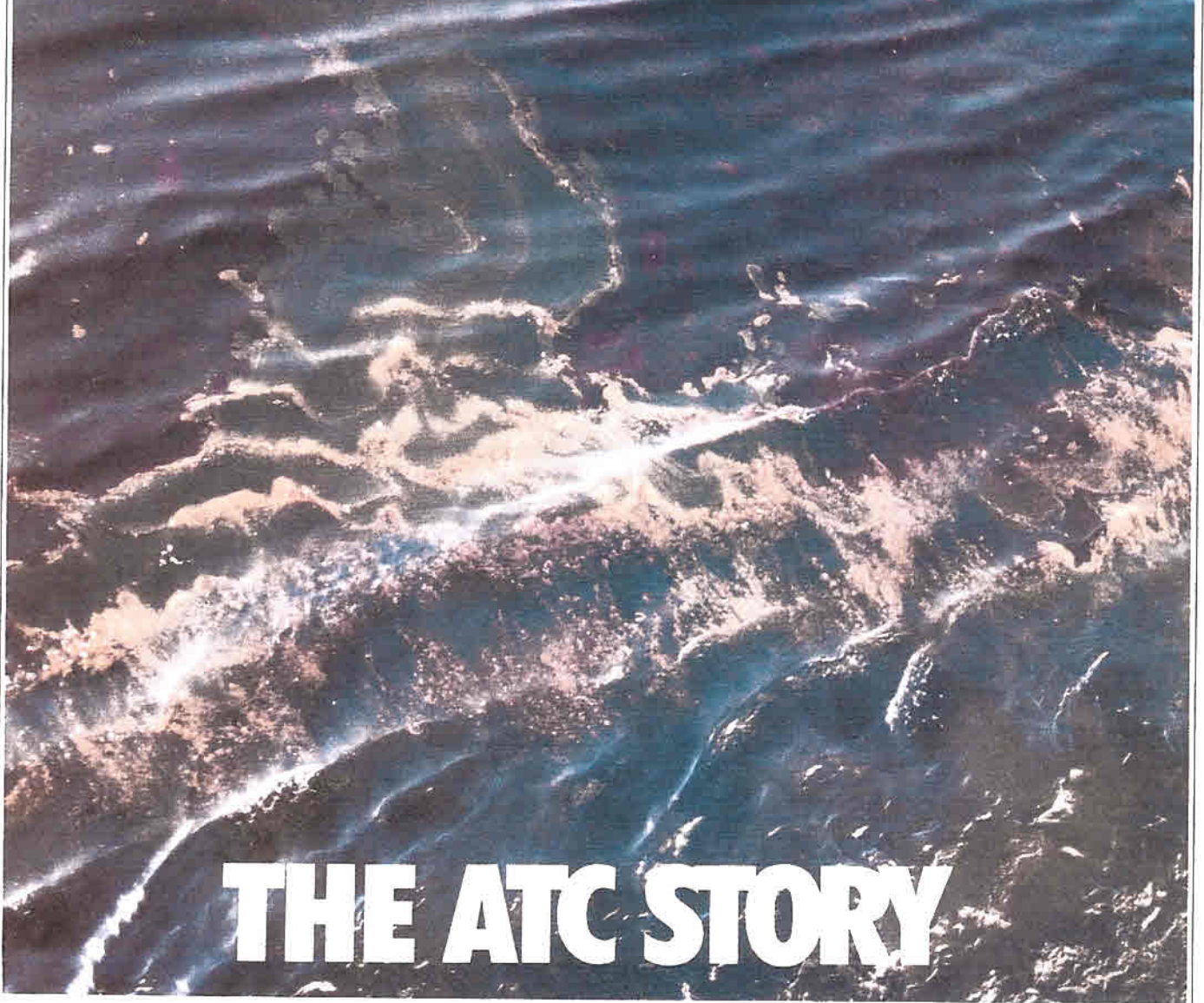


MISSION TO VALDEZ



THE ATC STORY

BY RAY BALLANTYNE

I left Colorado Springs, Colorado, in late March to transfer to the control tower at Anchorage, Alaska, International Airport. My family and I drove to Seattle and then traveled the Alaska Ferry up the inland passage. The weather and scenery were magnificent. The majestic white mountains come right out of the water with little or no beach and tower thousands of feet over the ocean. We saw porpoises and killer whales swim with us for a while and sea birds too numerous to count. I remember remarking when we were about to dock after four days that I would enjoy an even longer ocean voyage to view this wonderful wilderness area. Little did I know how soon

I would get my wish.

I had been at the tower for about a week, studying the operation, when early one morning I was surprised when the assistant air traffic facility manager called to ask me to go manage the air traffic over Prince William Sound, off the Gulf of Alaska, from a Coast Guard cutter. Six days earlier, on March 23, the tanker *Exxon Valdez* had run aground on Bligh Reef, spilling more than 10.1 million gallons of North Slope crude oil. This accident had resulted in a lot of air traffic supporting the cleanup effort. I was a likely candidate to go because I would not be missed at the tower, I had high-density/complex air traffic control experi-

ence, and I knew as much about the Prince William Sound area as anyone else—not much.

The Air Traffic Division Airspace and Procedures Branch had worked hard developing a practical airspace plan that would restrict the number of aircraft in the oil spill area without impeding either the cleanup operation or those needing access. A large kite-shaped area encompassing 2,677 square miles was divided into three areas: the public area, 4,000 to 1,000 feet msl; the cleanup area, 1,000 feet msl to the surface; and the tanker area, encompassing a three-mile radius around the grounded *Exxon Valdez* from

It was a very odd feeling being on the Valdez bridge, where I could envision what had gone on that fateful night.

the surface to 3,000 feet msl. Entry into the tanker and cleanup areas required a mission number issued by the U.S. Coast Guard, and operation in any of the areas required radio contact with the “controlling agency,” USCG. The

USCG cutter *Rush* was on site to provide assistance, and the decision was made to use it for the required communication because it could provide housing and communications facilities and had already been talking to aircraft.

It became clear to my coworker, Don Hall, and me that, although a lot of thought and preplanning had been done, no one really knew how much traffic to expect or what they would require to support their mission and enhance safety. Once on the ship, we would be required to be innovative and creative to accomplish the mission with our limited resources. But in our naïveté,

we felt sure that we were on a great adventure that would turn out fine. Little did we realize that we would be working 12 to 15 hours a day, interrupted by highly hazardous travel arrangements, providing a service never before provided, using antiquated equipment, and adjusting our procedures as we went along.

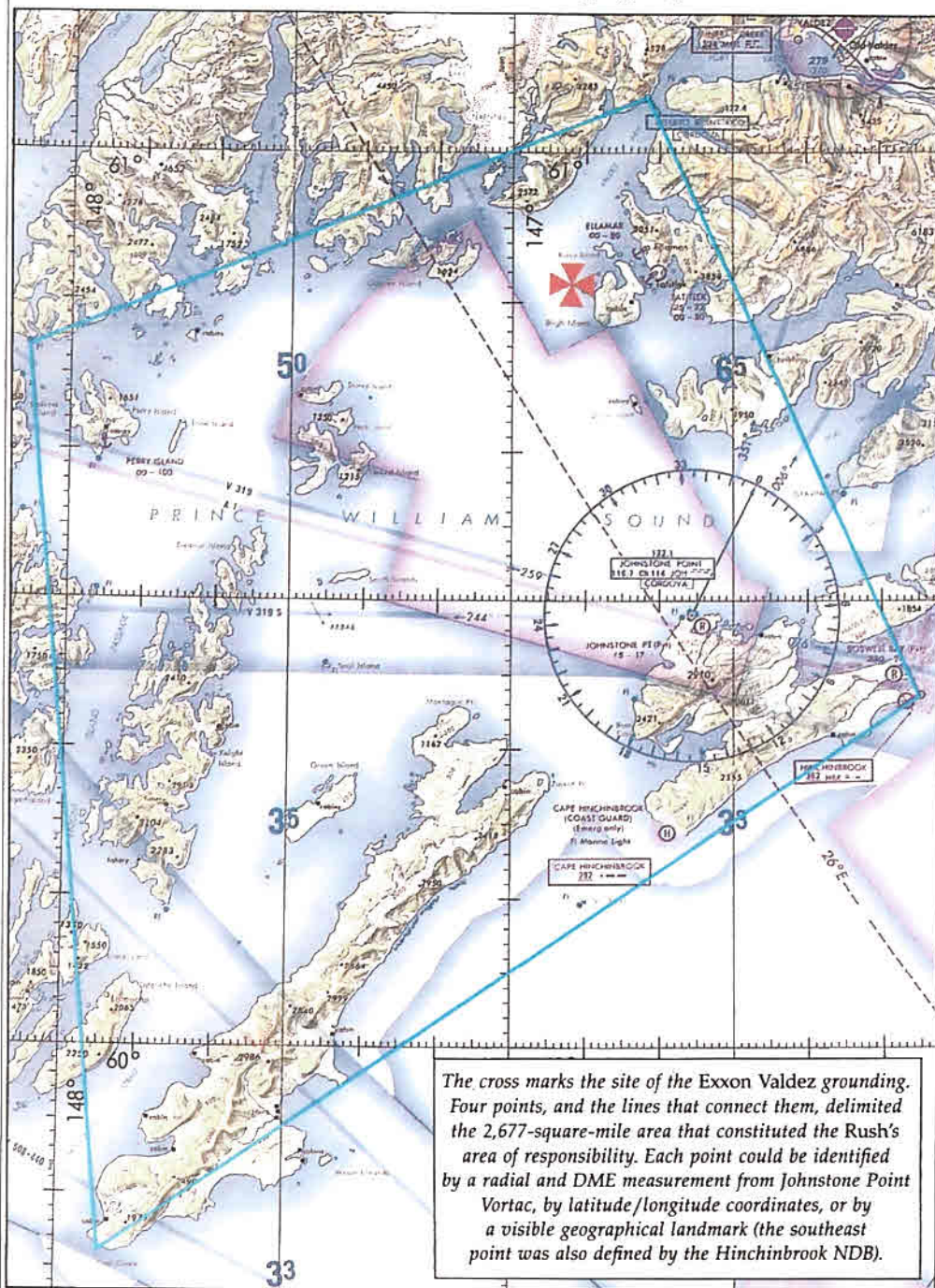
The FAA in Alaska was so concerned about helping the Coast Guard manage the air traffic the cleanup effort would generate that the regional administrator, Frank Cunningham, and the manager of the Air Traffic Division, Henry Elias, flew with us to Valdez, where a temporary airport traffic control tower had already been set up. As we landed at Valdez, a Coast Guard Aero-spatiale HH-65A Dolphin helicopter was pointed out as our transportation to the *Rush*, which is equipped with a helideck that is the home of the Dolphin. When we were ready to depart, we learned the Dolphin was having a “mechanical,” and our new mode of transport was a large H-3 helicopter that is too large to land on the *Rush*.

“How do we get from the helicopter to the cutter?” I asked.

“Not a problem,” my Coast Guard pilots assured me. “We’ll simply drop you off. No, no, a poor choice of words. We’ll hoist you aboard.”

“What does that entail?” I courageously asked.

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The cross marks the site of the Exxon Valdez grounding. Four points, and the lines that connect them, delimited the 2,677-square-mile area that constituted the *Rush's* area of responsibility. Each point could be identified by a radial and DME measurement from Johnstone Point Vortac, by latitude/longitude coordinates, or by a visible geographical landmark (the southeast point was also defined by the Hinchinbrook NDB).

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"We'll get you over the ship and lower you down in a wire basket with the winch to the flight deck."

"Not this kid," I exclaimed.

"Oh, it's no problem. We do it all the time," they said. Despite my continued reservations, everyone including Don assured me, "It's just like Disneyland, only you don't have to pay for it."

A hoist aboard a ship is a very humble way to arrive. Once aboard, everyone was amazed we came that way. "Did they shock you?" they asked. I thought they were asking if we landed hard, which we didn't because the flight crew did such a good job. But we learned that as a heli-

copter flies through the air it produces static electricity. If the hoist basket is not grounded by the landing crew before the basket touches the ship, the occupant will receive a great electric shock.

The captain greeted us with the ominous news that all VHF radio equipment had just failed, and we had no means to talk to aircraft. All the airspace plans in the world will not do you a lot of good if you can't communicate. We knew our assignment was important and were eager to get on with it. At 2 p.m., there was still a chance to get some kind of radio gear before nightfall. I relayed a message to Valdez Tower asking for a portable transceiver. By 6 p.m. we had the radio in our hands, but as Murphy's Law would have it, the radio was packed with the wrong microphone. It looked as if all communications would be out for the entire next day.

Arriving at the Combat Information Center the following morning at 5:30 a.m., I found that one of the Coast Guard electronic technicians had spent until two in the morning jury-rigging the microphone. We were in business.

Don and I worked with the two Coast Guard radio operators who had been handling air traffic since shortly after the tanker grounding. We kept track of the aircraft by recording position reports on flight progress strips. If the strips were then properly arranged, conflicts in routes and altitudes could be seen. We worked out our flight strip marking to include the departure point, destination, time of last fix, and next fix. By issuing crossing route traffic and altitude



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advisories, point-to-point flight following, and sequencing through the Valdez Narrows, we were providing services similar to those provided by enroute center, flight service station, and approach control facilities. We were working up to 20 aircraft at a time. Many pilots thought we were using the ship's radar, but it was not usable for our needs. Every flight, every position report was a geography lesson because neither of us had ever worked this area. We quickly learned some effective reporting points and some of the hazardous flight areas.

Bligh Reef, Tatitlik, Glacier Island, and Naked Island were all well-known reporting points that worked well, except when a female helicopter pilot wanted to know our intentions when she was requested to "Report Naked." We discovered that great attention was required in the area of the wrecked tanker and in the infamous Valdez Narrows. This narrows area pinches the entrance to the port of Valdez to less than a mile wide, with mountains from the ocean almost straight up to 4,500 feet. We advised outbound aircraft of traffic and had inbound aircraft follow previ-

ously sighted traffic into the airport. We talked to 214 aircraft that first day.

As the day ended, we had a more pressing problem. The *Rush* had to go into the port of Valdez all the next day to replenish food and water supplies. That would make radio communications impossible. After brainstorming with the captain, we agreed our best move would be to send two people to the smaller cutter *Sedge*, which was in the area doing oil skimming operations, with portable FAA radio gear to work traffic the following day. Don volunteered to go to the *Sedge*, and I gladly let him.

At about 9 p.m., the *Sedge* sent an inflatable boat to pick up Don and one of the Coast

Guard seamen who had been working with us. In the night air you could smell the strong odor of the oil on the water, and as the boat came into the lights you could see the oil-stained water lines on the bow. During the daylight, the oil on the water looked like liquid melted marbles. The oil was so thick on the water that the wake from the ship wouldn't crest, and even the helicopters couldn't create a spray. Sometimes there were just patches or globs of oil drifting by in red and green colors or a frothy mousse. But you could always tell if the ship was in the oil by that distinctive smell. It made me sad to watch the birds and otters in the water. You wanted to yell, "Get out of here!" or "Go somewhere else!" but there was no way to warn them of the danger. Nature had not prepared them for man's stupidity.

At 2:30 in the morning, Don established communications with me on the *Rush*, and then the ship Don had spent so much time equipping for ATC radio communications was ordered to the south end of the Sound, out of the most effective radio reception range. After much discussion with Coast Guard Marine Safety Office Valdez, we thought we had convinced them the *Sedge* must remain around Naked Island for the best air-to-ground communications.

Docking the *Rush* in Valdez the next morning, it felt good to have a day away from the overcrowded frequency in the smoke-filled CIC room. I hitchhiked to the Valdez Control Tower to catch up on events and decide on future operations. I was greeted at the tower with a call from

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Anchorage saying that the *Sedge* had indeed gone to the south end of the Sound and the only alternative to maintain radio communications required for the operations was to go to the *Valdez* itself and work traffic with a portable radio. This time I checked out my radio (and found it not packed with an antenna). The next thing I knew, I was on my way to the tanker with an Army controller who was assigned to the Valdez Tower.

When I thought of an oil tanker, I imagined hundreds of yards of smooth metal deck where you could land a helicopter anywhere. As we arrived, the *Exxon San Francisco* was tied up alongside the *Valdez* pumping off the remaining oil. On their decks were miles of large and small pipes, valves, and machinery. Our landing area was about 25 × 25 feet, surrounded by large whip antennas. The USCG helicopter crew deftly maneuvered the H-3 onto the deck.

The *Valdez* is a beautiful ship. We were ushered via elevator to the wheelhouse and given an area where we could set up our radio, unfold the map, set up a flight strip board, and start working traffic. It was a very odd feeling being on the bridge where I could envision what went on that fateful night. The ship is huge when viewed from the top, and it was difficult to imagine what it must have felt like to run aground in something that big.

After talking with Don on the *Sedge* by high-frequency radio, we decided I would work a 10-mile radius around the tanker on one frequency and Don would talk to aircraft south of that on another frequency. I worked 126 aircraft in the seven and a half hours it took the *Rush* to come out of port and through the narrows to take over the radio watch.

During the hour or two it took for the *Rush* to come near the tanker and send a boat, I was invited to the galley for something to eat. In the officer's mess, I found about 10 men huddled around a table covered with blueprints, obviously talking about refloating the tanker. Although they varied from older men in lab coats to young men in flannel shirts, I realized that these were some of the heaviest heavyweights of marine engineering in the world.

To return to the *Rush*, I needed to get to a place where the surfboat could pick me up. By crossing over to the tanker *San Francisco* on a gangplank, I walked to the side where a Jacob's ladder went down the side of the ship. I had no life preserver or survival suit, and looking

85 feet straight down to 34-degree, oily water was not my idea of a good time. The surfboat arrived, and after I lowered my radio gear, there was nothing left to do but start down, down, down the ladder. Toward the end, I looked at the boat and thought I could reach it with my foot. The man assigned to help me aboard hollered out that I had three more rungs. I looked again and was sure I could make it. About that time the seaman realized I was about to do something stupid, and he reached up and grabbed my waist. "Let go!" he yelled. "Like hell," I thought. Seeing my death grip on the rope, he whirled me around into the boat like I was a rag doll. Then off into the night with spray flying.

The next day Don and I decided to split the airspace north and south and use different frequencies. We handed aircraft off to each other prior to the boundaries and found we had solved some of our major problems. Not only did that reduce the frequency congestion, it also made working the position more manageable for one person. For the first time since we arrived, Don and I finished the day without a tremendous headache; we had worked 305 aircraft with more than 1,490 radio contacts.

Sunday, April 3, was dubbed "tourist Sunday." In addition to our normal work load of mission aircraft, a lot flew over just to look at the disaster. Although we talked to a total of 379 aircraft, there was not a lot of frequency congestion, and there was time for the specialist to think. Things went smoother than ever, although anything less than insanity was an improvement.

The next afternoon two gentlemen from the FAA Alaska Regional Office hoisted aboard to inspect the operation, and they were accompanied by another controller to relieve me.

A lot of dedicated and talented people have contributed to the oil spill cleanup effort. My experiences controlling air traffic in Prince William Sound are no longer unique. Controllers remained on the *Rush* until late May, and, as this piece went to press, traffic in the narrows was being controlled, by means of an expanded airport traffic area, from Valdez Tower. The bulk of the air traffic has moved to the southwest, following the slick that marks America's worst oil spill disaster. □

Air traffic controller Ray Ballantyne, AOPA 676150, is also a commercial pilot and CFI. He has accumulated 1,400 hours in 20 years of flying, much of it as a bush pilot.