

## International Air Rally

## Riddu Riddu and the midnight sun



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# AIR RALLY BRINGS INTERNATIONAL

feature

## 'JET SET' TO WEMINDJI

by Will Nicholls

When you hear the words air rally, you automatically think one of two things; air show or a race.

It is neither of these things. They have competitions on landing and accuracy but it isn't a race and it definitely isn't an air show. Rally check points are set up with the idea of visiting beautiful and welcoming areas around the world. Wemindji was part of last year's Cree Challenge portion of the International Air Rally ([www.air-rally.com](http://www.air-rally.com)) and impressed participants so much they wanted to visit this community once again.

A few planes were slow getting to Wemindji for this year's rally as the weather leaving Hearst, Ontario (the third rally checkpoint) left something to be desired. Most planes had to climb over the storm clouds and fly by instruments for a while.

The rally attracted people not only from Canada but from the U.S., Germany, Switzerland and South Africa. A lot of the planes started from Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

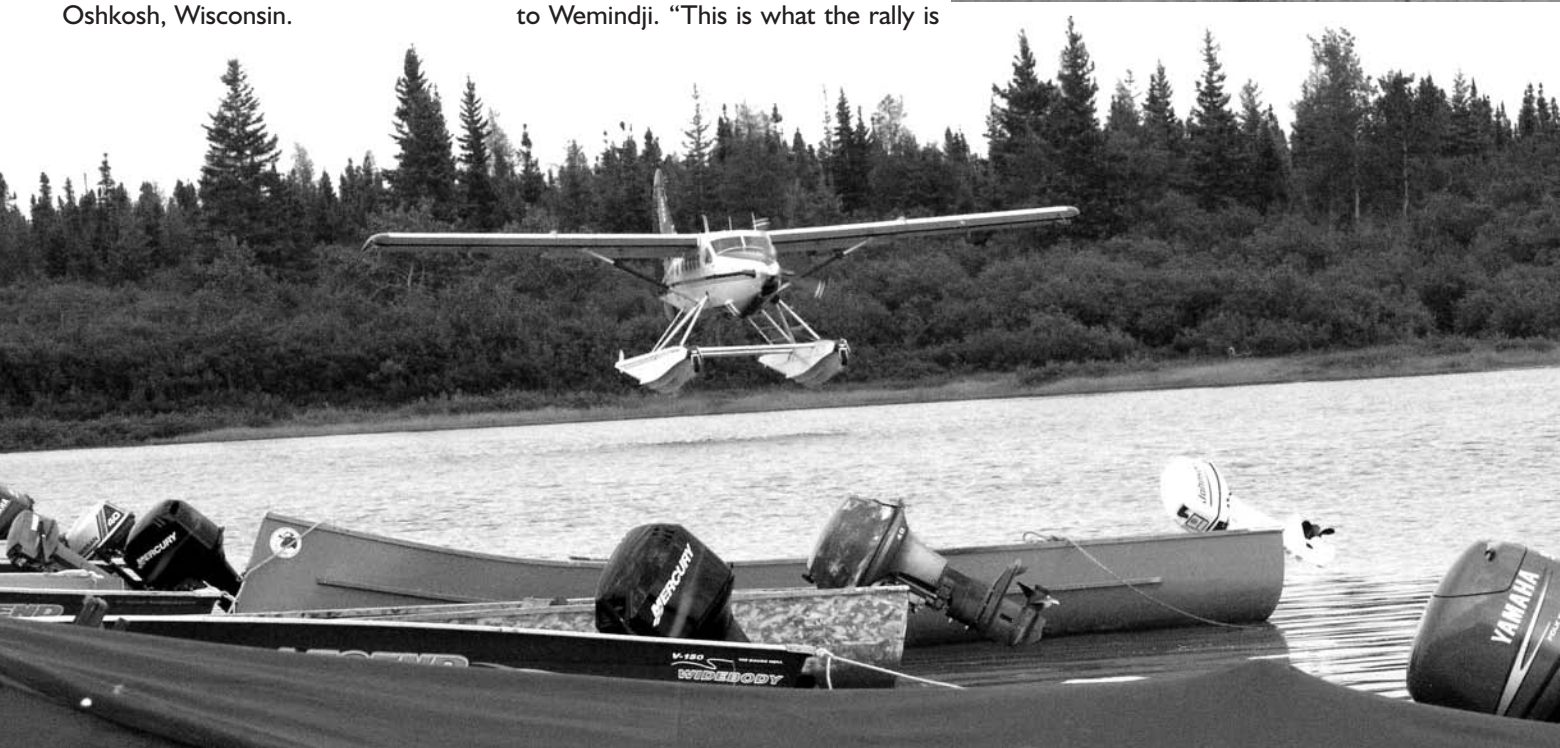
The planes came in all shapes and sizes from a

Cessna to a Pilatus and cost from \$70,000 to \$3.3 million.

The rally itself cost \$800 to enter. Minimum cost for a team on a plane was \$3,500 (counting gas) with an estimated high of \$8,000 for the bigger planes. It is not an experience for the timid or the poor. One team made the rally by getting sponsors and trying to raise money for breast cancer research.

They were an all-woman team and one of the team members was a woman who had breast cancer. They were renting a plane for \$110/hr flying time with a three hour daily minimum.

Camil Dumont, president of International Air Rally organizing committee, said that all the people participating last year wanted to come back to Wemindji. "This is what the rally is





all about,” said Dumont, “meeting the people in communities like this and sharing experiences. Wemindji impressed us with the way they received us and made us a part of the community. We are proud and happy to have them as partners. We will be doing more with them in the future because of the positive response from everyone over the past two years. Everyone wants to come back.”

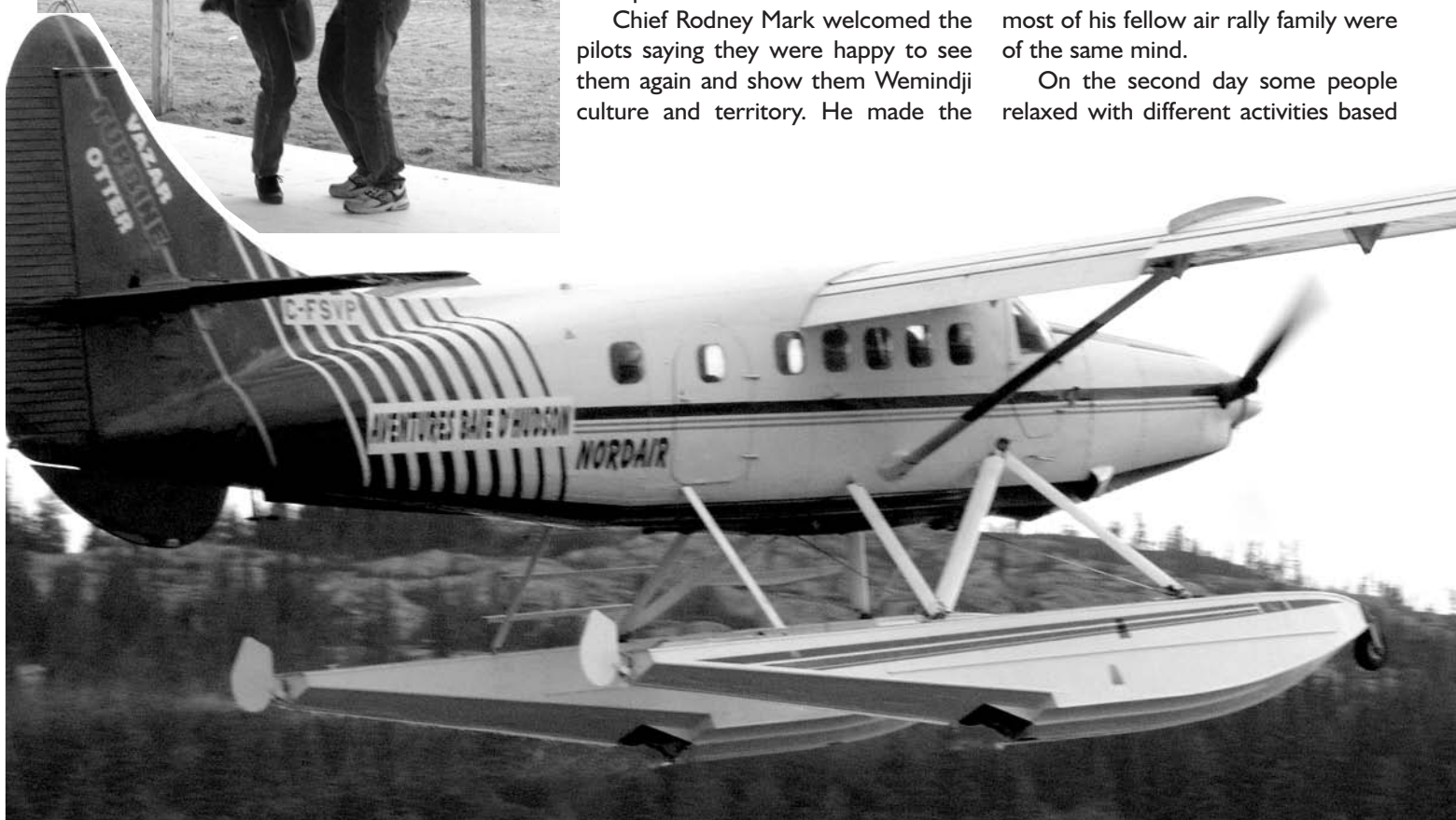
The first day in this northern community allowed the visitors to relax with a fish dinner followed by some Karaoke during the evening. The meal was delicious and welcomed by the tired pilots.

Chief Rodney Mark welcomed the pilots saying they were happy to see them again and show them Wemindji culture and territory. He made the

speech simple and sweet. He commented on a book he had read called *Trespassing in God's Country, Sixty Years of Flying in Northern Canada*, by George Theriault, a bush pilot.

Alan Matson, a former US army pilot, seemed to be the flight boss. He gathered information on the weather and winds and mapped out routes. Matson was an important part of the rally team as he made sure everyone made it to Wemindji airport. In his former career he was a helicopter crew chief and gunner for military helicopters. His love of flying has been with him all his life and continues to this day. He wasn't unusual in that sense as most of his fellow air rally family were of the same mind.

On the second day some people relaxed with different activities based





on the community lifestyle. In the morning some pilots would leave by boat for Paint Hills Island. It is beautiful and untouched except by the occasional shotgun shell showing this is a hunter's paradise.

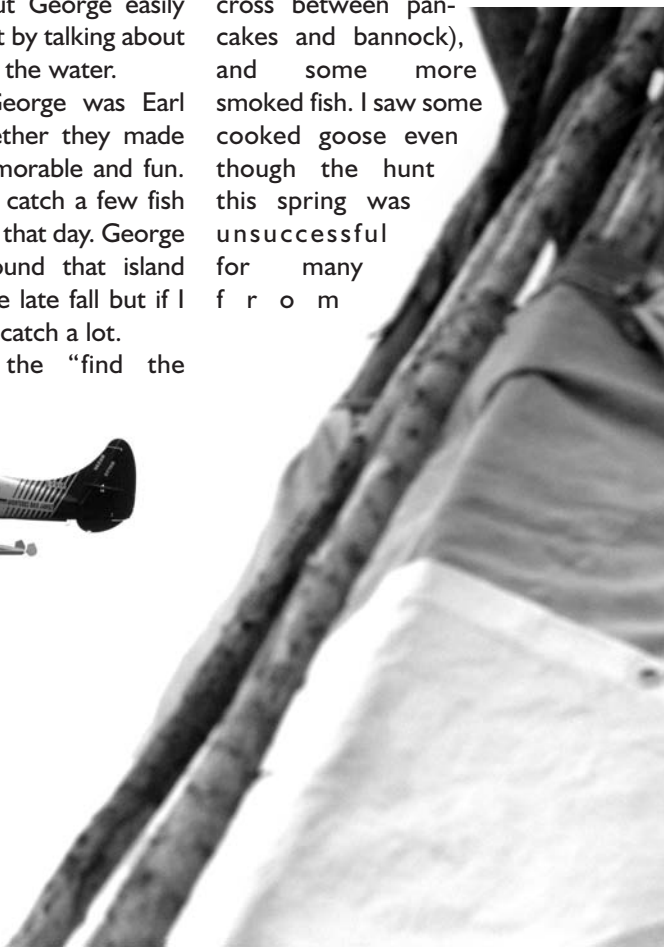
Our guide was an old Inuit named George Kudlu, who migrated south to Wemindji, where he has been navigating local waters for over 60 years. We know this as one of the rally participants was concerned about the weather. Even though it was windy, a misty fog moved in. But George easily reassured the pilot by talking about his many years on the water.

Along with George was Earl Danyluck Jr. Together they made the trip both memorable and fun. Though I tried to catch a few fish nothing was biting that day. George said the fish around that island don't bite until the late fall but if I had a net I would catch a lot.

After lunch the "find the

downed pilot training exercise and game" was canceled due to gusty winds and low cloud ceiling. A few of the pilots went out to the Wemindji countryside for some ATV fun. There was a lot of racing around madly and only one accident... well two but by the same guy. His pride was probably more hurt than he was.

The community supper later that day was amazing, with sturgeon and blue berries. Along with it was blueberry "bancakes" (a cross between pancakes and bannock), and some more smoked fish. I saw some cooked goose even though the hunt this spring was unsuccessful for many





Wemindji. This generosity shows just how far Wemindji goes to extend hospitality to visitors. Everyone feasted heartily.

Later events included a film, basketball, karaoke and square dancing. A film was screened called *Operation Red Flag*. It told the story of over 140 jets and fighters from the U.S., Canada, England and Germany participating in one of the largest air war games in the world.

In basketball the Wemindji youth seemed to outclass the pilots. The second night of Karaoke was attended by even more community members than the previous night.

Then the fiddlers got their chance to strut their stuff and the dance was on. Square dancing is very much a part of the Wemindji community. The prizes for the spot dancing contests were made up from donations from the audience itself.

One dance for the over 40 men and women saw 4 prizes of \$32 awarded to the lucky dancers. The crowd that gathered for this event was full of fun and laughter. It was





the perfect end to the rally as most would be heading out the next day.

Some pilots would attend the sunrise ceremony to greet the day. They would say the experience was something that would remain with them for the rest of their lives. Slowly they would head off to their next destination. The community will wait until next year to see the Air Rally return. Some pilots will return and new ones will show up to visit this hospitable community and for a couple of days enjoy life among the Cree.

