

Bob Gleason

Interviewed by Hilary Hilscher

March 4, 2000

Tape 2, Side A

Hilary: I'm talking with Bob Gleason again and today is the 4th of March and we want to go back for a short correction on some earlier information.

Bob: On Thursday I told you I would always tell the truth and I have tried to, but it is hard to sometimes and I exaggerated on one thing. I told you about meeting with General Butler and I think the words that I quoted to you are exactly what he said, but my next statement to you, not to him, was that the next day I took Ketchikan and Juneau out. I did not. Of course I could not. These facilities were being used. I had to make arrangements for whatever, but I did emphasize -- the story emphasizes -- the fact that while they were putting the heat on me to serve the Aleutians, I had three big jobs, of course. The Aleutians, the war, and the air transport to Alaska both from Seattle and from Montana.

Hilary: And why Montana?

Bob: Great Falls, Montana, was the base from which they ferried these aircraft across to the Russians.

Hilary: On the Lend-Lease Program.

Bob: Yeah, and they also sent them from there to Fairbanks and Anchorage and on out to the Aleutians. So a lot of aircraft came that way.

Hilary: Rather than through Nome and up that way? They went all through the Aleutians?

Bob: No, no, no, no, you're getting me wrong.

Hilary: Okay.

Bob: These airplanes were coming from the States.

Hilary: Right.

Bob: And they came two ways: from Seattle...

Hilary: Right.

Bob: And from interior, from Montana particularly.

Hilary: Okay.

Bob: Via what is called the Al-Sib (Alaska Siberia) route and the Russian aircraft -- the airplanes that were given to the Russians -- always came over the Al-Sib and went through Nome and over to Siberia.

Hilary: Okay.

Bob: The other aircraft frequently came, some of them came, out destined not for there but for the war and they came down to Anchorage and then out to the Chain where they fought.

Hilary: So you had the two different directions that the airplanes would go?

Bob: Yeah.

Hilary: Okay. So you had the three jobs. They were the war, in the Aleutians, the air transport to Alaska.

Bob: And on to the Trans-Siberia, the (inaudible) of Siberia connection.

Hilary: Great. Bob, when you think back on your time in Alaska and the different work you did and places you went, what are some memories that jump out at you?

Bob: Well, so many, I don't know which to choose. But, well, of course, first was just seeing all of Alaska. When I first came to Fairbanks to work for Pan Am, I was anxious to go on any trip that gave (me the chance) to go to a new place. See Bethel, go to Fort Yukon, well, even Manley Hot Springs, Livengood, anyplace. That impressed me -- how big Alaska was, and of course I had been to Nome by sea, and it was thrilling for me to get to those places again and see what was there. Similarly, later on during the Aleutian campaign, I got out to Dutch Harbor, which I had been on (for) several hours in 1929-30 coming and going. And it was thrilling for me to see those places again and see what had happened to them. What else was big? Well, just seeing the Aleutians. I said I had been in Alaska. I had, but I had not been out to the Aleutians. I had not been out the Seward Peninsula -- I mean. I had not been out the Alaska Peninsula. Nome, of course, was on the Seward Peninsula. I had not been out as far as, for instance, Nushagak or any of those places.

Hilary: And what struck you about the Aleutians?

Bob: The weather, yeah, particularly flying. It was very difficult. There were two ways of going out to the Aleutians in those days in '42, '43. One was to go "contact" all the way: stay underneath, fly from island to island.

Hilary: Visual contact.

Bob: Yeah. And the other was to go on instruments. Now I was real lucky. The troop carrier up (there) that worked for Butler and supplied the Aleutians was -- I have forgotten the number -- but it was a troop carrier and its commander was Pat Arnold. Now Pat Arnold became one of my bosses, you might say. He was demanding in what he wanted done, and when we put in the first loop range at Fort Glenn he began a pretty regular operation into Fort Glenn on instruments. You could get there and get down with the help of the range. Pat Arnold was a great guy for my money all through the war. I flew with him a lot.

But I'm going to have to break here and tell you that I want to drop back to my corrections for yesterday. I told you about Presidential Order 6734. That's true what I told you, but I don't think it should be in your book. It was a little disagreement between the War Department and the Department of Commerce. Of course, FAA was part of the Department of Commerce as to who was going to do what. And that got solved, you might say, more by acceptance of the CAA -- FAA -- and it was not a big point in the war, even though it's in a couple books.

Hilary: Yeah.

Bob: Let's see... I had that to correct or to add to and FAA, CAA, did great work really in Alaska during the war. And if you haven't read Jack Jeffers book, *Winging It*, get it and read it. I flew a lot with Jack Jeffers and Al Horning. They were the two chief pilots. I also want to emphasize that back in my own office, though I was civilian, they had sent me a captain, Big Christianson, who was my deputy and he was the guy who was a long-time military man who knew how to write the orders, who knew the ropes in the military, and without him I couldn't run the thing, of course. That's about all the corrections.

One more, not a correction, but did you find out anything about the Alaska Aeronautics Communications Commission?

Hilary: I haven't yet. I have a note to do that.

Bob: Okay. Well it should... it was a law passed by the legislature and it was only in existence maybe two years but it best covered in this book that I can't find. Maybe we will find it this afternoon, I don't know.

Hilary: Okay.

Bob: A book by a man named Brennerman who was the head of a Society of Wireless Pioneers and he wrote a book, wrote a booklet. It's softbound, 8 x 10 or so -- something about the airways pioneers and in it he has a half a page about Alaska.

Hilary: Oh, good, okay. I can look that up.

Bob: I don't know, it may be hard to find.

Hilary: Great.

Bob: I looked: the Society of Wireless Pioneers still exists and they publish a magazine every month.

Hilary: Right.

Bob: And it's called *The Beacon* and unfortunately I've gotten so flooded with junk I've been throwing them away lately, but the next one I get I'll save and send you his current address.

Hilary: Great, okay.

Bob: Last year I noticed they had offered a bunch of old copies of old... those things that you're looking at.

Hilary: Right, these. Uh-huh.

Bob: And they might even have Brennerman's book but it wasn't published by them I don't think.

Hilary: Great. So you know they may have a website and I can go on line and order that.

Bob: Sure. I think they do have.

Hilary: Okay, great.

Bob: Now I think that's all the corrections I have.

Hilary: Okay.

Bob: Or additions. We might find in there this afternoon a facility chart of Alaska as it was near the end of the war.

Hilary: Okay. And I think I have... I either have that already or I have seen it. I think John Dudley has a copy of one.

Bob: He might. If he did, I sent it to him.

Hilary: That's okay. And these were all the different... these were of all the different facilities, right?

Bob: Yeah.

Hilary: At this point?

Bob: Everything. It was a facility chart to be used by the aircraft flying through.

Hilary: So you had all the military facilities, (all the) civilian?

Bob: Anything that aircraft could use, yes. Yeah. I think I've got one of those. I know I have one somewhere if we can find it.

Hilary: Okay. Okay.

Bob: Now you asked me some more.

Hilary: I did. Well, you were talking about going out the Aleutians and the fact that you had seen all of Alaska that you hadn't seen the Aleutians and you were talking about the weather being different and how you could go out on VFR, you know, using visual or instruments.

Bob: Yeah.

Hilary: And who did you communicate with on the ground if you were using instruments?

Bob: With the facilities that I...

Hilary: That you had put in.

Bob: Yeah, that's right.

Hilary: And

Bob: Army Airways Communication System, yeah.

Hilary: And one of the things we talked about on Thursday was that there was Navy, there was ACS, there were different systems.

Bob: Yeah, there were. Well, for instance, Navy had a big station at Sitka and a big station at Kodiak and at Dutch Harbor. And I think they had some other smaller stuff in between, but I've forgotten. But we made up charts showing everything there was and tried to boil it down so we had a good system particularly for the... well, for anyone to go out there and if we find a facility chart it will show all that stuff.

Hilary: And when you were going out there in a plane were... How did you know how to communicate with the different facilities. Were they on different frequencies?

Bob: Yes.

Hilary: So they monitored their different frequencies?

Bob: Yeah. AACS had a set of frequencies and then, of course, the control towers were all on another frequency and the radio ranges were on a particular frequency, low frequency, so and you could... We got more ranges as we went along. Eventually I went all the way to

Attu, yeah. And I was on, for instance, I was on Umnak Island. I remember surveying for their big radio range, a SRA, one of the five towers. First one we put in was a loop range, which was very poor. But I was on Shemya when we were surveying for facility sites and I was on Attu after it was taken. Eventually we had a station at Attu. You say the weather... yeah, the weather off the Aleutians is usually not too good for aircraft, especially VFR. I'm sure you read about the confluence between the cold Bering Sea waters and the warm Pacific Japanese current coming up through there (which) produces a lot of fogs and storms, and this was the pain of all aviation out the Aleutians. All these kids, you know, were not instrument pilots and the fighters and what not, and they had a rough time. But when we took Adak, we improvised the field there very rapidly. A General Talley was the engineer in charge and they drained the lagoon and put a dam in it and used the sand flats, so to speak, as the airport. That's what Adak was. The only trouble with Adak was that it had two big mountains: Great Sitkin, right here, and Mt. Moffett, practically on the field. So lots of people were lost trying to get into Adak, but and one of the approaches was over water and we tried... they tried a system of barrels out there try to mark a way in, but that didn't work very well.

Okay, well, let's jump back to the northern route. The northern route, of course, was out of my jurisdiction along with stuff through Canada -- Fort Nelson and all that and all the way to Whitehorse -- but at Whitehorse we picked it up and we had stations at Whitehorse, Northway, Galena, Nome, and eventually at Tanacross. I don't know what got in there after I left but anyhow it was pretty well covered. The difficulty here again was the, for instance, I had to get people for the control towers who could speak Russian.

Hilary: And where did you find them?

Bob: Well, fortunately, I knew one. One had worked for me at Pan American, Victor Page, Pajovski (sp?) was his real name. And then the military supplied a couple others that spoke Russian, so...

Hilary: And this was actual voice transmission -

Bob: Voice.

Hilary: At this point?

Bob: Yeah. We should emphasize or at least mention the fact that, as I said, Pan American Airways was already, was already on telegraph but the military was not and we had the Al-Sib route was all voice, the whole thing. And as well as when the CAA got going, they got more and more voice, but primarily it was out the Aleutians, primarily radiotelegraph, but not all like quite a bit. We had a voice frequency on AACS and it was used quite a bit.

Hilary: So you basically had two sets of equipment?

Bob: Yeah.

Hilary: In each of these (locations).

Bob: Yeah. If you want to use voice and you want to use telegraph, you can use the same equipment but it takes time to change it over, so you usually have both.

Hilary: And that meant you had to have people on the ground who knew both.

Bob: Oh, yeah. Uh-huh. But out the Aleutians there was not too much radiotelegraph, radio-telephone.

Hilary: Are there any particular trips...

Bob: Any what?

Hilary: Any particular trips or incidents that stick in your mind about traveling out there? Was there one trip that was more hair-raising than any other? Or things, people you met or something?

Bob: A couple I can think of. One trip I made out there with Pat Arnold. He was flying a... one of Lockheeds, I've forgotten which one, but anyhow, a rather limited range and as we were coming back from Dutch Harbor, which was a pretty long haul, he wanted to make it all the way to Anchorage. And we nearly ran out of gas, but we got in, you know. And then another one, of course, where I had my own airplane later on, first had a DC-3 and then I had a B-25, yeah. It was an ACS airplane -- and on the B-25 we were going to fly down to Seattle one time, bringing some people down and picking up some people and that's a long story but we ran out of gas in a storm and landed on the beach, yeah.

Hilary: Where?

Bob: A place called Kalaloch on the west side of state of Washington. Yeah. Well you don't want this kind of stuff in your book, but it happened to me personally. We were coming down from Anchorage. Bill Geser was the pilot. Joseph Little was the co-pilot. I was a major but I was not a pilot, of course. So the first thing that happened we got into weather, and so we stopped at Yakutat. And then we left Yakutat and made a mistake in that we probably could have landed at Annette Island in Ketchikan but we did not. We kept going and the farther we went, the worse problems got. We tried to get into Port Hardy, which is on the north end of Vancouver Island, and then we left Port Hardy and started to go down the outside of Vancouver Island on the Pacific side and at that time I was sitting, riding, up in the nose, you know. I don't know what I was doing, working or something, and I heard him talking to the... the radio operator talking to the CAA station at Everett, Washington, and saying... they were saying that the weather was getting worse and worse and worse. And Bill went up to, I don't know, five or six thousand feet and then he came back down on the "deck", just flying down the deck, and we had an automatic direction finder and we were holding on the SwiftSure lightship which was right at the entrance of Cape Flattery. We almost ran into it. And then Bill turned and started to go in the strait (Strait of Juan de Fuca) and said told everybody -- there were

eight of us aboard – “Put on your life vests.” And I said -- I was standing there between Bill and Joe -- and I said, “Bill, I don’t know the strait but I do know the Pacific side. I used to go out there with my mother and father out to Pacific Beach and so on. I know there are beaches on the ocean side.” And by that time it was raining real hard and the wind was blowing pretty hard at us. And Bill started flying down the coast and we were... there was a big pinnacle of rocks out there. Have you ever been out there? We were dodging some of those. Anyhow we came... we finally saw a beach and Bill said, “I think I can get on there,” and pulled up like this to turn to come back in and both engines quit. We were out of gas. And he yells, “Full flaps!” And Salutum (sp?) shoves on the flaps, and then he said, “Wheels down!” And Joe Salutum looked at me and I said to leave them up. I had no authority on the pilot, nothing whatsoever. So anyhow we skidded in on the beach and we stopped just short of where the riverbank... where the river comes out there. But anyhow we were all right and nobody (was) hurt. We all got out and we were there on this beach and we knew there was a highway just up above and we waited for someone to come and get us. And nobody did. Nobody had seen us. So finally I sent an enlisted man to climb up the cliff and (he) got on the road and stopped a car. And they took them to the... there was a Coast Guard lookout facility right there near the little park where it is now, and this guy said -- the guy in this lookout said – “Well, we saw you go by. You were right down there. We didn’t see you come back.” And our man said, “Well, we didn’t come back because we’re on the beach.” So anyhow, they came and got us finally. And we tried to salvage the airplane. We were lucky the tide was low. And later on the tide rose and the airplane began to fill up with sand, and we took all the radio equipment and stuff out we could. So then we go back up to the roadhouse. There’s a little roadhouse there. You’ve probably been there. Have you?

Hilary: Yeah, it’s one of our favorite places on the coast.

Bob: Yeah, great. So a little drinking went on, of course, but everyone was happy (that) we were down. But I don’t know what Bill is going to say, you know, about this “wheels up” landing. He lost the airplane. So sometime the next day, some officers came out from McCord Field to investigate this accident. So we’re all sitting there and I hadn’t talked to Bill about it at all. So he began describing what happened and then he gets to this landing, and he says, “So I elected to make a wheels-up landing on the beach.” Well, that was the end of that as far as the war was concerned. But Bill and I became great friends. I saw him for many years after, knew his children.

Hilary: That’s a wonderful story. Oh, gosh.

Bob: True.

Hilary: Gosh, that is just, that is so fun. It’s fun to hear completely different stories like that, yeah.

Bob: Stupid accident.

Hilary: Yeah, and a very fortunate ending.

Bob: Yeah, right. And my Pan Am pilot friends said... well, I didn't mention that when Bill turned to go into the strait, he lost control of the aircraft. He was up a couple thousand feet. He was trying to climb to be sure to avoid... Mt. Olympus.

Hilary: Mt. Hood, Mt. Baker?

Bob: No, Mt. Olympus.

Hilary: Oh, right, Mt. Olympus, right, sure on the Olympic Peninsula, yeah.

Bob: And we spun. We lost the gyros, but Salutum saw the water before Bill did and got us flattened out. But Bill was a... he came from Anchorage and during the war, early part of the war when the Japs attacked Dutch Harbor and so on. He was in one of the bombers that went out and tried to attack the carriers and he got shot up and made a wheels-up landing on a beach, on a field somewhere there, but let's see, what was I going to say about that? Oh, yeah, Bill from Anchorage. He had been anxious to get in the war and he joined the RAF, Royal Air Force. I don't know where he got in that. I never got the details on that, but he had Royal Air Force wings and US wings. And I thought really at that time that he was a good instrument pilot, but Salutum said no, that no, he wasn't. He hadn't qualified as an instrument pilot.

Hilary: Tell me about Joe Crosson and your experience of him.

Bob: Great guy. Where you want to go? Back when I first met him?

Hilary: Yeah.

Bob: Well. I first met Joe when he flew to the *Nanook*.

Hilary: Flew to?

Bob: The *Nanook*, the ship.

Hilary: Right.

Bob: And flying that little Wakal (sp?), this one, little after.

Hilary: Yes.

Bob: The one in the painting.

Hilary: Yeah.

Bob: Gillam. He and Gillam started out together in a Sula open cockpit back when in, I don't know, December or January, December I guess, and they got across the strait all right.

This was after many attempts to cross the strait and they landed at... this is all in my book.

Hilary: Right.

Bob: But so, the next day after they left Teller, that's all we knew and the next day it is getting quite dark, two o'clock, (when) here comes an airplane and it's Gillam. And as soon as we know who he is, well, where's Crosson? Well, we were together and we landed and we started out together, but we got separated and I kept going. He said, "I guess he went back to the camp." Which he had, and the next day he came in. And of course, Joe was an operations manager of the company. Gillam was a novice pilot. That's a great story. (Inaudible) is writing a biography of Gillam. I've been helping him a little bit. So there they were and they started looking for the airplane, or Eielson's airplane immediately, and of course didn't find... nothing until January. But during that time, I got to know Joe pretty well. He was put in charge of Alaskan Airways. Of course, every single word going in and out of there I was sending or receiving. I knew everything. I even knew when they sent a wire to their wives or girlfriends or whatnot. Like Lillian Osborn, Joe's wife later. So I got to know him very well. Then, of course, the problems... like Gillam's airplane got busted up, which the Russians primarily helped him rebuild, and the rest of the story is in the book, but so that was my initial acquaintance, my friendship with Joe Crosson.

Hilary: What kind of a guy was he? What kind of friendship did you two have?

Bob: Extremely good. He was a very dynamic guy really, a go-getter on the first order, and liked to experiment with things. A good mechanic. Took every little airplane. A real fine guy. Well, then, I didn't see him again until I went up to Fairbanks for this job for the WAMCATS that I told you about.

End Tape 2, Side A

Tape 2, Side B

Bob: (He) sort of looked after me during my winter there which was real rough. In fact, I know I borrowed a couple of hundred dollars from Joe to get through the winter and you've heard the rest of the story. I almost went into the Signal Corps but I didn't. And then when I came back to... came up, when I was hired by Pan American... came back up, Joe was my boss and we made a lot of trips together. He loved radio. He loved to be able to communicate.

Hilary: And he was doing CW or voice?

Bob: CW, all CW, yeah. And I made a lot of trips with him, well like the one in the book. Anytime the VIPs came up from New York or something, why, he'd take them on tours and I always went on those. And on the other hand, he was a good leader. For instance, when these specialized jobs came up, he wouldn't always take them himself. He'd dole them out to other people. I can give you two good examples. One, when Bradford Washburn came up to photograph Mt. McKinley and wanted an airplane to fly over the top of it, which was pretty high for an Electra. Joe didn't take that flight himself. He gave it to Robby Robin. And I went along as co-pilot, radio operator. And the main reason I was along was to be sure we had some holes to get back down, you know. We were going up on top of the clouds and we wanted to be sure we could get back under the clouds, so I was getting reports from Fairbanks and places up and down the railroad, and fortunately the weather stayed good when we flew over the top of Mt. McKinley. And I took a picture of Mt. Foraker at that time. Oh, we were on oxygen. Washburn provided oxygen canisters and I can remember taking my first whiff of oxygen and everything got louder and brighter and I was cooking.

Hilary: Did you get better at the key at that point?

Bob: I had no problem.

Hilary: Was that when he was hanging out of the plane to photograph?

Bob: They took a door off and I've got a *National Geographic* that covers that. I had that. He wrote it up in the *Geographic* two years later. Have you ever seen that?

Hilary: In the *Alaska Geographic*?

Bob: Yeah.

Hilary: Actually, I know Brad and he has modeled that harness and the camera, you know, the way he took off the door and then hung out and took the pictures. That was in the *Alaska Geographic*. I can look that up and get that.

Bob: I have a copy of that.

Hilary: Okay.

Bob: If we think of it, we'll drag it out.

Hilary: That's great.

Bob: Find that, yeah, again that little... I think you looked... there it says "Aurora Borealis" or something, a little certificate. There's one that Crosson took himself where we had all these people from New York and the FCC and the CAA and head of CAA, host of assembly at that time. This was all, of course, before the war, in '38 or sometime, about

'38, I think. We'll look. And then, of course, I made the trip when (Wiley) Post and (Will) Rogers were killed. You've got that book, too.

Hilary: Right.

Bob: Which is pretty good. Sterling Foot.

Hilary: Yeah.

Bob: And the most thrilling trip I remember with Crosson was a crazy one and I don't want you to write anything about this one. Along about after our headquarters had been moved down to Seattle, for some reason Joe and I were both in Fairbanks. Summertime. And a doctor came to us, came to Joe I guess, came to Joe, and a patient who wanted to go to Seattle. (They) thought he was desperately ill and, of course, we were flying to Seattle at that time, but the next flight was a couple days later or something. And he wanted to go right then and I don't know why I agreed to take him. I had a little Stinson (Reliant) on floats and we started off out of Fairbanks. And we had Joe, and that airplane had a co-pilot seat, and I was riding co-pilot, and then we had the patient and a male nurse. The patient (was) on a stretcher in back and we started out, good weather down to Juneau and then I've forgotten where all we stopped. Ketchikan I guess, maybe not.

Hilary: And you were the radio operator?

Bob: I was the radio operator, yeah, and the weather was pretty good until we got down into the Inside Passage and Grindall Passage and, of course, all of this was VFR, not instruments. And it got real foggy, and Joe landed and so we taxied a long time and we almost got run over by a steamboat, but not quite. And we taxied and we finally got to Powell River, yeah, Powell River and I was glad to get there. We were both pretty tired and I thought, well, we'll stay here for the night, but Joe went somewhere, I don't remember, and after a while he came back and he said, "We're going to try to go on. This guy really wants to go."

So it had gotten dark and we're on floats at the dock there in Powell River. And the first thing that happened was that the battery was run down. I had used the radio so much and the alternator didn't charge it enough and the starter wouldn't work. Joe got on the float and hand-cranked that prop standing the float like this. We started down the channel. Powell River is on an island off Vancouver Island. I'm trying to think of the right name of the place. I don't know. No... Alert Bay, Alert Bay and started down the coastline after about ten minutes of flying, Joe lost the ground. We were on instruments and I guess he tried to turn back, I don't know, but anyhow on this airplane there was no gyro-compass. There was only the turn-and-bank (indicator) so he was climbing, trying to get out, and we kept climbing and it got real rough. And at one time, Joe turned to me and said, "Put the flashlight on the compass." We didn't have a light on the compass overhead and I did, and was trying to get the compass to steady down, and so we

continued. I was talking to the Seattle station radiotelegraph. My old friend Chuck Conley was on the key, and I said to Chuck, "Looks like this is it." That's what I said.

And so anyhow Joe got... Joe turned to me and said, "I've got to get a hold of this thing," which I thought was an odd thing to say about an airplane. "I got to get a hold of this thing". Well, he did and we kept climbing. We were climbing good. We were under control. He had control of the airplane and finally at 11,000 feet we came out of the side of a cloud, and were we glad, you know. We were on top. Stars. So we kept flying and looked for lights on the ground, and one time I spotted some but we couldn't find them again. And then we kept going this side. Glad I got my names straight because now we got... we saw a whole town, a city, a small city, and we went right down there, and as we got down over the town we saw a great sight. We saw a ship. We were on the Inside Passage. We didn't know where we were. So from then on it was pretty easy. Well, not real easy, but we flew on down and we got to Vancouver. Fortunately Joe had been there before and he knew where the seaplane ramp was at the airport of Vancouver. (It) was still on Sea Island and it is up about, (would) normally be about twenty – thirty feet above the river, the Fraser River. And so here comes Joe in the dark, no lights of any kind, no lights on the airplane, and he is feeling for the water and he gets it fine, and we get to this ramp and taxi up to it and (he) gets the nose on it, and I get off and we tie up.

So we think some people will come -- and nobody comes. Nobody had seen us. So I run, I can see the terminal building way across the airport and there was no flying into Seattle at that time at night in that year. And I run across to the terminal building, or whatever it was, and started banging on doors. And finally somebody came to the door, and I said, "We need somebody to come and get us. We're down at the... on the ramp." He said, "The seaplane ramp?" And I said, "Yeah, we just landed." "Okay." So they started getting people to go and get us. And well, I sat in there with these two guys overnight but that's neither here nor there. The gentleman who was ill, who was a very wealthy guy from Yakima, decided he wanted to go to Seattle right now, tonight. They got an ambulance and they took him into Seattle and he died 14 days later. I never knew what he had but that was nothing.

But in the meantime I said to Joe, "Well, you know, I said I told Chuck that we were having a bad time." And he said we were. So we came into Seattle the next day and... Joe was not the boss -- Harold Gray, who was later the president of the company, Pan Am (inaudible), was operations manager there. He was working on the flying boat delivery, the 314s, and he was our boss really at that time. But whether he chided Joe for doing this or anything, I don't know. I never heard. That's my last flight with Joe Crosson.

Hilary: Wow, what a story.

Bob: Yeah. Joe Junior was also a pilot. But Don (?) was there and I told them the story just like I told it to you now.

Hilary: Yeah.

Bob: And he didn't say much. He just said... pretty quiet. But that was my last flight with Joe. You know a little about what happened afterward, that he got in disagreement with Pan Am.

Hilary: Mmm.

Bob: And (inaudible) he was really the one who caused me to make that trip because his parents told me about it. And he and I were lifelong friends. Well, a lot of people stuck with me. Chuck came to work for me in 1934 when we started the expansion down to... and stayed with me all through my Pan American days. And Cart Griden (sp?) who was the cabin boy, (inaudible) stick with Pan American in those days. Well, there were a lot of great people in the airline business in those days. We were all good... hard-drinking. We drank a lot. There was a pretty good bootlegger in... prohibition days, you know. (inaudible) some of the townspeople didn't like that airline bunch very much and they got in the habit of busting up dances and stuff like that, and a few fights, but it was real close-knit and, incidentally, all that time we had been without an accident. We broke up some airplanes but we didn't hurt anybody. And then we had our first fatality. It was Ed Young and two passengers and I attribute that to my radio. But I wouldn't tell anybody that because the last thing that he said was... we had the pilots doing the operating and they had to teach them to reel in the antenna before they'd land so they didn't drag that lead weight ball through somebody's house. So the last thing Ed said was, "Reeling in", and shortly after that he stalled and went right into the ground in the airport.

Hilary: So you left the antenna out?

Bob: All those airplanes, the only antenna they had was a wire.

Hilary: That trailed?

Bob: That trailed. You had it on a reel and on the end of it had a ball weight about that big, a lead weight, so it would hold it down and it wouldn't stream out behind. Reeled that out and tuned the antenna with that reel. For instance, if you were working on a low frequency, you'd reel out maybe 120 times. Working on a high frequency, maybe as few as 20 turns to it. They left a few ball weights around here.

Hilary: And so you reeled it in then as you were approaching the strip?

Bob: Yeah.

Hilary: How interesting. When you look back on all that work you did with communications in all its various forms up there, what are you most proud of?

Bob: Doing a job, doing well. Well, we overcame some difficulties that... like the use of the lowest frequency when high frequencies were out. I've got a whole year's worth of records that I can communicate with this and that, so the record of how (inaudible) about 1938-39. I got those in the attic. And the people we got were great really, mostly young

kids, of course. A lot of them with wives, like, well, for instance, like take Koyuk, Alaska, where we finally built a pretty good house there, and Bruce Hensley and his wife Ruth lived there. And let's say we had flights going to Nome that day, so Bruce was up to give the weather report and so on, and then the airplane leaves and he stays on there the whole time until that airplane gets to Nome, which may be five-and-a-half hours. And during this time, he gets fed and gets taken care of. Yeah, the wives were great. And we had a few problems but not many.

We had some funny instances. For instance, one time we had built stations at McGrath and Flat and Bethel. And probably Robins, and Bill Knox as co-pilot, were coming back from Bethel and they landed at Flat, and Flat reported so and so had landed. He used the call letters of the airplane for identification. And Frank Klat, who was the operator there at that time, said, "She (led with) her nose" and she was." What happened... Bill Knox, instead of putting the flaps back up, he put the wheels up. But nobody knew that for some time.

Hilary: That's great.

Bob: Things like that. And then the time when Bobby Robins was down at Tanana. The transition from winter to spring and vice versa was always a difficult time. Because you can be on wheels and skis, and then came time when we had to get on floats. And similarly in the fall, when you wanted to land on skis and you didn't know if the ice was good enough yet or not so. So one time Robby was on an airplane that did not have radio, and he landed and, of course, they had people come out and checked the ice. Well, he got in a soft spot somewhere and he went through the ice. He climbed out on the wing. The airplane didn't sink, of course, the wings held it up. And things like that happened and others.

Hilary: What was...

Bob: Minor accidents.

Hilary: Yeah. What were some of the biggest challenges for those people in those spots, those stations out there?

Bob: The stations?

Hilary: Yeah.

Bob: Not to get "cabin fever" for one.

Hilary: It was a huge thing, yeah.

Bob: Yeah. No, they were really lucky because there was something to do every day. If the weather turned bad for two or three days, maybe they didn't get much done, but...

Hilary: But they had to report weather?

Bob: That's right.

Hilary: Uh-huh. Four times a day?

Bob: It depended, yeah.

Hilary: It depended... whatever...

Bob: Well, I could tell you another funny one. We had put a run of flying boats out of Seattle up to Ketchikan and Juneau. At Seattle at night, someone had to come out to the station at midnight and get the reports from Ketchikan and Juneau from our two stations. And one night I was doing this myself. I lived not too far above the airfield at Sand Point. And Ketchikan was okay, but Juneau... a couple times I could hear his call sign but it didn't make any sense. So I called WAMCATS and said, "I had several messages to our chief operator at Juneau." And I said, "What's wrong with Juneau's transmitter?" I got back a classic wire, which I won't give you the name of the guy, but it said... but it just said, "James Stone is a fine operator when sober." That's all it said.

Hilary: That's great. Now when you... were you on voice? Did you call Ketchikan or this...

Bob: No, this was radiotelegraph.

Hilary: It was on radiotelegraph.

Bob: Sure.

Hilary: At that point. And so, when you say you got back a wire, it was the actual message coming back?

Bob: Oh, no when I got my wire it was from WAMCATS. They were in a regular telegraph system, you know. I had to utilize WAMCATS to get the message to Juneau and back. And luckily, I could. Incidentally, some of those stations didn't stay open all night up there.

Hilary: Exactly.

Bob: Yeah.

Hilary: So you sent a wire to ACS?

Bob: I sent a wire through ACS to Pan America at Juneau.

Hilary: At Juneau?

Bob: And said, "What's the matter with the station?" McCraw, he was chief operator and he sent back this classical wire.

Hilary: Oh, that's wonderful. So all you guys in communications knew each other?

Bob: Oh, yeah.

Hilary: Like you knew the ACS guys and the Navy?

Bob: Yeah, pretty much. Oh, we haven't even touched on one thing. The instruments for Army Airways Communication System... the Signal Corps would supply the equipment, and our supplier for the Alaska operation was the Alaska Communication System at Seattle, and they were very good but equipment was in terribly short supply. My boss was John Anderson, who was a northwest-area manager, Canada and Alaska, (who) stationed himself in Seattle and he worked directly with Colonel Andrews, head of ACS, and he was pretty successful in getting equipment for us.

That brings me to another little bitty story. [Tape off.] December, I guess about '43, maybe '42, ACS had managed to get a (Wilcox?) transmitter, a great one, five bay, 2000 watts, from Eastern Airlines and they finally got it delivered to Seattle and Andy arranged for an Army transport aircraft to take it.

Hilary: And how big of a thing are we talking about?

Bob: Big as this couch and about five feet high. So Andy was so anxious to get it there, and where we needed it was at Galena. We had only a little bitty transmitter there and (were) so proud to get it. So Andy decided to come with them when they delivered this thing and they stopped in Anchorage and picked me up, and I went with Andy to Galena and we got the stuff off the airplane. It was bitter, bitter cold. It was 30 or 40 below, yeah. And got it over to our Quonset, which we had procured, and set some guys to unpacking it and stuff. And then somebody said, "Chow time." We had to go to chow. So Andy and I went off to the mess hall and we're having dinner and the fire alarm goes off. The whole damn thing burned up in the Quonset, everything.

Hilary: The whole thing you just brought in?

Bob: Everything we just brought in. Total loss, yeah. They had gotten some packing material or something too near the stove. I don't know what happened, but anyhow it went and that was the end of that.

Hilary: What was the piece of equipment again?

Bob: It was a big transmitter.

Hilary: A transmitter.

Bob: Five-bay transmitter. It came in big racks so. Power unit and then five bays with different frequency transmitters in these bays. Standard airline equipment in those days.

Hilary: Yeah. So much for that.

Bob: Yeah. Another time Andy came up. He didn't make many trips to Alaska, but anyhow he came up and we went to see the station at Northway, which was being built and again it was bitter cold. We went with a CAA pilot by the name of Dan Victor, and we got to Northway. Boy, was it cold, and it was even cold in the living quarters. Some guys were there from Northwest Airlines installing the transmitter. Northwest installed the transmitters all the way up from Pendleton clear to Fairbanks, and that's where the dispute arose between CAA and the military, but anyhow, we got in there and I've forgotten what time of the day it was, but anyhow, I guess we had slept. No, it was evening and so we wanted something to eat and there was a guy there that was sort of cook or something. He said, "Well, all I've got is eggs, nothing but eggs." So he cooked some eggs and fried them and anyway he did worse. He had some plates off the shelf and the plates were cold, put the eggs on it and I can remember eating that meal yet. No bread. No crackers. Nothing (but) eggs.

Hilary: Just eggs, oh gosh.

Bob: We got some eggs shortly after... got some food.

Hilary: How did all this equipment work when it was so cold?

Bob: Well, it will all work if you keep it at a reasonable temperature.

Hilary: Yeah, so as long as it was warm inside.

Bob: Yeah, nothing was outside really. Oh, we had trouble keeping some stations warm enough to live in but not too bad, no. Much better than the tropics where you have heat to contend with.

Hilary: Where you couldn't cool it?

Bob: Yeah.

Hilary: Yeah. What haven't we touched on?

Bob: What?

Hilary: What haven't we touched on with...

Bob: Oh, you've covered a lot of ground.

Hilary: ...with communications? Yeah.

Bob: I'm trying to think of things. I'm not trying to think of interesting things, but you made me think of them. But that trip that's in this book was real interesting... that I could communicate back to Fairbanks from Siberia and...

End Tape 2, Side B

Tape 3, Side A Only

Hilary: Okay. So tell me about the ACS bunch you worked with, I mean the WAMCATS group.

Bob: Well, the first... I got to know them first in '26 and '27 when I was communicating with them. Didn't get to know the people very well, but I talked with them, radiotelegraph. Well, you've got (Al) Moyers' history of WAMCATS and you know how they got there in 1902. And when I got there, as I said, there was only one commissioned officer in communications and his name was Rex Corbett. I met him in Anchorage when I came through there in 1931, and he later became Chief Signal Officer. These enlisted men were wonderful. They were great. They ran good stations. They were public service stations. They had to charge you for the... to send the messages and a lot of them were in outlying places like Nulato, and all they did on WAMCATS really was to keep their equipment in shape and get the fuel lined up, make sure they ordered enough groceries in time to catch the last boat up the river, and all that stuff and work about four schedules a day and so on. For instance...

Hilary: What do you mean work four schedules a day? What does that mean?

Bob: Well, let's take Fairbanks. Fairbanks was the central station, a collection place. It worked, it talked (via) radiotelegraph to about eight or nine outlying stations, including, for instance: Point Barrow, Fort Yukon, Nome, Teller. No, they didn't work Teller directly. Anyhow, Nome collected from the smaller stations around it and then Nome sent stuff to Fairbanks, and Fairbanks sent stuff to Anchorage, and Anchorage either sent it to Seattle by telegraph, by radiotelegraph, or by cable. And these guys' main job was to keep their station in shape and make all these schedules.

Hilary: And tell me about the schedules. What did they collect? They collected weather or what did they...

Bob: Well, they would send... they were required to send weather reports. I have a sample of some of those, incidentally, in there somewhere. But there were about 15 a day that came in to Fairbanks for example, I mean, 15 stations a day. The only official thing they sent was weather. The rest was all what everybody, somebody, wanted to send (as) a message, (and) they paid for it.

Hilary: So weather came in, and that came in four times a day, or it varied?

Bob: Twice a day usually and then someone else, for instance... you came to see the guy at 10 o'clock and you wanted to send a message this morning and he said, "Well, I can't. My

next schedule is four o'clock." Because he can't communicate till the guy on the other end is listening for him.

Hilary: Oh, sure, okay. So you had regular assigned times that you...

Bob: That's right. That's right. For example, a peculiar one, when Wiley Post landed at Flat on his second trip around the world, he landed at Flat and there was a WAMCATS station there. What was real lucky about it was (that) this guy at Flat had a schedule with Anchorage very shortly after he got there, so that's how the word got out quick and how he got help, and so on. If it had been some other time, the guy gone couldn't (have done) it. Just at the scheduled times.

Hilary: Interesting. Interesting.

Bob: A lot of the... for instance, at Fairbanks, the chief operator, the chief sergeant in charge was a man named Ralph Reeser. R-E-E-S-E-R and his principal assistant was C. J. Woofter, and they were both quick prominent in town affairs and so on, and took active part in the community. They were part of the community. I think Moyers addresses that in here, in his book, and it was certainly true. Everywhere I knew they were part of the community. They weren't just there running the radio stations, and I didn't know any of them that I didn't like incidentally, never met any.

Hilary: You said... I want to go back to something you said, you said they worked four schedules a day.

Bob: Maybe not, maybe only two.

Hilary: Two and that meant you listened for the station to report in.

Bob: No, no. The Anchorage, the key station, would call them to say, "Now."

Hilary: So you called out. If you were in Fairbanks, you called out to the stations.

Bob: The main station called the outlying stations. For instance, when I went to Bristol Bay in 1931, my station was Dillingham, and I had two schedules a day with them, morning and night. And they would call me. I didn't... I had to wait until my turn came, yeah. I can tell you a little story on that one too. The place that I was at was a place called Nankeen, which was owned by the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, remember A&P, remember them?

Hilary: I don't remember them but I know... I've read about it.

Bob: Okay. Well, the summer that I worked there, 1931, one of the big wheels in the A&P Tea Company was a man named H. P. Friele, F-R-I-E-L-E, and he was flown up from Juneau to be at the cannery during the packing season, a few weeks. And I got to know him very well, a very nice gentleman, and he used to come up to the radio shack with me at night,

particularly. Well, most times he wanted to get his messages right now. So there were two ways to send message on WAMCATS. You could send it the record rate and then you could send a night letter, the next day. So on this night schedule, two or three times Bob Scarce, who was the operator at Dillingham...[Tape off]

Hilary: Okay. There were two ways to send a letter.

Bob: Message.

Hilary: Message.

Bob: Regular rate, you might say "first class", and night letter. And, of course, the rates were very different. So one night Friele was up there, and I think it was the second night this happened, but anyhow Bob Scarce over in Dillingham sent me a couple of night letters which I wasn't supposed to get until the next day, you know. And so Friele is sitting there and he writes a reply, you know, right now. And they did it a couple times and then Bob Scarce said to me, "You tell H. P. that if he wants to do that it is going to cost him a case of hand-packed salmon." Friele said to me, "Tell him: where does he want it delivered?"

Hilary: Great.

Bob: And he did. I heard afterwards he was happy that he got it.

Hilary: And he got his salmon. This was great.

Bob: Yeah. And you mentioned one time who'd I communicate with in (inaudible). My record place of communication was Nome, but I could also work Teller and Point Barrow. The Dalton Station burned to the ground on Christmas Eve, 1929, so Bob Holms (sp?) called me (on) my schedule so I called Teller. And I get Teller, so then... we only had 100-watt transmitters then... and I have good communication with Teller. So that's what I used to get some equipment. And then, I used to work at Point Barrow just because I liked to (go) a little farther and Stanley Morgan, the operator up there, whom I never met, was anxious to work. We worked on shortwave a couple times, then we found we could work on the (inaudible).

Another thing I could tell you about was that once in the spring after the flying operation had ceased... of course, it wasn't too important that I keep my schedule and we had a... we were very short on gasoline and it was hard to start the damn gas engine. And they could break. You know that (there were) no spark plugs, you know, so... do I fell to work at Point Barrow most of the time. and every time I'd miss a schedule, which I did sometimes, maybe very deliberately, Bill said, "Well, let's not crank her up today" since it was so hard to start. But Stan was always there and one day he said to me, "Anybody with you?" I said, "Yeah, Cap's right here." And he sent me a message that read that my father had died. Yeah. Yeah. Well, what prompted that (was) I got a message a few days before that, from my girlfriend, with condolences, and so I had wired home and got that from him. No, he was stricken with tubercular abscess and died very quickly, which was

too bad. He would have had a lot of fun with me. He taught me to hunt and fish and whatnot.

Hilary: Yeah, yeah. When you communicate with these different people on CW, could you tell -- did they have a different styles? -- who was there?

Bob: Pretty near everyone had a different style, yeah. Nowadays you can't tell as well, but yeah, in those days when they were using what is called a Vibraplex. I can show you one, but a Vibraplex is a semiautomatic key. You push it on this side and it makes dots.

Hilary: Right and that's...

Bob: How many times do you want the dot ishow many times you (hold it) (inaudible) on this side you make a dash.

Hilary: Right.

Bob: That's a Vibraplex. Nowadays they do that electronically and they go it one better, the left side makes the dot and the right side makes dashes so you don't have to make it manually. But you do have to learn how long to press it, you know.

Hilary: Yeah.

Bob: Yeah, now I go further than that: I use an automated keyboard.

Hilary: I saw that in your (study). What made it different? I mean, you know what made a signal different?

Bob: Well, it's like the way you talk almost. For instance, I have a friend who is dying right now (inaudible) and he makes his dashes very, very short, so that's his distinction really. In fact, you can make it (so) short that people don't like to listen to them too much. Some can't copy him very well. And then you have swings. [Tape off.] For instance, I began hearing this guy and I thought XXO and it took me... I didn't hear him very much for a couple days and then I heard him again. Turned out he was NAVM, that was a (inaudible). But he was on the Coast Guard geodetic explorer and XXA was a Mexican station. I knew it wasn't a ship.

Hilary: Yeah, well, the...how did you, how could you tell when one letter stopped and then...

Bob: That's the point...

Hilary: That's what you're...

Bob: You can only shift so long, and got so used... had this terrible swing. He just sort of rambled.

Hilary: Uh-huh.

Bob: He made it sound like XXO instead NAVM.

Hilary: Which is a huge difference.

Bob: Yep.

Hilary: How interesting.

Bob: Yeah, and others.

Hilary: They what? Say that again.

Bob: They murdered the... for instance, if they had to send an "H" they wouldn't care whether they sent four dots or five or six, you know.

Hilary: Oh, that's great.

Bob: And, oh, other peculiarities. But I'll tell you, a lot of these operators were great, particularly at these key stations where they accumulated the best operators and the man would send a message with his right hand, and with his left hand he would put the time he sent it and who he sent it to... with his left hand... while he was doing that. Yeah.

Hilary: Wow. They were really good.

Bob: Yeah, they were. And a lot of them were... this fellow Scarce for instance he could send about 40 words a minute by hand very easily.

Hilary: Wow.

Bob: Now that's pretty fast for hand sending.

Hilary: Yeah.

Bob: Of course with typewriters now...

Hilary: Yeah.

Bob: Yeah, I was lucky to have a typewriter on *Nanook*. I didn't have what was called a telegraph "mill", which prints all caps.

Hilary: Right.

Bob: But I had a pretty good typewriter and I copied a lot of press. I have some of it in there in a box that I copied and it's pretty good copy.

Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.
[HMC-0859](#). Hilary J. Hilscher Alaska telecommunications history project records.
Series 3: Oral history recordings transcripts.

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