SCENE 22

CGAS PORT ANGELES—1946-1949 (SEARCH-AND-RESCUE)

WOW!! What a drastic change in environment for flying! The **CGAS Port Angeles** is located on a natural land spit jutting into the Juan de Fuca Strait from the south shore, directly opposite Victoria, B.C. The straits form the border with Canada and a water connection between the Pacific Ocean and Puget Sound.

Our home in Port Angeles was a little prefab house brought by barge from Seattle, placed on a site, and sold to us. We added the sidewalk, landscaping, and picket fence

Offshore lies the North Pacific Ocean where storms generate swells making offshore seaplane landing hazardous. Down the coast in Oregon, huge solitary rocks rise to two hundred or more feet above the water surface, making it unsafe to fly under the weather.

Immediately south of the Air Station, Mount Olympus peaks at eight thousand feet. To the east, the Cascades reach even higher elevations, crowned by Mount Rainier and Mount Baker.

Puget Sound is dotted with islands and man-made structures such as

bridges, radio towers, and high-rise buildings. Islands cause gusty and shifting winds. Deadheads (ninety-percent-submerged logs) must be missed.

Topping these hazards to flight is the **weather**. The Pacific Northwest is noted for rain. If you can't fly around it, or under it, or over it…what do you do? If you fly into it, you must go IFR (abide by Instrument Flight Rules). That means going under Air Traffic Control (ATC), which will probably put you at some eight thousand feet! And what type aircraft does the Air Station have in which to do this? A little JRF seaplane? Or a lumbering, slow PBY? Where were the helicopters? (They will be there in about five more years!)

On a real emergency search-and-rescue case, we tried hard to get there. If the weather at the Air Station was good enough for takeoff and landing, maybe it would be good enough at the reported location of the emergency. We would take off and find out. If the weather closed in, we would reverse course to go back from where we came and go home. No one not there can criticize or challenge the pilot's judgment.

Now compare all this with the flight conditions out of CGAS St. Petersburg.

If the sun didn't shine before noon you could get a free newspaper! The highest point of land in all of Florida was 345 feet above sea level! You dodge around, not through, thunderstorms. When hurricanes came our way, we flew to Corpus Christi, several hundred miles to the west.

Now back to Port Angeles and cross-country **ferry flights.** The Coast Guard had established its own Aircraft Overhaul Facility at Elizabeth City. Among the aircraft delivered there for overhaul were the PBY-5A Catalinas (amphibians).

Since they had landing gear, those planes on the West Coast were flown straight across country—deserts, mountains, and all. I ferried one from Port Angeles to Elizabeth City and had a weird experience landing in Texas.

As we flew a dead-reckoning course over Texas, we studied our airways charts. Right on schedule, we found the airfield we wanted, identified by it being on the edge of a river, as shown on the chart. I established radio contact and was told to proceed and report when entering the landing pattern. This we did. Using the windsock as our guide, we flew downwind and noticed the runway was marked "16" (meaning 160 degrees by compass). The tower told us to continue our approach and circle to land on runway "32". That didn't jibe. The opposite of 160 would be 160 + 180 = 340. The correct runway should be marked "34". I called this to the attention of my copilot, since I was busy flying the plane, and I thought my math was off, but he also felt something was wrong. However, the tower now gave us permission to land. And we did! We stopped on the runway and waited for a jeep to lead us in when a weak voice said sheepishly, "Coast Guard, where are you now?" To which I replied, "Sitting on your runway." And he said, "You are not at <u>my</u> field. You have landed at the **wrong airport.** You must want the airport five miles to the east." (I have forgotten the name.) Anyway, we taxied around to the active runway and took off for the other field where we landed without incident, but with a lot of kidding. (Note: both airports bordered on the river.)

And now I am going to borrow from a report I wrote for the investigation of one ferry flight that ended in a tragedy:

A Fatal PBY-5A Crash

The Executive Officer at CGAS Port Angeles was Lieutenant Commander James MacIntosh. (He was senior, of course, to me.) He only flew to get the required four hours a month to receive flight pay. He avoided instrument training flights altogether. I needled him about it and he said he would like to fly more but his job as Exec kept him at his desk. When orders to ferry a PBY-5A Catalina from Port Angeles to Elizabeth City, N.C., for overhaul came through, he accepted the opportunity to not only get in a lot of flight hours but a lot of simulated instrument flight time.

The Fatal Flight. MacIntosh selected one of our most skilled pilots whose name I cannot remember. He had come up through the ranks to Lieutenant. He loved instrument flight, but he also took chances, especially on rescue missions. They would have an Aviation Machinist and a Radioman as crew. They were scheduled for a Saturday morning takeoff to land for the night in Medford, Oregon, south of Portland.

I (the Operations Officer) was called at home in the late afternoon with the report the plane had not yet reported its arrival. I went immediately to the station and we began checking with air traffic control and all the airports en route.

I learned that the pilots had decided to maximize instrument time by "flying under the hood" when not flying in real instrument conditions. "Under the hood" means covering the cockpit windows with amber isinglass and having the pilot "on instruments" wearing a blue glass eye shield. The pilot can see the dashboard instruments through the blue film but cannot see outside as that view is blacked out by the combination of blue and amber. The copilot, however, can see everything in the cockpit and outside just as if wearing sunglasses. I had no knowledge of their plan.

Their flight plan began to unravel. They were flying on an instrument clearance (IFR) between Portland and Medford at ten thousand feet at the PBY's cruising airspeed of about one hundred forty knots bucking a forty-knot headwind. It was very turbulent and must have felt like they were never going to get to Medford. They cancelled their instrument clearance and dropped down to fly below the clouds at 6,000 feet using **visual flight rules** (**VFR**). Contact was lost.

The Search. I spent a restless night at the station. I convinced the CO it was wishful thinking that they might have found an alternate airport and that I would take the ready PBY and search the route. He didn't object.

The weather had moderated. The winds were still from the south. Most of the turbulence was caused by thermals. I held their altitude of 6,000 feet easily until just in the lee of the ridge when a downdraft hit us and we had to quickly turn and get out of there.

On our second pass, I stayed a little higher and we spotted smoke. We circled and identified it as the crash and, in that pass, we spotted persons at a fire lookout station

waving at us. We prepared and dropped them a message block telling them of the sighting west about four hundred yards.

I landed at Medford and joined the land party being organized to go to the wreck to remove the bodies. The crash was a terrible sight. The four man crew was incinerated at their stations. But there was amazing news—two seamen who were getting a ride survived the crash. Riding in the waist section of the plane, they were slammed against the bulkhead but not otherwise hurt. The older of the two reported that he immediately opened the door to go forward to see if he could help and was met by flames. The two jumped out the blisters and ran for their lives to a safe distance, where the rescue party found them.

The Investigation concluded that the pilots probably studied the chart and found the highest point on the ridge immediately north of Medford to be 5,050 feet. At 6,000 feet, they would clear the ridge by nearly 1,000 feet. But at the ridge they entered clouds, hit a downdraft losing at least 200 feet, and crashed into the forest of evergreen trees. The plane burst into flames about 200 feet below the crest. That doesn't calculate. What went wrong?

Charts were checked. They had the latest issue. However, an older issue showed the ridge at 5,850 feet. The newer chart showed the eight crudely changed to zero! (Does that calculate? 6,000-foot flight altitude minus 200-foot downdraft equals 5,800 feet. But the ridge crest is at 5,850 feet!!)

The sad fact remains that they violated Visual Flight Rules by entering the clouds thinking they could squeak over the ridge.

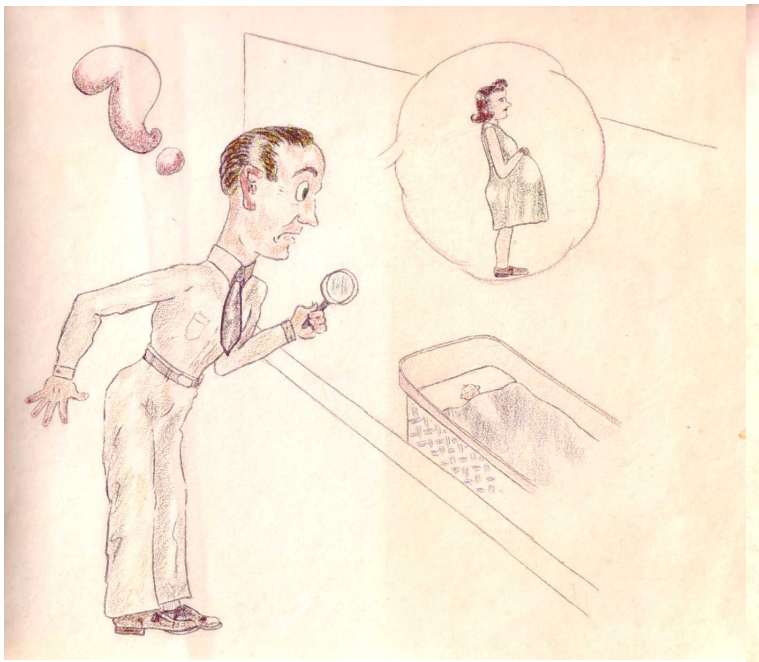
End

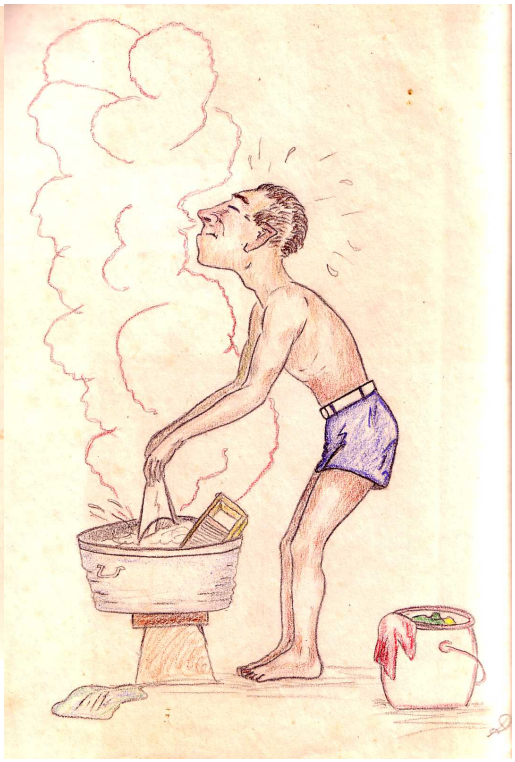
Mary and her mother

Let us leave flying now while I tell you about my family. Mary and I, together with our nine-months-old son Terry, arrived in Port Angeles from my brother's home in Newport Beach, California, in our little car with no idea where we would live. Again we went to an auto court and started our house search. A go-getter realtor just out of jail for embezzlement went searching for us. There were no suitable rentals available but he

found us a prefab cottage just brought in by barge from Seattle and erected where the forest trees had just been cleared for a couple more homes. We could get this one on Mary's G.I. Bill with nothing down and $52 per month. It was all-electric. (Electricity was cheap in the Northwest.) Two bedrooms, one bath, room in kitchen for small table to seat six. Cost $8,000. Raw lot—no landscaping. I built a picket fence. Raked thousands of rocks for lawn. We furnished it from the "Monkey" Wards catalog.

Mary was soon pregnant again and decided on her own for a "natural childbirth." Her doctor and a group of other doctors had bought the YMCA building and converted it into a hospital. Mary was one of the first to "deliver" there. I waited in the hall outside. She did it naturally! A girl we named **Christine** (b. July 28, 1948). Our family was growing!





It was past time to replace the little "double-date coupe" with a larger car. We bought an Oldsmobile sedan with an automatic transmission, one of the first to be seen around Port Angeles. When Christmas leave came around, we drove to Newport Beach for the holidays, and we bought a fifteen-foot vacation trailer. In it we, babies and all, would enjoy the Great Outdoors. It was fully screened, had a propane stove, icebox, car battery for lights, and a drinking water tank. We used Forest Service camps and their facilities.

On our trip north, we camped among the giant coastal redwoods. But it froze that night and we worried about the new little baby Chris. I lit the stove and then couldn't sleep for fear of carbon monoxide. But how wonderful it was to enjoy a sunny morning with fresh forest air!

A shock awaited us when we arrived home. A strange big flexible tube entered a bedroom window. It was an aircraft engine heater for freezing weather starts. What is this all about?

In our absence, our water heater, which was located in the attic, froze and burst a pipe. Son Terry's little girl playmate saw water running out of the house and told her parents we were not home. They saw what was happening, called the Air Station, and a work party was sent out to secure the house and try to dry things out. Thanks, Coast Guard, for the rescue!

Mary's parents, Lloyd and Stella Bond, came to visit from Illinois

I will wrap up this Scene with a report about an offshore landing I made. First, some background. The Port Angeles Air Station was assigned a PBM Mariner seaplane about the time I arrived. With my previous PBM qualification in Florida, I was the most experienced in that type of plane. An engineer from some rocket company arrived to show us how to install booster jets for short takeoffs. Each booster was dry chemical in a can about the size of trailer propane cooking gas. One was attached to each side of the fuselage about amidships. The technique was to accelerate on the takeoff run and when the hull rises to running on the "step" (where the bottom has a ledge to break the water suction) to fire both rockets simultaneously. We practiced in our bay just off the Air Station. Each seaplane pilot got a turn. The only trick was to stay low after getting airborne until full climbing airspeed was acquired.

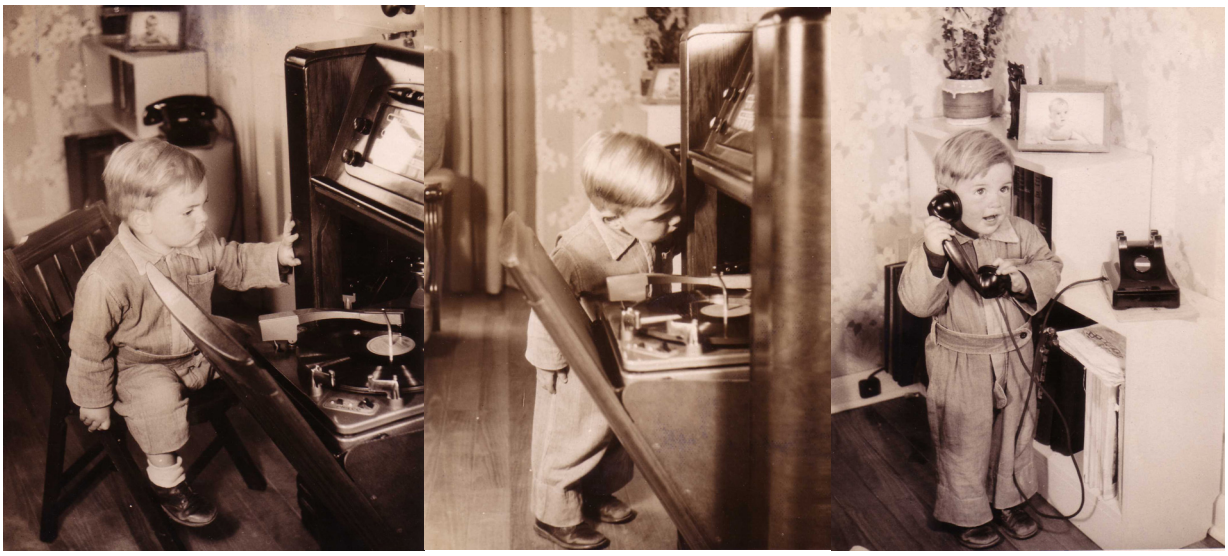
Experiments had been conducted at Air Station San Diego for the safest way to land offshore, where there is sure to be some swell running. We seaplane pilots had studied the reports but none of us really wanted to make an open water landing because even a minor accident might mean taxiing many hours or a difficult tow. (Offshore landings were ruled out when helicopters became available.)

A cargo ship sent an emergency call to "medevac" a seaman who had scalded his eyes and needed immediate hospitalization. I was "elected" to go see if I could land and bring him in.

We rigged the booster rockets and took off with a medical corpsman aboard. We found the ship in light fog. The sea was as calm as offshore seas ever get. We landed quite near the ship, and they came alongside in a lifeboat with the patient. I worried that they might bump my plane and damage it for takeoff. They were careful and didn't.

There was a little swell that I hadn't observed from the air. I would run cross-swell, not into it. I had observed the compass heading I selected and turned to it for the takeoff run. The cargo ship disappeared in the fog dead astern as planned. Oh, God, I hoped I was remembering the heading correctly. She **has** to be behind me. She was. The takeoff was normal. The rockets fired as advertised. We got home and the man got to the hospital on time.

That is it for Port Angeles Air Station. Next, I had another cross-country transfer, this one to Elizabeth City, North Carolina. My assignment was to be in charge of the International Ice Patrol aircraft, flying the **B-17 Flying Fortress**, a famous World War II bomber!



We settled into family life in Port Angeles, with toddler Terry and new baby Christine

These Martin PBM Mariner seaplanes were used for long range over water searches and offshore water landings. They were equipped for jet assisted takeoffs from rough water and in restricted areas. Shown above is a takeoff like one I made in the North Pacific Ocean to rescue an injured sailor.