

For a flight instructor, Graywood hired Piper Gunlock. As a bush pilot, Piper managed adversity with outward aplomb, and Graywood envied his stubborn strength.

Piper made a livelihood transporting tourists, sportsmen, and freight to remote areas in a de Havilland DHC-2 Beaver. On the lookout for extended work, he submitted competitive bids for multiple-day commercial

and governmental contracts to move clients, cargoes, or work teams across the hinterlands.

Once he'd flown a National Geographic team around Denali to complete an expedition. On another deal, he'd supported a Hollywood film crew shooting a three-month-long documentary about migrating birds of the tundra. He befriended one of the science advisors who, in turn, had recommended him to Doctor Cashel Goodlette at the US Geological Survey Office in Anchorage.

One of Doctor Goodlette's federal grant proposals had received last-minute approval to study climate change. Hard-pressed, he needed a crafty, reliable aviator to reposition data-collecting equipment in and out of twenty-three adverse locations hugging the North Slope prior to the fiscal year end. Piper made it happen, and Goodlette thereafter employed him as the primary back-country conveyance.

A charter member of the Chugach Air Volunteer Search & Rescue, Piper also listed availability on three rosters posted at the Merrill Field control tower for emergency transfers, evacuations, and urgent medical supply deliveries. Other registries had him as backup for routine hauls on fixed-wing, single- and twin-engine aircraft.

Word of mouth recommendations negated Piper's need to advertise as a flight instructor. Students sought him. He squeezed in the pilot training sessions with his unpredictable transport schedule.

Piper emphasized how to take risks in the air: his motto was, "Always prepare for calculated risks, and those will be handled well. It's risk you don't calculate for that'll kill you."

Two common hazards Piper hammered home involved the seasonal weather changes for thaw in the spring, and freeze-up in the fall. Unpredictable transitions between winter's perpetual dark and summer's long days compounded any flight plan—a pilot taking off on frozen ground might land on soft, soggy earth. The main challenge centered on selecting the correct landing gear for both ends whenever conditions dramatically altered. In winter, thick ice remained the pilot's friend, and attached skis allowed graceful approaches onto frozen lakes, but ice became the enemy once thinned too much into spring.

Simply put, the most important act in flying was the approach. At each touching down on whatever posed as the runway, Piper expressed, "It's God's will we got here again."

"Gary, I do this only for a few of my beginning students," said Piper. "I'm gonna show you how to fly from point A to point B with my method of blendin' to air currents, which Mother Nature gives us. I can tell you're up to it. So you ready for my first question?"

"Sure."

Out of the blue, Piper asked, "Do you think I'm mad?"

"No," replied Graywood, stunned. "Why should I?"

"Good. Always remember never sit next to a pilot you think's a madman."

"That makes sense."

"Damn straight it does," agreed Piper. "First you'll learn basics on a Cessna 152 at Merrill Field, and then we'll handle instrument flying with the 185."

"When will I fly a floatplane?"

"Well," paused Piper, eyes dancing with excitement, "you gotta first solo on wheels. Damn floats are a tricky pair of bastards and a whole skill level up. For that, we've gotta fly out of Lake Hood, but it'll cost you more."

"To fly anywhere, that's my goal."

Piper raised a hand to stroke his long neck weighing the opportunity Graywood presented. He needed to assess this doc's commitment to serious aviation.

"So, Gary, the key to keepin' yourself flyin' and alive in Alaska is knowin' your limits. You know the limits on your plane and match 'em to the limits weather gives each goddamn day and every goddamn hour. And always remember those goddamn limits can shift a helluva lot in ten minutes, 'specially round thaw and freeze-up. To survive, you gotta let yourself go and get kinda like the air 'cause air density gives wing lift, and weather and altitude make density. Think you can handle all that?"

"Damn straight," mimicked Graywood without hesitation. The best answer to give.

Yet Piper continued testing. "You doctors say you're always practicing medicine, right?"

“Yeah, we say that.”

“That means you’re always learnin’ something, right?”

“Yes, we learn from our patients all the time.”

“Well that’s damn straight of you, Gary, ’cause you’re always learnin’ when you’re flyin’ too. That’s how I see it and how I say it. You remember this . . . every time you’re up in the air, you’re damn well learnin’ something.”

Piper called himself an old-school bush pilot, meaning he’d learned airborne skills by wits in all sorts of weather conditions without the aid of aeronautical charts, beacons, or cockpit radios. If pressed, he’d hint earning wings over unknown foreign terrains dodging unmapped mountains in some of the worse conditions nature ever inflicted.

Decades before the advent of GPS, he’d mastered the magnetic compass. For navigational landmarks, Piper memorized lakes, hill groups, and river sways. A few times each season, he’d uncouple the Beaver’s GPS, dead reckoning the old way. It kept abilities sharp in a manner a seasoned engineer might calculate a construction project with a slide rule to avoid letting fundamentals lapse from only key-pressing the latest, brainless, hand-held marvel.

“One more thing, Gary.”

“What’s that?”

“You should know I’m what some people call dys-lectic.”

Graywood leaned closer, unsure he’d heard right. “Did you say dyslexic?”

“Ahh yeah,” replied Piper. “I guarantee I don’t see things upside-down. Sometimes it’s backwards seeing I get screwin’ up a bit.” Piper studied the fresh student to measure his resolve. “So you still think I’m not crazy?”

Graywood kept a pencil-thin smile and recalled the effusive recommendations given by two air traffic controllers at Merrill Field and a third stationed at the international airport. By them, Piper wasn’t just a good pilot—he wrote the book on how it’s done. They credited him with incredible talents, confirmed by the coolheaded ease he’d shoe-horn seemingly impossible aero-evacuations through the most difficult weather systems on earth. On wheels, skis, floats, or the thirty-five-inch tundra tires needed for far north approaches, he’d take off and land any fixed-winged aircraft on surfaces a white-fronted goose passed up as too short or too steep.

Graywood locked eyes to Piper's. "I've already said you're not mad. But if I don't get my money's worth out of you, I'm the one who's damn straight crazy!"

Both heaped up laughing.

"Damn good idea, Gary, lettin' me help with that."

After Graywood had signed his pilot's license, he approached Piper for advice in buying an airplane. "I need a reliable aircraft and your recommendation on who'd maintain it."

"Best mechanic 'round is Tailwind Talbot over at Merrill Field," said Piper. "I use him for the Beaver's big overhauls. I do the routine stuff. I'll help you with that too."

"That's great."

"Ahhh ... what kind of bird you thinkin' of?"

"I've no particular make in mind right now, except one I can change wheels over to floats or skis and back, depending on destination."

"That'd be my choice," agreed Piper. His hand rubbed nervously down his face and neck. "Ah, Gary, I'm meanin' to share somethin', and now's a good time."

"Okay."

"You know, I've too many customers to haul round who don't need all the space in the Beaver. So I need another plane, a smaller one, for a damn straight fit for my business."

Graywood remained silent, yet raised eyebrows to signal him on.

Piper cut to the proposal. "Gary, I'm looking for an equal partner to share a small bird, like a four-seater. Would you be interested?"

Flattered, the best pilot in Anchorage had invited Graywood into a business commitment. Piper trusted him enough to risk his livelihood. They'd have to become good friends and stay that way.

Perhaps the higher bond had been forged when Graywood had snapped in two a strut gliding the Cessna trainer onto Spencer Glacier. They had roped up and rappelled off the ice floe as a team on the day that had lasted forever. Alone, neither would have survived.

"How'd sharing the plane work?" said Graywood, probing.

"Let me know flyin' times you'll want to check your clinics. That'll be the scheduling priority. I'll fill the gaps with my smaller hauls or maintenance."

“How’d we split costs?”

“We each buy half the bird and split operation and maintenance by number of hours we each log every month.”

“So you mean if I fly twenty and you forty, I’d pay a third of fuel, hangar rent, insurance, and maintenance, and you’d cough up the other two?”

Piper stopped to think the proportions—for him, thirds took longer to divide than halves. With an orb-to-orb grin, he answered, “Damn straight,” yet wryly added, “but if one of us breaks something, he’s gotta’ fix it 100 percent.”

For Graywood, it made sense both pilots leveraged the other’s needs. “Any idea where to start looking for a plane?”

“So you’re agreein’, Gary?”

“Damn straight!”

They shook hands to seal the deal. Nothing more needed.

“So you’re interested in a bird,” cracked Tailwind Talbot, a wizened, grease-smelling, Vietnam veteran, who’d splice a workable aircraft together out of parts scrounged from ten planes, even cannibalized off choppers.

“Damn straight and blue, Tailbone,” kidded Piper. He called Talbot “Tailbone” to his bearded face because the mechanic’s hind vent stayed glued to the ground while Piper’s preferred to crease the air flying. “You got something to look at?”

Tailwind stopped dirt-picking fingernails to point out a single-engine Maule at the bay’s end. Its sole red stripe graced the sides on the exterior’s dune-white.

“That STOL’s in fine shape,” gruffed Tailwind, “and heard the owner got a heart attack last Halloween. The widow bolted back California way. It’s up for sale.”

“Let’s take a look,” said Graywood.

The three men passed a disassembled Cessna Grand Caravan as Graywood recalled STOL meant short take-off and landing.

“It’s been parked here since then,” said Tailwind, dog-eyed. He ran a shrewd palm across the seventy-six-inch Hartzel propeller. “I’ve kept her in a good way. She’s ready to go.”

“A real gem,” confirmed Graywood.

“The widow leave any papers?” asked Piper.

“Yep,” spat back Tailwind. “Old invoice, operating and maintenance manuals. Got ’em back in the office.”

“What about the pilot’s log and registration certificate?” queried Piper.

“Got ’em too.”

“Gary, head over with Tailbone and get ’em,” directed Piper. “I’ll start looking over the bird.”

Piper circled the MX-7-180B Star Rocket model with 180 HP, Lycoming engine; length, twenty-four feet; wingspan, thirty-three feet. He estimated engine performance, when matched to wingspan, placed the stall speed around forty miles per hour in average weather. Configured with tail-dragger landing gear leading an oleo strut, she had fittings and mountings for wheels, skis, or amphibian floats for increased utility. The taupe-colored cabin fitted four seats with three-point shoulder harnesses. Cargo straps and tie-down rings lined the fuselage. The control panel displayed standard avionics for GPS, navigation, and communication.

“Piper, I’ve tabbed the specifications summary,” boasted Graywood from excitement, returning from Tailwind’s office.

“Let’s take a look,” said Piper, closing the left eye to limit dyslexia.

“Manufactured 1993, gross weight—2,500 pounds; empty weight—1,438 pounds; useful load—1,062 pounds. Takeoff distance, 300 to 1100 feet depending on load. Service ceiling, 15,000 feet. Best climbing speed, 90 mph. Two main fuel tanks plus two auxiliary, 73-gallon capacity. Fuel consumption at 65-percent power, 9 gallons per hour.”

They skipped the faded illustrations to consume the maintenance instructions.

“I’m pretty interested,” said Graywood, trying to dampen his enthusiasm to neutral.

“Let me show what I found,” said Piper. “Then we’ll talk Tailwind into letting us try her out.”

They bought her as equal partners. Graywood named her *Seneca*. She’d become the woman who’d never fail him. She was not human like the others.

Piper dubbed her *Sky Woman*. Piper’s women were another story ...



At the end of the twentieth century, Piper stood forefront in the battle to move the state capital from Juneau to Willow. Politicians could not be trusted whenever holed up in a panhandle town one-tenth the size of Anchorage and inaccessible to the rest of the state unless one owned or rented a plane or boat.

Born in 1952, he mushroomed into a handsome charmer with an appetite for women, preferably rich. Baptized John Pierre Gunlock Jr., he'd have none of the Junior title once he'd mastered a Cessna 140 as a teenager on his uncle's thirteen-thousand-acre ranch south of Pueblo, Colorado.

Leaving home, he adopted "Piper" as his moniker. At six feet three inches, a loping stride complemented casual, deep-set eyes and receding, grey-brown hair on his Arctic weathered face. Afflicted by money anxieties and aging lust, Piper repackaged his obsessions for social justice and sex.

Piloting a de Havilland Beaver, he ferried groups of adventurers to remote cabins for hunting, fishing, and photography. The Beaver handled the bulkier air-taxi business. Piper leased smaller aircraft to transport one or two individuals or cargos weighing less than a quarter-ton. The subletting ceased after the joint purchase of *Seneca-Sky Woman*.

Quipping over the intercom to passengers, he joked about their current airborne status or *Sky Woman's* overall condition. When approaching the airport, he might banter: "I once put my contact lenses in backwards, and you know what I saw?"

"No, tell us, Piper."

"I saw the back of my goddamn eyeballs, that's what. So I ran to my wife yellin' at the top of my lungs, 'It's goddamn amazin' to see the whole world backwards, and it's scramblin' up my brains.' And she got really huffy and yelled back, 'Piper you take those out right now 'cause I never want you looking at your brains like that again. It's too dangerous.' So I took them out to please her, but now I don't use contacts anymore ... and it sure makes everything kinda blurry, 'specially when we're 'bout to land."

Whenever he flew toward the Alaskan panhandle, he lampooned Juneau: "Two brown bears caught a clown and started to eat him. After a couple of bites, the big bear asked the littler one, 'Don't he taste kinda funny?' And the little bear answered, 'Nah, I don't mind if you don't.' Then they caught a politician from Juneau and chewed him. Once each took a good sized bite, both spat him out, and the poor little bear cried,