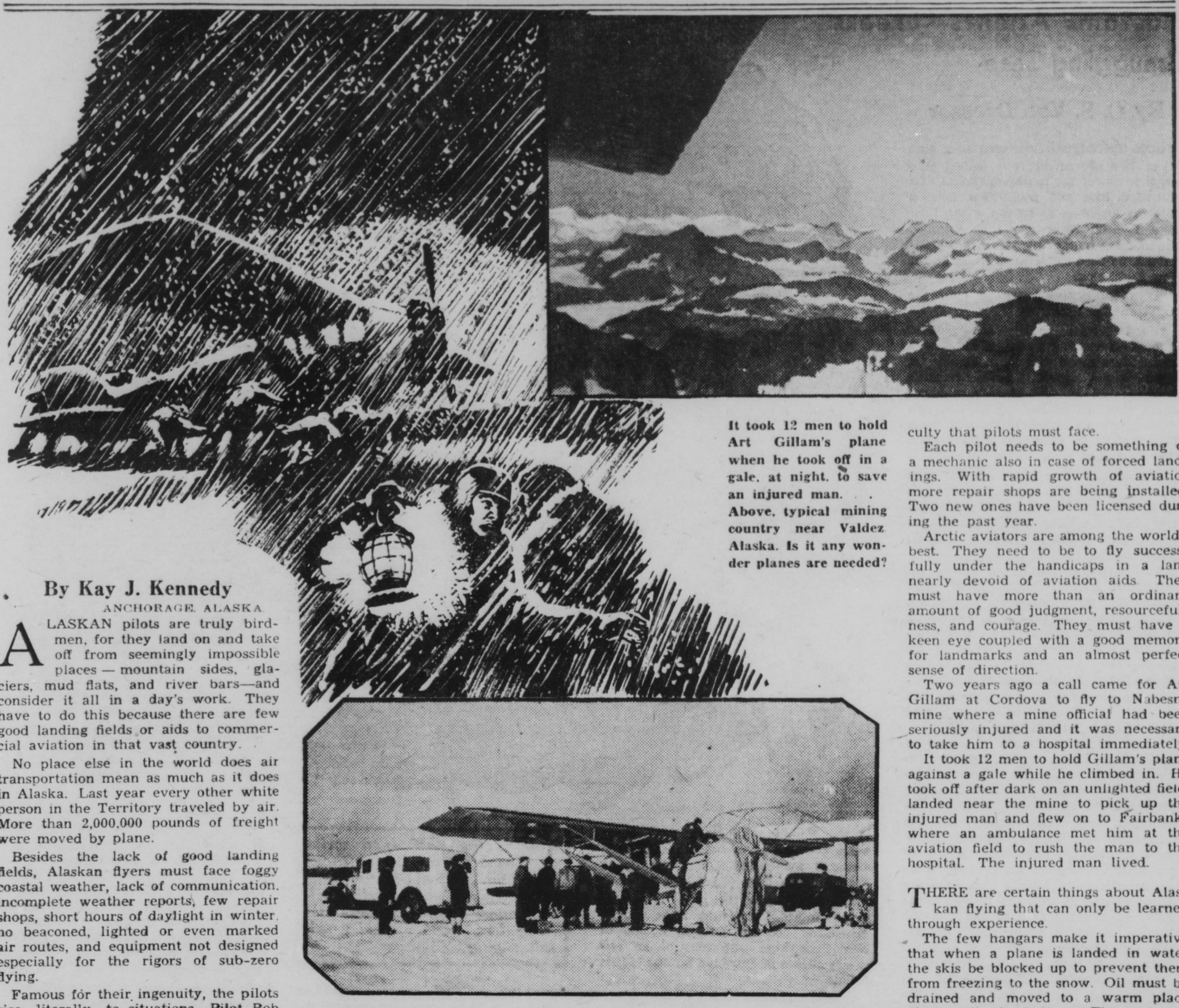
DAREDEVIL FLYING over ALASKA'S shifting ICE



It took 12 men to hold Art Gillam's plane when he took off in a gale, at night, to save an injured man. . . Above, typical mining country near Valdez, Alaska. Is it any wonder planes are needed?

By Kay J. Kennedy

ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

ALASKAN pilots are truly birdmen, for they land on and take off from seemingly impossible places — mountain sides, glaciers, mud flats, and river bars—and consider it all in a day's work. They have to do this because there are few good landing fields or aids to commercial aviation in that vast country.

No place else in the world does air transportation mean as much as it does in Alaska. Last year every other white person in the Territory traveled by air. More than 2,000,000 pounds of freight were moved by plane.

Besides the lack of good landing fields, Alaskan flyers must face foggy coastal weather, lack of communication, incomplete weather reports, few repair shops, short hours of daylight in winter, no beaconed, lighted or even marked air routes, and equipment not designed especially for the rigors of sub-zero flying.

Famous for their ingenuity, the pilots rise—literally—to situations. Pilot Bob Reeve of Valdez uses skis winter and summer for his glacier runs, taking off Valdez tidal mud flats in summer to land on Columbia glacier 15 minutes later with machinery, supplies, lumber, or dynamite for any one of eight rich gold quartz mines that he serves in that area. Due to inaccessibility by other means, these rich mines could not be operated without air transportation.

It takes a man 12 hours with best luck to travel from Valdez to the Rough and Tough mine located on a mountain poking its top out of the center of Columbia glacier with ice 2000 feet deep surrounding it. He can only pack in about 50 pounds over the dangerous rough ice trail. In contrast, Reeve can make the same trip in 12 minutes and deliver 1000 pounds to the isolated mine.

"IF it is possible to land at all, I set down almost anywhere," says Pilot Reeve. "Of course, I fly over the place several times when I have chosen a site to get the grade and location of crevasses. They're different every trip.

"When the sun glare on the snow and ice is especially bad, the fellows put up black and orange flags in order to help me avoid smacking into the snow, as it is difficult to judge distance under those conditions."

An ambulance stands by as an airplane brings a sick miner in for emergency treatment.

Reeve has specialized in the business of landing on glaciers and also delivering freight by the bombardment method where it is impossible for a plane to set down. Roy Dieringer, chief bomber for Reeve during the last four years, has successfully dropped tons of freight, becoming so expert that he can hit a 100-foot circle accurately.

A Gibson mill was taken apart in order to get it into the plane and was landed in this manner. The heaviest piece weighed 300 pounds. Parachutes are used for breakables which are often landed within 100 feet of the mine tunnels or cook shack.

Estoll Call, private pilot for a mining company at Hughes, cleared the rocks from a space just wide enough for a runway on a mountain side in order that he might land uphill at about a 25-degree angle when the wind conditions in the canyon were right, thus saving a long hike from the bottom of the canyon to the mine high on the mountain side. Once he saw a large boulder in the middle of his two-by-four field. Closer observation revealed a big brown bear which Call frightened away by zooming over him a couple of times.

It is common for pilots to land with wheels on river bars, tundra, and flats; or with pontoons on unnamed rivers, lakes, and inlets. In winter, landing with skis is considered safest of all. Any comparatively level place is a potential landing field in emergency.

THERE are a few fair aviation fields located near the larger towns. Ninety fields are listed in the highway engineer's report, but many are so primitive that pilots fresh from the "States" view them with alarm or amusement. Almost any place where a plane has landed twice is regarded as a landing field.

Extremely variable weather conditions, together with incomplete weather reports, contribute to discouragements for Alaskan flying. The U. S. Weather Bureau and U. S. Signal Corps cooperate closely in gathering reports from about 70 official stations scattered widely over the territory. It has only been since 1929 that the Bureau inaugurated weather service for planes.

Pure instrument flying is unknown in Alaska and only one company equips its planes with two-way radio. This lack of communication is another difficulty that pilots must face.

Each pilot needs to be something of a mechanic also in case of forced landings. With rapid growth of aviation more repair shops are being installed. Two new ones have been licensed during the past year.

Arctic aviators are among the world's best. They need to be to fly successfully under the handicaps in a land nearly devoid of aviation aids. They must have more than an ordinary amount of good judgment, resourcefulness, and courage. They must have a keen eye coupled with a good memory for landmarks and an almost perfect sense of direction.

Two years ago a call came for Art Gillam at Cordova to fly to Nabesna mine where a mine official had been seriously injured and it was necessary to take him to a hospital immediately.

It took 12 men to hold Gillam's plane against a gale while he climbed in. He took off after dark on an unlighted field, landed near the mine to pick up the injured man and flew on to Fairbanks where an ambulance met him at the aviation field to rush the man to the hospital. The injured man lived.

THERE are certain things about Alaskan flying that can only be learned through experience.

The few hangars make it imperative that when a plane is landed in water the skis be blocked up to prevent them from freezing to the snow. Oil must be drained and moved to a warm place along with the battery. The motor is covered and flimsy wing covers are put on to keep frost from gathering.

The pilot must dig ice bridges to tie his plane to. To put a plane away properly requires about an hour, but two or more hours are usually spent in preparing the ship for flight the next morning. In sub-zero weather the pilot must stand by with a fire extinguisher while a plumber's fire pot under the motor heats it sufficiently for starting.

In case of forced landings with passengers, the pilot must be cook, hunter, trapper, woodsman, and mechanic—always considering the safety of his passengers first. Each plane is equipped with concentrated rations and a gun. In winter sleeping bags and snowshoes are carried. There have been very few casualties in Alaskan flying in proportion to the amount of flying done.

Fred Ordway, Juneau, Alaska's flying photographer, who has flown 67,000 miles, has high esteem for Alaskan pilots.

"Last year I flew 8000 miles in the States," he says. "There they have beaconed airways, lighted fields, and radio beams, but I felt no safer than with our Alaskan aviators, who fly by experience and instinct. I am always ready to go anywhere any time with our boys. I trust their good judgment implicitly."