

MYT of the Alaskan





wanted to go back. That idea seemed insane to me.

I upgraded and honed my aviation skills over the next two and a half years. When I wasn't flying, I schemed how to avoid a tour in Kodiak. This effort was a direct result of how sick I was of Alaskan stories. Hawaii sounded like a lot more fun.

Then, a strange thing happened. I was on the phone with my detailer and asked for Alaska. I wasn't crazy; I wanted to challenge myself as a professional pilot, and I knew I had to go where the action is. Also, being a doubting Thomas, I wanted to verify those tall tales of the Alaskan winter and to disprove the rumor of the Alaskan qualification.

The Alaskan qual syllabus was rumored to be an extensive familiarization with the op area and the big, bad Alaskan winter. Every aircraft commander had to endure the syllabus before he could sign for a plane, regardless of rank, experience and designation. The truth is, the Alaskan qual is a formal-qualification syllabus required to fly into CGAS Kodiak and CGAS Sitka. The qual has no formal designation above the unit level.

If we are qualified as ACs, then we are capable of flying every mission. A Coast Guard air station never would disregard the rules and effectively downgrade us just because of a little turbulence and ice. "Come on, I can handle this," I thought, "I'm an AC!"

I rudely was awakened when I arrived in Kodiak October 30, in time for winter. I kept my feelings about the Alaskan qual to myself and grumbled privately about the lack of faith the command had in its pilots. After only three flights, I had changed my mind.

During my flights in the southeastern United States, I had shot exactly one approach where we broke out at minimums. Those days were gone, and I was unprepared for what next hit me.

We were on our way back to Kodiak, from Valdez, and night had fallen. A snowstorm had moved in, and the winds had picked up. We shot the ILS into Kodiak, broke out at minimums in a snowstorm, had a 30-knot tailwind, and the runway was covered with packed snow and ice. A 2,500-foot mountain marks the end of the Kodiak runway.

Qual

By Lt. James Zawrotny, USCG

"When I was in Kodiak, we would..."

"One time, when I was in Sitka..."

"You think this is bad, one time we were going to Attu..."

I've heard many Alaskan stories, anecdotes and lessons learned during my first tour as a Coast Guard C-130 pilot. I qualified as a copilot in January 1999, at CGAS Clearwater, Fla., and immediately was inundated with predictions of my upcoming tour in Kodiak—still four years in the future.

They shared several thousand warnings about the weather, and it took only a couple of months to get tired of hearing about Alaska. I had enough trouble dodging thunderstorms in the Caribbean and trying not to overshoot runway 10 at Guantanamo Bay. How bad could Alaska be?

Every pilot and flight engineer had a bag full of stories about hair-raising near-misses from their Alaskan exploits. Nearly all aircrew, despite their claims of almost dying several times,

Six months ago, I wouldn't have tried such an approach; I would have found an alternate. I asked the other pilot if we could get into Kodiak. Fortunately, he had been stationed here for six years, so he just looked at me, smiled, and said, "We'll see, won't we?" I'm glad it was dark in the cockpit, because the look of pained anxiety on my face may have scared even him.

Our normal landing speed was 110 knots for our weight and configuration. Because of the conditions, though, our main wheels touched down at 141 knots. I stopped the plane in a surprisingly short distance, taxied clear, and tried to keep my voice calm as we parked. At that moment, I believed the Alaskan qual was a good idea.

Two other flights reinforced my belief and prompted me to champion the cause of the Alaskan qual. The first was a logistics run to resupply the LORAN station on St. Paul Island, which is in the middle of the Bering Sea. The ice edge had crept south to within 10 miles of the island, and the weather had not been above 500 and 2 with blowing snow for four days. The only approach available was the NDB-A. We know how reliable those things are. After one missed approach, we tracked outbound again. Suddenly, we saw a break in the clouds and recognized some of the terrain. Fortunately, I had flown to St. Paul twice the previous week, and it doesn't take long to become familiar with an island that has few distinguishing features.

We requested a contact approach from Anchorage center and, to my surprise, were granted the request. I've always thought a contact approach is an emergency procedure, so I questioned the other pilot, who was a four-year Alaskan veteran. He looked at me without humor and said, "How else do you propose we land?" The debate was settled; we circled and landed without incident. I laughed as we stepped off the plane, and the visibility dropped to less than one-quarter of a mile. If I had to make up a bad-weather scenario, I couldn't have outdone reality that day.

The situation that cemented the qual for me occurred on a takeoff from Attu Island. Attu is the westernmost island in the Aleutian chain and has extremely unpredictable weather patterns. The day's forecast called for VFR, which gave us a view of CG1600, a Herc that crashed on Attu in 1982. It provided a sobering reminder we needed to be on top of our game. The crew at LORAN Station, Attu, reported two feet of packed snow

covered the runway and would make any attempt to quickly stop an adventure. I was thankful we didn't land long.

When our offload was complete, a snow squall rolled in from over Mt. Terrible. We started engines and taxied for takeoff, not worried about other traffic because, let's face it, who else is flying out here?

Coast Guard regulations require one-quarter-of-a-mile visibility for operational missions. We waited 10 minutes at the departure end of the runway while being pounded by horizontal snow. When a hole opened, we applied power and flew away.

I asked the pilot next to me if these conditions were normal, and his reply shocked me, "I've never seen it this bad before." We later learned the snow squall that had delayed our departure lasted six days. It's a good thing we didn't decide to wait it out. We would've been there until June.

In Alaska, conditions force us to operate an airplane in a wider range of its performance capability than anywhere in the Lower 48. Yes, if you are a qualified AC, you can handle it, but you need to experience these conditions with someone who has done it before. You have to prove to yourself that you and the plane can do much more than you thought was possible.

Despite the difficult winter and challenging conditions, I love the missions in Alaska. I used to think flying in these conditions was insane, but, now, the previously unthinkable is routine and enjoyable—or perhaps winter dementia has set in.

The Alaskan qual exists for the safety of our aircrews. Since the conditions are harsh and can change rapidly, you must adjust your game plan to match the environment. You can't learn by reading an article or watching a video; it is something you must experience to appreciate. To all who haven't yet experienced a tour in Alaska, I assure you the Alaskan qual is real, and it is for your own good.

Professional curiosity forced me to chase down the myth of the Alaskan qual. It possibly dates to the early 1970s, and yes, Alaskan pilots complained about it then, too. Someday, someone will uncover the exact origin of the myth. Just like those who look at a blurry picture of the Loch Ness monster or Bigfoot, I continue looking and wondering how it all got started. Who am I to expose the truth? 

Lt. Zawrotny is stationed at USCG Air Station, Kodiak, Alaska.