



After 35 years, pilot Richards takes last flight

By Linda Lord-Jenkins

Tundra Times

After more than 35 years and a career that took him from flying Piper Cub three-seaters to 737s, with hundreds of passengers, Wien pilot Tom Richards Sr. has hung up his Wien "wings" and will go into private business in Kotzebue.

The soft-spoken Kotzebue-born Inupiat pilot retired last month after hitting the age of 60. The Federal Aviation Administration requires that pilots retire on that date.

Richards, who has been flying with Wien since 1947, says he will become an operations manager with Baker Flight Service in Kotzebue. He has been living in Anchorage for the past several years.

Richards made his last Wien flight on the Wien mainline —

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Tom Richards Sr. is honored by an honor guard of Wien pilots after he takes his final Wien flight into Anchorage International Airport.

After 35 years, Richards retires

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Bethel, Kotzebue—Anchorage, and was honored by an "honor guard" of Wien pilots who lined up to salute him as he disembarked from his last landing in Anchorage. His family was also at the final landing strip to greet him, as was Wien president and new owner, James Flood.

A career in flying was not what Richards had in mind in the early 1940s when he enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard with the intention and promise of being stationed in Alaska.

"What I got couldn't be farther from that," says Richards. He was stationed in the Solomon Islands.

After a couple years he signed up for flight school but was discharged before completing it. He finished school as a civilian and returned to Alaska.

His first flying job was working for Archie Ferguson out of Kotzebue and he also flew for Louie Rockman's stores, he said.

He says he began working for Wien in 1947 and "My wife

never thought I'd stick with it . . . She asked me when I'd find a decent job."

He says he flew the Bush for 10 years before transferring to the main line.

His Bush experiences were a mix of history and old-fashioned Alaska adventure stories.

Richards was a friend of Tundra Times founder Howard Rock and flew Rock into Point Hope in 1948 or 1949 when the then-artist returned home to the Chukchi Sea village after a long absence.

Richards remembers that they made an almost perfect landing until a gust of wind swept the plane's tail up and drove the nose into the icy ground.

Richards has landed on ice, gravel, hard-packed ground and caribou migration paths. He says his favorite landing strip was a caribou trail on the Sol Solomon River which he landed on while making a mail delivery that was supposed to be a mail drop. He saw the path and decided to give it a go and reports it was almost as hard as pavement.

One of his most harrowing experiences and one which was written up in two magazines was a landing he attempted on the ice off of Point Hope while flying two polar bear hunters.

The hunters saw a bear and asked to be set down.

"I knew the ice didn't look right when I started to land," says Richards who put his plane down on what turned out to be heavy frost.

The plane quickly started to fill with water and Richards and his two passengers had to bail out.

The two men were directed to stay with the plane while their pilot started out to hike

the 10 miles to Point Hope. But he soon became trapped by leads which opened up between him and the village on one side, and between him and the plane on the other.

He and the others were rescued the next day by Wien pilot John Cross who was looking for them. He never flew another polar bear hunt.

"If I'd had another two to three days I would have made it," says Richards but he concedes that he wouldn't have lasted in the cold for that time.

He says he and his passengers stayed alive for as long as they did because their clothes were soaked with water which froze, then gave them some insulation.

The knowledge of his land taught by his family stood Richards in good stead during his early days of flying when he had to know a great deal about the land he was flying.

Although he never crashed and was stranded, he did have mishaps which caused minor damage on his small planes. He says he once flew into a strip that was so gravel-filled he and a mechanic had to spend a good portion of their night emptying the tires of gravel.

Skiis have fallen off during flight and a member of his crew once had to shut down one of his plane's engines because the crew member sensed the propeller was about to fly off. The immediate shut-down prevented the prop from coming off and potentially causing damage.

Weather in Alaska is always something to contend with and Richards tells the story of a ground support worker in Point Hope who was taught to tell weather conditions by spotting landmarks.

Visibility could be explained by sighting Cape Lisburne which was 30 miles away, he said. Flight "ceiling" was explained to her by using a flag pole.

On one occasion the woman gave him a "visibility 30 miles and ceiling zero reading" because she could see the Cape.

"We heard it and couldn't believe it but took her word and found out she was right when we landed."

Since being transferred to the Wien "mainline," Richards has flown every Wien route except the newly opened route to Reno, Nev.

He was the first Native pilot to be certified on a jet airplane but modestly admits it was a "mistake" because another Native pilot was due to be tested and Richards was tested first.

He has a scrapbook of mementos kept by his wife which contains clippings from a lifetime of flights, both worry-free and adventuresome.

One small clipping reports about a rescue of John Cross. Many of them are stories which are about some Alaska adventure and prominently mention "Eskimo pilot Tommy Richards."

Others show pictures of a young Richards administering to an ill passenger.

But yet, the quiet man who has done many things worthy of mention says of his flying life only one thing:

"I never did anything that I didn't have to do, really."

His career in flying thus far has not been followed by any of his four children, says Richards.

Son Tom Jr., is now a vice-president of the Association of Village Council Presidents in the Calista Region. He also is a former editor and publisher of the Tundra Times.

Daughter Marilyn is a freelance writer and also worked at the Tundra Times. Son B.J. lives in Kiana and daughter works at Artique Art Gallery.

Only daughter Barbara who works at Prudhoe Bay for ARCO and lives in Kotzebue has an interest in flying and is taking lessons, says Richards.



Tom Richards Sr. and family after his final Wien flight (upper left). (Above) pilots James Fredericks and Richards and man from Diomed Island in 1953. (Left) Richards and Jack Whaley and his daughter pick up Cessna from Fairbanks. Richards lands at Cape Lisburne before airstrip. (below left)

PHOTOS BY

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