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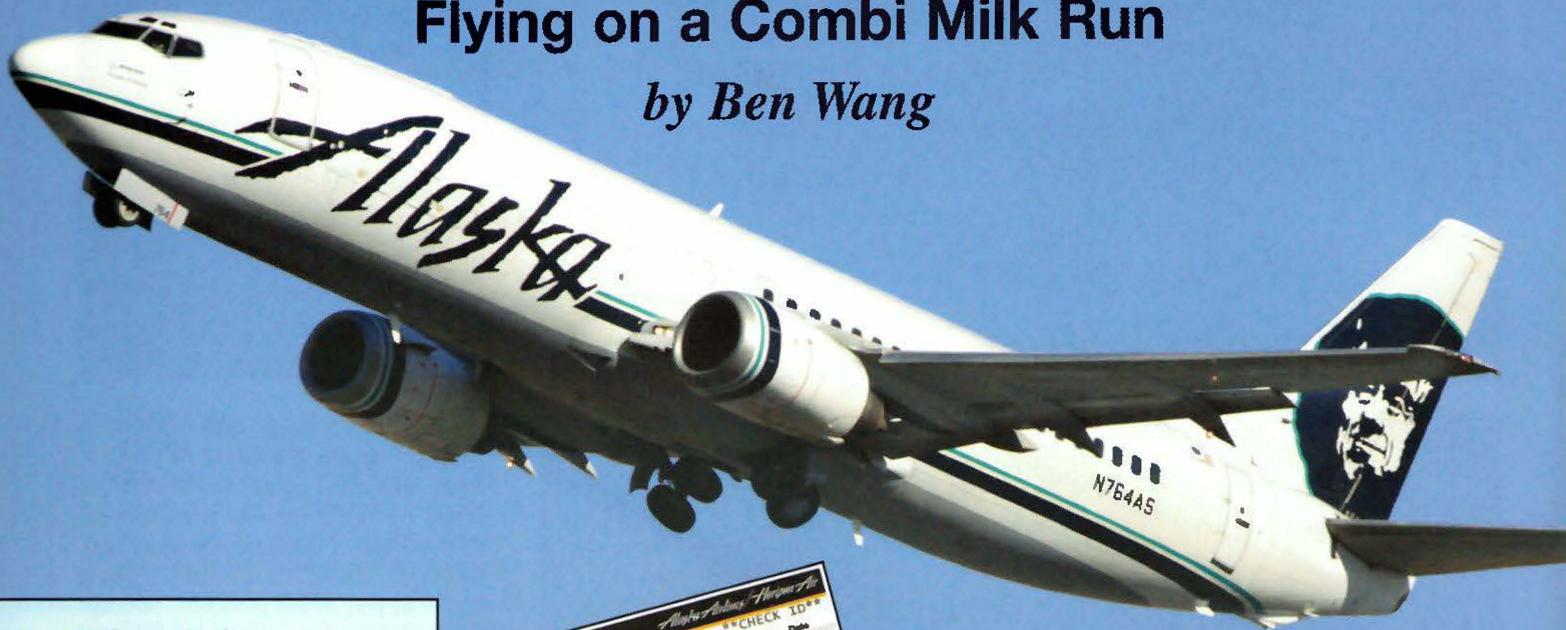
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Alaskan Adventure

Flying on a Combi Milk Run

by Ben Wang



(Above) Blank windows on the forward fuselage are a distinctive feature on the 737-400 Combi. N764AS lifts off Runway 32 at Anchorage with snow capped Chugach Mountains in the background. (Insert) Boarding pass for the AS 61 "milk run" flight. This was a mileage award ticket. The \$10 was for the tax. (Left) View of Situk River and frozen tundra while on approach to Runway 29 at Yakutat. (Ben Wang)

Alaska – the largest state in the United States – is known for its rugged isolation, wildlife and natural resources. Geographically isolated communities are sprinkled throughout the state, making air service the most efficient method of travel. Bush flying and floatplanes are synonymous with Alaska. Another unique aircraft type that can be found in Alaska is the Boeing 737-400 Combi.

"Combi" is short for combination freighter and passenger aircraft. Perhaps the most common Combi seen in the skies today is the 747-400 Combi. Airlines such as KLM use the Combi to haul passengers and large volumes of cargo between Europe and destinations throughout the world.

The unique geographic nature of Alaska is a perfect fit for the Combi where there may not be enough demand to fly a dedicated freighter or passenger aircraft to small communities. For 26 years through

2007, Alaska Airlines operated a fleet of nine Boeing 737-200QCs – or Quick Change – where the cabin can be reconfigured within a short time period to a different combination of seats and cargo pallets. These -200s were also equipped with a gravel kit, allowing the aircraft to operate from unpaved runways.

The -200s were due for replacement by a newer aircraft that was more capable, more fuel efficient and had more advanced avionics. The last gravel runway in Alaska

Airlines' system was paved, making the gravel kit unnecessary. In July of 2004, Alaska Airlines announced that it would spend \$15 million to convert five of its existing fleet of 737-400 aircraft used for cargo service. One aircraft was to be converted to become a dedicated freighter and the other four would be converted to become Combis.

737-400 Conversion

Pemco World Air Services in Dothan, Alabama, performed the 737-400 freighter and Combi

conversion work. The Alaska Airlines' 737-400 Combi were the first of their kind in the world and remain so even today. The -400 Combi features 72 all economy seats located in the aft of the aircraft. A side cargo door was added to the forward section behind the left forward door allowing four LD7 containers (measuring 88 x 108 inches or 88 x 125 inches) to be loaded on the main deck. Each container/position has a maximum capacity of 6,000 pounds. Other changes include floor strengthening, hydraulic and electrical system upgrades and the addition of cargo loading and smoke detection systems.

A fixed bulkhead separates the cargo and passenger cabins. Due to changes in fire and safety regulations, it is no longer possible to operate the Combi in the more flexible Quick Change configuration. This actually benefits the cargo customer because cargo capacity is now predicable. When loaded with containers, the cockpit, cargo area and passenger cabin become isolated.

737 Combi flights operate with a standard crew of two pilots and three flight attendants, with the unique arrangement of two flight attendants in the aft cabin tending to the passengers while the lone flight attendant is in the front cabin tending to the needs of the pilots!

The first 737-400 Combi was introduced into the Alaska Airlines system in February of 2007. At service launch, Bill MacKay, Alaska Airlines' Senior Vice-President for the state of Alaska said, "by upgrading the fleet and modernizing cargo infrastructure, we are providing more cargo capacity, a more comfortable passenger experience and a more reliable flight schedule." Exercising its option in 2007 to convert an additional aircraft, Alaska Airlines today operates a fleet of five 737-400 Combis and a single 737-400 Freighter – all converted by Pemco. Combi aircraft also operate regular freighter flights carrying only cargo.

Major shipments to Alaska include mail, supplies, cargo and

packages. The main shipment coming out of Alaska is fresh seafood. Thirty million pounds of seafood are shipped annually from Alaska to the Pacific Northwest and beyond. Alaska Airlines ships a total of 150 million pounds of cargo annually, and in 2008 cargo revenue exceeded \$99 million, an increase of 5% over 2007. The airline attributed this increase to freighter and Combi aircraft running at full capacity since coming on-line in addition to an increase in mail and seafood volumes.

In Service

Combi flights originate or terminate at Alaska Airlines' hub cities of Anchorage or Seattle. Combi flights can be found in all regions of Alaska ranging from the far northern towns of Prudhoe Bay/Deadhorse and Barrow, to the far western town of Adak in the Aleutian Islands and to the south-eastern coastal town of Ketchikan.

Air service by various airlines to 45 towns and villages in the state of Alaska are funded by a federal



The side cargo door on the 737-400 Combi measures 140' x 86.5'. N768AS was one of the first aircraft to be converted and delivered by Pemco in February of 2007. (Alaska Airlines)



737-400 Combi N768AS unloads shortly after arriving in Anchorage. Four LD7 containers load through the forward side cargo door while 72 passengers board through the rear main passenger door. (Ben Wang)

program known as Essential Air Service (EAS). Following airline deregulation in 1978, airlines were given the freedom domestically to serve any market and charge any fare that they wished. EAS was created to guarantee that small communities, which had air service prior to deregulation, would maintain that air service. The rule has since been updated to exclude cities within a reasonable driving distance to a medium or large hub airport. EAS' annual budget in 2009 is \$123 million, serving 153 communities around the United States. Between 2009 and 2011, Alaska Airlines will receive a \$7.1 million annual subsidy to provide air service to Cordova, Gustavus, Yakutat, Petersburg and Wrangell in south central and southeast Alaska. Adak, in the western Aleutian Islands, is also operated under subsidy by Alaska Airlines but under a separate agreement. Service to all afore-mentioned cities is flown using the 737-400 Combi.

Perhaps the most interesting Alaska Airlines' flights are the

"milk run" flights between Seattle and Anchorage through south central and southeast Alaska. The flights are called "milk run" flights because of the many stops, often in small communities, along the way. The flights are mostly short in flying distance and duration with about 40 minutes scheduled at each stop to drop off and pick up passengers and cargo. Two such flights are operated using the Combi: Flight AS 61 northbound originating in Seattle with stops in Juneau, Yakutat, Cordova and a final destination of Anchorage. Southbound, Flight AS 64 originates in Anchorage with stops in Juneau, Petersburg, Wrangell and Ketchikan with its final destination being Seattle.

Flying the Milk Run

This spring, *Airliners* had the pleasure of experiencing the Combi milk run on AS 61 from Juneau to Anchorage. This author was fortunate enough to be rewarded with perfectly clear skies and beautiful sights along the entire

trip. Seasoned locals and tourists alike were glued to their windows for the spectacular scenery.

Onboard the milk run, one will encounter passengers not typically expected: a mother returning home from Juneau after a grocery trip, fishermen joining boat crews in time for the salmon season, a plant manager travelling to his next assignment at a fish processing plant, a wildlife photographer making sales calls to local lodges and forestry service professional – everything one would expect on a local bus trip between small towns in Alaska – except on a 737!

Alaska Airlines allows three pieces of free checked baggage within the state of Alaska and it is no wonder why. These flights that service small communities are lifelines to the outside world as exemplified by the sight of many ice chests filled with perishable goods being loaded onboard the belly as checked baggage.

Juneau – Yakutat

Juneau is the state capital of

Alaska with a population of 30,000. The city is accessible only by water or air. Roads in Juneau do not connect to the outside world other than the one provided by the Alaska Marine Highway ferry.

The side cargo door on the Combi was closing when boarding commenced for Flight AS 61. Boarding involved walking on the open ramp to the rear stairs, where thru passengers from Seattle were waiting onboard. The flight took off on Runway 26 in the shadows of Mendenhall Glacier, routing along the shores of Gulf of Alaska, over the town of Gustavus and skirting Glacier Bay National Park over Fairweather Glacier before making the approach over Situk River to Yakutat. Landing was on Runway 29 at Yakutat. We taxied past the cross runway, still being cleared of snow, and World War II era hangars to the small but practical terminal building. The dis-

tance between Juneau and Yakutat is 197 miles and flying time was a short 34 minutes at an altitude of 30,000 feet. A large number of passengers deplaned at Yakutat, as did a number of containers mostly filled with fresh produce. Empty containers were then loaded back onto the aircraft. Deplaning and boarding was through open air then onto the ramp, while the loading and unloading of cargo was done simultaneously by forklift.

Yakutat – Cordova

The population of Yakutat is just 808. Fishing is the town's largest industry as seen by the large number of fishing crew getting off the aircraft. The town is also up-and-coming in tourism and recreation with a particular emphasis on surfing, hunting and fishing. The town is isolated and only accessed by water and air. Alaska Airlines' service is an

essential lifeline to the outside world for the town as the ferry only operates during the summer season.

A small number of passengers boarded in Yakutat with most headed for Anchorage. The total time on the ground was 40 minutes. We taxied away from the ramp ahead of the scheduled departure time and back taxied to Runway 29 for departure. We continued along the Alaskan gulf coast, passing the town of Yakutat on climb out, flying past Malaspina Glacier, the largest piedmont glacier in the world, and Bering Glacier, the largest glacier in North America, before descending over the Copper River Delta. This delta is considered to be the largest contiguous wetland in the Pacific in North America. Copper River is also famous for its wild salmon run with a short salmon season lasting for a few months in the summer. This was also the snack portion of the flight



Seen from the rear boarding door, a forklift is used at Yakutat for container loading and unloading duties. (Ben Wang)

with a bag of potato chips, a cookie and a container of orange juice! We touched down on Runway 27 and made the short taxi to the terminal. The distance between Yakutat and Cordova is 212 miles with a flying time of 33 minutes. Maximum altitude was 30,000 feet. The unassuming terminal at Cordova is about twice the size as Yakutat and deplaning and boarding once again took place on the open ramp. A small number of passengers deplaned at Cordova – mostly remaining passengers from Seattle and Juneau. A standard container loader (not forklift) was used in Cordova to load and unload cargo.

Cordova - Anchorage

Cordova's Merle K. (Mudhole) Smith Airport is named after the President of Cordova Air Service, later Cordova Airlines, which merged with Alaska Airlines in 1968. Smith was a pioneer bush pilot in Alaska who started his career with Cordova Air Service in 1937 and ultimately retired in 1973 as the Director and Vice-President of Alaska Airlines. Smith earned his "Mudhole" nickname from a competitor, fellow Alaskan aviation pioneer, Bob Reeve, by nosing his Stearman bi-plane into the mud while attempting to takeoff from a muddy field! The "Mudhole" nickname endured and stuck with Smith until his death in 1981.

Cordova has a population of 2,400 and is located on the eastern side of Prince William Sound near the mouth of the Copper River and the Orca Inlet. Historic industries include copper mining, oil and clamming. Today, the leading industry is fishing and fish canning. With the town isolated and also accessible only by water and air, Alaska Airlines' cargo service is a crucial component to the fishing industry. Last year, Alaska Airlines shipped 400,000 pounds of fresh Copper River salmon from Cordova

to the lower 48 states.

A large contingent of passengers boarded in Cordova for Anchorage. The total time on the ground in Cordova was about 45 minutes. Once again, we back taxied on Runway 27 to continue our trip west. We climbed over the town of Cordova and the mouth of the Orca River before cutting through Prince William Sound. Along the way we saw famous sights such as the Columbia Glacier, College Fjord and Harriman Fjord – all normally seen by cruise ship passengers – before making the descent over the Chugach Mountains for Runway 7R at Anchorage. The distance between Cordova and Anchorage is 159 miles with a flying time of 33 minutes and maximum altitude of 28,000 feet. Total time from push back in Juneau to wheel stop in Anchorage was 3:37 (compared to 1:44 scheduled on a non-stop flight). We pulled into gate C0 and deplaned down the stairs to walk past four empty cargo

containers being unloaded from our flight. The ground crew busily prepared the Combi for the next flight as passengers walked into the modern terminal.

Alaska Airlines' 737-400 Combi is truly a unique aircraft, flying a unique mission that can be found only in Alaska. The milk run flight, in particular, is a fun way to fly, to meet and experience local Alaskans and to enjoy the beautiful Alaskan scenery. While the -400 Combi will never replace the romance and the allure of the 737-200QC, the -400 is well prepared to take over for the future and carve out its own legacy.

Alaska Airlines' 737-200QC N740AS is on display at the Alaska Aviation Heritage Museum located at Lake Hood next to Anchorage International Airport.

If interested in taking a Combi flight, Alaska Airlines' Freighter and Combi timetable can be found on the Alaska Cargo website: www.alaskaair.com/cargo. ✈



View of Yakutat (population 808) - the town and bay - as we takeoff to continue the flight west. Alaska Airlines provides year-round access to the outside world for Yakutat. No roads lead to this town, and ferry service runs only in the summer. (Ben Wang)