

LOST IN



Ralph Flores spent three days tramping SOS in snow.

THE YUKON



Helen shows Hamilton the makeshift tent that provided shelter during 50-day ordeal.

and unloaded Davidson's supplies. By 3:30 I was flying above the woman again. She waved frantically at me. No smoke obscured the tent now, and I was surprised to see it was no more than a shelter cloth of bright yellow fabric—with black markings. I tried to read them—"N588..." The fabric was ripped after the last "8."

What was the number of that lost plane? I was almost sure it was "N58856." The Indians must have found the wreckage and were using parts for shelter. But Indians would have reported a crash. Could these two be survivors? That was even more unlikely.

As I climbed, I spotted airplane wreckage farther up the mountain, then about five miles closer to the lake I located the man again, still flashing his mirror from between lengthening shadows.

I radioed Watson Lake and told what I had seen. My receiver was bad that day, and the only reply I could understand was "Roger." But I sensed they were feeling the same anxiety and bafflement as I.

The closest I could land the Super Cub was on Aeroplane Lake another five miles northwest of the man. Two Indian trappers, Charlie Porter and Louie Boya, met me, and I told them to go inland with dogs and sleds as soon as possible: I could be back at dawn with help.

Watson Lake was humming with excitement when I got there. Pilots and hangers-on knotted around while I reported to the search and rescue unit of the RCAF and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Together, we developed a plan.

At dawn, Hal would fly our Super Cub to the lake with Mountie Constable George Lepky. I would fly there with Corporal Steve Pentiluk in a Cessna 180. From the lake, the Mounties, trappers, and Hal would search for the man. I would take the small, maneuverable Super Cub, land in a meadow about three miles from the woman, and snowshoe up to her. Other bush pilots had been

ordered by the Mounties to stand by on the ground in case we needed help.

By 4:30 a.m. Monday, we were warming our engines (it was then 10 below). Already news wires had flashed stories of "possible" survivors of N58856. The girl was Helen Klaben, 21, of Brooklyn, N. Y.; her pilot was Ralph Flores, a Mormon lay preacher and father of six children in San Bruno, Calif. Both had been returning to the States after working in Alaska.

I kind of regretted those news stories. In Brooklyn and San Bruno, families were hoping again. It was tragic that their loved ones had vanished in a void of wilderness. It was even more cruel, though, that we should be giving them false hope. And we were almost certain that was the case.

Too Many Odds Against Survival

From the wreckage I had seen, the couple must have smashed hard into the mountainside. Even if they had lived, they had been isolated for 50 days. They had carried virtually no food in a barren land impossible to live off, and during a winter which was a killer in itself.

I couldn't help thinking how my own wife Marion would react to such premature reports if I had been missing—and, worse, how she would feel when they were inevitably scotched.

By 6:30 I was taking off from Aeroplane Lake in the Super Cub, fearing I would be the person to smash the unexpected hopes of the Klaben and Flores families. I buzzed low over the meadow, looking for a place to set down. A guide had advised against landing there: the windfalls were plentiful and even the smooth stretches of snow might deceptively cloak dangerous obstructions. But the plane didn't need much run space, and I put the skis down gingerly on a strip of neat snow, joggled a little and slid to a smooth stop.

A private pilot, Jack McCallum, already had

landed nearby but had been unable to locate the woman immediately. I had flown over the terrain enough Sunday, however, to know where to pick up a footpath, presumably tracked through the snow by the man. I strapped on snowshoes and followed the trail.

The climb was steadily upward, and I was slowed by snow three feet deep, tangled with brush and blocked by fence-like rows of fallen pine. After an hour or so, I labored up a ridge and looked across a barren knoll to a triangle of yellow. I called out. A shapeless figure lifted itself from the ground and waved unsteadily to me. Jack McCallum had just arrived at the scene, too. The figure slumped down now, burying head in arms and crying in violent, body-shaking sobs. But I had glimpsed the face. It was a white woman, Helen Klaben was miraculously alive.

When I reached her, she lifted her head. "You've saved me." Her voice was choked. "I'd love to kiss you, but I can't walk." Her feet were wrapped in layer after layer of cloth; she must have been wearing five or six pairs of slacks, and a heavy scarf was pulled around her wind-burned face. She signaled me to sit down, and when I did she kissed me, and crying welled up in me, too.

A Problem: How to Get Helen Out?

I had to determine two things now: how badly was Helen injured, and how could I get her down to the plane? But Helen wiped away tears and rushed on:

"Ralph! He's out there! Did you see him?"

I assured her that he probably had already been rescued, and she sighed, "Oh, thank God! It was his faith, you know. His faith set the example for me to follow. That's what saved me."

She thanked God for being alive, for being rescued, for saving Ralph—but again and again she thanked God for "letting her see things." I didn't understand that at first. Later I was to

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