

JOURNEY TO THE LAST FRONTIER

Pilot takes the trip of a lifetime

From 10,000 feet in the air, the mountains of Alaska are vast, beautiful, awe inspiring...and dangerous—particularly if you're piloting a small plane. "I would sometimes wonder what my chances were of being found," says Tom Newell, ('99 Services Integration Group).

For many retirees, bucket lists include travel to far-off destinations. That was the same for Newell. The difference, however, is how Newell planned to get to his far-off destination—Barrow, Alaska, the northernmost city in the U.S. and 3,300 nautical miles away from his home in Richmond, Texas.

"A fellow pilot and I had always talked about making the trip." The two were inspired by Discovery Channel's *Flying Wild Alaska*. The documentary series followed Jim and Ferno Tweto, who own and operate their own airline, battling often unpredictable, harsh Alaskan weather conditions.

The two decided to make the 10-day trip in June of 2015—each piloting his own plane. "We flew solo. Our wives were not as enthusiastic about the trip and decided to stay home," he muses.

Newell is no stranger to piloting small aircraft. In 1964, Newell graduated from the Naval Academy and entered flight training. He flew combat missions in Vietnam from 1966 through 1968 and served on active duty with the U.S. Navy for 10 years, later serving in the Reserves. After retirement, while living in Buffalo, Wyoming, Newell served as a pilot in many search-and-rescue operations.

Flying over Alaska's vast, isolated mountain region required preparation. "There's a saying that goes 'It's a whole lot better to be on the ground wishing you were up in the air, than being up in the air wishing you were down on the ground.' We did our best to mitigate potentially dangerous scenarios."

That included a mechanical check-up for his BeechCraft Baron. Though Newell



Newell visits with Jim and Ferno Tweto in Unalakleet.

is capable of doing minor maintenance on his aircraft, he made sure a licensed mechanic gave it a thorough evaluation. And, he brought lots of tools on the flight.

The two pilots also each packed 27 days of food. "We brought a pretty hefty medical aid kit and survival gear like fire-starters, signaling devices, lots of blankets, sleeping bags, shelter and even a hand ax."

Though Newell never needed that survival gear, the two pilots were weathered-in and had to rearrange their flight path several times. "The wrinkle is that if it's raining low, even though you're flying higher than the rain, it's still cold enough that you have to worry about icing. And that was in June!"

The two took several side trips, including landing at Unalakleet, home of the Tweto family. "We were refueling at a fixed-base operator nearby and asked someone if Jim and Ferno still lived there. He told us they were down at the end of the ramp. We walked over. Ferno was driving a forklift and Jim was loading a plane. They stopped what they were doing and spent some time talking to us. They were very cordial and fun to talk with."



In Barrow, Alaska, Newell gives a shout-out to his Naval Academy classmates.

When Newell landed at Barrow, the sight of the northern-most airport in the U.S., he was struck by the isolation of the North Slope city. "There are no highways to Barrow. The highway north from Fairbanks ends at Bettles, which is about 245 nautical miles south of Barrow. Everything has to be flown in." That includes the fresh lettuce and tomatoes that Newell enjoyed on his hamburger. "The day we were there, it was 40 degrees Fahrenheit and rainy—and that was in June! The Arctic Sea was still frozen at the shoreline. I gained a whole new appreciation for those who work on the North Slope!"

Back on the ground, Newell only has one regret. "I wish we had taken more time for side trips." Though Newell has no current plan for a similar adventure, he keeps his wings from getting dusty with small trips around Texas. "When my son was running for judge of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, I'd fly him to two events in one day. That was my contribution to the campaign."

And, food trips are a must. "We'll do barbecue in Lockhart or Fredericksburg for lunch. I call it my \$100 hamburger!" «