THE DAILY COMMUTE: ANDY WILLIAMS FLYING OVER THE KASKAWULSH GLACIER ON HIS WAY INTO THEYUKON'S ST. ELIAS RANGE.

HIGH FLYER

For nearly four decades, Andy Williams has been the guy to call when you're heading in to Canada's tallest peak. And the guy to call when you need to get out in a hurry

BY TERESA EARLE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRITZ MUELLER

DOWN TIME: AT THE AIRPORT IN WHITEHORSE. RIGHT: FLYING HIS HELIO COURIER WITH MOUNT LOGAN IN THE BACKGROUND.

THE HIGH SUMMER sun is baking the gravel runway at the Yukon's Kluane Lake Research Station, testing the mettle of a dozen Swiss tourists in winter expedition gear waiting for their flight into the St. Elias Mountains. Rowdy weather over the icefields has already delayed their trip into the remote interior of Kluane National Park by a day—an eternity for impatient visitors with a tight itinerary. A few of the tourists try to find shade behind the skimpy scrub willows that line this isolated airstrip, about 200 kilometres west of Whitehorse. Others puff on cigarettes by the radio shack, while several more hover protectively near their luggage.

The buzz of a small plane breaks the hot silence, and everyone looks up. The plane circles, lines up at the end of the strip and comes in for a short but smooth landing. A few minutes later, Andy Williams steps away from his turbo-charged Helio Courier and bums a light from one of his Swiss customers. The tourists are heading into Williams' Icefield Discovery camp, a cluster of Weatherhaven shelters that perch on a divide between three glaciers and provide a killer view of Canada's highest peak—19,550-foot Mount Logan. Williams has already deposited two planeloads of researchers on the icefields this morning, and he's gearing up for several more trips before Kluane's notoriously fickle weather determines otherwise. He paces on the airstrip, smoking, while his passengers watch in silence. Someone must have informed them that you don't ask Williams when you're going to fly—he tells you.

Soon I'm squeezed in next to Williams, stuffed in with two other passengers and a pile of gear for the half-hour flight up onto the vast blanket of ice concealed behind the Kluane Front Range. Between the airstrip and the icefields camp, we'll be climbing almost 6,500 feet. Not long after takeoff, mountains begin to crowd the view as we follow the Slims River into the heart of Kluane, and when we round Observation Mountain, the sprawling Kaskawulsh Glacier appears ahead. One of Kluane's most photographed glaciers, the Kaskawulsh cleaves into icy ribbons as we follow it into the St. Elias.

The plane is still climbing hard as the mountains get swallowed in ice, and when we leave our glacial highway, I realize that my sense of proportion is suddenly messed up. The 8,000-foot mountains that seemed so grand a moment ago now look like foothills because, looming ahead, the giant island of Mount Logan dominates a glaring white ocean of ice. Gaping at the landscape unfolding below, I turn to look at Williams and see that he seems unimpressed, bored even. It occurs to me that for Williams this is just another routine shuttle into Kluane's icy core, his version of a commute on Toronto's 401. This desolate landscape—the size of Switzerland—is Williams' home, and no one in the world knows it like he does.

WHEN I MAKE THE MISTAKE of calling Andy Williams a bush pilot, the trim 66-year-old with unruly grey hair sets me straight. "I am not a bush pilot," he instructs with a touch of condescension in his Welsh brogue. "I am a *glassier* pilot. There is no bush where I fly."

"I DIDN'T KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT AIRCRAFT BACK THEN TO REALIZE THAT LANDING AT THOSE ALTITUDES WAS A VERY, VERY SILLY THING TO DO," SAYS WILLIAMS

It's a distinction that's black and white when Williams takes you up into his world: instead of flying across relatively static boreal terrain, he operates in one of the most dynamic landscapes in the world. His landing spots don't have the assured safety of the bush pilot's lakes or eskers; instead they're often sloping and short, riddled with yawning crevasses, and covered by snow that can change from glare ice to knee-deep mush in hours. And while bush pilots and their clients certainly deal with isolation, the unbroken, enormous white of the St. Elias adds a very different, and often more unsettling, dimension to the experience of wilderness. Virtually all of the travellers coming into this range get flown in and out, and very few understand the terrain that Williams carries them over. Mountain historian Chic Scott describes the typical reaction when he relates how the prolific British mountaineer Mick Fowler felt when dropped at the foot of Mount Kennedy. "If the pilot didn't pick them up, he didn't have the slightest idea which way to go home. No idea."

Williams shares a bush pilot's concern about weather, but on an entirely different scale: with 20 peaks over 13,000 feet and an ocean nearby, the St. Elias Range is notorious for its fierce conditions. Moist, turbulent systems in the Gulf of Alaska pound these mountains, and Mount Logan's enormous mass can churn the sea storms into a fury in a matter of minutes. What's more, the great sweeps of ice can create terrifyingly unpredictable winds. Hector Mackenzie, a long-time friend, says he's had plenty of "hairy" flights with Williams over the years. "There are some really rough spots where the wind convergence is unbelievably powerful and you just get blown around like a ping-pong ball."

The weather here forces visitors to set their clocks to St. Elias time. While the climbers and researchers and sightseers wait impatiently for their flights in the sunshine back at Kluane Lake, the icefields can be locked down by storms that rage for weeks, and Williams is the one who has to explain. "The tension can be high," says climber Pat Morrow. "I've known people to wait 18 days before flying in to the St. Elias." Parks Canada warden Kevin McLaughlin adds: "I've been up there where Andy might have five or six groups lined up, and people are

bugging and bugging him to go."

The situation can be even more frustrating, and far more precarious, for those pinned down by the storms up on the ice. For years, Williams' voice on the daily scheduled radio calls was often their only connection to the outside world. He's the one who has to settle everyone's nerves, despite the fact that it's often impossible for him to predict when he might be able to finally fly them out. And, as McLaughlin explains, Williams takes it personally. "Once they're in, Andy's sense of duty and responsibility does not leave until he's got them back on solid ground and they're on their way down the road."

Chic Scott speaks for many others when he says that Williams has played a crucial role in the exploration of the icefields. "Andy is the linchpin for all of us who fly in the St. Elias."

It's a bit surprising, then, to discover that Williams didn't actually plan to become a pilot.

ANDY WILLIAMS' PATH NORTH was a winding one. He was raised on a family estate in Wales, where he also went to boarding school. As a young man, mountaineering lured him around Europe and eventually to Antarctica. "I worked with the British Antarctic Survey," says Williams, "and lived at a base for two-and-a-half years with 16 people and maybe 50 dogs. Later I spent a couple of sessions instructing at the original Outward Bound Trust in North Wales."

While there, he met a sociology student from the University of Bath named Carole, and they started dating. Not long after, Williams emigrated to Canada to help run the University of McGill's subarctic research lab in Northern Quebec. He and Carole kept up an overseas relationship, and they married a few years later when he was working at Outward Bound in Keremeos, B.C. His daughter Sian was born en route to hospital late at night in a highway pull-out overlooking Okanagan Lake. (His second daughter Megan arrived a few years later.)

In 1973, Williams piled his young family into their rundown VW van and headed north to the Yukon. "I was still in travelling mode; I'd always been something of a nomad," Williams explains. "I'd come from the East across to the West, and I saw this road going up the other way and felt we might as well do that while we still could."

Williams had a new job: managing the Kluane Lake Research Station, which included a high-altitude physiology study (HAPS) lab near the summit of Mount Logan. When Williams arrived at Kluane, the HAPS project had been running for several years, collecting data on a steady supply of "volunteers" who lived for extended stretches at Logan High, a camp built at the dizzying height of 17,500 feet. Many subjects were Canadian Forces recruits who suffered a laundry list of symptoms including high-altitude ataxia, pulmonary edema and cerebral edema.

ABOVE RIGHT: COURTESY ANDY WILLIAMS

ANDY'S WORLD (CLOCKWISE): DROPPING CLIENTS OFF AT THE BASE OF MOUNT LOGAN; GETTING SOME HELP WITH THE PLANE; THE FAMILY-OWNED ICEFIELD DISCOVERY CAMP.

The HAPS program was possible primarily because of the man who would become Williams' mentor, a pilot named Phil Upton. In 1968, Upton had pioneered high-altitude landings on Mount Logan in the gutsy little Helio Courier. This plane has long been popular among bush pilots who value its exceptional short takeoff and landing performance, a characteristic enshrined in the manufacturer's motto: *If it had claws, it could land on a fencepost.* But during hundreds of flights into Logan, Upton took the plane's natural abilities to an entirely new level.

Around the time Williams showed up, the HAPS program had acquired a second Helio Courier, and a few backup pilots were helping Upton with the high flights. Williams recalls that these men were excellent pilots but they were not familiar with mountains. "The first year the aircraft got banged up a fair bit, which got Upton fairly pissed off," says Williams. "I remember Upton looking at me somewhat speculatively one day at the end of the season, and he said, 'You know, we probably couldn't do any worse if you did this.'" Within a year, Williams was landing high on Logan himself. (He would continue until the HAPS project ended in 1981.)

CONSIDERING ALL THE FLYING THAT WILLIAMS HAS DONE, ONE HAS TO WONDER WHETHER, IN ADDITION TO BEING A SUPERB TECHNICIAN, HE'S ALSO ONE HELL OF A LUCKY GAMBLER

"I didn't know enough about aircraft back then to realize that landing at those altitudes was a very, very silly thing to do," explains Williams. "Because Phil was doing it, I thought this was pretty normal."

The HAPS lab and tents were installed on a downslope bench just 2,000 feet shy of Logan's summit. Williams would land uphill and turn the aircraft across slope, usually sinking into deep snow that required lots of digging and tramping. It was exhausting work and progress was slow in the thin air. He'd load in some gear and perhaps a sickly cadet, and then hurtle downslope toward a line of menacing seracs at the plateau edge. "You'd try to hold your altitude until you cleared the obstacles, and then you'd just disappear over the edge," says Williams. "You'd plunge and let Newton take care of the rest."

BEYOND HIS OWN CLOSE-KNIT family, Williams is the patriarch of a large clan of researchers, mountaineers and the "real" outdoorsy types who seem to concentrate in the North—guides, trappers, biologists and the like. At the Williams' annual winter solstice party, you might run into former NDP leader Audrey McLaughlin, or mountaineer and author Peter Steele, or a fresh-faced field assistant just in from the University of Calgary. Williams' wide, eclectic circle of friends and colleagues reflects his varied interests. "He is not just a pilot," says his daughter Sian. "He's other things first: explorer, mountaineer, father."

Ask any climber who has passed through Kluane about Williams, and a picture emerges of a wise-cracking prankster with a wild side. Williams once stockpiled a summer's worth of combustibles to liven up an end-of-season party with do-it-yourself pyrotechnics. He's also renowned for his love of a sip or two of Scotch, which is why climbers sometimes show up with a bottle. "I always brought Andy a bottle of Bushmills," says Chic Scott. "I don't know where that tradition started, but it's definitely worth a bottle to have Andy on your side."

Anyone who flies with Williams is clear, however, that nothing compromises safety. Still, in such a high-stakes environment, accidents are a simple mathematical reality. Two experienced glacier pilots based

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out of Yakutat, Alaska, have died in these mountains. A Norseman plane with three aboard disappeared in the icefields in 1951, and the fuselage of a Cessna is still visible in a crevasse on the Kaskawulsh Glacier.

Considering all the flying that Williams has done—including hundreds of take-offs at 17,500 feet—one has to wonder whether, in addition to being a superb technician, he's also one hell of a lucky gambler. Williams doesn't like to talk about the kinds of incidents that are bound to be part of any mountain pilot's career. But there have been a few. Such as the time a very hard landing at Mount Walsh sent a crack up the entire rear end of the fuselage. Williams explains that under these circumstances, you either abandon the aircraft, in which case a storm the next day means it's gone forever, or you decide to fly it out. He decided to fly it out. "You obviously don't carry passengers," he says, "but you can make the decision for yourself, I think, that you're going to bring the aircraft home."

Williams' friend Hector Mackenzie says that plane was in very bad shape. "I think the [Department of Transportation] people had a look and were horrified that he'd flown it under those circumstances." But he says that Williams accepted the risk. "In Andy's words, he went up as high as he possibly could so that if the fuselage disintegrated, the results would be definitive as far as he was concerned."

Another time, Williams and a grizzly-bear biologist were doing routine telemetry in the front ranges when they got caught in some heavy descending air in a tight valley. Rather than try and turn out of it—which is what most pilots would do, but which Williams felt would be fatal—he decided to take the plane down. The two men stepped away from the crash and radioed for a helicopter.

"Andy was able to put it down in the best controlled way that he could," says warden Kevin McLaughlin, who has logged hundreds of hours flying with Williams. "The plane was banged up but not that badly. I wasn't there that day, but I served him some Scotch when he got home."

In these days of adventure extremism, some might see the risks Williams has taken and label him a daredevil. But Williams' friends and clients say that's not the case. "It isn't glamorous and glorious, it's just very dangerous work where you've got to do it right," says Chic Scott.

Mountain writer Paddy Sherman says nobody does it better. In 1985, Sherman was a member of a small team attempting the King Trench route on Logan when a member of the group started suffering chest pains. After an anxious night on the mountain, they raised Williams on the radio to call for an evacuation. Sherman recalls tramping out and marking a landing site some distance from camp only to have Williams emerge from massing clouds and execute a flawless landing near the tent instead. Sherman says there's no doubt that Williams saved the man's life.

DURING THE NEARLY FOUR DECADES that Williams has been part of the climbing scene on Logan and the rest of the St. Elias Mountains, the situation on the American side of the border—on Denali and the other peaks of the Alaska Range—has changed drastically. The growth of the commercial climbing industry there has resulted in an almost absurd number of climbers.

The picture is quite different in the St. Elias. In an average season, the entire range sees fewer than one-tenth the number of climbers that attempt Denali. The challenge for a pilot in Williams' shoes is not having *too many* climbers, but rather having *enough* clients to make operations viable. "The mountaineering business here hasn't really taken off in a big way. It's still a remote place, it's expensive to get in. Denali's a third of the distance, and Logan remains a pretty major journey for people."

Williams also says that he hasn't seen too many of the inexperienced climbers that have been causing trouble in Alaska. In fact, if anything, people coming to the St. Elias seem to be at the leading edge of mountaineering, foregoing the bigger expeditions in favour of lighter, faster ascents.

He does mention one thing, however, that *has* changed the historically self-reliant tenor of St. Elias climbing. Satellite phones, he observes, have made people more trigger-happy about rescue calls. "It's a lot easier now to call up help when you are getting into a bit of a mess instead of getting yourself out of it. The satellite phones can create an expectation that aircraft will come in and rescue you." But in the St. Elias, he points out, that's just not a safe, or reasonable, assumption. "You're dealing with such a huge country with such different weather conditions and the expectations of what an aircraft can do are pretty ridiculous sometimes."

But Williams says that most of the people who might get into trouble are scared off before they do. "I've taken groups in there, and then have brought them home the next day when the reality of where they are has sunk in," he says. "They take a look at the country we're flying across and they suddenly realize that there's no treeline; that if it goes wrong, it goes *seriously* wrong..."

SINCE HE STARTED FLYING at Kluane in 1974, Williams has made it possible for countless climbers to get onto the mountains of their dreams, and he's flown hundreds of clients into the family-owned lodge near Mount Queen Mary. He's also been involved in numerous research programs studying the mountains, the icefields and the boreal forest of southwestern Yukon. Students from dozens of universities have come under his wing, and Williams himself has published a number of peer-reviewed scientific papers.

These days, Williams, who now has three grandchildren chasing around the base at Kluane, is starting to scale back his air time, but he's been mentoring a pilot with great flying genes—Phil Upton's son, Donjek. Williams recently passed along some written advice for the younger Upton: *Most of our clients are mountaineers… Your job is to get them in and back to their mums as safely as possible. It is not your job to prove that you are the world's greatest mountain pilot.*

To many of those who have flown with him, Williams *has* proven himself to be one of the world's greatest mountain pilots. He's certainly one of the only pilots to have repeatedly flown *onto* one of the great mountains of the world.

Ironically, though a lifelong mountaineer, Williams has never actually attempted Mount Logan himself. Did he ever have any interest in climbing the mountain? "No! None whatsoever!" he says. "Though I did touch a ski on the summit once. Just tapped the summit. That's good enough for me. I left my mark, and the next storm it was gone." **e**

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