

Edge of Alaska



by Captain Carl Swickley, USCG (Ret.)

Chief Machinist's Mate Del Downing was one of those characters from the "Old Guard"—an old salt always ready to put a cup of coffee in your hand and entertain you from his bottomless sea bag of yarns, some of which were probably true. Many of those cups of coffee and yarns took place in Del's garage where visitors were warned not to whistle *Semper Paratus* or half the garage would snap to attention. But this story is not about Del Downing. It is about Commander Clarence F. Edge, USCG. I became interested in C.F. Edge after Downing showed me some photographs of an ice-covered Waco biplane aboard USCGC *John C. Spencer* (WPG-36) while she was stationed in Alaska in 1937. The mission was to reconnoiter Alaska for a suitable site for an air base. Downing was the Waco's mechanic, and C.F. Edge was the pilot.

The more Downing told me about his Alaskan adventure, the more it intrigued me. I wanted to learn more. Downing set up a pen-pal arrangement between Edge and me wherein I asked Edge about *Spencer*, the Waco and what he had found in Alaska. In response, Edge wrote a lengthy account full of colorful details and pithy happenings.

Too young to serve, Edge lied about his age to enlist in the Army in World War I and was sent to Russia in 1917-18 as part of the Allied Expeditionary Force fighting on the side of the czar during the Bolshevik revolution. Later, he again lied about his age (too old this time) to gain entrance to the Coast Guard Academy which was then located at Fort Trumbull in New London, Connecticut. Edge graduated first in the Class of 1927 and spent some time on the old four-stacker (piper) destroyers before reporting for flight training in Pensacola. Upon completion of flight training, he became Coast Guard Aviator No. 14. He claims to have made the first experimental offshore landings while at the first Coast Guard Air Station (at Cape May, New Jersey), was the first plane into the storm off Barnegat the night USS *Akron* (ZRS-4) went down, and spent time in Texas flying with the border patrol. Over the years, he lived through four crashes in which not all survived, was commanding officer of CGAS St. Petersburg, Florida during World War II, but turned in his wings to get sea duty and action in the Greenland area before the war ended.

But this story begins in 1936 when Captain Lloyd T. Chalker, the Coast Guard's Chief Avia-

tion Officer, sent Edge to observe the U.S. Navy's cold weather tests in Alaska aboard USS *Ranger* (CV-4). Edge reported that "the weather was sour but never really cold, so little was learned." Also in 1936, the new *Secretary*-class cutters were coming out, and Chalker next told Edge to take a Grumman JF and work with one of them, USCGC *Campbell* (WPG-32), to determine maximum sea conditions in which a plane could be launched and recovered. That done, Chalker sent Edge a dispatch ordering him to put a JF aboard *Spencer* and proceed to Alaska. Earlier, Edge had been promised the command at St. Petersburg, so he unhappily called Chalker.

"Boss, that Alaska coastline doesn't look much like St. Pete."

"Chalker chuckled. 'Edge, I need you there. I must have a man I can trust. We must know what we can do with CG aviation in Alaska, what we will need to do it, and where to establish an aviation operating base. I must have that information and it must be correct. You will be there one year and then you can name your next billet.'"

"Then can I have St. Pete?"

"St. Pete is yours one year from now."

So, Edge and his crew loaded a JF on *Spencer* and went up the inside passage to Ketchikan. There, he talked with the bush pilots and thought it evident that that area was not suitable for a base. Edge recalled, "With what money we could expect to have, we wouldn't have the equipment necessary to conduct operations safely."

Then to Juneau, about which Edge said, "Things didn't look good in that area either, although a seaplane base at Sitka was a possibility."

Then on to Cordova, where *Spencer* would base. That was a blank for Edge, too:

"Weather and the mountains would make operations scary, and it was remote from expected operation areas. The lake and the little landing strip that could be extended would have done well for a small CG Air Station—if they had been somewhere else and if the lake did not freeze."

Edge then planned a number of exploratory flights, but soon butted heads with *Spencer's* skipper, E.H. "Iceberg" Smith. The original plan was



A current map of Alaska. Edge scouted for possible locations for a Coast Guard Air Station along the southern coastline, from Ketchikan and Juneau to Dutch Harbour in the Aleutians before recommending Kodiak. Mountain High Maps

for *Spencer* to have logistics and administrative control only, but Smith ordered that any flight must have a detailed written flight plan approved by him on the day of the flight. Since it was seldom that Edge could get weather data from the various traders' radios, write up a flight plan, and catch Smith to sign it before he went ashore, operations were crippled. Edge wrote Chalker in Headquarters but Chalker could do nothing. This issue was partially resolved when the Smith tried to get Edge to stand OOD watches in port. In the event that a distress call came in, Edge did not want to be tied down as a "shipkeeper" with all other officers ashore. He told Smith that, in case of an important distress call, he would get into the air. Smith reluctantly agreed that in such case Edge did not have to clear it with him. Instead, Edge wrote:

"I am sure he was afraid of what would happen if a bad distress call came and I did nothing because I could not to get him to approve takeoff because of his own rules."

Edge also claimed that, since Smith hated to leave the dock, the plane got sent out occasionally on missions where the ship should have gone. Thus he felt lucky to get in as many flight operations as he did.

Edge flew to Anchorage, where he met with Hugh Brewster, the CAA inspector for Alaska. Edge felt that:

"Anchorage would have been fine for a CG operation, as weather was so much better than along the coast, and with good approaches and no high mountains near. But it was too far from operation area, and any seaplane operations would have been difficult due to extremely high tides and bad currents. I took 'Precious' Miller (*Spencer's* navigator) along on that flight. Late in the evening we made contact with two good-looking gals in the Top Hat Cabaret. They were out exercising the accepted Alaskan white woman's privilege of doing what they wanted whether their husbands

liked it or not. We had a amusing evening, and more about these gals later."

In a sortie to Kodiak, Edge made the Coast Guard's first "medico" flight in Alaska. He wrote:

"We had a good young medical officer who was in the public health to get some experience before going into private practice. Doc was eager to get victims to practice on so when we got a call on radio from the trader at Kodiak that there was an epidemic of tonsillitis among the kids at Kodiak, Doc wanted to go over and pull tonsils. Very few 'whites' on Kodiak then. The trader and his daughter, the U.S. marshal, 'Uncle Carl' Armstrong, and his niece, Midge Long, a few hunting guides and cattle raisers, and the Army had two men there for some purpose or other. The native nurse and native schoolteacher lined the kids up and Doc went down the line snatching out tonsils. Only a few of the kids did not need to have their tonsils out. They were all natives or part native, and not a one of them whimpered. Doc stayed a couple of hours to check them for

any unnecessary bleeding.

"We ROned, for Doc wanted to check the kids next morning. The marshall's deputy suggested trout fishing. We went to a beaver pond about a mile out of the village. So full of little rainbows that they were starved. We caught 44 in about 20 minutes—all nice pan size, a pound to one and-a-half pounds. You could wave your fly along about four inches above the water and they would jump and grab it. Talked to the people about an aviation base location. After some discussion Midge Long suggested I look at Woman's Bay. So I flew over it when we left. It looked pretty good, except for that hill to the west, but I still hoped to find something better and not so remote. I considered Dutch Harbor to be pretty well in the middle of our expected operating area. On the way home I ran into a cloud bank over Prince William Sound. Since I knew it was CAVU at Cordova I didn't try to go under it. When the milk closed in around the plane, Doc panicked. (Radioman) Cole had to hold him from trying to jump out. That was the only time I got Doc into a plane.

"A few weeks later we got a radio mes-

A U.S. Coast Guard JF is offloaded from USCGC *Spencer* somewhere off the coast of Alaska. Edge initially flew the JF, but soon switched to the more reliable *Waco*.



Downing Collection

sage from the trader on Kodiak. The priest (Eastern Orthodox) there said his daughter was having an acute appendix attack. Doc asked for particulars of the symptoms. When they came in, he said "That girl is about to deliver a baby." The trader relayed this to the priest, who swore that his daughter was a virgin. Doc wouldn't buy it. He had no stomach for a night flight to Kodiak anyway. About 0200 we bumped the trader on the radio and asked how things were. He replied 'Seven pound boy just delivered by the nurse.'

"One night we got a call from the whaling station south of Kodiak [about a] badly injured man they were afraid might die. Weather was good so I took off. Clear night but no moon. The whaling station was on a long narrow fjord, with mountains close on each side. A good light at the station as a marker, but black as pitch in the fjord. I ran a compass course approach and let down in a power stall. Just as we kissed the water, Cole yelled, 'Breakers ahead.' I had seen the white dim line but it was too late. Se we plowed right through that school of fish... We got the man aboard and flew him

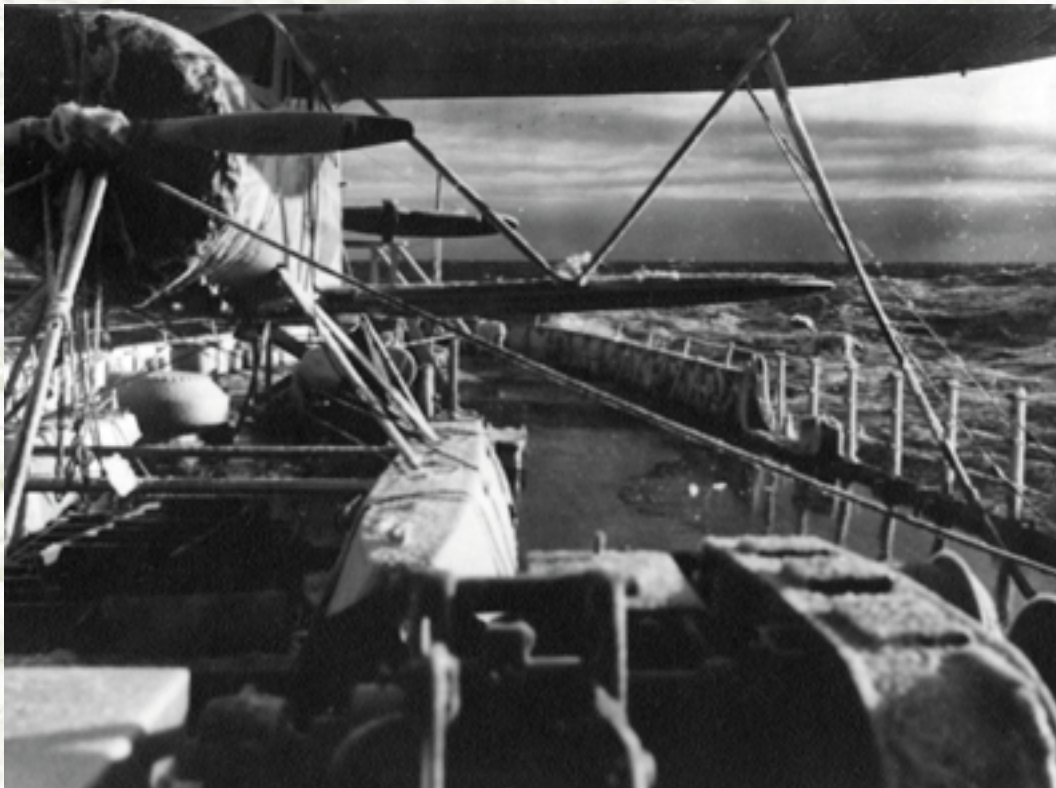
to Seward [Methodist Hospital], reaching the little rough landing strip about dawn. The man was a tough Swede and he recovered.

"Got in a few more flights looking for an air base location, but found nothing very good. Navy had a bird boat (ocean going tug used as a seaplane tender and all named after birds) up there that summer looking for a location for an air base. My friend Al Morehouse was in charge. They put a few planes at Sitka to try it out, but it didn't work out vary well.

When fall came, *Spencer* sailed to Seattle for supplies while Edge, wanting to try out a different plane, traded his JF in for a Waco on twin floats.

"Winter had set in, and got a call from Dutch Harbor that a traveling trader was overdue. He had a converted whaleboat with two big outboard motors, and went from village to village trading for furs and beach ivory. Smith wanted me to go do the search alone, but I pointed out the long trip, problems of refueling and shel-

The icy Waco aboard USCGC Spencer, plying the waters of Alaska sometime in 1937.



Downing Collection



Downing Collection

Edge taxis the Waco in preparation for a flight as Downing stows the hoist line.

ter and possible repairs, and what in hell could I do if I found the trader in serious trouble? So *Spencer* was pried away from the dock. She was to cruise offshore and search, while I flew the coast and inlets. *Spencer* would put into shelter to refuel us and to hoist the plane aboard overnight. We ran down along the Aleutians about a hundred miles searching, and then I found the whaleboat wrecked and bottom up on an open beach. Searched closely around and saw nobody, but saw an old weathered cabin not far away. Heavy surf on the beach and I knew I couldn't land and taxi up on the beach ... So had *Spencer* put in at Volcano Bay about eight miles west where there was good shelter ...

"Got aboard in late afternoon, and found that I had been elected to lead the ground party. I was tired, but it made sense because I had just been over the terrain. Picked some hardy men, with a stokes stretcher, some whiskey and food, and a pharmacist's mate along with his emergency bag. Since we had two inlets to cross somehow, I put all hands in life jackets ... Found fording places across the inlets where the water was not more than four feet deep, so we made it but, Jesus,

that water was cold.

"Reached the scene and no sign of the trader around the boat, so went to the shack. Found an old character who lived there alone. Said the trader's body had washed up on the beach and had it in his woodshed, frozen stiff. Asked why he hadn't buried it and he said 'Dig in this frozen ground? He will keep good till spring.'

"Got what details I could from the old fellow, lashed the stiff to the Stokes stretcher and headed back. It was a little rough, for the sand was soft, where there was any, and the rocks were rough the rest of the way. The cold water crossing the inlets felt good.

"Later, we got a call from Kodiak that a squaw in the little village on the west side of the island was very ill, and the trader said cautiously that she might have leprosy. Smith wanted me to fly there with the medical officer. But there was no harbor there—only open shingle beach. And weather was making up—wind SW force four and rising, so no chance of the plane landing. So *Spencer* pried herself away from the dock again. Stood down Shelikoff Straits and hove to off the village.



C.F. Edge (left) and Del Downing pause for a photograph before an icy Waco in Alaska. Though foul weather was an accepted part of life for Edge and his crewmen, they provided aerial assistance throughout the territory. Downing Collection

Wind about force five with snow flurries. I was boat officer, of course, and picked a good crew of oarsmen. We had a different medical officer, and this fellow was something of a goof-off.

“Surf breaking pretty heavy on the beach. I laid off and studied it until got the swell sequence, and then we ran it. She beached nicely, half out of the water. Doc and the PhM. went off to get the patient.

“Two hours later, still no Doc. Weather was worsening and it was nearly dark. I sent a man to the village to drag out the Doc, and he came back saying Doc wouldn’t come because he had found some other patients. I sent the messenger back with word to bring the squaw at once or I would come up and carry him back. So they came bringing the squaw.

“We headed the boat out, watched our chance, and shoved her off and rowed like hell. But she had dragged hard on the shingle as we pushed her out and delayed us too long. We almost made it, but a big breaker rolled over us and swamped us.

“We wrestled her back up the beach and bailed her out. Got everything set and we

put all we had into it and this time we made it through the surf. It was dark, snowing, and we were all soaked to the skin. Before dark I laid out a course to *Spencer* by the angle on the wind.

“We pulled and pulled. The men at the oars were okay, for they were pulling hard and kept warm. I had the steering oar and was freezing, so I swapped with one of the men and pulled his oar. We relieved that man when he got too cold.

“We had rowed much farther than I had calculated *Spencer* to be, and I began to fear we had missed her in the snow. Considered heading back, beaching the boat, and holing up in the village until morning. Then we picked up *Spencer’s* lights through the snow. Her captain got nervous and stood further offshore.

“Got the crew aboard and sent them below for hot shower and then to the sick bay for double whiskey. Got dry clothes on myself and a slug out of my bottle, when one of the men came to me and said the Doc wouldn’t break out the sick bay whiskey. I went to his stateroom and there he was, warm and dry, with a bottle that

was already well used. I grabbed him by the throat and said ‘You sonofabitch, get down there and give all those men a shot of liquor, or I will carry you up on deck and heave you overboard.’ Doc never liked me after that.

“We got another call about a sick person on one of the Aleutians. Smith wanted me to take the Doc and go. A long trip, in winter with the winter storms. A sort of harbor there, but open all around to the south, and a lot of pinnacle rocks in the harbor. With the SW wind likely, there would be heavy surf even on the beach in the harbor. I told Smith that if I went I might not get back until Spring and I wouldn’t bet that I would bring the plane back with me. So *Spencer* groaned and pried loose from the dock again.

“The water in the harbor looked bad, so *Spencer* didn’t go in. Launched the motor sailer off the entrance; since it was not a pulling boat I didn’t have to take her ... In about half an hour the boat came plugging back; they had holed her on a pinnacle rock and nearly lost her. Smith gave up the mission.

“We put in at Dutch Harbor. Location for CG operations is good, but it had the eternal lousy Aleutian weather and the mountains, including Mount Ballyhoo, sticking up into the soup. Air operations from there would be rough. Just NW of the village there was a fairly flat space big enough for a small landing field, but it was boggy and would cost like hell to fill. Dutch Harbor was out.

“Early in January we got a call from Seward. Three trappers were overdue. They had been trapping from a cabin on a little cove about 20 miles east of the entrance to Resurrection Bay. They had promised to be in Seward for New Year’s. A search party from Seward had found the cabin deserted, the boat gone, and a calendar on the cabin wall with all days crossed off up to 28 December.

“It looked like a considerable search, so *Spencer* put out without any fuss. They would search offshore and I would cover the coast and inlets. We started at the entrance to Prince William Sound and worked west. Weather was bad. Heavy squalls, snow, williwaws. During snow

The Waco tied aboard Spencer near the coastline of Alaska. Downing Collection





(From left) C.F. Edge, Del Downing, and two unidentified Coast Guardsmen pause before the Waco assigned to USCGC Spencer. When the Alaskan weather was too hostile for flight operations, Edge and the other Coast Guardsmen took part in shipboard operations. Downing Collection

squalls I would find sheltered water, land, and ride it out with engine idling. Coming around the cliff at the south end of the island I didn't keep wide enough and as we turned we were caught in a gigantic gust that picked us up and threw us toward the cliff. Controls were useless and the wings of that little Waco bent like an archer's bow. We were thrown almost against the cliff and I was reaching to cut the switch when the rebound gust caught us and hurled us out again. When we got through that ice-cream mixer and settled down, Cole, who was riding beside me, leaned over and yelled in my ear 'Captain, I'll take vanilla!'

"We made Resurrection Bay entrance that afternoon, and *Spencer* went on up to Seward to see if we could get more information. Here we found out who the trappers were. They were: George Miller's gal from Anchorage, her husband and my Anchorage gal's husband. So, the next day as we continued our search to the west we were doubly careful not to miss anything. 'Precious' Miller wanted to go along, but I said no. He was navigator on *Spencer* and

his own job to do. I fine-combed every damned island and inlet and beach, looking for any people, smoke, logs crossed on the beach, or any other sign. We searched two days and got down as far as the Pye Islands, but—nothing.

"The *Spencer's* CO had been whining that the people were dead and no use of further search. Miller and I begged for one more day of search but the CO reversed course and rang up full speed to get back to his wife.

"There is an afterword. About a month later the old *Star of Alaska* was making her usual trip through those waters and saw smoke on an island about 10 miles west of where we had discontinued search. Nobody lived on any of those islands, so she pulled in close and saw three people running along the beach waving. They were nearly starved to death. Propeller shaft on their boat had broken and they were swept west. Iced up heavily and nearly capsized. Wood for tiny stove in cabin gave out and they chopped up everything they could without sinking the

boat. Boat was thrown on the rocks off the island finally and wrecked. They managed to make shore and one of the men had a Marble waterproof match box, so got a fire started and got dried out and survived. Lived on anything they could scavenge, mostly clams dug out of the sand in a little cove. If we could have had that one more day to search we would have found them and saved them all that misery.

"Back to Seattle early that spring, and my orders to command St. Pete. But first a trip to Washington to tell people in HQ what I found and what I thought would work up there."

Edge recommended Kodiak, not because it was good, but because other places were worse. He noted there was good sheltered water in Woman's Bay, and the channel would carry fairly good draft ships. There were good approaches for planes, except that sharp little hill to the west, and northwest of that was the Buskin River Flat with room for a small air strip without excessive cost. Not very good, but usable, and:

"Kodiak was partly out of the lousy coastal weather.

"Chalker listened, then said 'Edge, Navy picked Kodiak too, but they plan to build a seaplane base on Woody Island. What do you think?'

"Boss, somebody must be nuts over on the Navy side. Woody is out in Chiniak Bay, nearly a mile east of Kodiak Village and open to all weather except from the west. And there are some pinnacle rocks in Chiniak Bay.'

"Chalker had served on the old cutter *Thetis* years before in Alaska, and knew what I was talking about. So he sent me over to meet with the Navy and tell them my opinion about Kodiak. They junked their own plans and threw in with us for a combined base on Woman's Bay. I have never seen (the air base there) and I know it may not be very good, but it could have been a hell of a lot worse!" ☺



Captain Carl Swickley, USCG (Ret.) was born and raised near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He is a graduate of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and holds a master's degree in business administration from George Mason University. During 26 years on active duty,

most of Swickley's flight time was in the Grumman HU-16 Albatross and Sikorsky HH-52 Sea Guardian. Following retirement from the Coast Guard, he worked as a consulting engineer, as an administrator in higher education and finally as director of the Experimental Aircraft Association's Air Adventure Museum in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

Swickley holds a commercial airman's certificate that includes ratings in multi-engine seaplane and helicopter and is current in his Piper Cherokee. In 1999, he and his wife Shirley moved to Pensacola, where they started their marriage 48 years ago. They have three children and one grandchild. Though none of them have followed in their father's footsteps, they have served in the Army, Navy and Air Force Reserves.