

Pilot recalls first flight to Soviet Union

by Barbara Crane
Tundra Times reporter

Last month Maj. Milt Cross realized a dream.

Cross piloted an Alaska Army National Guard Twin Otter from Anchorage to Nome and across the International Dateline, landing at the Provideniya airport in the Soviet Far East.

The sky was clear and the sun was shining when Cross arrived in Provideniya Sept. 10.

"Before we landed, we saw that we had quite an audience," Cross said. "Folks were standing on top of the buildings and around the other aircraft to get a look at us."

Cross decided to show off a little for the crowd which had gathered for the extraordinary sight of an American military plane landing at their airport.

"The Twin Otter does a real good job of flying slow," Cross said, "so I came in with full flaps and just as I touched down I went into reverse and put on the brakes. It didn't take too much ground roll to stop."

While travel between the Soviet Far East and Alaska is becoming almost commonplace, a problem with his passport almost kept Cross from making the trip.

"I found out I needed an 'official' passport instead of my tourist passport," he said, "so I had to go in and get pictures taken and go through the whole rigamarole again."

"Then I had trouble with the visa. As it turned out, they had the wrong dates for us, so our visas expired before we even got there."

So after making the trip all the way to Provideniya, Cross and his crew were informed that because their visas had expired, they would not be allowed to leave the terminal.

Deeply disappointed, they found themselves with ten hours to kill until it was time to pick up their passengers and fly home.

"They opened up for us what seemed to be a VIP room with a color TV,"



Maj. Milt Cross piloted a National Guard Twin Otter to Provideniya, U.S.S.R.

Cross and his crew had two meals while they waited. They had cabbage soup, meatballs and gravy, cottage cheese and bread.

"While we were eating there was a Soviet infantry captain sitting at another table," Cross said. "He would look over at us and laugh and shake his head."

"I don't know for sure what he was

laughing at, but I assume he just couldn't believe there were American military men sitting in the same room and eating lunch, when the only reason he was stationed out there was to protect his country from Americans like us!"

Cross, who is a NANA shareholder, said his ears perked up when he overheard some Natives talking.

"While I couldn't understand what they were saying, I could recognize the dialect. It was the same as the folks on St. Lawrence Island speak."

The American pilots also had a chance to talk with some Soviet pilots.

"I guess pilots are pilots everywhere," Cross said. "We got along great and exchanged hats."

"We talked about our navigational equipment. They still use slide rules while we do it all with the computer onboard the aircraft."

While his visit to Provideniya wasn't exactly what he had hoped for, Cross said he enjoyed the experience and would like to go back again when he could see and do more.

"For years I had looked at that area while flying to and from Gambell and Diomed Island," he said. "I wondered what it would be like."

"I had strong feelings as we crossed the Dateline, talked to the Soviets on the radio and then landed on their soil."

"It was an experience I never thought I'd live to see — me, an American military pilot, landing my plane in the Soviet Union."

*'It was an experience
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—Maj. Milt Cross

Cross said. "But it didn't work all the time."

"When it did work, we saw an old man with a bunch of books in front of him. He just talked, apparently giving a lecture of some kind."

Not wanting to spend ten hours listening to a lecture in a language they couldn't understand, the crew wandered around the terminal building, talking through an interpreter to the people they met.

"We talked to the flight service man and went up into his office which was about three floors high," Cross said.

"We could look over the runway and see helicopters come and go. The man laughed, pointed to one of their aircraft taxiing out and said, 'Cheap Douglas.' In other words, it was their copy of our Douglas DC-3."

Figuring the Soviets would be interested in seeing the inside of his plane, Cross offered to give them a tour. But only if he could see the inside of one of their helicopters first.

"There was a definite, loud 'NO!'" Cross recalled. "I knew that subject was closed."