

The Choice

Chapter One

James Murphy was seated in front of his computer screen when I stepped into the small room that served as his office. “The Piper’s ready,” I informed him. “How’s the weather looking?”

He turned around in his swivel chair and replied, “Looks mainly clear today, Bruce. It might get a little windy, though, on the return trip. If the plane is ready, let’s go. The Arctic Tern is over in the Shumagin Islands.”

As the amphibian skimmed across the water and rose swiftly into the air, Jim commented, “Excellent take off, Bruce!” The city of Chignik, Alaska was visible over the hills as we climbed to an altitude of 2000 feet and leveled off. Jim entered the co-ordinates that the Arctic Tern had given us into the GPS unit, so that we would be able to find the trawler faster. The Piper was an amphibian, having pontoons, which allowed it to land and take off on water, as well as wheels. These could be raised or lowered, to allow it to land on a runway.

After flying for about an hour, we were near the point where the ship had said she would be. “Okay,

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Bruce. Call the Arctic Tern and find out if she sees us yet,” Jim directed. “It saves time to call the boat and have them tell you where they are in relation to you, rather than trying to find them yourself.”

“November-Seven-Four-Two-Eight-Bravo to Arctic Tern, we are somewhere near you, but we do not have you in our sights. Do you see us?”

“Yes, we see you,” somebody replied. “You are north-north-east of us and moving to the northeast.”

Looking over to the southwest, I saw the ship rising and falling gently with the blue swell of the Pacific ocean.

“Roger, thank you, Arctic Tern, we have sighted you now,” I assured them. I pushed the yoke forward and turned it to the left, at the same time moving the ailerons with my feet. The Piper J-4 Cub swung toward the ship and began to lose altitude as I eased down the throttle. The plane flew along about twenty feet above the waves, then settled gently onto the water. We taxied to within 30 feet of the ship, and switched off the motor. The momentum carried us fifteen feet, then the plane was turned with the rudders on the pontoons, which stopped the plane and allowed a boat to be driven out to us. The men in the boat waited while I climbed from the cockpit onto the pontoon.

“How are we going to get that thing off the plane? It looks quite heavy!” The speaker was a young man in his early twenties, who looked as if he belonged behind a desk in an office instead of out here.

“Well,” I replied, “Jim and I loaded it, just the two of us, so we should be able to do it with four guys pretty easily. And it’s called a bilge pump.” The other two sailors laughed and one of them turned to the city man.

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“I s’pose it might look kinder heavy to you, Luke, but it ain’t. Leastwise, not for folks who make their livin’ the way we do. If you really want to be helpful, pass the pilot that line.” Luke climbed to the front of the boat, which is called the bow, and handed me the bowline. I tied it to a cleat on the front of the pontoon, welded there for that purpose. Then I took the stern line, a rope from the back of the boat, and tied it to a cleat on the back of the pontoon. Securing the boat to the plane with these two lines kept them from floating away from each other while we were working. A sailor always calls a rope a line.

“Even if that pump is not heavy, Erik, I don’t see how we’re going to get it off the plane and into the boat.” Luke was worried.

“Calm down, will ya? You and Dan can stay in the boat and take it from me and this young man,” Erik replied good-naturedly, then turned and addressed me. “I didn’t get your name; mine’s Erik, this is Dan, an’ this is Luke.”

“I’m Bruce,” I responded. “Ready to get this unloaded?”

“Sure, I’m ready, I just got to talkin’, gotta stop talking so much all the time, can’t get nuthin’ done if you just talk,” Erik returned. “We’d better put a line around that pump in case somebody don’t hold up their end. Be a bad thing, havin’ that bran’ new pump on the ocean floor, sittin’ there for the fish to use at their leisure. Might catch a trawl on it, tear it right up the middle, and a trawl ain’t no cheap piece o’ ’quipment, neither. Then you’d have to fly us out a new trawl.”

“Hey, I thought you just promised us you’d quit talkin’ so much,” complained the taciturn Dan.

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“That’s right, that’s right, I did,” Erik confessed, “but . . . naw, I better not even say that, might get to gabbin’ again.” While this had been going on, I had fastened the pump to their boat with a line that Luke had handed me, and loosened the lines that held the pump in place on the pontoon. It was not uncommon to tie large or bulky items onto a pontoon, rather than trying to fit them inside the cockpit.

“Okay, if you’re ready, I am,” I informed them.

“Sure, we’re ready, I’ll take this side an’ han’ it to Luke, you take that side an’ han’ it to Dan, and they can set it down in the boat,” Erik directed. I put one foot in the front of the boat, and the other foot on the front of the pontoon. Erik stood at the back of the pump, like me.

“Ready? One, two, THREE!” The pump was lifted off the pontoon, into the boat, and set down on the bottom of the boat as planned. Erik untied the stern line and prepared to climb into the boat.

“Wait a minute,” I began, climbing to the back of the pontoon, “the boat might move and you would fall in, let me . . .”

I was moving as quickly as possible, but the arms that fastened the pontoon to the plane were in my way, slowing my progress considerably. Before I could help him, Erik put one leg over the side of the boat. This pushed the small motorboat away from the plane, and Erik, unable to do the splits, fell into the water, and went under. In a second he bobbed back up, and grabbed the side of the boat. He looked up at me and grinned. “Well, maybe I should have let you hold the boat, then I’d be dry!”

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Dan and I helped him into the boat, and I cast off the bowline. “See you later, maybe,” Erik chuckled, “if I don’t try that trick again!”

“Here’s the check.” Luke stretched out his hand. “The captain made it out to Sky Supply, is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s it,” I replied. “See you guys later, unless you try to do a trick like Erik’s!” They started back to the trawler in a cloud of blue smoke, and I returned to the cockpit. Jim shook his head and laughed. “That Erik sure is a character, isn’t he?”

“He sure is,” I agreed, “and Luke looked like he ought to be in an office. Did you see his sunburn?”

“No, I missed that,” Jim answered. I started the engine and taxied across the water, gathering speed. The waves sank slowly away beneath us as we gained altitude. We had been flying for about five minutes when someone began calling Jim on the radio. It was a gillnetter in Chignik Bay. They needed us because the reel clutch had gone out.

A gillnetter is a small boat, usually about twenty feet long, with a long net rolled onto a drum at the back of the boat. When the captain reaches the place where he wants to go fishing, the net is unrolled, and trailed out in a line behind the boat. The boat then anchors, and waits for several hours as the net hangs vertically, weights along the bottom of the net holding it down in the water. Salmon swim into the net, but the holes aren’t large enough for them to go all the way through. When they try to back out, their gills catch in the net, keeping them from being able to free themselves. After several hours have gone by, the net is slowly pulled back on board and the fish are removed as they come over the stern, or back of the boat.

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As we continued toward home base, Jim planned our actions. “When we land, I’ll go get the parts, and you get the Cessna ready. You are going to fly this one alone. If you have trouble, you can just come back. Think you can handle that?”

“Yes sir!” I replied enthusiastically. We were silent for the rest of the return trip, since there was nothing that needed to be said. Jim owned two planes, the Piper J-4 Cub that we were flying in, and a Cessna Skywagon. The Piper was getting older, and was not able to carry as much as the Cessna could. Jim had bought the Piper when he was first starting out, and it had been his only plane for quite a few years. However, as his reputation for honesty and fairness grew, his services were more and more in demand. Jim delivered parts and supplies to fishing boats here in Alaska, and during the busy season, he usually hired a second pilot.

Chignik appeared as we came in over the hills, then suddenly we were dropping down to land in the water. Lower and lower we came, till finally the pontoons touched the water, and we were down. I closed the throttle almost all the way, and we taxied to the dock. After I shut off the motor and the propeller stopped, Jim tied the Piper to the dock and we went up on shore. He left to get the parts and I went into the hangar.

The Cessna was a beautiful little plane, with four seats. I opened the door, climbed in, and began the preflight checklist. As I checked each component and verified that it was okay, I marked it down on the list. First was checking all the switches, making sure they were in the correct positions. Next I turned on the master switch, and checked the gauges and lights. Turning the master switch off, I climbed out of the airplane, and

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began the external checks. All of the flaps moved, the tires were okay. All access panels were shut and fastened. Then I opened the engine compartment and began checking fluid levels. When that was completed, the access panel was shut and fastened. Climbing back into the Cessna, I shut the door and turned on the master switch. I opened the window.

“Clear prop!” I shouted out the window. Even though I knew there was no one around, it made no difference. Protocol had to be followed, no matter what. The engine started fine, and I taxied out onto the apron and checked the engine, revving it up to make sure that it worked well. It did, so I shut it off and went into Jim’s office. The weather looked clear on radar. Jim arrived and got in touch with the gillnetter, the Mary B. He then filled in the needed information, and gave me the parts.

“You’re good to go!” he told me. “I’ll see you later.”

“Okay,” I said. “Bye!” I got into the plane, shut the door, and started the engine. Taxiing onto the runway, I plugged in my headset.

“November-Five-Niner-Three-Six-Juliet is departing on runway Two Six,” I stated, telling Jim that I was leaving. The trees at the far end of the runway zoomed toward me, then seemed to sink into the ground as I lifted off. “November-Five-Niner-Three-Six-Juliet is clear of runway Two Six.” The numbers and letters identified which plane I was using. If another plane was in the area, the pilot would know that someone else was flying in the vicinity. The runways were at different angles, so that if the wind was not right for one, a plane could still take off from the other. Runways are named according to how many degrees from true north they are pointing. Each end is numbered differently. When approaching runway Two

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Six from the other end, it would be runway Zero Eight. When naming a runway, only the first two numbers of three are used. If there are only two numbers, a zero is the first number.

In a very short time, I was dropping down over a cluster of boats.

“November-Five-Niner-Three-Six-Juliet to Mary B., which boat are you?” I questioned. There were about seven gillnetters in a very close space, and I could not pick out which one she was.

“Mary B. to November-Five-Niner-Three-Six-Juliet, we are the bright blue one on the east side here,” the captain replied. “Slight breeze from the northeast, maybe five knots per hour.”

“Roger, thank you,” I replied, coming down to the surface and taxiing toward the small boat. She started up and came slowly over, careful not to bump the plane. I shut off the motor and opened the door. The captain swung down onto the pontoon and took the parts.

“Mary’s controlling the boat,” he assured me, in response to my worried look. “I thought I could get off and on easier than she could.” He handed me the check and climbed aboard the gillnetter. His wife backed the boat clear, and I started the engine and took off.

“November-Five-Niner-Three-Six-Juliet is clear of the Mary B. and returning at this time,” I informed Jim.

I had not been flying for more than about a minute when Jim called me. “November-Seven-Four-Two-Eight-Bravo to November-Five-Niner-Three-Six-Juliet, I have to go deliver some parts to a boat off Fox Island, you can land in the water, taxi onto shore, and refuel.”

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“Roger, November-Seven-Four-Two-Eight-Bravo, November-Five-Niner-Three-Six-Juliet will land in the water, taxi onto land, and refuel,” I responded.

As I approached the small airstrip, I saw Jim in the Piper, flying away across the sea. I touched down smoothly, and throttled down to an idle. When the plane was going slow enough, I gave it a little gas and taxied up the ramp onto the tarmac, or runway, coming to rest in front of the gas tank. Shutting off the engine, I took off my headset and got out. As I began refueling, I thought about how well the flights had gone this morning.

It was the Lord who allowed me to learn to fly, as well as allowing me to get the excellent training that I’ve had, I reflected. If Jim hadn’t been willing to teach me to fly, I probably wouldn’t be doing this right now.

It all began when I was seven years old. Dad had taken me out on our gillnetter, the Kirsten. Dad had let the long rectangular net slide off the stern into the sea, as usual. We had been fishing for about three hours, and it was time to reel in the net. Dad had started the reel engine, and put the reel in gear. Nothing happened. He tried several more times, putting it in gear, and throwing it out. Still, nothing happened.

Dad had desperately stripped off the covers protecting the equipment, and began taking it apart. It quickly became apparent that something was wrong. There were a couple of broken pieces of metal that I thought looked neat, but didn’t impress Dad. He had called Jim on the radio, requesting that he bring the needed parts as quickly as possible. Within half an hour, the Piper, then a much newer plane, splashed down, and Jim traded the parts for a check. “Got to go!” he told us.

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“A seiner needs some parts fast.” He left as quickly as he had come.

Dad was already installing the new parts when I returned to the stern. I had been busy watching Jim leave. “Dad,” I began, “I know what I want to do when I grow up. I want to be a pilot.”

Dad, his mind on other things, had just said, “That’s nice, can you get me that wrench?” no doubt thinking that I had decided that because I had seen Jim’s plane. Well, as I got older, I still wanted to be a pilot, and Dad took me on a plane ride for my twelfth birthday. I loved it, and when I was sixteen, he let me begin working for Jim, doing odd jobs in return for flying lessons. I was learning to fly with Jim, taking parts and mail to boats all over the sea in the area. Now I was nineteen and had completed my first solo flight delivering parts to a boat. I had flown solo before, but just in training.

The tanks were full, and I shut off the gas, hung up the hose, and taxied the plane onto the apron, the concrete area in front of the hangar. Walking into the office of Sky Supply, Jim’s business, I picked up the microphone of the base radio. Jim had three radios, one in each plane, and one in his office. When we announced that a plane was departing or arriving on a runway, we were telling each other or any planes that might be in the vicinity what was going on. There was no air traffic control tower nearby, and we did not have to get clearance to take off and land. The nearest airport was in Chignik, and we were outside of their jurisdiction.

“Sky Supply headquarters to November-Seven-Four-Two-Eight-Bravo, the Cessna is ready and refueled.”

“Roger, Bruce, you can just hang loose for a bit. I’m getting ready to land at this boat here, then I’ll be coming

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back,” Jim reported. “Just stay in hearing distance of the radio.”

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Chapter Two

I walked out of the office and sat on a bench by the door. The sun was warm, a nice change from the weather of last week, when it was foggy and rained nearly every day. The waves were slapping against the piers of the dock, and the gulls were circling slowly overhead, watching for something to eat.

A squirrel ran around the corner of the building, scampered up the wall, and hurried across the roof. A moment later he began to chatter noisily at something that was apparently worrying him, but out of my sight. I sat there for awhile longer, and then went to investigate. The squirrel was really making a fuss, and I wondered what he had seen. I looked around the corner of the building cautiously, and saw something not many people ever see.

There, under a pine tree, lay a mother fox, watching her pups playing in a grassy spot. Their red coats and black legs showed up clearly against the green grass. The pups seemed to never stop moving, wrestling, or just bouncing around. The mischievous little foxes decided to attack their mother all at the same time.

One minute she was alert and watchful, the next she was rolling around like she was just as young as her offspring. Suddenly she sat up and looked at the ground some distance off. Her pups looked at her, then at the ground where she was looking, then back at their mother. The mother fox leapt suddenly, a red blur. Then she was trotting back to her eager young, a live mouse between

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her jaws. All eagerness, her young crowded around her. She dropped the mouse and one of them pounced on it. The little fox must have missed, because it gave a shrill bark and pounced again. Instantly all five of its siblings were barking and jumping about, clumsily trying to get the prey. One of them got it, then quickly devoured the snack. There was a quick bark from the alert mother, and those pups just disappeared. A second red fox appeared from the taller grass, and the mother barked again. The young foxes reappeared and rushed toward their father. He too brought food, but had already killed his. They all grabbed for it, and the victor had to eat on the run, while its envious siblings tried to capture the food. The mother fox barked again, and the young ones ran to her. She quickly led them away into the tall grass, and the father took up the rear. Just a moment later, I heard a plane. The Piper was coming in to land, headed for the runway.

Jim had done well over the years, and had built the hangar and two runways, so that he had his own airport. That way, he wouldn't have to wait for any other planes to take off or land before he could deliver parts to the boats. Now, over the radio, Jim's voice could be heard. "November-Seven-Four-Two-Eight-Bravo coming in on final approach for runway One Five." A few minutes later, Jim was climbing out of the cockpit onto the tarmac.

"How did your flight go?" he questioned. "Any problems?"

"It was fine, no problems," I answered. "Mrs. Red stopped by; she has six pups this year. Mr. Red was here, too."

"Six pups?" Jim commented. "Not bad, but she had seven last year." He looked at the full metal drum

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standing nearby. “Can you start the burn barrel going, while I service the Piper?”

“Yes sir,” I replied. I took a waterproof match container from my pocket, and opening it, took out a strike-anywhere match. Swiping it on the side of the burn barrel, I applied it to an old catalog. Dropping the match, I watch-ed the flame slowly consume the Beechcraft Bonanza depicted on the front. The flame suddenly jumped to several other pieces of trash, and I walked to the hangar.

“It’s started . . .” I began, and then stopped, seeing Jim speaking into the radio. He soon finished, and turned to me. “There is a boat up by Sutwik Island, needs new clutch parts. I’ll be flying this one in the Cessna; the wind can play some mean tricks up there, and I’m not ready for you to do that one alone yet.”

“Is the Piper ready, or do you want me to finish it?” I inquired.

“I got it finished except for fuel. I’m going to do that, though, and you can go get the parts this time.”

“Yes sir, that’s fine with me,” I replied.

“Here’s the list. Give it to Ivar, and he’ll fill the order. Charge it to my account,” Jim directed. I hurried to where Jim kept his cars parked. He had three: a Ford pickup, a Dodge station wagon, and a Corvette Stingray. The station wagon had a dead battery, and the pickup was a rust bucket, only used when the other vehicles were too small to carry something, as it used a gallon of gas every ten miles. I got into the Stingray and turned the key on. The engine roared to life and I was soon driving toward town. In a short time I was parking in front of Ivar Thorvald’s boat supply store. Going in, I handed Ivar the list.

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“Busy day for Sky Supply, yes?” he commented. “Jim want this be filled quick?”

“He didn’t seem to be in a big hurry,” I replied. “Boat’s by Sutwik, so he’s going to fly out this order. The mountains over there affect the wind, and flying can be tricky sometimes.”

After leaving the store, I got into the Corvette and returned to Jim’s. He came out of the office with the pre-flight checklist in his hand. “Got them?” he questioned.

“Yes sir, here they are,” I assured him.

“Thanks!” he said. “See you later!” He walked out toward the Cessna and climbed in. Closing the door, he started the engine and taxied toward the runway.

As I entered the office, I looked on Jim’s desk to see if he’d left me a list of things that needed to be done. There wasn’t one, so I turned up the radio, took out my jackknife, went out under the trees and selected a dead branch that was free of offshoots. I walked back to the bench by the door and sat down. I often carved wooden chains while I thought, and it seemed to me that I had a lot of thinking to do.

I really enjoyed flying, but was it the right job for me? Dad was a fisherman, as his father had been. In fact, at least four generations of Cohlmanns had been fishermen. Should I carry on the tradition, and follow in the footsteps of my father, or should I become a pilot? Or was there some other job that God had in store for me? *The only way to know is to ask the Lord for wisdom and guidance, and ask godly men for advice*, I reflected. I knew of several men I could ask: first, of course, my father.

The pastor of our church would be another one, as well as Mr. McLaughn, one of the elders in the church.

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Jim might also have some insight. I was thankful that I had a Christian boss. Not many Christian young men had bosses who were also Christians. *I should pray now*, I decided. *I have nothing to do for Jim, and I won't be interrupted.*

“November-Five-Niner-Three-Six-Juliet is preparing to land at the Shasta, coming in for the landing at this time,” the radio boomed. “I will be here for approximately five minutes before returning to headquarters.”

Well, okay, so maybe I will be interrupted, I thought with a grin. *But I can still pray now*. I bowed my head. “Lord,” I began, “I thank You for Your protecting Hand today as we flew, and I ask that You would give Jim safety as he flies now. Lord, there are so many decisions that I'll have to make as I get older and go through life, and I don't want to do it on my own. I need Your help and guidance as I search for Your will for my life. Please make Your will clear to me. I don't know what it is You want me to do, whether it's flying, or fishing, or even something else. Thank You that You will be with me and guide me all the time, through good and bad. I don't want to complain to You when things go wrong. Please help me to remember that my life is for Your glory and honor, and that whatever You choose is best for me. I don't want to forget You when things are going well, which, as You have shown us in the Bible, is an easy thing to do. I ask that You would teach me the things that I need to learn, whether it's easy for me or not. I ask that You would give me boldness to share Your word with others, and that my life will be a good testimony for You. These things I ask in Jesus' Name, Amen.”

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I began whittling for a while, then I closed my jackknife and strolled into the office. Turning down the radio volume, I reached for a flying magazine that had come, opened it, and looked at the list of articles. “Hmm . . . Editor’s Desk: Come Again? ...Flight Board: News and Announcements . . . Luxury Jets: Are They Worth the Money? ...The Beechcraft Bonanza: Just How Good Is It? ...Flight Doctor: Q’s and A’s . . . Flying in The Jungle: These Guys Are Fearless! ...New Radios: We Compare Six of The Newest Radios . . . Mechanic’s Corner: Adjusting Oil Pressure . . . New Aircraft . . . Used Aircraft . . . Misc. . . . Advertisements.” I finished reading the list, and paused for a moment, deciding which article I should read first. *Guess I’ll start with the jungle article*, I decided, *sounds interesting enough*.

The article was certainly interesting, and a lot more. It was about pilots who fly people and materials into and out of jungles around the world. It had quite a bit about missionary pilots in it, the planes they flew, the landing strips (their runways), and the work that they did. There were full color photographs of the jungles, the native huts, the landing strips, the pilots, and the planes. Some of those landing strips were on the side of a mountain, at an angle. One picture showed a strip that ended at the edge of a cliff! You just flew off the edge, and the drop provided enough time to pick up speed before you came to the ground. The pilots flew missionaries and their families in and out of the jungle, as well as taking in supplies, Bibles and Christian literature, and bringing in medicines and all the other things needed by the missionaries. The pilots were missionaries, flying when needed.

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That article really grabbed my attention. *That would certainly be an interesting job – you would never know what the day would bring. Not only would it be interesting, it would be a good way to serve the Lord, I thought to myself. It sure would be hot in the jungle, though. I’ve heard there are all kinds of unusual sicknesses and strange animals, some of them quite vicious. What if the Lord was to lead me to serve Him in the jungle? I know that wherever the Lord wants me to serve Him, He will also provide the grace to bear whatever problems come with it.*

“November-Five-Niner-Three-Six-Juliet is coming in on final approach to land on runway Zero Eight at this time,” Jim reported as I heard the plane overhead. I walked out to the hangar, and awaited the Cessna’s arrival. Soon the white and blue plane pulled up and came to a stop in front of the gas tank. After waiting until the propeller stopped, I hurried over to begin fueling. Jim grinned at me as he got out of the cockpit.

“I’ve really got you trained, haven’t I?” he grinned. “It sure is nice!”

“Yes sir, you have trained me well,” I replied. “In flying as well as other work.”

“You don’t have to fuel it up, actually,” Jim decided. “It’s about time for me to fly you home, so you can go ahead and get your stuff together.”

I went to Jim’s office and picked up my cooler and the wooden chain I had begun. Hurrying back out to the plane, I placed my things in the cargo area and climbed into the back seat. Jim got in, closed the door, and started the engine. We were soon circling over the small island that my family called home.

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