



CHALKYITSIK—Except for the resourcefulness of Ft. Yukon Air Service bush pilots, the villages of Chalkyitsik and Venetie might have been a bit cold this winter. Despite a short runway at Chalkyitsik, the pilots transported 42,000 gallons

of fuel oil to the two villages using tiny planes as tiny tankers. As a result, the children of the two villages are going to school in warm classrooms.

—Photo by C.H. DARBY

Ingenious Bush Pilots Convert Small Planes Into Tiny Tankers To Furnish Fuel for Two Villages

By C.H. DARBY

It was a close call, but the residents of Chalkyitsik and Venetie can rest easily now. The fuel oil is in for the village schools and the children will make it through the winter in warm buildings.

When the first of September arrived and the annual fuel oil shipment hadn't been received for the big diesel engines and furnaces in the Bureau of Indian Affairs schools at either location, village parents began to worry.

The transportation contract called for 42,000 gallons of oil to be delivered, 25,000 to Chalkyitsik, and 17,000 to Venetie, from the bulk storage tanks at Ft. Yukon.

The problem was that the last boat had long since gone downriver, ground transportation was impossible and the snow was due to start falling at any time.

The answer was, of course, shipment by air, but again the villagers were stymied. The big Hercules and C-46 tankers couldn't land at the small fields because of conditions and length, especially at Chalkyitsik.

There the strip, though listed as 1,300 feet long, barely managed to end up with much more than 900 feet of usable runway. The first 300 feet had been cleared at one time but was now grown over with weeds, and running across the middle was a deep ditch just waiting to trap some unwary pilot.

It was going to be a cold winter if someone didn't find an answer.

Two well-known Alaska bush pilots, Tommy Olson and Cliff Fairchild, owners of Ft. Yukon Air Service, came up with the solution. Since the big ones couldn't do the job, they'd build a pair of "Tiny Tankers" which would be able to land and take

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Tiny Tankers . . .

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off from the limited strips.

After bidding and getting the contract, both men were subject to no small amount of ridicule from other operators in the area.

"It couldn't be done, they told us," said Tommy. "All their thinking ran along lines of carrying reloaded barrels of oil to the villages, rather than the bulk product. We had a different idea."

"We picked two of our planes for the job, a Cessna 206 Super Turbo Skywagon and a Piper Cherokee 300, because they both had big cargo doors and the seats were easily removable. Greer Tank and Welding in Fairbanks made us a pair of 180 gallon tanks that would just fit through the doors, and we fastened them down to the cargo fittings. Big two-inch pipe at the end of the tanks allowed for quick unloading when tied into a small gasoline pump at the villages."

On Sunday, Sept. 22, the installations were complete and Tommy flew to Ft. Yukon where he and Cliff made a couple of trial runs into Chlakyitsik.

They loaded from a thousand gallon tank on skids that had been dragged out to the airport from the Standard Oil bulk plant there.

"It was better than we expected," Tommy reported. "Loading was slow, about 20 minutes, using gravity flow from the big tank, but the off-loading was wonderful. We could empty the 180 gallons in three minutes flat. Flight time between Ft. Yukon and Chalkyitsik took about 20 minutes."

Monday morning, Jim Pippin, Ft. Yukon Air Service pilot who was to fly the Super Skywagon, came up from Fairbanks, and he and Cliff settled into a more or

less regular schedule.

Weather turned out as predicted, a worse problem than the short airstrips. Wednesday and Thursday the first snow of the season arrived.

It was only a couple of inches, but visibility was reduced to a few hundred feet and both Jim and Cliff spent most of the day reading magazines at the Ft. Yukon Lodge which Cliff owns and operates.

By the end of the week, however, almost 17,000 gallons had been delivered and the weather had improved so that almost 12 hours a day was spent flying back and forth between fields.

Earlier in the week, a small electric pump had been added to the big bulk tank, which cut the loading time from 20 to 10 minutes. Total time for each trip was now down to 55 minutes, which helped considerably.

By Tuesday of the second week, the 25,000 gallon order for Chalkyitsik had been delivered, along with about a dozen barrels of lube oil. Cliff Nelson, another Ft. Yukon Air pilot, flew in from Fairbanks to replace Pippin, and the two Cliffs, Fairchild and Nelson, began the Venetie run.

No real trouble was encountered with the second part of the contract there, although weather slowed the operation on several occasions. The longer strip offered no problems in landing and the entire operation was counted a huge success.

Two bush pilots, their airplanes, and a little imagination had succeeded in making sure that the children could go to school this winter in warm, comfortable buildings like their fellow students in the big cities.

Who says Alaska isn't civilized?



TINY TANKER—Tom Olson, owner of the Ft. Yukon Air Service, right, is standing by his Cessna 206 he and his pilots converted into a tiny tanker to transport fuel oil to the villages of Chalkyitsik and Venetie deep in the interior of

Alaska. Greer Tank and Welding Co. of Fairbanks fashioned 180 gallon drums to fit the cabins of the Cessna 206 and Cherokee 300 for the transportation of oil.

—Photo by C.H. DARBY