

The SOS made in the snow, from green boughs, on a frozen pond near the survivor's campsite. RCAF Photo

Remarkable Rotorcraft Rescue

THE CRASH OF AN RCAF CANSO FLYING BOAT IN THE REMOTE WILDERNESS NEAR THE QUEBEC-LABRADOR BORDER IN THE SNOWY SPRING OF 1945 LED TO THE FIRST-EVER HELICOPTER RESCUE IN A NEAR-ARCTIC REGION.

by Bob Petite

The USCG HNS-1 lands on the frozen surface of Lake Morhiban, near the remote weather station, with one of the Canso crash victims. The helicopter had to land on the canvas tarp to prevent the floats from freezing to the ice. USAAF Photo



A portable heating unit had to be flown in to warm the engine when the Sikorsky would not start one cold morning at the weather station/radio-range site on Lake Morhiban. USAAF Photo

It was a tight squeeze in the Sikorsky R-4 cabin. USCG Photo



The U.S. Coast Guard Sikorsky R-4/HNS-1 at the Sikorsky Aircraft plant in Bridgeport, Conn., in 1945, after the completion of the rescue in Labrador. Sikorsky Aircraft/Bob Petite Collection Photo

It was a frigid-cold day on April 19, 1945, across the vast, harsh expanses of the Labrador region of Newfoundland (then still a British dominion). A Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) Canso patrol bomber/flying boat (PBV-5A/PBV-1A), Registration No. 11076, with 162 Squadron was lumbering its way to the RCAF base in Goose Bay. The crew's final destination was to be Reykjavik, Iceland, where 162 Squadron was stationed and carrying out wartime anti-submarine duties. For this flight, however, the crew was just trying to get to Goose Bay without a recurrence of the fuel-line issue that had caused them to set down for repairs at the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) base at Longue-Pointe-de-Mingan, Que., on the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Suddenly, the starboard engine on the Canso sputtered and quit. RCAF Pilot Officer Bert Lahey from Port McNicoll, Ont., scrambled to restart the affected engine as the disabled amphibious aircraft began to lose altitude, breaking through the thick cloud layer about 100 feet above the snow-covered wilderness. Lahey and his co-pilot, Pilot Officer A.C. Smith from Vancouver, B.C., had little time to try to land on one of the many lakes in the vicinity. Instead, they steered the aircraft to a relatively flat area covered by a stand of small black spruce trees, and ended up crashing onto slightly rising ground. The Canso was badly damaged, but all nine crewmembers survived the impact without injury.

After initially making a quick exit from the ship, the crew soon returned to remove the survival gear from the wrecked airplane. Unfortunately, a sudden explosion and fire resulted in Lahey and Pilot Officer William R. Baggett, from Edmonton, Alta., receiving serious burns. While some crew-

members administered first aid to the injured officers, the others began to build a shelter and start a campfire — since no one knew where they had actually crashed, and they were not able to contact anyone due to the Canso's radios having broken down not long after leaving Mingan, the crew was not holding out hope of a quick rescue. (The actual location of the crash was in eastern Quebec, just below the Labrador border.)

THE SEARCH BEGINS

After the Canso was reported missing on April 20, Flight Lieut. Dave Avent, air-sea rescue officer at the RCAF base in Goose Bay, Labrador, immediately started the search for the downed aircraft and crew. Avent utilized airplanes from the RCAF, British Royal Air Force and USAAF Air Transport Command (ATC) in the search. Unfortunately, even two days after the accident the various search aircraft still hadn't found the downed airmen.

Meanwhile, three survivors from the accident decided to take off overland, through the deep snow, to try and get to Goose Bay to get help. Fortunately, a little ways into their trek, the men spotted two ATC Douglas C-54 Skymasters (DC-4s) overhead and lit a smudge fire and used a heliograph mirror to make sure the aircraft's crews noticed them. The first C-54 dropped emergency supplies to them, while the second aircraft was able to find the other men, some 10 miles away, following the direction of the stamped out arrow the three-man advance party had made in the snow, and drop emergency supplies at the accident campsite.

Two RCAF Noorduyrn Norseman single-engine bush planes

The Sikorsky HNS-1 on the lake near the remote radio-range/weather station. A USAAF UC-64 Norseman sits near the HNS-1. USAAF Photo



were then sent from Goose Bay with additional winter clothing, medical supplies and emergency equipment. One of these ski-equipped aircraft was able to land on a small lake near the original campsite, and the medical officer and crew were able to walk through the snow to administer aid to the two injured officers, and then carry them back to the Norseman to be flown out.

The second Norseman landed near the three men who had started out for Goose Bay, but crashed into the trees at the end of the lake when it tried to takeoff again, thus stranding now seven men (the original three, plus the four-man Norseman crew). While the aircraft was later made airworthy after field repairs, it could only takeoff with the pilots, leaving the original three survivors, plus two Norseman crewmembers, stranded.

The first Norseman, meanwhile, had managed to return to the accident campsite, but could not takeoff due to the slushy conditions. Further rescue efforts were then hampered for two days due to a major snowstorm. Eventually, this first Norseman was able to takeoff, but only with its crew.

With the three-man advance party, and two additional stranded Norseman crewmembers, having walked back to the accident site, this left nine people at the original campsite still needing to be rescued. Worse, the now melting snow was again creating slushy conditions, making it nearly impossible for the Norseman aircraft to try to land again; the same conditions were preventing ground teams with dog sleds and snowmobiles from reaching the site.

PLAN B TO THE RESCUE

With its traditional options exhausted, communications began with USAAF ATC and RCAF Eastern Air Command (EAC) in Halifax, N.S., about possibly using a helicopter for the rescue mission. EAC coordinated with USAAF Lt.-Col. Norman Vaughn, head of the ATC Rescue Control Center, North Atlantic Division Headquarters in Manchester, N.H. He contacted the U.S. Navy, who advised that there was a U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) Sikorsky R-4B/HNS-1 two-place helicopter available from Coast Guard Air Station Brooklyn/ Naval Air Station New York at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn, N.Y. (The R-4 had been the first production helicopter used by the U.S. military during the Second World War; *see p.124, Vertical, Oct-Nov 2011.*)

Veteran USCG rotary-wing pilot Lieut. August (Gus) Kleisch was chosen to fly the HNS-1, Bureau No. 39045 (Kleisch would also later be instrumental in another famed wilderness rescue, *see p.108, Vertical, Dec'10-Jan'11*). Aviation Machinist's Mate 1st Class Gus Jablonski was chosen as crew chief for the rescue mission, and oversaw the dismantling of the Sikorsky, which was then loaded onto a USAAF C-54 Skymaster.

The C-54 arrived at Goose Bay on April 29 in the early afternoon and work began right away to re-assemble the little helicopter. Working through the day and night, the USCG crew had the ship assembled and ready for a test flight by the early morning of April 30. "I took it up on a 20-minute flight, and it performed satisfactorily, and was now ready for the mission," said Kleisch in a report after the rescue.

To allow the HNS-1 to refuel during the rescue mission, an RCAF Canso, Registration No. 9768, dropped 200 gallons of fuel at Mecatina, the remote site of a U.S. military radio-range/weather station on Lac de/Lake Morhiban (now known as Lac de Morbihan). Along the way to the accident site, Kleisch would have to refuel from the gasoline cans situated on the floats of the little helicopter.

After a 180-plus-mile trip, Kleisch landed the HNS-1 at the survivors' camp at around 4 p.m. on April 30. "The survivors waved up joyously as I slipped slowly down," said Kleisch. "They had heard, the day before, that a helicopter would be ready to take them out."

RCAF navigator Sgt. G. J. Bunnell from Toronto, Ont., was the first one to go, and while obviously excited to end his ordeal, it was said that he kept looking up apprehensively at the rotor blades for most of the 45-minute trip to the radio-range/weather station. A more familiar aircraft, an RCAF Norseman, then flew him to Goose Bay that evening.

Meanwhile, with it already being late in the day, Kleisch had to end the rescue operations and overnight at the station.

The next morning, the first of May, Kleisch was up early to prepare the HNS-1 for the day's rescue flights. The main rotor blades were covered with heavy frost, so Kleisch had to clean them off before attempting to start the Warner Super Scarab engine. Unfortunately, the helicopter would not start.

Kleisch quickly sent a message to Goose Bay to request a portable heater, and crew chief Jablonski. Thankfully, shortly after 12 p.m. the helicopter finally started and Kleisch lifted off for the survivor's camp soon after.

Kleisch began transporting the survivors over to Mecatina/Lake Morhiban soon after he landed at the camp. In all, four of the stranded men were hauled out to the radio range station by the end of the day. The helicopter performed very satisfactorily all day long, and Jablonski serviced the HNS-1 at day's end to prepare for the final flights on May 2.

Kleisch arrived back at the accident campsite at around 6 a.m. the following morning. The flying operations went well that day, too, and saw him land to pick up the final man, Squadron Leader F. H. Smith, shortly after noon.

ONE FINAL FLIGHT

With all the survivors finally heading (or already at) Goose Bay, there was still one more flight that had to be made. Kleisch needed to get himself back to base.

"After the ski plane left, I readied the helicopter for the flight to Goose Bay," recalled Kleisch. "The sky was overcast at 3,000 feet with the wind NE [northeast] at 20 to 30 m.p.h. [miles per hour] with stiff head winds. I took off at 2:50 p.m. and arrived over Lake Twenty with only four gallons in my fuel tank. I landed and quickly refueled. I was happy to leave this wilderness for the last time and breathed easier when the rotors started and lifted me back

toward Goose Bay."

Lieut. Gus Kleisch remained in Goose Bay for several days, showing off this new type of air travel, and giving many rides to enthusiastic passengers. Afterwards, the helicopter was finally disassembled for the return flight back to Floyd Bennett Field.

This unprecedented and dramatic helicopter rescue operation in the wilds of Quebec and Labrador — completed without damage to the helicopter, without injuries to any personnel, and with the helicopter functioning flawlessly in the difficult conditions — definitively proved the future usefulness of rotary-wing aircraft in air-sea search-and-rescue activities. Along with praise and the Air Force Cross from the RCAF, Kleisch received the Distinguished Flying Cross from the U.S. military; the other USCG personnel (including Jablonski, Lt.-Cmdr. Alvin Fisher, Chief Aviation Machinist's Mate Forrest Giles and Aviation Machinist's Mate 1st Class Irving Zifferblatt) received Air Medals or commendations for their contributions to the success of the very-first near-Arctic helicopter rescue.

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