

# ARCTIC ADVENTURES

By Capt. Jim Blackburn



B-25 flight training in Enid, OK

After winning my silver Air Force wings, on completion of B-25, multi-engine training in 1954, I was given my choice of flight assignments. At the time I was considering a possible future with the airlines, unless I chose to continue a career in the USAF. The only Air Transport Squadron opening on the list was one based at Harmon AFB, in Stephenville, Newfoundland. The implication was that, this was part of the Military Air Transport Service, (MATs Atlantic Division), and would be great training for either career. The transport airplane I was to be trained on, however, was the C-119 (Flying Boxcar). Flying cargo was still airline type flying though, so I opted for it and was sent to flight school transition training at Randolph Field, Texas. The two-engine C-119 didn't have the best reliability record, but it was only one of a few planes, at that time, able to transport large, bulky cargo, such as the huge Caterpillar D-8 Bulldozers. One thing we learned later was that, if we lost an engine, it would not stay in the air with a moderate to heavy cargo load on board.

Maguire AFB, NJ was our overseas point of departure, and a few hours later we arrived at my new home base, Harmon AFB, located on the Western side of Newfoundland.

After orientation, I found out that our unit (6614<sup>th</sup> Air Transport Squadron and Group) had been separated from MATS because we only operated in the NEAC (NorthEast Air Command), which was composed of northern parts of Canada and Greenland. Basically, I realized that we were really a military, Arctic Airline. We had to operate with much lower minimum weather restrictions in order to get things done, because of the limitations of the harsh Arctic weather. MATS didn't want to have us as a part of their operation because they feared that we would mess up their safety record. We came to find out that we operated as a "Calculated Risk" operation. They calculated, and we risked.

One of my early flights in the Arctic was a rescue flight, of sorts. I was assigned as co-pilot on a C-119 crew that was selected to fly replacement landing gear ski parts into a remote Arctic DEWLINE (Distant Early Warning radar) station on Resolution Island, near the Arctic Circle. There was a C-47 (DC-3) transport plane down with a broken landing-gear ski assembly. It had been ripped off as they made a landing on sea ice in a fjord by the base. This was in May and there was concern that the melting sea ice would soon cause the C-47 to sink through the ice surface, unless we could fly the replacement parts to them in time. One of our concerns was whether that same sea ice would support the weight of our much heavier aircraft. Also, we had to make a wheel landing because our C-119 was not equipped with skis. The sea ice landing strip was located in a fjord with high mountains on each side. This meant that there was only one way in for landing and the opposite way out for takeoff, no matter which way the wind was blowing - sort of a box canyon, in effect. Our base had radioed Resolution Station to check the thickness of the sea ice in the area of our proposed landing and calculate whether or not it would support our weight. (Again and again in our Arctic flying, we would encounter our old friend, "calculated risk").

Nearing the island, we contacted Resolution by radio and were told that the sea ice landing area had been marked with sea dye marker. They also told us that they had checked the thickness of the ice and it seemed O.K. to them. On our landing roll out, we suddenly spotted what appeared to be a 4 x 8 sheet of plywood, right in the center of our marked landing area. The Captain still had enough flying speed to raise the nose and keep the nose

wheel from rolling over the plywood, as we straddled the spot with our main landing gear. Later we found out that, indeed, this was plywood and that Lucky Pierre the French-Canadian civilian contractor, had placed it over the hole that had been cut into the sea ice to determine its thickness. All this and with a slight quartering tail wind for the landing. Our main brakes were not very efficient on the sea ice, but our big reverse props stopped us quickly. We expressed our disappointment with the plywood covered hole to the local civilian contract people and explained that, had we hit the wood covered hole, we could have possibly sheared off our nose wheel and then been the second disabled plane down on the sea ice. The critical parts were soon unloaded and then we faced the takeoff challenge. We taxied around the plywood covered hole and were able to successfully get our bird off the rough sea ice, before we got to the open sea. We flew down to Goose Bay, Labrador for a fuel stop on our way back to home base in Newfoundland. Shortly after our return from this calculated risk mission, the Captain on the flight elected to remove himself from flight status and became our squadron maintenance officer. He said that he had three kids and didn't want them to grow up without a father. As for me, a fairly new, un-married, Second Lieutenant I thought that this type of flying was just routine duty.

There was no glory in flying the Arctic, with our enemy being severe weather much of the time. Our pilot buddies in the Korean War front were gathering in the flying medals for their missions, but no one in the USAF seemed to consider the extreme Arctic weather conditions as an enemy, worthy of recognition. Some of the Reserve units flew on two week tours out of Goose Bay, Labrador. They were in Refueling Squadron KC-97s that supported the Strategic Air Command (SAC), and got Presidential Unit Citations for their service. Those of us who were flying up there on two year, or more, overseas tours, just did our duty, day in and day out.

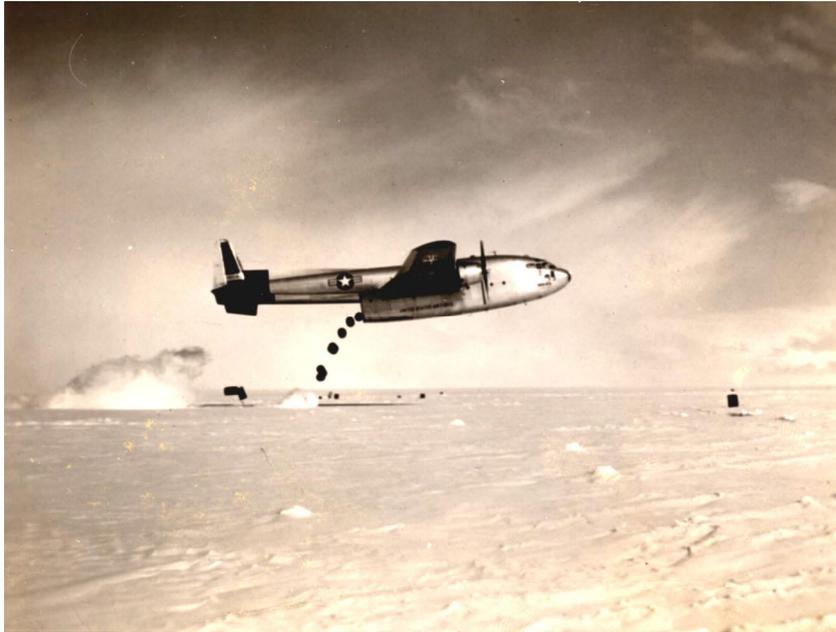
Our squadron was composed of two flights. The C-119 Flight (aka, the Kamakazi flight) and the C-54 (DC-4) Flight. A good buddy of mine, who was an Aircraft Commander in the C-54 Flight, invited me to fly as co-pilot with him on some local, round the island, flights. With four engines instead of two, and a real airline type plane, I jumped at the chance. By then we were both First Lieutenants. I volunteered to fly as co-pilot on the C-54, every opportunity I got, and built up enough time to be able to fly regularly on the C-54s, later checking out as an aircraft commander, myself.

Losing engines was NOT an uncommon thing for us. Temperature drops of 100 degrees F were not unusual, flying North in the Arctic. It was much more critical on the 2 engine C-119. One day I dropped in on our Squadron Master Sergeant, and said "Hey, Sarge. I'm flying as much on the C-54 now as on the C-119." (*At the same time, I was placing a bottle of Segrain's Crown Royal in his desk drawer*). "Do you think you could drop my C-119 rating and just keep the C-54 AFSC (Air Force Specialty Code)?" *Closing the desk drawer, he said, "Wouldn't be a bit surprised there, Lutenant."* Then I had hopes that I was home free with 4 engines, rather than 2 to rely on.

For this native Florida lad, the Arctic flying was a real change to say the least. They sent us to ARTIC SURVIVAL SCHOOL outside Goose Bay Labrador. We had two days of training on survival methods at Goose Air Base, then came the real application of our learning by going out in the frozen wilderness for 5 days. We had learned how to traverse the frosty terrain with snowshoes, and build traps to catch rabbits and other small critters. We were also taught how to fish with gill nets placed under the ice of frozen lakes. Each crew of three was given a parachute (for setting up a para-teepee), a few cooking utensils, a hatchet and their "best wishes". We had food for three days and were to be out in the wild for five days, so we had incentive to catch what we could. I'm hoping that it would not be pneumonia. To me, being an ex Eagle Scout, it was more like a great camping trip adventure.

Later that summer, we were sent up to Thule Air Base in northern Greenland for ICE CAP SURVIVAL SCHOOL. It didn't seem like summer to us, but they needed to get us out on the Ice Cap in daylight. The sun never set, but would rise in the east and roll across the sky and not quite set in the west, but roll across the horizon, then repeat the process. We were taught how to build modified igloos. We'd cut trenches in the ice, then cut out slabs of ice for a roof. We had to be below the surface of the ice cap because of the high arctic winds that came up occasionally. We put our sleeping bags in what we called our "ice hole" and were surprised at how one candle could heat it and keep us snug. The survival schools were very important because of the real probability of our being forced down somewhere up there. The arctic weather was very hard on our engines and planes, and losing an engine became a rather routine event. I will attach a photo of one of our cargo C-119 planes, dropping 55 gallon oil drums to a

site out on the ice cap. It was taken by one of the site airmen and later appeared in National Geographic Magazine.



*Dropping oil barrels to an Ice Cap Site from 50 feet*

We flew Re-Supply Missions out of Thule Air Base, both in summer and winter. We would fly supplies to outlying stations just a few hundred miles from the North Pole. Stations with names like ALERT, EUREKA and NORD. We'd fly about eight hour missions, then have eight hours to sleep, and eight hours off. In the winter, when we were in total darkness, we'd wake up, look at our watch and see that it was 8 o'clock, but we didn't know if it was ham and eggs or Steak and potatoes 8 o'clock until we called the chow hall and found out what they were serving. We stayed in insulated buildings with triple paned windows. Shades were only used in the summer to keep out the constant light. We had marine type toilets that had to be hand pumped into holding tanks. All the buildings had piped in heat from a central base plant.

Flying across northern Greenland to Station Nord, we'd see herds of arctic musk oxen. We had heard that in times of danger, they would circle the wagons and put the old and young in the middle to protect them. We tested this on one flight and dropped down to about 1,000 feet. As we drew near, they did form their protective circle and we were amazed at how God gave them this survival tactic instinct. The USAF had built an 11,000 foot runway at Station Nord, which was put there to recover our B-47 bombers if

they ever had to strike targets in Russia. Greenland is owned by the Danish government and they were our allies in the Cold War days.

We flew regularly published, airline type schedules in the Arctic area. From our home base in Newfoundland, we'd fly north to Goose Bay, Labrador, then the DEWline sites at Saglek, Resolution Island, Frobisher Bay and then over to Greenland bases in Sondrestrom and Narsarsuak. Then back to home via St. Johns, Newfoundland base at Gander.

In September of 1956, I was told that I had completed my obligated tour in the USAF and could get out. When I asked about what my next assignment in the Air Force was to be, they said if I stayed and finished my overseas tour, I would get my next assignment at that time. I opted to do this and got assigned as Aircraft Commander, C-124 aircraft in Dover AFB, Delaware. This assignment would put me on a fast track to make Captain. This was the largest aircraft the Air Force had at the time and I had ridden in one, coming back from a leave in Europe. It had the nick name of "Old Shakey". At the time, I was not impressed so left the "peacetime" service and joined Eastern Air Lines on March 11, 1957. My two year tour, flying the Arctic, had provided me with great flying experience that would serve me well later with my airline flying career.