

## "A RECORD BREAKING FLIGHT"

By COL. JOHN HED (USAF RET.)

AS MY MEMORIES OF W. W. II FLYING GRADUALLY FADE WITH TIME, I BECOME MORE AWARE OF MY DUTIES AS OPERATIONS OFFICER WITH THE 15th TOW TARGET SQUADRON ON THE ISLAND OF SHEMYA. MOST OF MY FRIENDS WHO EXPERIENCED COMBAT IN THE AIR, ON THE SEA AND ON LAND WERE BEING SHOT AT WITH VENGEANCE BY AN ENEMY WHO INTENDED TO KILL THEM. COMMENCING IN JUNE OF 1944 I WAS BEING SHOT AT JUST TO KEEP FRIENDLY GUNNERS PROFICIENT. THE BATTLE FOR ATTU WAS OVER AND THE JAPANESE HAD QUIETLY EVACUATED KISKA DURING A HEAVY FOG. THESE WERE THE TIMES WHEN THE GUNNERS ON THE GROUND OR ON THOSE NAVY SHIPS LAID FLAK RIGHT IN FRONT OF OUR PLANES INSTEAD OF IN THE TARGET PANELS THAT WERE DRAGGING 3000 FEET BEHIND US. DURING THIS PERIOD WE WERE FLYING B-26s ON TARGET MISSIONS FOR THE ALEUTIAN BASED P-38s AND P-40s AS WELL AS FOR NAVY BATTLESHIPS, CRUISERS AND DESTROYERS ASSIGNED TO THE NORTH PACIFIC WATERS. THE A. A. GUN CREWS ON SHEMYA, ATTU AND ADAK WERE ALSO PROVIDED WITH OUR SERVICES. THIS CERTAINLY WAS NOT THE GLAMOROUS OR AWFUL COMBAT MY FRIENDS WENT THROUGH DURING THE WAR. SO I GUESS IT IS ONLY NATURAL, AND IN DESPERATION, THAT I LOOK BACK AT ONE OF MY ALEUTIAN FLYING EXPERIENCES AS A HISTORIC, BRAVE AND USELESS ADVENTURE THAT SHOULD BE RECORDED SOMEWHERE IN THE ANNALS OF ALASKAN AVIATION. MY FORM 5, TOGETHER WITH MAPS AND OTHER DOCUMENTS THAT I HAD ACTUALLY USED AND SAVED FOR 42 1/2 YEARS, PLUS MY MEMORY, ALL MADE IT EASY TO RECONSTRUCT THIS FLIGHT.



John Hed on the L-1



The PBY and the L-1

FROM THE JOHN HED COLLECTION

**IT STARTED EARLY IN JULY 1945, WHEN AN URGENT 11TH AIR FORCE MESSAGE CAME THROUGH OUR MESSAGE CENTER SEARCHING FOR A QUALIFIED L-1 PILOT TO BE USED FOR A CLASSIFIED PROJECT ORIGINATING IN ANCHORAGE. THIS JOB WAS FOR ME!**

**I HAD BEEN FLYING AND WAS BEING SHOT AT OVER SHEMYA FOR MORE THAN A YEAR, AND I NEEDED A CHANGE FROM MY DAILY ROUTINE DESPERATELY! I VOLUNTEERED AND GOT THE ASSIGNMENT AND SOON LEARNED THAT THE PROJECT CONSISTED OF DELIVERING AN L-1 WITH AMPHIBIOUS FLOATS TO SHEMYA. AN OA-10 (NAVY PBY-5A CATALINA) WAS ASSIGNED AS A SAFETY OR "CHASE" AIRCRAFT COMPLETE WITH SURVIVAL KIT READY TO BE DROPPED NEAR ME IF I SHOULD HAPPEN TO LAND IN THE OCEAN OR IN CASE I WAS FORCED TO LAND ON SOME LONELY TERRAIN. I FLEW TO ELMENDORF AND REPORTED TO THE PROJECTS OFFICER ON JULY 25th, 1945 WHERE I WAS BRIEFED AND WHERE I MADE ARRANGEMENTS FOR A CHECK OUT ON THIS UNIQUE BIRD BEFORE STARTING WEST DOWN THE "CHAIN."**

**THE L-1 WAS MADE BY STINSON AIRCRAFT COMPANY AND WAS POWERED BY A JACOBS 285 HP RADIAL ENGINE. THERE WERE TWO RETRACTABLE WHEELS IN EACH EDO FLOAT, EACH ACTUATED SEPARATELY BY AN ELECTRICAL MOTOR. A 35 GALLON DRUM AUXILIARY TANK WAS RIGGED UP IN THE BACK SEAT. THIS PLANE WAS SLOW, SLUGGISH AND CRUISED AT 80-85 MPH, BUT IT HAD OUTSTANDING VISIBILITY ALL AROUND AND COULD LAND IN JUST A FEW FEET WITH THOSE FULL WING FLAPS AND FOUR WHEEL LANDING GEAR. THE BRAKES ALSO COULD BE "SLAMMED ON" WITHOUT THE FEAR OF NOSING OVER.**

**WE WORKED OUT A FLIGHT PLAN FOR OUR FIRST LEG TO NAKNEK, 321 MILES AWAY, THEN WAITED FOR SIX DAYS TO TAKE OFF BECAUSE WINDY AND STORMY WEATHER PREVAILED ON ROUTE. PERFECT CONDITIONS DEVELOPED ON AUGUST 2nd AND OFF WE WENT, TRULY A STRANGE LOOKING FLIGHT OF TWO AS WE SLOWLY DISAPPEARED INTO THE WESTERN SKY. WE FLEW OVER THE VILLAGE OF KENAI AND THOSE HUGE MOUNTAINS TO THE NORTH OF OUR COURSE, WHICH I CAN STILL ENVISION. AT THIS TIME I GOT FAMILIAR WITH THE ROUTINE OF KEEPING THAT BIG OA-10 IN SIGHT. ALTHOUGH IT WAS MUCH EASIER FOR ME TO SEE THE BIG BIRD THAN FOR IT TO SEE ME IT WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR PICKING ME UP IN CASE I HAD ENGINE TROUBLE. IF SEA CONDITIONS WERE OK THE PLANE COULD PICK ME UP, IF NOT IT COULD ORBIT OVER ME OR DROP AN EMERGENCY KIT. WHILE THE PBY's FLYING SPEED WAS ABOUT 110 MPH COMPARED TO MY 85 MPH, IT WAS NECESSARY FOR IT TO BE CONSTANTLY CIRCLING OR MAKING BIG "S" TURNS TO KEEP ME IN SIGHT.**

**AFTER 120 MILES OVER WATER WE CHANGED OUR HEADING AT ST. AUGUSTINE ISLAND AND INTERCEPTED THE NAKNEK RADIO "BEAM" ON THE WEST END OF ILIAMNA LAKE. WE FLEW OVER LAND TO THE NAKNEK AIRFIELD WHERE WE**

**LANDED ON PSP (PIERCED STEEL PLATE). THIS WAS A FOUR HOUR FLIGHT COVERING 320 STATUTE MILES WHICH CALCULATES TO BE A "GROUND" SPEED OF 80 MPH.**

**THE NEXT MORNING, AUGUST 3rd, 1945, WE FILED A FLIGHT PLAN FOR COLD BAY AND TOOK OFF IN BEAUTIFUL WEATHER BUT BY THE TIME I GOT TO PORT HEIDEN, I HAD LOST SIGHT OF THE OA-10 DUE TO FOG AND HAZE SO I LANDED THERE ON SLIPPERY PSP, CHECKED THE WEATHER, REFUELED AND TOOK OFF FOR COLD BAY. I FLEW ON TOP OF A LOW OVERCAST ON THE PORT HEIDEN AND FORT RANDAL RADIO BEAMS AND PENETRATED THE OVERCAST TO THE COLD BAY LANDING STRIP. THE TWO HOPS TOTALED 4:10 FOR 338 MILES, GIVING US ANOTHER "GROUND" SPEED OF 81 MPH.**

**STORMY WEATHER DELAYED US FOR TWO DAYS AT COLD BAY AND ON AUGUST 7th WE TOOK OFF FOR THE 182 MILE FLIGHT TO DUTCH HARBOR. WE LANDED AFTER 3:00 HOURS ON A WINDY, CLEAR DAY OVER THOSE HUGE SWELLS AND WHITECAPS. AT DUTCH HARBOR WE WERE TOLD ABOUT AN "A" BOMB BEING DROPPED ON HIROSHIMA.**

**THE WEATHER TOOK A TURN FOR THE WORSE AND THERE WASN'T A CHANCE OF PROCEEDING WEST SO I DECIDED TO GET SOME FLOATPLANE EXPERIENCE. OFF I WENT ON MY FIRST EVER FLOATPLANE FLIGHT, I RAISED MY WHEELS, LANDED ON THE WATER THEN TRIED TO TAKE OFF; AND I TRIED AND I TRIED, BUT NEVER HAVING BEEN INSTRUCTED IN THIS TECHNIQUE I GAVE UP, LOWERED MY WHEELS IN THE WATER AND TAXIED UP TO THE SEAPLANE RAMP AND PARKED. A NAVY PILOT WHO HAD BEEN WATCHING MY EFFORTS TO FLY OFF OF THE WATER TOLD ME TO "GET ON THE 'STEP,' BUILD SOME SPEED, ROCK THE WINGS SLOWLY, AND THEN GENTLY LIFT IT OFF". I TAXIED DOWN THE RAMP INTO THE WATER AND PROCEEDED TO MAKE SEVERAL TAKE-OFFS AND LANDINGS. AT DUTCH HARBOR WE GOT THE WORD OF THE SECOND "A" BOMB DROP, THIS WAS ON NAGASAKI.**

**FINALLY ON AUGUST 14th WE GOT OFF OF THE GROUND AND LANDED ON UMNAK ABOUT AN HOUR LATER. HERE I TOPPED OFF MY TANKS FOR A MARGINAL VFR FLIGHT TO ATKA. I WILL NEVER FORGET WHEN WE GOT OVER MOUNT CLEVELAND WITH ITS SMOKING VOLCANO, A CALL CAME OVER THE RADIO THAT THE WAR WITH JAPAN WAS OVER! I CELEBRATED MY 25th BIRTHDAY ON UMNAK ON AUGUST 16th. WHEN THE WEATHER WOULD CLEAR AT UMNAK THE WEATHER AT ATKA, 275 MILES AWAY WOULD BE SOCKED IN AND WHEN ATKA WOULD CLEAR UMNAK WOULD BE SOCKED IN. WE KEPT THINKING ABOUT THE CELEBRATION ACTIVITIES THAT WE WERE MISSING ON SHEMYA.**

**FINALLY ON AUGUST 25th, AFTER 17 DAYS OF WEATHER DELAYS IN THE DUTCH HARBOR, UMNAK AREA, A COLD FRONT MOVED IN WITH ITS CUSTOMARY STRONG WEST WINDS. IT TOOK 6:25 TO FLY 395 MILES TO ADAK AVERAGING 61**

**MPH OVER NOTHING BUT HUGE WHITECAPS AND LITTLE ROCKY ISLANDS. EVEN THOUGH THAT BIG OA-10 WAS ALWAYS MORE OR LESS IN SIGHT, I FELT THAT THERE WAS NO WAY HE COULD HAVE SAFELY LANDED IN THAT OCEAN TO PICK ME UP IF MY TRUSTY JACOBS 285 WOULD HAPPEN TO QUIT RUNNING. STILL, IT WAS A GREAT MORALE FACTOR TO HAVE THAT BIG AMPHIBIAN AROUND AND TO HAVE THOSE WISECRACKS COMING OVER THE RADIO FROM MY FRIEND CAPTAIN CHUCK CHESTERSON.**

**THE CLEAR, WINDY WEATHER CONTINUED AND ON AUGUST 26th WE FLEW THE 422 MILES TO SHEMYA, VIA AMCHITKA WHERE I LANDED CROSSWAYS ON THEIR PSP RUNWAY. I REFILLED MY FUEL TANKS AND THEN FLEW THE LAST LEG OF THIS WHOLE FRUSTRATING TRIP OVER KISKA, BULDIR ISLAND AND AS USUAL OVER ALL THOSE HUGE WHITECAPS WHERE I AVERAGED 62 MPH TO SHEMYA. I LANDED WITHIN A COUPLE HUNDRED FEET OF THE B-26 DISPERSAL AREA RIGHT IN FRONT OF SEVERAL 15th TOW TARGET SQUADRON PILOTS AND MECHANICS.**

**I HAD FERRIED THIS FUNNY PLANE OVER MUCH VERY DEADLY COLD WATER, OVER MANY UNINHABITED ISLANDS AND OVER A LOT OF LONELY LAND FOR 1719 STATUTE MILES, USING 25:10 FLYING HOURS DURING A PERIOD OF 24 DAYS AVERAGING A "GROUND" SPEED OF 68 MPH. SOME KIND OF ALEUTIAN RECORD HAD TO HAVE BEEN ACHIEVED BY THIS TRIP. THE SLOWEST? THE MOST USELESS? I WOULD LIKE TO FEEL THAT THE DELIVERY OF THIS AIRPLANE TO THE LOCAL ARMY COMMANDING GENERAL WOULD HAVE BENEFITED THE ALEUTIAN CAMPAIGN BUT IT DIDN'T BECAUSE THE WAR WAS OVER AND TO TOP IT ALL OFF I HEARD THAT LATER THE PLANE WAS SMASHED UP ON SHEMYA OR ATTU IN A HIGH WIND.**

**I NEXT VOLUNTEERED FOR AN ASSIGNMENT AS C.O. OF THE NOME SEARCH AND RESCUE DETACHMENT WHERE I FLEW A VARIETY OF AIRCRAFT INCLUDING L-1s ON SKIS AND WHERE I WAS ALWAYS OVER SNOW COVERED LAND INSTEAD OF THOSE HUGE WAVES. NEVERTHELESS I WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT 1700-MILE TRIP AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II.**