

New airline seeks to bring a

By Bill Hess
Tundra Times

Frozen fishing skiffs camouflaged in snow sit on the edge of the Kuskokwim as it drops off further beneath the windows of the De Havilland Twin Otter. A barge which did not leave Bethel in time to avoid freezi-up sits locked tight in the river ice, where it will remain until breakup. Hundreds of frozen lakes of many shapes and sizes stretch out across the tundra toward the seacoast, the direction this plane is headed.

"Would you like anything to drink?" the pleasant voice of a young black-haired woman startles the passenger. "We have soft drinks and juice. We have snacks, too. Cashews and almonds."

Whoa! What's happening here? This is a Bush flight. Bush flights don't have attractive young stewardesses wearing bright red jackets serving drinks and snacks. The passenger has learned through painful experience that on Bush flights you must be somewhat on guard.

More than once, he has been horrified to see a pilot or someone else suddenly grab his expensive cameras just as he was getting ready to step off a plane, and impatiently hurl them crashing to the runway.

Now a flight attendant offers refreshments.

This is Camai-ERA-Alaska Airlines Flight 863, off on its inaugural run from Bethel to the villages of Chefnak, Nightmute, Newtok, and back to Bethel.

The "Camai" part of the service is Native-owned, and has brought to the business with it a determination to provide the predominantly Yup'ik population of the area services they have never experienced before. Like the other three flight attendants working on the two Twin Otters which serve 12 Southwestern villages, Cynthia Nicori of Kwethluk is Yup'ik.

She is fluent in her language, and is looking forward to providing older passengers who speak little or no English with service they can understand, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

"No," she will tell them in their own tongue. "There is nothing to be worried about. We are encountering some minor turbulence which will soon pass."

Deacon Nick Charles opened up this first day of service shortly before 9:00 a.m. while it was still dark when he offered a blessing of the ground facilities, delivered in his Native Yup'ik. Then the employees, many of them on the job for the first day, and guests followed him out into a cold dark fog where he sprinkled holy water in the direction of the airplanes and called on a higher source of protection than could be provided by the sophisticated technology and skilled pilots.



Deacon Nick Charles blesses the Twin Otters Halloween morning in near zero degree weather.

That first morning not everything went smoothly. The fuel supply tank had not been installed, and the fuel for the morning's run was slightly late in arriving. It wouldn't have made any difference, though; poor weather forced a nearly two-hour delay on the first flights.

Flight 863 has only two passengers during the first leg of its run, and Nicori is able to take a bit of time to chat. "I am really excited," she says. "This is what I always dreamed of. When I was younger, and I would travel to Anchorage, I would see the flight attendants. They would make me feel so comfortable. I felt I wanted to be one."

Now that she has a start, Nicori plans to make something of it. "I'd like to get to Japan, Korea, and other places, and see how people live," she smiles happily. For now, she plans to stick with Camai-ERA-Alaska where she can be of benefit to her own people.

Not only can she help them through serving, but Nicori that other Yup'iks, seeing her and the other attendants making it in a profession they may have thought unavailable to Native people, will be encouraged to succeed in their dreams.

Still, she is convinced her day to move on into national and international stewardess positions is coming. "I'm going to go for it!" she promises, with a determined gesture of her right fist.

Snowmachines and all-terrain cycles gather in welcome as the Twin Otter taxis to its first stop in Chefnak. Some villagers have come to pick up

freight or mail, and some just to watch. Jimmy and Betty Ann Tom, an elderly couple from Newtok, have come to catch the flight home.

With them is Father Tom Provinsac, a Jesuit priest also living in Newtok. The three had come to Chefnak to attend the funeral of Father Norman Donohue. One passenger from Bethel ends his trip here.

"You're our first passengers in the Bush!" Uni Hanley, a blonde ERA official helping to train the Yup'ik flight attendants, says. The Toms are also the first Native passengers on Flight 863.

"He's one of the owners!" Father Tom motions proudly

toward Jimmy Tom.

Camai is owned by the village corporations in the communities of Tununak, Tooksook Bay, Nightmute, Chefnak, Newtok, and Mekoryuk. The villages formed the airline last April, offering charter flights in a single Cessna 207. Business proved good, and Camai was able to add two more small planes to its fleet.

Ruth Kaloa, manager of Camai, says several passengers encouraged the airline to start a scheduled run. "We did a marketing analysis and came to the conclusion that yes, additional air service was needed. But it had to be different, not just transportation; it had to be an airline, where the people

would be treated first class!"

Mark Charlie of Tununak, president of Camai, explained that many visits were made with villagers to see what they desired in an airline, and incorporated their wishes into the plan.

"I hate to bring up a bad history, but back in 1975, the villages started an airline, and it just didn't go. This time, we studied the market closely, and planned very carefully."

Under the arrangement worked out with Alaska Airlines and ERA, Alaska provides daily service between Anchorage and Bethel on a "Dash-7." The two Twin Otters and their crews come from ERA, and the ground support facilities are



Jimmy and Betty Tom of Newtok wait to board the Otter as it taxis up to the loading dock in Chefnak.

touch of luxury to bush flying

Camai's. Several new jobs have been created.

Besides the pilots and mechanics, there are two ticket agents, four flight attendants, three ramp personnel and 12

village agents. Almost all are Native.

There is a very brief stop in Nightmute, where no passengers are picked up. Then the plane rises up over some hilly

country buried in snow.

Jimmy Tom has spent his life pulling a living from the land and sea animals living in the wilderness below. After a few changes of scenery he be-

gins to wave his hand, signaling for someone to give a message to the pilot.

Newtok is to the right, he says, and the pilot adjusts accordingly. "He knows this

country like you and I would know Anchorage!" Father Tom says admiringly.

In Newtok, village agent George Tom, son of Jimmy and Betty, greets the plane. On his head is a fine beaver hat sewn by Betty, whose skill is well known in these parts.

He wears a black coat emblazoned with colorful oriental designs and the names of many Eastern Pacific ports-of-call.

It is a gift from his brother, who is in the Navy, protecting U.S. interests from Japan to the Philippines.

"Oh, I like it!" says young Tom of his new job as he unloads a large box of disposable diapers from the airplane. "It's the best service of any airline out here!"

"Then he shrugs sheepishly. "I've got no passengers, though!"

"I would like to take a few moments to acquaint you with our De Havilland Twin Otter," flight attendant Anna Kinagak tries her turn on the P.A. system as the flight leaves for Bethel. "Tua-lu mat'umek ten-suutemtnek De Havilland Twin Otter-aamek qanrutqataramci . . ."

Kinagak has just begun her work, and has not had as much training as the other flight attendants who were able to spend some time flying with ERA on the Anchorage-Kenai run.

She has just resigned her job managing the Ayalpik apartments for the elderly and handicapped to take this job.

Despite having been born and raised in Southwest Alaska this trip marks her visit to the Coast.

Only the original observer is still a passenger on the plane. He has seen nothing but optimism here, and the service has been truly fine.

But starting a new business, especially an airline business in the Bush, has got to be rough. What about the service, the two flight attendants per plane, and the refreshments? That will cost money. Will it not give a financial edge to competitors?

Both Kaloa and Charlie reject such pessimism. The people want to be treated like people, they say. The Elders want to know what is going on, and to be addressed in a language they easily understand.

Prices will be kept competitive, they promise. "Right now, we're serving 12 villages instead of the 56 possible," says Charlie.

"If we do this right, if we show we care, we can expand to all these communities."

The Twin Otter touches down in Bethel. "Well, Bill," Nicori speaks over the intercom. "We hope you have enjoyed your flight. At this time we would like to welcome you to Bethel . . ."

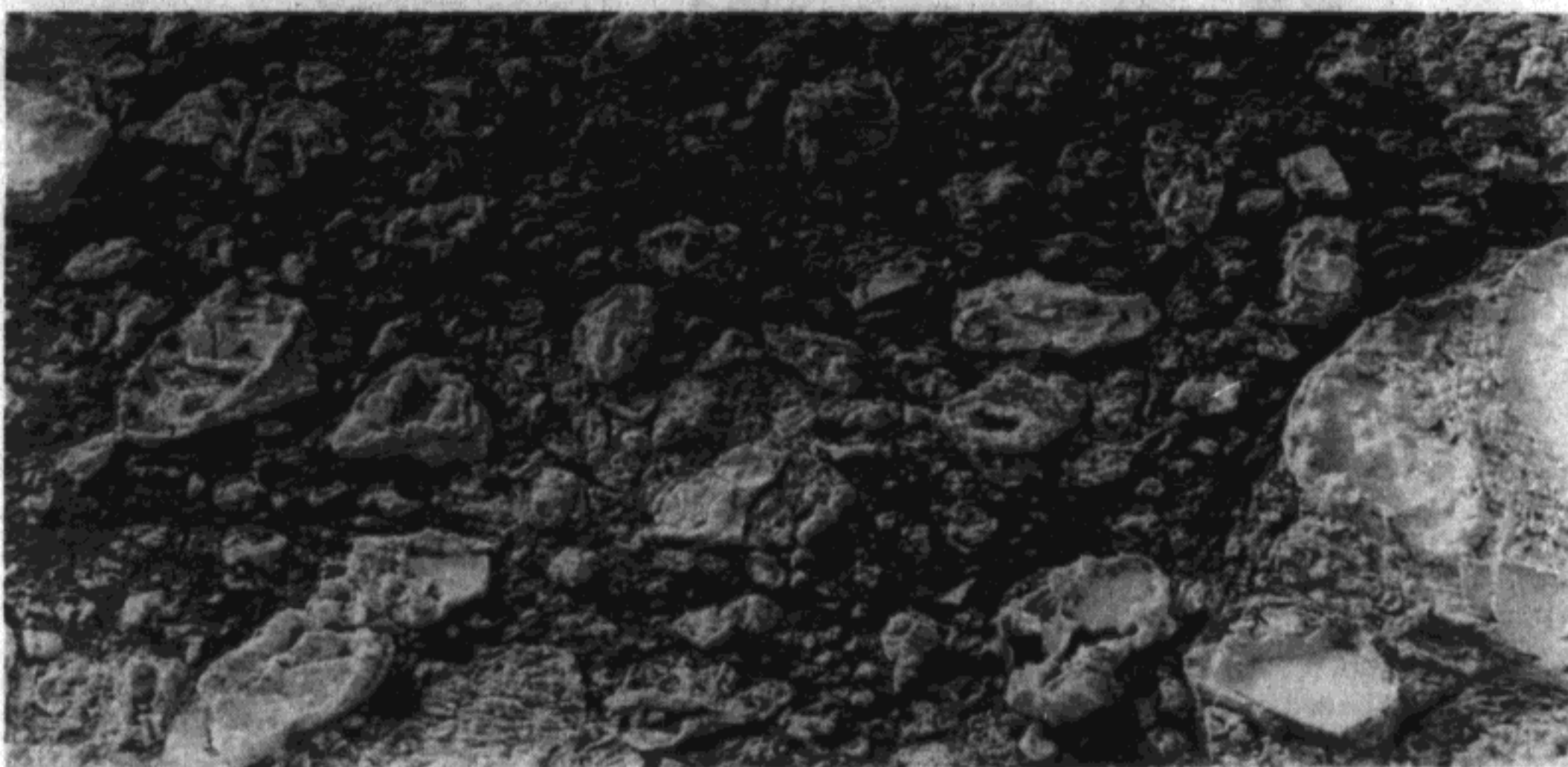
Now, that's personalized service!



Cynthia Nicori welcomes passengers aboard Flight 863. The message is delivered in both English and Yup'ik.



Nicori answers questions for Betty Tom, while her husband, Jimmy, scans the landscape below.



Ice in the channel separating Nelson Island from the main body of Alaska

PHOTOS BY BILL HESS



George Tom, wearing a beaver hat made by his mother, Betty, and a Navy jacket from his brother in the Navy, unloads disposable diapers with an assist from Nicori.