



In Brooklyn, Helen is reunited with her mother Ida, brother Arthur, and sister-in-law Fran.

Ralph Flores, who kept Helen's spirits up by giving her the Bible to read, calls wife after rescue.



The plane carrying Helen and Ralph went down near Watson Lake on its way to Fort St. John.

"The Bible Kept Me Alive," Helen Said

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learn that I was not witnessing just a miraculous survival, but that I was privileged to be part of a profound religious experience as well.

Helen was in bad shape. Her left arm was broken and in a splint. Her right foot was fractured, and gangrene had set in (subsequently she would lose her toes on that foot). She said she was "plump" once; now her arms were taut flesh over bone. Yet she had some deeper strength in her, and I sensed she could sustain more than the hardest Yukon veteran. Suddenly she caught my arm.

"And my mother? Oh, God, she must have suffered more than I! You've told her, haven't you? All this time—not knowing whether I was alive or not. Oh, poor Mom!"

"I didn't realize it was you," I said. "But within a couple of hours she'll know for sure." More than anything, though, Helen was disturbed by those extra hours her mother must endure.

Jack McCallum suggested that because of Helen's condition we might try to take her out by helicopter or dog sled. But there were no copters nearby, and dogs would take time. I felt Helen must get medical treatment immediately. "I'll take you out piggyback," I told her. "But it'll be tough for you."

She smiled wanly. "I'm all right. Thank you."

Why the Crash Occurred

Slowly we began to piece together the story of her fight for survival. To save travel money, Helen had bought passage with Flores, who was headed for a new job. As they flew over a 4,200-foot mountain, Flores was checking a faltering radio beam when his center fuel tank went dry, and as he reached over to switch on the front tank, a wing caught a treetop, and the plane careened through a snare of heavy branches.

Helen guessed she was unconscious about half

an hour. "When I came to, my foot was stuck in wreckage. I just turned around and said, 'Ralph, get up.' Blood was all over the place." Then she added proudly: "But I didn't panic."

It was seven or eight hours before Flores regained consciousness, but when he did he took charge of survival needs with a firm hand. He constructed a brush-lined shelter with the plane's cowl and salvaged matches, chisel, and clothing. Weeks later, the two moved their camp to a clearing where they knew they could be spotted more easily from the air. They had two cans of fruit salad, two cans of sardines, and a box of crackers. In a week, that supply was gone.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You haven't eaten in six weeks!"

"Well," Helen said, "we did have two tubes of toothpaste, too."

"What kept you alive?"

Helen thought a moment. "It was Ralph's Bible. First, I read Thoreau's 'Walden.' Then Ralph gave me his Bible. I read both the Old and New Testaments. Whenever I'd begin to lose hope, Ralph would have me read the Bible. His faith set the example for me to follow."

Six weeks after the crash, Flores realized he must gamble. The winds had carried what Flores apparently thought were the sounds of a nearby sawmill, so he set out to find it; if unsuccessful, he was determined to try for the Alcan Highway 60 miles away.

Enroute he stopped to track out the SOS I had seen. It had taken him three days and left him so exhausted he could travel only about a mile a day.

"Weren't you frightened when Ralph had to leave you alone?" we asked.

"No," Helen replied simply. "He left me his Bible when he set off."

I don't think I yet fully appreciated the deep spiritual experience I was involved in. My im-

mediate problem was to lift Helen on my back without hurting her and trudge off on the unwieldy snowshoes.

The exertion, combined with bitter cold, made each step a conscious effort. We slogged over and under windfalls, slipped along icy slopes. My grip cut off circulation in Helen's already pain-racked legs. But she never uttered a cry. The burden of her weight, though, numbed my hips every half hour or so, and I would have to stop and lower her as gently as possible to the snow. I'm afraid it wasn't always as gentle as I hoped, and I would see Helen's pretty face wince in pain. But then she would smile warmly and say something to cut off my apologies.

It was during these agonizing two or three hours that I began to understand the special strength of Helen Klaben and how it had grown in this seemingly God-forsaken wilderness.

Flores and Helen had thought they had heard at least 40 planes flying near their camps. Each time, hope would set their emotions soaring. Then the sound would fade, and in the silent mountains they would plunge to near despair.

The Answer to a Doubt

"I couldn't understand," Helen said. "Why was God keeping us here so long?" Each time hope rose and fell, the question was repeated. At first there was no answer. Then, as Helen read the Bible, the answer slowly evolved, and when the ordeal ended, Helen could say:

"Ralph and I needed time to think over our lives and understand ourselves better. That's why God kept us there so long."

By the time we reached the Super Cub and then flew to Aeroplane Lake, the others in the rescue party already had brought out Flores. We found them in a warm cabin. They had moose sandwiches and tea ready.

She hadn't eaten in six weeks, but when she saw Flores, all she could do was to keep thanking him for giving her not only life but something that made life meaningful. They clasped each other and again thanked God. Helen turned to me.

"Chuck, if there is anything I can do for you, let me know. Please, let me try to thank you."

As I said before, helping people in distress is something everybody does up here, not as heroism but just because it is our way of life. A "thank you" is a good reward. In Helen Klaben's case, though, I think all of us in that cabin could have thanked her. Just sharing what she experienced in those seven lost weeks was something to think about when she said:

"I'm lucky. Now I've learned what I have to do with life, what my work is, what faith is—faith in God."