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The Arctic Flight



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Flying a small, four-seater aircraft from the US to the UK across the Arctic Circle during Winter in 1969: this is one of my Dad's adventures.



Photo by [Dylan Shaw](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Over the Arctic

The yellow-orange streak across the horizon had disappeared. After a long dim twilight, it was now dark. No Aurora tonight. The smell of petrol from the extra fuel tank in the rear reminded me to check the gauges. The cockpit heater was running on “high”, but it made little difference. Icy fingers clawed at my face and hands. My feet remained warm as the one-inch thick felt arctic boots fought off the cold. The snow was streaking off the heated windscreen like sticky rain as winds occasionally buffeted our plane. The light from the instrument panel revealed Jim’s face.

“Do you see anything on your side?” I yelled over the drone of the engines. Jim scratched the frost from the side window, gazed momentarily, and then shook his head. We both knew the fjord was just below. Once we commenced our descent, the walls of this 110-mile-long ice valley would soon be on either side of our Twin Comanche. The NDB beacon continued to show our way. Our charts said we were in the right place.

Landing Blind

I picked up the microphone, “Sondrestrom approach, this is Comanche November Seven Niner Sixty-Four Yankee, requesting clearance.”

Silence.

The fuel gauges showed we still had three hours of endurance — enough to return to Canada. But our oxygen was depleted after the journey, so we couldn’t climb beyond 10,000 feet. I repeated our call sign and request.

An American accent from the deep-south broke the static; it sounded like Gomer Pyle was on the radio. “November Seven Nine Six Four Yankee, this is Sondrestrom approach. We have you in radar contact. You are cleared to 3,300 feet; maintain present heading to intercept the final approach course.”

“Roger, Sixty-four Yankee.”, I answered with a sigh of relief.

Neither Jim nor I could see a damn thing. We knew the terrain around this fjord was high, and we’d just been ordered below the lowest safe altitude for the airport. The flight plan had us dropping into the fjord and following it to the Airforce Base, just a few miles away. If we deviated from our heading, we would run into cumulo-granulartis — a cloud with a mountain inside — which is decidedly not good for your health.

“Six Four Yankee, this will be a GCA (Ground Control Assisted) approach to Sondrestrom Air Base. Turn Right 30 degrees and slow to your final approach speed, and do not acknowledge further instructions, please.”

We “copied” his transmission and turned on to our final approach. “Gomer Pyle” had state-of-the-art military radar and could tell where we were within inches. I joked with Jim, “Between our cockpit instruments and Gomer’s radar, we have a good chance of getting out of this weather in one piece.” He winced back at me. This landing was getting tense.

At 7 miles, “Gomer Pyle” told us we were approaching the glide path and to begin our descent at 500 feet per minute. Jim kept track of our progress on the charts while I was focused on the instrument panel. In the darkness below, along our route, was a 2,000-foot mountain hidden by clouds and fog. We continued our descent into the fjord; our calculations assured us we would miss the mountaintop by at least 1,000 feet. We both anxiously waited for the next instruction from the Ground Controller.

“You are left of the centre line; turn right five degrees.”, came the voice over the radio. “You are 200 feet above the glide path; ease it down.”

I corrected our heading and altitude — still zero visibility, no sign of the airport.

A minute later, “Gomer” said, “Distance from touchdown three miles, cleared to land, check gear down and locked.”

Jim pointed to something on the map. We were soon to fly over a small hill; we figured it was about 400 feet below us. I was grinding my teeth and wished I had a cigarette. Despite the cold, sweat was running down the back of my neck.

Passing through 300 feet, less than a mile out — we were committed — no way to go around now. Mountains guarded the far end of the runway — a little too high to climb over from here. We continued our descent.

“You are over the end of the Runway, 50 feet!” came the American voice over the radio.

As the runway lights became visible, we cut our engines and touched down with a gentle thud. Now all we had to do was stop.

The Airforce Base

I pumped the brakes — nothing. The strip was icy, so I worked the rudder to keep us on the centre line. Jim counted down the distance markers as we skated along the runway. We both held our breath; this airstrip was 9,000 feet long, and we wondered if we’d stop before the end.

At 7,000 feet, we turned off to the taxiway, and we could both breathe again.

The Control Tower directed us to a large yellow square painted on the apron outside the terminal. It was minus twenty-five degrees Celsius, and the Arctic snow and wind were blowing something

fierce, so we were not looking forward to opening the cockpit door.

Was it an earthquake? Jim and I looked at each other speechless, as we both felt the shudder. Our little twin-engined aircraft began to descend as if we were on the deck of an aircraft carrier. Or perhaps we were on the latest “James Bond” movie set. Military personnel were busily going about their business in this floodlit cavern beneath the airport. Across from our plane was a row of large military aircraft — Hercules C-130s. We taxied off the platform and parked in our spot as the ground controller directed us with his lighted paddles.

It was “pleasant” down here — out of the weather. Jim and I unzipped our arctic jackets and exited the cockpit. It was a toasty minus-five degrees Celsius. Bad idea! I felt a cold slap of ice forming across my back — I swiftly zipped up. Jim had the same reaction. We secured the Twin Comanche and soon arranged for fuel and fresh oxygen. After the approach and landing stress, we looked forward to the hotel, where hot meals and cold beers awaited. Planning for the next leg to Reykjavík could wait until tomorrow after a good night’s sleep.

The Back-Story to the Journey

It was a different time. Everyone smoked cigarettes. Nixon was the US President. The Vietnam War was raging. The Cold War mindset prevailed. The Beatles had released “Abbey Road”, and “Something” was a #1 hit. Apollo 12 had just returned from the Moon last month.

This was December 1969.

Dad was going to the US to pick up a new plane he’d just bought — the Twin Comanche. It was much faster than the Piper Aztecs he already had, and this new aircraft would replace another he’d recently sold. A dozen years earlier, he had established a small plane-for-hire service — Australian Air Charterers (AAC). His business was growing.



The Fleet at Aus-Air (AAC) circa 1980s [Photo by Bill Dart]

Flight to Chicago

On the flight from San Francisco to Chicago, Dad sat beside a Business Executive. He became very interested when Dad mentioned he was headed to Chicago to buy a plane. The Executive said they were looking for private investors for these new silicon computer chips they were developing. Dad declined after discovering that only one in 100 chips worked out of every batch. He always wondered if he missed a big opportunity to make a killing. Still, he never got the Executive's business card — so it was just another of his “One that got away” stories.

In Chicago, Dad met with Phil Coleman of Coleman Aircraft Corporation (Later Coleman Jet Solutions). He was the aircraft broker from whom Dad was buying the Twin Comanche. In the past, light aircraft would be disassembled, shipped by boat, and reassembled on arrival in Australia. However, Coleman pioneered the techniques for flying these small planes — ferrying them — to their overseas destinations.

Based on Phil's advice, Dad planned to fly his Twin Comanche across the Arctic Circle to London. From there, Dad would compete in the BP London to Sydney Air Race — flying his Twin Comanche home.



Phil Coleman in front of the Hangar at AAC circa 1970s [Photo by Dave Coleman]

A few years later, Phil Coleman would follow the same route to ferry a plane to Australia for Dad.

Dad's Plane

The Twin Comanche was about three years old. Being turbocharged, it had a ceiling of 24,000 feet and was one of its class's fastest and most fuel-efficient types. Dad planned to operate the aircraft above 18,000 feet to take advantage of prevailing winds and the plane's superior performance at those higher flight levels. Oxygen was installed for the pilots as it was required for operations above 10,000 feet. Specialised high-frequency radios — critical for safety while flying in remote locations — would be installed later as Dad passed through Boston.

The aircraft already sported wing-tip fuel tanks, but for this journey, Phil recommended the installation of another fuel tank inside the cockpit, behind the two passenger seats. This gave Dad the additional range needed to fly safely over Greenland and across to Iceland. Some legs of this journey could range up to 1,000 miles and cross some of the most desolate places on the planet.



Phil Coleman with Dad's Twin Comanche [Photo by Dave Coleman]

Air-Race officials required the aircraft to be painted with iridescent orange spots across the wings, tail, fuselage, and nose — to aid in any search and rescue attempts on the snow and ice. Of course, since the plane was in a race, it was also decked out with various sponsors' logos.

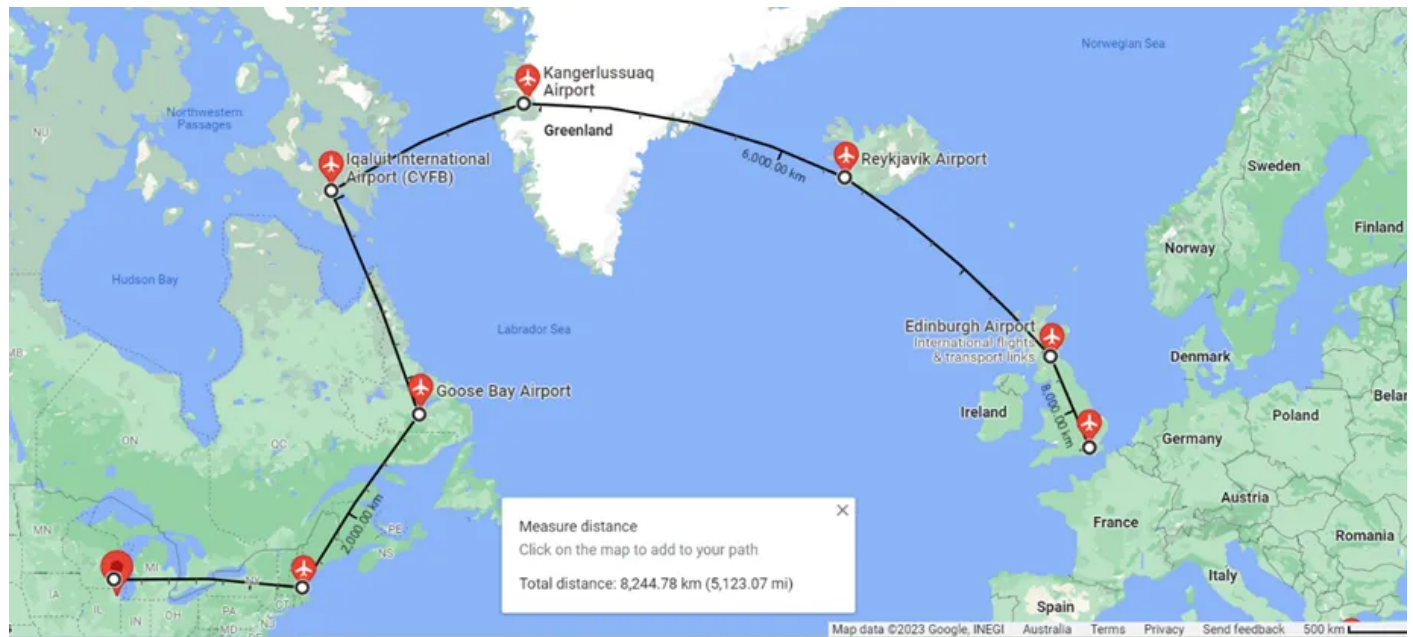
Charting the Route

Back then, there was no Global Positioning System to locate you. No Google Maps to help you navigate. It was down to aviation charts, radio beacons, air-traffic controllers with radar, and calculations to guide you to your destination. When Dad bought his charts for the trip in Chicago, the salesperson said, "Australia? That's South of the equator. Man, no one goes there!"

Jim Cook was Dad's co-pilot for the journey to the UK. They were introduced to each other by Phil. They had a good laugh later in the trip when they discovered that this would be the first time either would be ferrying a plane out of the US. For some reason, they were both led to believe that the other was very experienced in this kind of flight. Once in London, Jim would return home to

Chicago and Graeme Lowe, the AAC Chief Pilot, would fly with Dad the rest of the way to Australia.

Using their charts and Phil Coleman's experience, they settled on the following route: Chicago to Boston (867 miles), Boston to Goose Bay in Canada (901 miles), Goose Bay to Frobisher Bay in Canada (778 miles), Frobisher Bay to Sondrestrom in Greenland (552 miles), Sondrestrom to Reykjavik in Iceland (835 miles), Reykjavik to Edinburgh in the UK (852 miles), and Edinburgh to Biggin Hill in the suburbs of London (348 miles).



The route my Dad flew from Chicago to London [Image by Google & INEGI]

The most treacherous part of the journey to London was over the Arctic Circle. The selection of Sondrestrom was a critical safety factor. It was a US Airforce Base and was part of the US Nuclear Early Warning System. It guaranteed the airport would be open, even in the foulest weather. Despite that, based on Phil's advice, Dad opted to fly from Frobisher Bay for that leg. On full tanks, it meant they had enough endurance to return to Frobisher Bay or divert South to Narsarsuaq in Greenland if Sondrestrom was unavailable.

My Reflections

Arctic survival gear was essential for this journey. As a child, I played with this equipment after Dad's return home. I marvelled at the boots. They had a stiff black plastic shell with felt inlay booties. The felt was 1 inch thick and had a silver zipper from above the ankle to the middle of the foot. He had woven woollen long underwear, with legs down to the ankles. The arctic parker had a long hood that extended about 6 inches beyond the face, forming a fur-lined tunnel. I recall it was reversible with bright orange lining to aid search and rescue efforts on the ice.

Dad also carried an orange plastic “club”. It had a long handle about the diameter of a D-cell battery. The head was bulbous and contained a radio beacon and flashing light. I understood it could be activated automatically by being immersed in salt water. As a child, you don’t reflect on what that means. As an adult, I realise my Dad prepared for the worst — crashing into a freezing ocean that would kill him within a few minutes if unprotected. He made sure that nothing was left to chance. He eliminated as much risk as possible from an inherently risky adventure.

Writing this story gave me a greater perspective on the distances and the dangers involved. I am amazed and humbled. My Dad had supreme confidence in himself and faith in the technology he used to make this incredible journey over fifty years ago. His approach to flying was meticulous and thorough, and this discipline carried over into the rest of his life. I never considered him especially “brave” or a “hero”. He was just Dad. I am proud to tell his personal story and celebrate his memory. And I’m glad my kids will understand a little more about a very old man they called “Papa”, whom they barely knew.

Thank you for taking the time to read this story. If you liked it, please let me know by applauding &/or following me. I’d love to hear your stories about your parents, so comment — let’s start a conversation. If you want to read some of my other memoirs and life lessons, you can check them out in my library [here](#).

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Acknowledgement: Many thanks to Dave Coleman for his kind assistance in digging out family photos related to this story, the discussion of the route and the corrections in the dialogue for making an instrument approach to Sondrestrom Airforce Base.

Memoir

Travel

Adventure

Aircraft

Life Lessons