



Alaskan
Blizzard or
No Blizzard,
It Was
Cramer's
Wedding
Day!



As he fired the
second shot, the
man near the
plane staggered
and fell

Bush Pilot's Happy New Year

by JOHNSTON McCULLEY

AS HE walked against the force of the biting wind from the hangar to Sam Halley's airport store, Jim Cramer was thinking that the old year would end with the start of a blizzard and the new one start with said blizzard mounting to its supreme intensity.

But one blizzard more or less meant little in Jim Cramer's life. An Alaska bush

pilot takes a blizzard as a part of the day's work. As long as he can get a plane off the ground, he will fly. It is getting that plane down on the ground again safely that ages him in an hour sometimes.

This last day of the year, not even a blizzard could upset Jim Cramer. He had enjoyed a prosperous year, and for once his bills for repairs and upkeep had kept

down to a decent figure. He had a nestegg tucked away in the Fairbanks bank. He had a living hut-and-office out here at Ladd Field, and during the summer he had added a large room to the hut, for he figured he would need it.

For, tomorrow afternoon, on New Year's Day, he would be married to Edna Halley, the vivacious brunette daughter of the airport's storekeeper. He had~ won Edna after a long-drawn-out contest. Marriageable males outnumbering the marriageable females by more than two to one in Fairbanks and vicinity, to win a particularly desirable girl for his wife a man had to be good.

It was all settled now, Jim Cramer told himself as he went on toward the store. Captain Bob Marsh, the army flier, refused to give up in the face of defeat and Jim might have to pound sense into him yet, but that was only a trifle.

This evening, he would make merry with other bush pilots and such army fliers as were considered good enough, personally and professionally, to be admitted to the bush fliers' inner circle of companionship. And tomorrow he would marry Edna and settle down—as much as a bush pilot can settle down.

The blizzard slapped at him as he beat his way against it toward the store. Halley's establishment was quite large, and had two rooms connected by a wide archway. The larger room was the usual supply store filled with general merchandise, Halley not specializing but stocking the establishment with anything people would buy. The smaller room was a combination bar and restaurant, patronized principally by pilots and passengers.

Jim Cramer headed for the door which opened into the store proper—he would spend plenty of time on the other side of the partition between now and midnight,

he thought. Through a snowstreaked window he saw that the place was comfortably crowded. Edna was behind the counter, helping her father and a breed clerk wait on trade.

The interior was well lighted, and for a moment Jim stood outside and feasted his eyes upon his bride-to-be. Pretty and snappy and extremely delicious—yes. But that wasn't all, Jim told himself. She had sound common sense, was an excellent housekeeper, enjoyed perfect health—and loved him. This calendar year, he judged, was coming to an end in a beautiful world.

Jim opened the door and went inside with a breath of the icy gale pushing him, closed the door quickly and turned around to take off his caribou parka. The pot-bellied stove, he noticed, was red-hot, and he knew it would be kept that way as long as this weather lasted.

A chorus of voices gave him greeting, and he smiled and waved at the crowd.

“Cold, Jim?” somebody asked.

“Oh, a mite. Prob'ly forty-five below. It may be real cold by mornin'.”

With his parka hood over his left arm, he moved toward the counter, sidestepping sundry boxes and barrels to keep from barking his shins. Edna gave him a smile that dizzied him. For no apparent reason, he laughed. His thirty-two years set lightly upon him; his lean body was erect, his chin was always up, his dark eyes were always a gleam. A man who lived every minute thoroughly, a stranger would have said.

From the archway, through which a man passed to get to the bar, came several howled invitations. Jim waved and shouted back that he would be there soon, and plowed through the crowd to the counter where Edna was standing. She blushed at the look he gave her.

“Go into the other room, Jim, and have your fun,” she said merrily. “Starting

tomorrow, you have to behave—have to be a sober and sedate married man.”

“I’m willin’,” Jim told her. He tried to bend forward to kiss her, but she drew back laughing. “Save it for midnight,” she ordered. “Start the new year with one!”

JIM went through the archway and to the bar. Men slapped his back and howled congratulations. He was a favorite with the bush pilots, with most of the men of Fairbanks. They liked his honest, frank manner. They liked the way he handled his old Norseman, a plane that didn’t look like much but always got there and back—which was the principal thing, after all. He was a man upon whom other men could depend.

The breed who tended bar put a glass and bottle before him and Jim filled the glass and left it on the bar.

“So this is New Year’s Eve,” he said, as he rolled a cigarette. “Some of us bush pilots have finished another year alive. I aim to celebrate this night well. I aim to live through a lot more years!”

“You’ll have a good reason to do that!” somebody called, and the others laughed. The speaker had referred to Jim’s marriage on the morrow.

“Plane comin’ in,” somebody said.

Lights flashed through the window, and above the howl of the icy wind could be heard the roar of a motor being cut out.

“Army plane,” somebody at the window said.

“Surprised any of the army boys would be out on a bad night like this,” a bush pilot down the bar said. “Shucks, they might get frost-bitten!”

“Oh, most of the army pilots are all right,” Jim declared. “Now and then there’s a bad ‘un. It’s the big brass we’ve got our gripes about. Always tryin’ to pull their fool regulations on us.”

He looked at the tall drink before him

on the bar. He was delaying the pleasure of commencing on it. It was a long time until midnight, and he wanted to show Edna he could be in good shape then. The others would understand if he did not join in the general effort to drink one another under the tables.

The door was pulled open and a gust of cold and sleet slipped inside as somebody entered. Jim turned to see Captain Bob Marsh. He knew Marsh had been on some sort of a service flight to Anchorage.

Captain Marsh seemed excited about something. He removed his parka nervously and gestured for a drink.

“How’s the weather?” somebody asked. “Have a tough trip?”

“Not in that neat army job, he didn’t,” a bush pilot remarked. “Those danged things fly themselves. Be different if he’d been usin’ my old Stinson crate.”

Captain Bob Marsh, a rather handsome young gentleman who had won his wings honestly enough, did not grin at the speech. Instead, he asked in a harsh voice, “Didn’t some bush pilot take a couple of trappers, Ed Adams and Joe Larsen, in for the winter where Crooked Creek runs into the Tanana River, or thereabouts?”

“Sure—Bart Wills did,” Jim called in reply. “What about it?”

“Where is Wills?” the officer asked.

“He took off at noon with a fur cargo and a gent eager to get somewhere,” another pilot replied. “And a sweet fee he’ll be gettin’ for havin’ his New Year’s Eve spoiled!”

“There’s trouble,” Marsh explained. “Right near where Crooked Creek runs into the Tanana, I saw a fire on the ground. The weather was tough and the wind bad, but I circled as low as I dared. ‘Somebody had built a fire, all right. I saw a man dancin’ around it movin’ his arms. Some kind of trouble. And I saw the word

‘Help’ spelled out on the snow with stripped saplin’s—”

“And you didn’t land?” Jim Cramer asked.

Marsh whirled to face him. “I didn’t land!” he snapped. “I was under orders to get in quick. I carried important papers, which is none of your business. I didn’t dare run the risk of landin’ and havin’ a crack-up. Anyhow, what could I have done? I couldn’t have brought out a couple of men. So I came on to give the news. I don’t know that country there except from the air.

“Understand, Cramer, I fly an army plane that belongs to the government. And I belong to the army and am supposed to stay alive long enough to pay ‘em back for train in’ me. You bush pilots—your planes and lives are your own.”

“That’s one way of puttin’ it,” Cramer replied.

“There’s somethin’ else: As I passed over, I saw flashes from the bush. They looked like gunfire. And the man who had been dancin’ around the fire ran for cover. I’ve reported it—that’s all I can do.”

JIM CRAMER looked thoughtful. “I know where Bart Wills dropped Ed Adams and Joe Larsen,” he said. “He agreed to pick ‘em up in the spring. Larsen is an old-time trapper, and Adams is younger and tougher—a good team of partners.”

Marsh gulped his drink and rubbed his hands together briskly to get his blood circulating again. The other men were silent for a moment, leaving their drinks untasted. Then there was a sudden babel of voices:

“The blizzard’s mountin’—”

“Thermometer’ll hit bottom and go on through—”

“Wonder what’s wrong?”

“Shame Bart Wills ain’t here. Those

men are his lookout—”

“A man never knows what’s happenin’—”

Jim Cramer began getting into his parka. “I’ll go!” he decided. “I know that country well. Landed there half a dozen times.”

“Hey, but Jim, you aim to be married tomorrow” somebody called.

“Oh, I’ll be married! I can make it there and back in time.”

“This blizzard. . . don’t know what you might run into after you get there . . . may not be anything serious at all . . . easy to crack up . . . rough country for a .ski plane . . .” the babel continued.

Edna Halley ran in from the other room and clutched Jim’s arm.

“You’ll go, Jim,” she said. “Joe Larsen is an old man. Ed Adams, he’s fine, trying to get a start in life. They can’t be left alone out there, with something wrong. If they were found dead—in the spring—you’d never forgive yourself, Jim. And I’d never forgive you!”

Jim put an arm around her, looked into her face almost white with anxiety, pulled her to him and kissed her gently.

“I’ll go!” he said. “Listen, everybody! I’ve got this drink on the bar. I want it left right there. I’ll be back to drink it, understand?”

“It’ll be there when you come back, Jim,” one of the bush-pilots said.

Jim strode to where Captain Bob Marsh was standing.

“I hope all this is on the level, Marsh,” he said. “It could be that you think you’re sendin’ me where I won’t come back, so you’ll have a chance with Edna after all. Could be. I sure hope it’s on the level, because if it ain’t, and I get back after findin’ there’s no trouble out there at all, I’ll be lookin’ you up Marsh. And the army will be shy a flier!”

“It’s on the level, Cramer. When will

you bush pilots learn that not all army fliers are dishonorable devils? I know the high brass annoys you at times—maybe it annoys us of lesser rank, too. But that's how things are. Cramer, I'd like to shake hands with you."

"Save it till I get back," Jim said. He turned to his friends. "Some of you give me quick help, huh? Get my Norseman out of the hangar. Check her quick. Fuel her up and have her ready. I got to get some stuff—medical supplies and my gun and a full flask—"

Men began rushing around. Lights blazed on a runway. Jim hurried into the store part of the establishment to get the things he needed.

"Hurry back, Jim," Edna said bravely, as he finally started for the door.

"I'll be back!" he promised. "See that my drink is saved for me. I'll eat New Year's dinner with you, and we'll be married as we planned."

Then he rushed through the door and fought the biting wind to get to his Norseman . . .

JIM knew his route. He had flown it often before to the headwaters of the Tanana and beyond. That part of it was all right. The Norseman was behaving splendidly, and that was all right, too. But the weather wasn't all right.

The blizzard raged at him, and he flew through gusts of sleet and flurries of snow that slapped against the plane's cabin. The ship tossed and heaved and dropped as Jim fought to get above the worst of the storm.

And finally he was riding high and with less trouble. Yet the wind was strong and fitful, and it was colder. He got to where he had to guess at his position, and finally he went down through the storm again, searching for the ground. He seemed to have left the worst of the storm behind him.

Far below, after a time, he made out a

winding white streak that he knew was the frozen Tanana. He dropped toward it as much as he dared and ran into another series of gusts that tossed the plane like an empty box on a raging sea. Up he went, and presently down again. And then, in the distance, he saw a tiny amber speck that he thought might be a fire.

He passed over it and made a great circle and returned, getting lower and lower as he came nearer. Yes, it was a fire. He could see it plainly now. It had ceased snowing and the wind was steady.

Jim Cramer flew over the spot again. Nobody was in sight. Beside the fire he saw the word "Help" made on the snow with the stripped saplings, as Marsh had reported. But no man was dancing around the fire to attract attention.

Away from it and back again, skimming the river ice, he flew. It would be dangerous landing. A ruffle in the ice might be enough to break a plane ski, to tilt the plane and snap a propeller blade. But it was something that had to be done.

He let the plane down a distance from the fire. It bounced like a rubber ball and he gunned it forward and tried again. This time, he made it. Along the snow-covered stretch of ice the plane slid, to be brought to a stop not far from the fire.

Jim got his right mitten off, adjusted his holster, and got out of the cabin. Frozen snow squeaked beneath his step. He leaned against the plane out of the wind and shouted:

"Hello! . . . Hello there!"

No answer came to him on the wind. The fire blazed merrily, and it seemed to Jim to have been refueled recently. He left the plane and lurched toward it.

"Hello!" he called again.

Tracks of boots around the fire had been half filled with wind-driven snow. The tracks were around the arranged saplings, too. He wondered how near the

trappers' camp was, why somebody did not answer his hail.

Something zipped past his head and downwind came the crack of a gun.

Jim darted to one side quickly, flattened himself on the snow behind a ridge of ice, whipped his own gun out of its holster to hold it gripped in a partially cold-numbered hand. Another zip passed him, another crack came downwind.

"Hello!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "I'm Jim Cramer! Adams—Larsen? Are you there? Can you hear me?"

A wild laugh rang down the wind, and what man made it Jim could not tell. It was like the laugh of an insane man. Well, it would not be the first time a trapper had gone insane in the bush during the winter.

Another shot came, to chip the ice near him. He changed his position swiftly, running away from the fire, making for the fringe of timber not far from the river's edge. He got to a spot of shadow and dropped flat again, and searched the fire-lit stretch beyond the leaping flames.

He saw nobody at first. But suddenly a dark spot came from behind a drift of snow banked against the brush. He saw a man bending forward and running as swiftly as he could—toward Jim's Norseman.

RAGE and anger came to Jim Cramer then. If that unknown man could fly a plane, and was the wrong sort of man, he could get into the Norseman and possibly get away. And Jim Cramer would be left behind—for what fate, he could not guess. Possibly he could survive until help came. Perhaps he would be given up for lost and the search slow in coming.

He thought of Edna worrying if he did not get back to Ladd Field after a decent lapse of time. She might think, and the others also, that he was down with a cracked plane, that he had crashed and

been killed, that one more bush pilot had gone where many good ones had gone before him.

He opened fire. At the second shot, he saw the man running toward the plane stagger and sprawl. Jim watched for a moment and saw that the other was trying to get up and could not, and so remained quietly on the ground.

Jim circled through the shadows and approached from the opposite direction. Slowly he advanced from cover to cover, using bunches of brush, drifts of snow, hummocks of ice as body shields.

He braced himself for the final rush. He made the dash as swiftly as possible, slipping and sliding, his speed retarded at times by heaps of soft snow. He saw the man on the ground half lift himself, raise a gun, fire, then sprawl again as if the act had been his last effort. The bullet sang past within inches of Jim's head.

Then he had hurled himself forward, his own gun held ready for a series of stunning chops. His body crashed atop that of the other man. As he raised his gun to bring it down forcibly, he heard a whimper:

"My laig! You're ahurtin' my laig—"

He did not strike. By the light of the fire, he saw it was old Joe Larsen who had fired at him, who had tried to get to the plane. And in old Joe Larsen's eyes was the gleam of madness.

"It's Jim Cramer, Joe," the bush pilot cried. "Don't you know me?"

"You're a liar! Cramer's in Fairbanks. You've killed Bart Wills and come here to get our fur!"

"Listen!" Jim ordered, shaking him. "Where's Ed Adams?"

"Ed—Adams? Don't know him."

"Ed Adams, your partner—where is he, Joe? Who built the fire and put out the help sign? Do some quick talkin'."

Joe Larsen moaned again. "My laig!

Somebody shot me—”

Jim turned him over after making sure his gun was at a distance. He didn't want the insane man to get hold of it and take another shot at him. He made a swift examination. One of his bullets had struck Larsen in his right leg above the knee, had dropped him. The wound did not seem dangerous, and this was not the time or place for surgery. Jim sprang up. “Adams!” he called. “Where are you? This is Jim Cramer!”

He heard a distant, weak cry: “Over here—here I am!”

Jim was strictly on guard and had his gun ready as he went in zigzag fashion toward the spot from which the cry had come. He kept to the dark spots until he got a distance from the fire. The call was repeated several times.

“Where are you, Adams?” Jim shouted. “What's happened?”

“I'm hidin' out. Larsen went crazy— took all the ammunition and some grub and went into the bush while I was runnin' a trap line. I'm shot—”

Jim hurried on toward him. He found him after a search, burrowed into a heap of the bush. His face was twisted with pain, Jim saw when he snapped on his flashlight.

“He got me in the hip—when I was puttin' more fuel on the fire,” Ed Adams reported. “I tried to signal—some plane flew over and circled and went away—”

“Army plane. Brought the news to Ladd Field,” Jim explained. “I had to shoot Larsen in the leg. Let's see if you can get up and lean on me.”

“It's my left hip— Seems paralyzed.”

“Don't wonder at it, out in this cold.”

He got Adams to his feet, and Adams hobbled along clinging to him. They went toward the plane. Joe Larsen was still sprawled on the snow moaning: “My laig! I'm shot!”

Jim got Adams into the plane. He picked up a couple of short lengths of rope and went back to where Larsen was stretched out. “I'll get you into the plane and fix your leg,” he said.

BUT a fit of madness came to Larsen again. He grabbed Jim and began struggling. With the last strength of a man about to pass into oblivion, he gave Jim considerable trouble for a short time.

Then Jim had his wrists and ankles lashed, and picked the old man up bodily and got him on his shoulders and staggered with him to the plane.

He had difficulty getting Larsen into the cabin of the plane, for Adams was unable to help. But he made it. He closed the door and looked at Larsen, who had ceased moaning. Larsen was unconscious from shock and cold.

“I'll take off the ropes and give him a shot in the arm,” Jim told Adams. “Can't care for his leg here. Both of you have to get to the hospital at Fairbanks.”

He got out the hypo and jabbed the needle into Larsen's wrist, and took off the ropes from Larsen's ankles and wrists. Then he gave Ed Adams a swift examination. “It s high up in the hip,” Adams told him weakly. “The bleedin' seems to have stopped.”

Jim got out his flask and Adams took a deep drink. “Keep the flask,” Jim said. “If Larsen comes awake while we're travelin', give him a shot.”

“We were havin' good luck,” Adams said. “A lot of marten and other stuff. I don't know what made Larsen go crazy. We were gettin' along fine. Had plenty of grub to last till spring. Bart Wills was to pick us up—”

“Tough luck,” Jim broke in. “Bart was away on a trip when Cap'n Marsh brought the news to Ladd Field.”

There wasn't a lot of room in the cabin

of the Norseman. Jim made a swift examination of his instruments. He checked his fuel supply and didn't like what he found. He had burned a lot of gas bucking the storm. He wouldn't dare wander off the course on his return.

He reminded himself grimly that he wasn't in the air yet. He started the motor and warmed her, turned on his landing lights and with his eyes searched the snow and ice ahead. For as much space as the lights exposed, it looked good enough.

He started, taxied the plane on its skis, gathered speed. There was a wild lurch as a ski struck a hummock. But the plane righted and took to the air.

Jim gave a sigh of relief and lifted it as rapidly as he dared as he followed the white line of the river. As he went aloft, the storm came at him again in fitful gusts that seemed to be trying to wreck him. The plane tossed and weaved. He heard Adams groaning.

Jim had commenced slipping himself. He found himself murmuring: "Got to get through . . . two hurt men . . . Edna waitin' . . . Got three things to do after I get there . . . three things to do . . ."

He checked himself, blinked rapidly, looked at the instrument board. The storm seemed to relent some as he went in higher. Away off there somewhere was Fairbanks, and Ladd Field, and a hangar, and Sam Halley's airport store where the light would be shining brightly and it would be warm, and people's cheery voices could be heard.

Edna would be there, and hot coffee would be ready, and a bed if he wanted it, a chance to rest. And his New Year's Eve drink would be waiting for him on the bar as he had left it. He had to get back and take that drink—it was a promise! Only it wouldn't be a New Year's Eve drink. It would be a New Year's Day drink. His watch told him it was past two in the

morning.

He flew on mechanically, watching the instruments and fuel gage. He had heard no sounds from the others for some time, he realized. He spoke: "Adams! You all right? Larsen still unconscious?"

No answer came. He turned his head—in time to see old Joe Larsen smashing at him with the whisky flask.

JIM DODGED the blow, and the plane lurched. The flask was shattered on the instrument board. Jim righted the plane as Larsen collapsed against him. He threw Larsen aside, and a swift glance told him the old trapper had passed out again. He called to Adams, but Adams made no response.

The Norseman struck an air pocket and dropped like a rock. Jim recovered control and gunned her up again. Some of the instruments had been smashed when Larsen had struck with the flask.

"Adams!" Jim shouted again.

"Wh-what—"

"Wake up! Larsen almost got me! Crawl here. Take my hypo and give him another shot. Can you do it?"

Adams managed it. "Passed—out," he explained. "I'll be—all right now."

"Fix that hypo and give yourself a shot, too," Jim ordered. "It'll keep you from tossin' around."

"How—are we makin' it, Jim?"

"We'll be all right. Storm's weakenin'."

He knew he lied, but he wanted to reassure Adams. He saw Adams jab the needle into his own arm and fall back to a comfortable position. The blizzard was as strong as ever—it'd be a record-maker, he judged.

Half the time, now, he moved without conscious thought, feeling the plane, doing the things he had learned to do. It was a long time before he let the plane down for

a distance and strained eyes to search the earth below.

Then he saw it—the light he had been hoping to see. It could come from nowhere except Ladd Field. The sight of it braced him. He shook off the feeling of sleep. The plane roared on.

When the right time came, he crossed the field and turned to circle. Down below, all the lights were on and he could see the wind sock seemingly being whipped to pieces. He saw it all through sheets of sleet and snow.

He took a deep breath and went down. Because he had taken off and landed there so often, he did the right thing by instinct. The landing was rough, the plane bounced, he heard wild voices as men shouted.

Then the plane was at rest and he was trying to get the door open. When he did finally, he tumbled out into the arms of some of his friends.

“You made it, Jim—made it!” somebody yelled.

He answered weakly, “Get ‘em out—hospital—both shot.”

They helped him toward the store. Men were running toward him. But it was

a weeping, laughing Edna Halley who clasped him as the men stepped aside.

Then he was in the store, in a chair before the fire, half undressed, people working over him, Edna bringing scalding hot coffee, people jabbering questions. In halting phrases, he gave them the story of the rescue.

Strength came back to him. He tried to stand, and they helped him.

“Just remembered. I’ve got three things to do,” he said. “First thing, to kiss Edna.”

She laughed and clung to him, and he kissed her.

“Next, where’s Cap’n Marsh?”

“Right here, Cramer.”

“Now, I’ll shake hands with you,” Jim said. They shook hands as men who realize each other’s worth.

“And the third— Help me into the other room.”

Edna and Marsh helped him. He grinned when he saw the tall drink still on the bar where he had left it.

“Promised myself I’d get back to drink that,” he said. And drink it he did.