



MUSHING DOWN THE AIR TRAIL

by FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

High-powered planes and battling pilots above the snow fields of Alaska!

THAT AIR MUSER is going to use up a lot of his luck if he gets out of this mess alive!" "Alaska Pete" was tense as he made the observation.

Outside a blizzard completely obscured the landing field. Overhead "Rusty" Wade, known as the "Air Musher" because he did his mushing about Alaska with plane instead of dogs, swung back and forth peering for a brief glimpse of the landing field.

Whang!

"There goes our radio wire," yelled "Stumpy" Anderson, Alaska's partner. The two had donated the landing field to the little mining camp of Gold Poke. For that reason they spent many of their leisure hours at the field. However they did their mushing with a retired army mule, General Jackson.

With the snapping of the radio wire, the motor suddenly cut out. Above the storm came a new sound—the scream of wires and the gasping of an idling motor. The plane burst through a swirl of snow and her skis skimmed along the surface for some distance and then buried into a drift.

A rusty-headed youth, built along lean, but powerful lines, peered from a cabin window.

"Thought I never would find the field," he calmly observed, "but the instant I hit that radio wire I not only knew where I was, but my exact elevation."

He climbed stiffly from the plane. He was dressed for the North, a caribou skin parka extended to his knees, the hood was faced with wolverene fur, which dissipates the moisture from breathing and prevents ice forming between the hood and the

face. On his feet he wore Eskimo mukluks.

The country under the *Air Musher's* wings was wild, thinly populated; supplies and parts thinner, and a pilot might well expect to walk from one to five hundred miles if he made a forced landing.

Stumpy Anderson slapped the lucky pilot on the back. "Rusty, old son, you made it—but watch out. You can't always be lucky."

Rusty Wade opened the cabin door of the plane and a deputy marshal stepped out. He was followed by a sullen old man who was handcuffed. The latter scowled at the others.

"They're railroading me to an insane asylum," he screamed, "just so Pratt can get my mine! Let me face Pratt! Let me at him. The dirty, double-crossing—"

The marshal attempted to quiet the man.

Stumpy shook his head sadly and used the expression the North uses to indicate an insane man. "Poor cuss, he's missed too many boats."

Anderson's words reached the unfortunate man.

"That's a lie!" he shouted. "I'm as sane as you are. It's a frame-up. Any man will kick if he's charged with being crazy. And when he kicks they say that proves it. Bring Pratt to me. Bring Pratt— Bring—" He was led away.

Rusty Wade slid the plane into a hangar, then lifted his brows in surprise. He indicated a big plane in an adjoining hangar.

"Some ship. Where did it come from? Whose is it?"

"Came in while you and the marshal were getting 'Old Man' Dorsey," Stumpy explained. "It's piloted by a man named Scudder. Pratt bought it. He figures to take supplies in to remote mining camps."

"Pratt, eh?" A glitter came into Rusty Wade's eyes. "I think I'll hurry into town. I'd like to be on the jury that tries Old Man Dorsey for insanity."

THE United States commissioner looked up with interest as the big pilot entered the log structure that served as a courtroom.

"Hello, Rusty," the official said pleasantly, "planes sure are going to make a difference in this country. You did in a day what it would have taken weeks for a dog team to do. Old Man Dorsey is pretty violent. Did he give you any trouble?"

"No," replied Rusty, "the marshal took care of that. Dorsey wasn't keen about flying, but once he got into the air he liked it! When's he going to be tried? I'd like to listen in—if I can't be on the jury."

"I've got the jury about made up." He read off five names, including Alaska Pete and Stumpy Anderson.

To these he added, Rusty Wade. "That makes six—all we need for insanity cases. Be around in the morning!"

The room was silent next day as Dorsey gave his defense. His effort to remain calm; to prove to these men he was not insane, was pitiful.

"For years, boys," he said appealingly, "Pratt grubstaked me. Sometimes I got enough to even things up; sometimes not. That's the chance a grubstaker takes. Three years ago I struck a hard-rock proposition in the Chandalar. On the coast it would have been worth millions. But the Chandalar is a hard place to get to. It'd cost too much to bring even that rich ore out in pack trains. Pratt said forget it—but I stuck—went deeper and found richer ore. He refused to back me on that position and side-tracked me. I trusted him and he double-crossed me. He's found transportation—big planes will lake men and grub into the country and bring the ore out."

Then leaping at Pratt he screamed: "You're double-crossing me! You made on let the assessment work go and now you figure to stake it for yourself—"

The marshal pulled him down.

Pratt took the stand. "Poor fellow," he said in a low tone, "it is true I staked him for years. I've staked a number of these old miners and have yet to make money. If a railroad ran into the Chandalar country Dorsey's hard-rock proposition would make us both money, but under present conditions transportation would eat up profits and more. I've refused to spend any money in the district and—well, you know the rest. It's the old, old story of the miner who remained in the country too long and faced disappointment too many times."

Five minutes later the jury retired. Stumpy Anderson was the first to speak.

"Suppose we'll have to send Old Dorsey to Morningside," he announced. "It's tough, but he thinks Pratt is out to get him. If we turn him loose he'll kill Pratt sure. I vote insane!"

"Same here," added Pete.

Five pairs of eyes turned to Rusty Wade.

"He is just as sane as we are," said Rusty slowly. "Pratt is double-crossing him and that's enough to make any one violent. Dorsey has gone through a lot to open that mine. He packed grub on his back for miles; relayed it over mountain and glacier; he fought hunger, wolves and mosquitoes to find a paying mine and he found it. Pratt sees a chance to use plane transportation and this is his way of getting rid of the man who is entitled to half the profits. I won't stand

for it. I know Pratt and I've heard of his pilot, Scudder. Old Dorsey needs help and he's going to get it. I vote him sane."

USUALLY easy-going, there were occasions when Rusty Wade spoke his mind and this was one of them. It had an immediate effect. Several minutes later they emerged from the jury room. The marshal stepped closer to Dorsey. He expected an outbreak. Dorsey leaned forward.

"Listen, boys," he cried, "you're not going to send me to Morningside, are you? Christmas is just past and New Year's is ahead. It won't lie a happy New Year for me. Crazy! I never thought I'd be suspected of that. But it's Pratt!"

"Silence," the commissioner ordered. "Have you reached a verdict?"

"Yes, we find him sane," Rusty Wade announced.

"What?" The cry came from Pratt. "I warn you my life's in danger from this moment. I warn you I shall arm myself for defense. I—" He stopped and looked from the big pilot to the smiling old prospector. "Wade was bribed!" he shouted. "Dorsey has traded a mine for his freedom."

Rusty Wade flushed with resentment, but he managed to control himself under this false accusation.

"Dorsey has no mine to trade for anything," Rusty said slowly. "The assessment work isn't done. It's anybody's mine right now."

With that he walked out. Every man in the room understood the situation. This was a new stampede—the first stampede down the air trail. New rules, new methods, new tricks; but for the old, old prize—gold.

Old Man Dorsey followed. "Thanks, Rusty," he whispered, "for a minute I thought I was licked."

"No thanks due, Mr. Dorsey," Rusty answered, "the least we can do is to give a man justice. Now to beat Pratt!"

"Do you think you can beat him? I'm thankful to get out of the mess a sane man."

"I've never been into that part of the country but I think we can beat him to that claim. What's the country like?"

For the next five minutes Rusty Wade listened to a story of glaciers, pinnacle peaks, deep gorges and windswept mountain passes. It was the North he knew. True, it was a different part of the country; but experience would help. The element of risk and uncertainty fired his blood. Then, there was the sporting angle.

Standing there in the shelter of a building Rusty suddenly noticed a light flash on.

"Pratt's store," Dorsey whispered, "he's made a bee line for his supplies. They'll be hitting the trail soon as the storm lets up."

"You get fifty pounds of trail grub ready, Dorsey," Rusty directed, "I'll get my old *Air Musher* into condition. If Scudder and Pratt hit the air for the mine we'll be on their tail—or a little ahead." As the old man turned, Rusty gave a final bit of warning. "Pratt publicly announced he expected you to shoot him. Watch your step. Don't do a thing that will give him an excuse to shoot you."

"I won't! I'm looking too danged far into the future for that!"

"If anything happens to you, Dorsey, I'll have a tough time finding your mine!"

He watched the old man hurry away and smiled as he noted the lightness of step.

ALASKA PETE and the mushing mule chanced to drive past, and Rusty hailed him.

"Drive me out to the field," he said. "It may be just a bum hunch, but I want to keep an eye on that plane. Scudder might not tamper with it; but a gold mine will tempt some men to do most anything."

They drove at a brisk pace to the field. Eddies of snow obscured the buildings and hangars, but a white eye, peering through the snow, indicated some one was using a flash light.

Rusty leaped from the sled and ran to the hangar. His hand shot out and gripped an arm emerging from the *Air Musher's* hangar.

"Scudder! You work fast!"

"I—I—got mixed up in the storm and thought my plane was—"

"Don't lie!" Rusty's fist shot out and Scudder went sprawling. "Maybe that'll help you remember which hangar your bus is in."

The fallen pilot reached under his parka, then changed his mind. Before he could hope to draw a gun Rusty would be upon him.

"I'll live to get you for that, Wade," he promised. "*Air Musher*, eh? I'll show you real air mushing before this year's over."

"You'll have to hurry, there's not much of this year left!" Rusty retorted.

The incident served to show just what he was up against—trickery by a man who knew the book. Just

to play safe he emptied both the oil and gasoline tanks. Emery dust in the oil, dirt or water in the gasoline, could render the best plane helpless.

Scudder slunk away to his own hangar. Willing to stoop to crookedness himself, he naturally expected it from Rusty. He planned to watch his own plane until Pratt arrived.

Half the population of Gold Poke, expecting the unusual, began to arrive at the field. As against a stranger the miners were backing their own—Rusty Wade.

To the crowd the air stampede seemed madness. There was scant daylight—the nights were nearly twenty-four hours long.

The *Air Musher* was getting tuned up when Dorsey appeared, breathless, but with trail grub: bacon, beans, rice, prunes, flour and so forth. He carried a rifle and ammunition. For it might be necessary to live off the country.

Pratt appeared presently, accompanied by a bulky individual whose chest and jaws were large, but whose forehead was rather too small. He favored Rusty with a leer of contempt.

“Who’s that cuss?” Dorsey demanded. “He looks like a strike-breaker to me.”

“He’s one of Pratt’s rough-and-ready lads. When talk won’t accomplish the job, those boys swing into action.”

“Looks like he don’t expect to get far talking with us,” Dorsey observed. “Say, maybe I’d better get my maps. The country will look different from the air.”

As Dorsey hurried away, Pratt watched him from his seat in the big plane. “One more thing I’ve got to get,” he shouted above the roar of the motors.

He dropped to the snow and hurried into the hangar, while snow kicked up by the wind of the prop eddied about him. Slipping out a small door in the rear he ran down the trail and cut in ahead of Dorsey. As the old man hurried past, he lifted an automatic pistol and fired. The roar of the motors in the distance drowned the report. He ran back, reentered the hangar, then came out of the front entrance. A hundred people would have sworn Pratt never left the hangar.

“Did you get what you started after?” Scudder inquired.

“Yes,” Pratt answered, “now let’s go. I don’t think Wade will have much luck locating that mine.”

Scudder shot him a quick glance. “Dorsey’s going to show him the way, isn’t he?”

“I think Dorsey’s got cold feet by now.” He laughed unpleasantly, “Yes, I’m sure of it!”

The motor roared, the plane moved ponderously for several rods, then seeming to shake off the ties that bound it to the earth, lifted clear of the field and vanished into the North.

“WHAT’S keeping Dorsey?” For the sixth time Wade put the question.

As if in answer, a reeling figure appeared on the field. Somebody laughed. “The old man’s drunk. Sorta fortified himself with a shot!”

They could not see the great crease along his scalp; could not know of the crimson flowing down his neck and shoulders. The parka hood concealed that.

“I’ve got to beat him,” Dorsey muttered, “got to last long enough to show old Rusty the way. Gotta beat Pratt!”

People laughed. His words sounded like the muttering of a drunken man. Of course Dorsey was not a drinking man, but then, a man had to have something when he was afraid of planes. He dropped into his seat and Rusty closed the door.

Straight into the tracks of the rival plane he drove the *Air Musher*. The field dropped beneath him. He soared upward; five thousand feet, eight thousand, then ten thousand. It was raging below them, but there was no storm here. A shaft of light shot from the horizon, fluttered, then widened. Then came another and another. The colors appeared—colors that rivaled the rainbow.

“Northern lights,” Rusty exclaimed. “They look like a rainbow to-night. And that’s where we’re going—to the pot of gold at the rainbow’s end, eh, Dorsey!”

His eyes darted to the older man, slumped down in the seat.

“Say, what’s the matter? You’re hurt! I see blood! I’m going back.”

This seemed to rouse Dorsey.

“Nothing,” he cried. “I scratched my scalp on a nail. My heart got to acting up from too much running—be right in a minute.” Even in his dazed condition Dorsey realized his deception had been successful.

The plane continued to roar into the North. White peaks, gleaming in the northern lights, rolled beneath them. Their whiteness and silence was the white silence of graveyard tombstones. Frozen rivers and valleys lay beneath the storm clouds. The plane became a thing apart, like a distant star, as the world sped beneath it.

FREQUENTLY Rusty Wade looked back at his companion. Dorsey appeared to be sleeping heavily.

His face was colorless. The pilot did not like it, so he dropped to five thousand feet elevation, hoping the change in pressure would make a difference in the man's heart.

"We're goin' to beat him," Dorsey muttered in his delirium.

Rusty was relieved. "You bet we are! Now, take it easy!"

He remained at the lower altitude for two hours. Snow squalls flurried about the plane and at this elevation he fought head winds. Oh, well, the plane was faster than Scudder's, so he would regain what he had lost. Once more he climbed, seeking a peak that might give him his bearings.

"None too soon," he growled as a high range loomed dead ahead.

He banked and turned back to gain elevation. Eight thousand feet was not enough. Ten thousand would put most of the lower peaks below him, but still there were others. He consulted the map, identified Twin Peaks and then searched for the pass between them.

Air pockets, created by deep canyons and the gale, tossed the craft about desperately. The pass came slowly toward them. They dropped as they drew near and Rusty held his breath for a moment.

Down! Down! Down! Thrust earthward by a freak air current. He could make out the ragged portals of the pass. The floor was broken granite, swept clear of snow by the tremendous gale. The fanglike rocks seemed to snap at the *Air Musher's* skis.

The motor was turning over better than a hundred miles an hour, yet the huge boulders directly below, stood there a full minute. Rusty understood. Air currents, rushing over thousands of square miles of arctic, piled up against the range and the passes were like funnels.

A half hour of violent pitching at last brought him through. Rusty changed his course and headed directly for the Chandalar. Somewhere ahead roared the rival plane—unless she lay shattered among the pinnacle peaks.

Wade shook the apparently sleeping man.

"Dorsey! I need your help now! Dorsey! Dorsey!" The man's parka hood fell back and Rusty cried out in alarm. "Ye gods! Wounded! Shot!"

His thoughts went back to the takeoff. "I don't remember Pratt or any of his men leaving the hangar, but—Dorsey!" He opened a porthole for a moment and let the icy blast against the miner's face. The temperature was far below zero.

"Dorsey!" he shouted again.

The miner roused himself like a very tired man. He pressed his hands against his eyes.

"Where am—I? Yes! Oh, yes! We've got to beat 'em!" He lurched and struggled to a cabin porthole. The scene was unfamiliar at first.

"Turn back!" he whispered. "We're too far!"

Five minutes he slouched half conscious, his eyes watching the parade of peaks. "There! Sheep Mountain. Ten miles south—valley, that's—it!" He dropped down again as the wound opened and began flowing slightly, causing him much pain.

On the wings of the storm they rushed past Sheep Mountain.

"Five minutes at this speed should do it," Rusty muttered. He dropped swiftly, then soared at a thousand feet elevation, his practiced eyes seeking evidence of prospecting. Snow concealed the ore dump, but it failed to hide the scars the miner leaves on cliff faces.

Presently he risked landing, selecting an area that sloped slightly. He was thinking of a take-off later as he landed up grade and turned the plane about before cutting the motor.

THE first sound to greet his ears was the roar of the rival plane. It passed overhead, repassed twice more, then landed in a position that stopped his taking off ahead of them.

"Clever," he growled, "but at that I can beat you—unless you pull some crooked stuff. Dorsey! Dorsey!" He shook the man gently. The miner opened his eyes, blinked and muttered:

"This is it!"

Rusty opened a first-aid kit and went to work. This done, he left the plane and legged it up the slope intent on putting up a corner monument.

Pratt and his heavy-jawed bruiser disputed the first point.

"Put down that gun," Rusty barked, "or Old Man Dorsey will drop you!" He jerked his thumb toward the plane.

Pratt was about to say Dorsey was at Gold Poke; then he thought better of it. Besides he could see a rifle thrust from the cabin—thoughtfully propped up to deceive them by Rusty Wade. Pratt dropped the gun.

"Close in on him," he cried, "we'll finish him off. Dorsey can't pop us without hitting Wade."

Rusty's feet sought the smooth ice. Mukluks were made for that sort of footing. It gave him an

advantage. He struck out at Pratt, then turning he whirled on the bruiser. In a rough-and-tumble fight the man would have been dangerous, but Rusty kept out of reach.

Lashing out often enough to keep Pratt at a distance, Rusty went around the other in a businesslike manner. Each time that the man slipped and was off-balance, Rusty stepped in and popped him.

Cursing with rage the bruiser charged again and again, only to be coolly met and staggered. Three minutes after the fight started the bruiser was stretched out unconscious and Pratt was sent sprawling. Rusty searched them for arms which he tossed away, then hurrying up the mountainside he erected a monument of ice and stone. In the center he placed the usual location notice in a bottle.

AS HE legged it for the next corner he noticed Scudder was working toward the *Air Musher*.

"If he touches that bus I'll kill him," Rusty growled. The brief day was already ending. In the gloom he could not definitely see what the pilot was doing, although he seemed interested in the landing gear rather than the motor. Pratt had revived, and with the groggy bruiser was busy staking the same ground.

Suddenly the bruiser turned and raced for his own plane. "Get off," Pratt snarled, "or he'll drop you!"

Leaping from the plane the big man leveled a rifle. He was two hundred yards away, but if he was any kind of a shot he was dangerous.

Crack!

Snow leaped up a few feet ahead of Rusty Wade. The next shot came nearer. Rusty did not hesitate. The third droned past his head.

Crack! Crack!

The second report came almost with the first. The rifle thrust from the porthole of the *Air Musher* was swinging from the bruiser who lay sprawling in the snow, to Pratt. In the midst of the arc the muzzle tilted upward as though the guiding hand had suddenly dropped it.

Pratt finished his last monument and legged it for his plane. He made no effort to aid the wounded bruiser but jumped into the plane, which immediately rushed down the slope. Rusty Wade saw it clear the snow and swing southward.

"Dirty work," he snarled, "leaving their man. Pratt knows I won't leave him. The extra weight of that hulk— oh, Lord!"

He ran to the *Air Musher* first. Dorsey had got in

one shot—the shot that saved the situation—then lapsed into unconsciousness. Rusty picked up the first-aid kit and ran to the bruiser. He was badly hurt. Rusty stopped the flow of blood, dragged him to the machine and thrust him into the baggage compartment.

Glancing at the skis he swore with feeling, yet could not help but admire Scudder's resourcefulness. He had broken the ice on a pond, carried water and dumped it onto the skis. The mass had frozen and the plane was held almost as though it were embedded in concrete.

Running to Dorsey's cabin he broke open the door and located a miner's pick. He also found a quantity of dry fuel. This he carried to the skis. Picking away the larger blocks of ice he dropped the fuel along the skis, spilled a small quantity of gasoline and lighted it. At the same time he stood by with a fire extinguisher in case the flames got the upper hand.

As the fire died down he climbed into the plane and started the motor. She would not break free. He dragged out the two men and equipment and tried again. Already Pratt had a half hour start. Opening the throttles wide he felt the *Air Musher* move ponderously and come to a stop on the brink of the slide. He shoveled the snow clear, loaded in the wounded and tried once more.

It was a desperate take-off. Twice they were near disaster and then she lifted. He opened the throttle wide and left it there. The same gale that had before hampered, now aided him. He headed for the worst pass in the range and shot through. His elevation, hour after hour, was where the wind blew hardest. The *Air Musher* groaned and protested at the treatment as if the craft were human. And sometimes Rusty Wade thought she was.

FAMILIAR peaks came over the rim of the world at last. The storm was over. Far ahead gleamed the lights of Gold Poke. He saw a sudden flash and realized the field lights had been turned on.

"Pratt's landing! I can't land and beat him to the commissioner's office. And the first man there, wins. Lord, if Old Man Dorsey was conscious I could drop him in a parachute on top of the commissioner's place."

Then Gold Poke was under his skis. He dropped low and rushed over town. Back he came at an elevation that sent the miners indoors in a panic.

"He's going to land in town," Pete bellowed. "Everybody off the street. Hey, commissioner, get into your office. New Year's Day don't commence for two

minutes yet. You can keep your office open if you want to—December thirty-first isn't a legal holiday.”

His words were drowned by the thunder of the motor. Then it suddenly stopped. Down the air trail came the *Air Musher*. The skis struck the center of the street; dogs and humans scattered, the wing tips narrowly missed buildings, but they missed and that was what counted.

Pratt raced afoot from a side street and Rusty swerved to keep from running him down. The left wing tip overturned a woodshed and crumpled up. The prop smashed as the craft nosed into an adjoining building. Rusty leaped from the cabin and cut in ahead of the panting Pratt.

“After me, you're next,” Rusty panted. “File these location notices, commissioner—and Happy New Year to you!”