procedure. So we limped in as tight a circle as we could safely accomplish to return to our runway approach. Our one good engine roaring at nearly full throttle and the other coughing and causing great control problems of violent yaws as it came on and quit, making our approach rather erratic ~~but~~ we once again put wheels down, leveled off and prepared to throttle back and touch down as the last few yards of runway became obscured in fog. In the last seconds before touch down, I saw from the corner of my eye a sight that chilled me to the bone; some idiot had left a giant crane at the end of the runway and we just missed its towering boom by what seemed a matter of feet. Our tires hit the runway, thoughtfully lighted for our foggy runout, and we in the cockpit (pilot, copilot and engineer) watched and called out directions to keep our runout straight.

Our squadron mates, flight crews and maintenance crews alike, had ^{been} "sweating us out" and had heard our engine cut out as we gave full throttle to "go around". We were able to taxi back with just the one engine, but it was a tedious process in the fog and darkness. As we tumbled out of the plane, the group greeted us with a boisterous "all's well that ends well" attitude and it was off to dinner. The maintenance men took a much more serious view and grounded that craft until they could change the guilty engine.

The next day my number one project was to go see about that crane that would endanger everyone's lives until moved. This, of course, was accomplished in short order, but would you believe that damn monster belonged to a construction company from Orange City, Iowa!

Cape?