

North from Whitehorse YT

After 10 years as First Officer with CPA, my first opportunity for a captaincy was an opening on the DC-3, flying the route Whitehorse - Mayo - Dawson City in the Yukon. It would not have been my first choice if I had had another option, but as it turned out, it was one of the best years of my life. Only those that have lived in the north will know what I mean. After a year you don't want to leave and go "outside".

So on a day in September 1955 I proceeded up to YXY for a fam trip. The Captain to show me the ropes was well experienced and known for a keen sense of humour. We left for Mayo with me standing behind (if you sat in jump seat you were so low you couldn't see anything). The weather was IFR with an ADF approach required down to 400 feet. He showed me an approach he had developed to land to the west as there was no official approach to that runway. It was perfectly safe as I found out on the first clear day but it did give me a hint this was not a normal straight and level airline operation.

On the ground it became abundantly clear when he says "now you get your weather briefing to Dawson by calling the cafe on the road and asking them if they can see across the lake". He phoned and they could see the far shore, so off we go, following the road as there was no IFR approach at YDA, strictly VFR.

After about 3 miles it changed from an airline operation to a bush operation. We were down to a hundred feet or lower with cloud right above us and forward visibility was maybe a thousand feet (think CAT 2 weather).

About half way we passed the cafe and you could see across the lake all right, but it looked more like a pothole to me. A ways later I could see the road going up into the cloud, but no fear the check pilot had turned slightly to the right and he says "now you hold this heading until you cross a drainage ditch". We are flying over marshy flat ground. Sure enough we cross the ditch and he says "now you continue on this heading until you cross the ditch again". So we arrive at the ditch again and he says "now you turn 20 degrees left and listen on the earphones to the HF radio for static from a power plant ahead and you know you are at the Klondike River". So we get the static and then follow the river.

After a bit it's obvious that we are getting close, as he has lowered the gear and has taken flaps. I still can't see anything ahead when he turns and calls out to the First Officer, "Have you got the horse, have you got the horse"?

About a minute later the F/O calls out, "There's the horse" and so he flies over the horse and lo and behold the runway appears and he lands, making out he used the horse as an outer marker.

I'm standing there thinking what have I got myself into but played mister cool and never said a word indicating there was anything out of the ordinary, as I felt they were having a great time seeing if I would flinch. Just so you know, the horse was moved two weeks later but it wouldn't have made any difference, he knew exactly where he was.

After I flew the route in the clear, I saw that we were never in any danger from terrain as at anytime even with an engine failure we could have climbed up and proceeded to Mayo and made another approach. I flew the route for a year and even though I practiced that approach many times, I never saw any sign of that kind of weather.

It was a perfect day for a fam trip. I hope you enjoyed it. I did and will always remember the horse.

Capt. V. Ralph Quick (ret.)
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