

FLYING CARPET / By Greg Brown

JUST PASSING THROUGH

THE JOYS OF AN UNPLANNED STOP



Hey, Dad, you'll never guess where I spent the last few days!" It was my son Austin, a U.S. Air Force pilot with the Twentieth Fighter Wing.

"Last I heard you were headed for Alaska, right, Austin?"

"Yeah, I'm at Eielson Air Force Base near Fairbanks, but we had an unscheduled adventure flying a pair of F-16s up here from Shaw AFB, South Carolina. We'd planned to do the trip nonstop and refuel from tankers along the way. I was in a two-seat D model with my buddy Howie, call sign 'Farley.' We'd just waved the tanker away for our last leg to Eielson following our final air-to-air refueling when our wingman Casey ('Deuce') in a single-seater reported that he couldn't access fuel from his external tanks.



"That raised questions about safely continuing to Fairbanks, so Farley—the flight lead—requested a precautionary landing at the nearest suitable airport, which turned out to be Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada. Of course whenever a problem like this occurs, both planes stay together, so we diverted too.

"Farley radioed Edmonton Center requesting radar vectors to the instrument landing system at Whitehorse, but to our surprise the controller said, 'Sorry, we don't have any air traffic control radar up here. But I'll be glad to read you the approach plate.' Now there's an offer I haven't heard before!

"That's OK,' Farley told him, 'I have the charts.' As it turned out, there was a big hole in the clouds directly over the airport, and we were able to circle down visually. Somehow during this short period, word had gotten out about American military aircraft landing at the local civilian airport, so an unexpected crowd was waiting when we landed." He later learned that a local airplane buff phones in interesting arriving aircraft to the media.

"We stayed with the jets until warmly greeted by a Canadian Army major who offered to assist us any way he could. It was decided that one pilot should remain with the fighters at all times since no other U.S. security was present. Since I was the non-flying pilot in the two-seater for this leg, I volunteered to sleep with the planes. Farley and Deuce caught a ride into town that evening to pick up dinner, which we enjoyed together under the wing before they went to their hotel rooms.

"It was really cold that night with subfreezing temperatures, but I must admit to sleeping wonderfully on the ramp, all wrapped up in a toasty Canadian Army sleeping bag. I awoke to the sound of a diesel truck at 6 a.m.; it was the guy who'd fueled our jets the day before.

"Here's a little Yukon hospitality for you,' he said, handing me a hot cup of coffee. 'If you need anything else let me know. Enjoy your morning!'

"That's pretty random,' I remember thinking, 'but nice!' Guess I appreciated the coffee but wasn't quite ready to wake up. Later that morning a maintenance crew arrived, having driven 12 hours from Eielson overnight. While they were working, it seemed like everyone on or near the airport came out to greet us. We even made the local paper.

"Now, get this. The airport fire station was only a few hundred feet from where we parked. Some firemen came over, and after we'd shown them our jets, they offered a ride in their fire truck. What self-respecting pilot could refuse that?"

“Deuce and I said, ‘Sure!’ so the department arranged a firefighting exercise involving igniting a large pan of fuel on the ramp. We raced around the airport in a giant fire truck, including a 100-kilometer-per-hour maximum-speed run down the runway. When we reached the pan of burning fuel, the firemen offered each of us turns directing the remote-controlled water cannon against the fire! You could say I used a new form of ‘firepower’ this trip.

“As it turned out, the other jet’s fuel system tested fine that afternoon, so we concluded that the fuel-flow problem had probably resulted from a temporarily frozen valve. Frankly, we’d suspected that from the beginning, but of course we couldn’t chance proceeding over 600 miles of empty country toward Eielson without being certain.”

I found myself pondering parallels between Austin’s layover and similar experiences in our own Flying Carpet. No matter what we fly, some of aviation’s best adventures arise from unplanned weather or mechanical diversions. Then again, our military brethren get to enjoy some adventures that we cannot.

“Any interesting exploits once you reached Alaska?” I asked, figuring that the Whitehorse experience had been the highlight of the trip.

“Actually, yes.” To my envy, Austin told of dogfighting as an enemy aggressor in international Red Flag combat exercises. But most memorable had been a “routine” maintenance test flight involving air-to-air refueling.

“Another pilot and I planned the mission to intercept a tanker directly over North America’s tallest peak, Mount McKinley [Denali], and then after the tests flew low-altitude training routes through the Alaskan mountains back to Eielson. It was awesome! Definitely my most incredible sightseeing ride, ever.

“Anyway, Dad, gotta go. Some guys from our squadron went fishing on their day off, and I’m off to a salmon bake!” Ah, the life of a fighter pilot—and the joys of an unplanned stop.

GREG BROWN'S books include *Flying Carpet*, *The Savvy Flight Instructor*, and *You Can Fly!* Visit his [Web site](#).