



The semi-rigid dirigible Norge as it appeared just prior to its arrival at the Arctic Circle.



The Norge as it deflates after arriving in Teller, Alaska, at 7:30 a.m. on May 14, 1926.

# In Search of the Norge

## Teller, Alaska's Claim to Fame

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As a member of the EAA Vintage Aircraft Association I tried for years to keep my airplane in its original configuration. My reasoning was simple. Since Cessna's design team worked for years developing its four-place, economical-to-operate, all-metal, easy-to-fly, low-maintenance, good-performance personal transportation aircraft, why should I try to change anything? Living in Alaska, though, did require a few modifications, such as steel axles to safely use skis in the winter.

I purchased N3428C in 1975. It had rolled out of the Wichita factory

in 1954; a beautiful Cessna 170B, Serial No. 26471, that had incorporated all of the refinements to the original 170 design.

The original Continental 145-hp engine had been replaced back in 1967 with a new Continental O-300A 145-hp engine. I had acquired the aircraft with about 250 hours on that engine, and I put another 1,400 hours on it before I decided to have it overhauled or replaced. The time between overhauls (TBO) was listed as 1,800 hours, but I decided to do something before things started to go bad.

I looked at various options. A few people I knew owned Cessna 170s. One had replaced his engine with a 160-hp Lycoming, another with a 180-hp Lycoming, and still another with a new 180-hp Continental with fuel injection. All of these conversions gave their owners a little higher cruise speed and better take-off performance, while the gross weight and useful load remained nearly the same. The downside was that all of those engines burned a lot more fuel. So unless an auxiliary fuel tank is installed, which usually decreases the baggage area, the range goes down as the fuel cost increases as you arrive at your destination a little sooner.

In addition, the installation of these engines requires major and costly changes to the airplane. For instance, an auxiliary fuel tank, new



My Cessna 180, Charlie, just before my departure. All this camping and survival gear had to fit inside the cabin. Although it only weighed 160 pounds, it was rather bulky.



Teller, Alaska, the landing spot for the first transpolar flight.

engine mounts, relocation of the battery, alteration of the engine cowling, installation of propeller controls, purchase of a constant speed prop, installation of manifold pressure gauge, and more. All of these things cost money, and the result is only a marginal increase in performance at certain weight and balance configurations.

So, I made the decision to keep my Continental O-300A and have it overhauled. After this work was done by Alaskan Aircraft Engines in Anchorage, Alaska, and after the break-in period, I wanted to go on a long trip to see how the airplane performed with its new engine.

During the 27 years I have owned N3428C I have flown it to nearly all parts of Alaska, either on work assignments or on fun trips that have included hunting, fishing, and prospecting. The one area of the state that I had not ventured into was the extreme northwestern part, so I began planning a trip to try out my new engine.

Nearly all of us have been on many of the so-called \$100 hamburger outings, where we fly out to some destination for lunch and return home the same day. It's just an excuse to go fly on a pretty day. Up here in Alaska many of our destinations are hundreds of miles apart, and overnight camp-outs are commonly associated with weekend trips. This is especially true in the winter, where the small number of daylight hours makes planning critical.

One village in northwest Alaska has held my interest for quite some time as a destination I needed to visit. That village is Teller, Alaska, located about 55 miles northwest of Nome. Since I know that all of our members of Vintage Aircraft Association enjoy vintage and classic aircraft and the history of early aviation, or you probably wouldn't even be reading this magazine, you can appreciate my interest in Teller, Alaska, which has a unique aviation history.

You see, this little Eskimo village of Teller, situated near Port Clarence

on the Bering Sea gained national recognition in aviation circles back in 1926 as the landing site of the very first transpolar flight from Europe to Alaska by the dirigible Norge.

The Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen wanted to be the first to fly to the North Pole and then on to Alaska. He and Lincoln Ellsworth, a wealthy pilot and explorer, tried in it 1925 using a pair of Dornier Wal seaplanes, but failed in the attempt and had to return to their base. Deciding that a dirigible was more likely to succeed on such a flight, Amundsen made a special purchase deal with the Italian government, which was approved by Mussolini on two conditions: that the Italian Col. Umberto Nobile, designer of the airship, be appointed commander, with five other Italians forming a part of the crew, and that Italy would repurchase the ship, then called N-1, if it survived the expedition in good condition.

Later, Ellsworth eventually contributed more than \$100,000 to the enterprise, covering nearly one third of the cost. The deal was made, and the airship was stripped and renamed the Norge and flown to Spitsbergen, a Norwegian-held island, in preparation for the transpolar flight. There was competition when they got to Spitsbergen. Cmdr. Richard Byrd and his crew arrived April 29, with their Fokker tri-motor, the Josephine Ford, tied down fast to the deck of the steamer Chantier. Byrd and his pilot, Floyd Bennett, took off and

staked their claim to reaching the North Pole by air on May 9, 1926. The first flight to the North Pole would not be theirs to grasp, but the crew of the Norge would be the first



Ten-year-old Janelle Menadelook stands by the concrete block that used to serve as the monument at the spot where the Norge landed. A bronze plaque used to be mounted on the base, but it has been missing for some time.



Later, the bronze plaque used to be on display here at the Teller Trading Co. store, but it's no longer there.

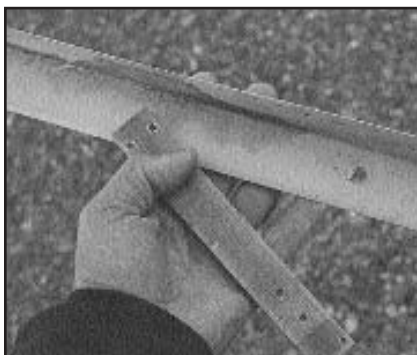
to attempt a transpolar flight. Like most dirigibles, the Norge was large, as the following statistics show:

**Length:** . . . . . 348 feet  
**Height:** . . . . . 79 feet  
**Power:** . . . . . Three 230-hp engines  
**Maximum speed:** . . 71 mph  
**Load, including crew, fuel, and ballast:**  
. . . . . 11 tons  
**Hydrogen gas:** . . . . 670,980 cubic feet

With Amundsen in command of the expedition and with Nobile at the helm, and carrying a crew of eight



The Norge's landing spot is now occupied by fishing boats, a snow machine, and a dog sled.



Are these pieces of the Norge? I don't know, but if they are, they are a sad reminder of a once large airship that weighed tons and made history when it landed at this small Eskimo village.

Norwegians, one American, one Swede, and six Italians, the Norge lifted off of Spitsbergen, Norway, at Kings Bay on May 11, 1926, and headed for the North Pole, with a planned destination of Nome, Alaska.

Navigation was difficult in those days before LORAN and GPS, as a magnetic compass is not reliable at high latitudes. Perhaps celestial navigation was the key to their success. After an exhausting three-day flight, and with the airship heavy with ice and difficult to control in a brisk wind, Amundsen and Nobile decided to land at the small Eskimo village of Teller rather than the target destination of Nome. Thus, Teller was destined to become famous in early aviation circles. The transpolar flight had covered 3,180 miles and had taken 70 hours, 40 minutes, giving the airship an average groundspeed of 45 mph.

The flight was not without controversy. Later, signs of a strong

disagreement between Amundsen and Nobile became known, particularly after President Coolidge and Italian dictator Benito Mussolini feted Nobile as a great hero. Amundsen had felt that credit for the planning and execution of the flight belonged to him, Ellsworth, and his crew, and that Nobile had been no more than a hired pilot and engineer. No sign of this rift appears in the book *First Crossing of the Polar Sea* by Amundsen and Ellsworth, published by Doubleday, Doran & Co. in 1928. Yet in his other book, *My Life as an Explorer*, he spent nearly 100 pages discrediting Nobile. Still, in June 1928, Amundsen chose honor above his hard feelings and joined a rescue operation to retrieve Nobile and the crew of the airship *Italia*. After departing Tromso in a search plane, Amundsen was never heard from again. He and his plane's crew disappeared without a trace. Nobile, after a tumultuous career punctuated by persecution by the Italian Fascists, immigrated to the United States, where he died in 1978.

After landing in Teller, the crew decided not to proceed any farther even though a big celebration awaited in Nome. The uncelebrated crew set about dismantling the airship. Nobile wanted the engines returned to Italy, so they were crated and shipped out. The rest of the airship was also taken apart, but here the differing accounts become confusing.

Some old-timers had stories about villagers carting off pieces of the Norge. Was the Norge fabric used for wall coverings or insulation, was some of the aluminum frame made into tools, and were other pieces of the airship used in other ways? If this is the case, then the whole airship was not returned to Italy. I don't know if Italy repurchased the dismantled pieces or even if any pieces except the engines ever got back to Italy.

Teller seemed like a great destination to give my new engine a workout, so I decided to fly up there and talk to any folks who may have

remembered or been told about the Norge. I wanted to get my hands on a piece of the airship or at least stand where the historic flight had landed.

On September 20, 2002, I got a good weather report on local news, and Duat.com confirmed a nice, sunny high-pressure weather window of about five days. I sorted all my camping and survival gear and loaded N3428C, Charlie, and took off at 10:47 a.m. From my home base at Soldotna, Alaska, I climbed steadily westward, crossing Cook Inlet and the Alaska Range through Rainy Pass at 6,500 feet with a good tail wind and a groundspeed of 125 mph. Mount McKinley and the other peaks, partially covered with new snow, provided spectacular scenery. I landed at McGrath and again at Unalakleet to gas up and found fuel cost \$3.45 per gallon, so I had an instant clue that this trip was going to cost me. I continued flying to the north and northeast around Norton Sound. My groundspeed dropped to about 60 mph as I bucked about a 30-knot easterly flow. Once around the Sound, I could then run west again, and the groundspeed picked up to 115 mph. I flew on into Nome, arriving at 6:25 p.m. I gassed up at the Bering Air terminal and pitched my tent beside the airplane for the night.

The next morning I awoke to a 24°F temperature and lots of frost on the tent and the airplane. I turned Charlie around so its tail pointed east and exposed the top surface of the wing and tail surfaces to the rising sun. I had a bite of breakfast, and by the time I had repacked the sleeping bag and tent, the sun had melted all the frost off the wing and tail. I was off the ground by 10:20 a.m. and 50 minutes later overflew Teller to view the spot where Norge had landed. Of course in May 1926, the water in Port Clarence and the adjacent lagoon would have still been frozen. I landed at the Teller Airport, which must be at least 2 or 3 miles from the village. I was contemplating my long walk into town when a pickup truck pulled



The author inside of an Eskimo sod house in Point Hope, Alaska. This may very well be one of the last surviving sod houses in all of Alaska. The interior framework is made with bowhead whalebones. It is amazing what we pilots can see on our journeys around this amazing state.

to a stop. I told the driver that I'd like a ride to the village, and he said, "Hop in." On the drive into town I told him my mission. He told me that there aren't any really old people in the village that would have seen the Norge, that the only person who did see it that he knew about was living in Seattle, and her name was Ethyl Vogen. It is rumored the Mrs. Vogen made a blouse from a piece of the Norge's rubberized silk gasbag. She would be in her 90s if she was still alive.

My new friend drove me to town, and we stopped near the beach. He pointed to a large block of concrete. That is all that's left of the monument to commemorate the Norge landing, he said. He told me it used to occupy a prominent place on the beach, but was pushed out of the way to make a better tie-up spot for villagers' fishing boats. He pointed to a spot on the concrete and told me there used to be a bronze plaque on it that told of the transpolar flight. The plaque had been removed and placed on a storefront along Main Street. I took a photo of the concrete monument with Janelle Menadelook, 10 years old, standing next to it. I photographed the old store on Main Street, too, but the plaque was missing, and no one seemed to know where it was. Ethyl Vogen's house was also pointed out to me, but it was vacant.

I walked around the village, knocked on a few doors, and talked to a lot of people. Most of the young people I met had never heard of the Norge, and those that had only knew about the concrete block over by the beach that used to be the monument. One middle-aged man said he remembered people talking about the Norge, and that there used

to be pieces in the local landfill. Since there has been 76 years of junk piled on top of anything put there in 1926, it seemed hopeless to me that there would be anything visible. Another man said his uncle had some odd pieces of aluminum in his shop that might have come from the Norge. We went to a small shed used as a workshop, and he rummaged around and found a couple of pieces, and said there are more but he didn't know where. I looked at the pieces and took a photo. I held them in my hand. I could not tell what they were. Since I had never seen any part of a dirigible, I couldn't know if they were a part of the puzzle. My search for the Norge ended right there with a couple pieces of scrap aluminum.

Since I had come so far, it seemed like a golden opportunity to see the most remote part of northwest Alaska. So I flew across the Seward Peninsula to Kotzebue, Kivalina, the Red Dog Mine (the largest lead/zinc mine in the world), and on to Point Hope. The highlight of the region was my visit to one of the last remaining Eskimo sod houses, which had its wall and roof structure made from the bones of countless bowhead whales.

I took a different route returning home. From Kotzebue I flew to Husila, and en route to Galena I flew over the spectacular Nogahabara sand dunes, a Pleistocene geologic formation that is continually being

blown across the forested terrain. From Galena it was on to Nenana, then south through the Alaska Range, once again via the aptly named Windy Pass, and on south through Anchorage to my home base at Soldotna. My GPS and LO-RAN proved extremely valuable during those long flights over forest and hills, where the sameness made picking out prominent landmark checkpoints extremely difficult. The entire trip was flown VFR so I could enjoy the scenery.

Aviation in Alaska is the lifeblood of the state. With so few roads to supply towns and villages with essential items needed to conduct daily living, airplanes are essential. Most sites I landed at on this trip are way too small for commercial airliners. Small private planes and local fixed-based operators keep these villages supplied, and their citizens in contact with the outside world.

I flew on this trip alone in my small airplane and saw things that the earth-bound or commercial airline traveler will never see. My new engine ran perfectly. Charlie and I flew over some of Alaska's, maybe the world's, most beautiful vistas. My trip cost me nine times a \$100 a hamburger, but the memories of my search for the Norge, the surprise of the ancient sod houses, and the warmth of the Northern hospitality were well worth the expense. For your interested readers I offer the following numbers:

Food and supplies: . . . . .	\$65
Film and processing: . . . . .	\$54
Hotel room in Kotzebue: . . . . .	\$166
Gasoline: . . . . .	\$624
Total: . . . . .	\$909

Total flying hours: . . . . .	26.9 in five days
Total miles flown: . . . . .	1,920
Total fuel used: . . . . .	203 gallons
Average fuel cost: . . . . .	\$3.10 per gallon
Average fuel consumption:	
. . . . .	7.58 gallons per hour
Average miles per gallon: . . . . .	9.41
Average power setting: . . . . .	60 percent
Average cost per flying hour (fuel): .	\$23.19

