

I FOUND



Pilot Chuck Hamilton spotted the downed Americans first.

THE GIRL



"Faith kept me alive," Helen Klaben cried when she was rescued.

Their plane crashed in sub-Arctic wilderness, food gone, and rescue abandoned, a lay preacher and a young woman found strength in the Bible; here is the incredible story as told by the man who heard it first—the bush pilot who rescued them **By CHUCK HAMILTON**

AEROPLANE LAKE was a smooth stretch of blinding white in an otherwise pine- and scrub-covered expanse of mountains. As the lake loomed larger on my horizon, I dipped my Super Cub to about 300 feet, remembering the last instructions of my partner, Hal Komish.

Together we operate B. C. Yukon Air Service, Ltd., a charter flying company with a small fleet of craft based at Watson Lake, Yukon Territory. "Take a look at the lake, Chuck," Hal had told me. "Those Indians may need more help."

A couple of months before, Hal had been flying over the same area and had spotted a "Help" sign trampled in the snow. He had landed on the lake and found an Indian family whose new baby desperately needed milk.

In the Yukon, where Hal and I fly, families may live 50 or 100 miles apart, and when winter closes in they become locked in a sub-Arctic prison of waist-deep snow, 40-below-zero temperatures, and winds of 40 miles an hour. All of us have learned that to survive we must help each other. That's why Hal wanted me to see if we could help that Indian family any more. It was nothing extraordinary; bush pilots do it regularly

and, when in trouble themselves, know that help is never far off.

Now it was my turn to see what we could do. It was about 11:30 Sunday, March 24, and I was flying an Indian trapper named Jack George to Terminus Mountain, the last of the Rockies; I was also bringing supplies to one of the region's most famous big-game outfitters, Skook Davidson.

I passed over the frozen lake slowly. The brilliant sun, low as it always is up here in winter, glared harshly on the stark snow, but George's eyes and mine were accustomed to it. The snow lay undisturbed beneath us, no sign of trouble. I figured I had better start for Terminus before that low sun spent itself. First, though, one more sweep.

It seems strange now, but in talking about people in danger Hal and I hadn't mentioned one case that had been big news around our home base at Watson Lake seven weeks before. A pilot and a young woman, both from the United States, had taken off from White Horse, capital of the Yukon Territory, for a 600-mile trip to Fort St. John, British Columbia. They had not been heard of since. The Royal Canadian Air Force and bush pilots had scoured the flight path. No trace of the plane had been spotted. Since then, the worst of Arctic winters had fallen on the area. There

wasn't much reason to talk about the lost flyers now: like others before them, the frozen wilderness had swallowed them up.

I made my second sweep, but again nothing. I started to pull up at the southeast end of the lake. As I did, a meadow rushed beneath us. It was crisscrossed with the dark outlines of windfalls—timber toppled by fierce winds—but there was something else that caught my eye! An orderly scar on the surface of snow. I looked down. It was a huge SOS.

"What does that mean?" George asked.

"It's a distress signal! Keep looking!"

We could see nobody. I tried to follow tracks leading from the SOS but lost them in a thicket. I circled, found another foot track, and lost it, too. I came back again, determined to locate the distressed party if it took the waning daylight hours. Then a flash of light caught my eye. I looked down.

"Somebody's flashing a mirror at us—I see him! Must be an Indian."

We See Signs of Life

I flew back to the SOS looking for his family. Instead a wisp of smoke caught our attention a couple of miles beyond. As we approached, George and I strained to see against the piercing white and deep shadows of snow and timberland, and I checked off my observations against George's so my report would be accurate.

"I see a figure near the smoke—a squaw?"

"Looks like one," George confirmed.

"There's a crude tent."

"Yeh."

"And a fire."

"Not a cooking fire—signal fire."

I couldn't risk landing with a passenger and fully loaded plane, so I waggled my wings, hoping the woman would realize she wasn't being abandoned. Then I flew George to Terminus Mountain

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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