

FORCED LANDING By Donald Francis Lamb

March 1989

Tisdale, Saskatchewan, January 30, 1948. Temperature—30 degrees below zero Fahrenheit (-35° Celsius).

A phone call from the CN Railroad station started the whole adventure. Finley Fraser, the station agent was on the phone. “Donald,” he said, “there is a telegram for you here from your brother Tom at Wabowden. I’ll read it to you. ‘Pick up six injection nozzles for the D6 at Groat’s and fly them here tomorrow. Stop. Most important. Stop. Cat swing leaving for South Indian Lake as soon as you arrive.’”

Hurrying to Groat’s Garage, I picked up the injection nozzles, then made my way over to Bert Joinson’s shop to ask Bert if he would like to fly with me to Wabowden (mile 135 on the Hudson Bay Railroad), a three hour flight from Tisdale. Of course he would like



to go. Bert was an old flier, and we had enjoyed many a flight together. “We’ll have to hurry, Bert,” I said. “It’s almost noon now, and by the time we get the Taylorcraft warmed up it will be one-thirty. We will just make it to Wabowden before dark.”

DFL typed on the back of the photo:

March 1948, Grace Lake at The Pas, Manitoba. Rhena Lamb with the Taylorcraft CF-DOL. On a trip north with Donald to Snow Lake and Wabowden. Brought home a load of caribou meat and white fish. Jumbo whites from South Indian Lake.

Note – Skis up on a pole so they wouldn’t freeze down. The engine all bundled up like a baby. Rhena holding Donald’s 30-30 Winchester carbine.

The Taylorcraft was a two place (side by side seating) aircraft powered by a 65 hp Continental engine. In winter we had it equipped with Federal 1500 skis. There was no ADF (automatic direction finder) or VORs (VHF [Very High Frequency] Omni-directional Radio-range) in those days.

While warming up the plane with the blow-pot, we checked over our emergency rations and decided we were a little short. However, we didn't have time now to pick up more. In the baggage compartment behind the seat I had my sleeping bag, my 30-30 Winchester carbine, a half-pound of tea, a can of Spam, some extra matches, my axe, and a few tools. We later regretted that we hadn't taken time to include a few extra rations.

We decided that I would do the flying as far as The Pas, where we would be stopping for petrol, and Bert would fly the last leg from The Pas to Wabowden. As we taxied out for a take-off, the skis did not run easily over the snow. The thermometer I had taped to the strut read 28 degrees below zero.

The trip from Tisdale to The Pas was more or less without incident. A few ice crystals in the air, otherwise the visibility was good. Between Goose and Birch Lakes we spotted four moose, which wasn't unusual, as we often saw moose in that area. Landing on Grace Lake in The Pas, I taxied in to the Lamb Airways base where we helped ourselves to gasoline, filling all three tanks. There wasn't a soul around, so we didn't waste any time. It was now three-thirty, and we would just make Wabowden by dark.

Taking the tarps off the engine, Bert crawled into the left seat and I into the co-pilot's. Although the lake was a little rough for skis, we were soon airborne and climbing in a northerly direction. Leveling off at 3000 feet, Bert set course for the North Arm of Moose Lake. We never got there.

Twenty-five miles north of The Pas, we were following the east shore of Mawdesley Lake when suddenly the engine sounded rough. Glancing at the instrument panel, we immediately saw the oil pressure gauge was at zero. The oil temperature gauge indicated red hot. Bert instantly cut both switches and trimmed the plane for a dead stick landing on Mawdesley Lake. As we glided down I said, "Land as close to the east shore as you can, Bert. We're going to have to push her right up to the bushes to get her out of the wind." We couldn't leave this light aircraft out on the lake, as the first strong wind would probably blow it over. Bert made a good dead stick landing, though when we glided to a stop we were still 200 yards from shore and the protection of the willows.

We both jumped out onto the ice, each grabbing a wing strut, and pushed the plane towards the shore. In spite of the extreme cold, we were soon perspiring from the hard work. Finally we had the aircraft under a large willow tree and anchored to a couple of deadheads tramped into the deep snow. It was the best we could do, and we were satisfied that it would be reasonably safe unless an exceptionally high wind should develop.

Now we had decisions to make. What to do? It was getting dark, bitterly cold, deep snow, 25 miles from The Pas, eight or nine miles from the railroad. We also knew the people in Wabowden would be wondering why we hadn't arrived, and worrying about us. We had my one sleeping bag and very little food. Just one can of potted meat. We did have the little tea pail and the half-pound of tea.

If we made a bivouac and stayed by the plane, it would be at least two days before a search would be instigated. Even then there would be a possibility that the search planes may not find us. The only aircraft that were available to look for us were my Custom Waco, BDM, which Gordie Hoffos was using to haul fish from South Indian Lake, and Tom's Norseman, BHS, which Ervine Crane was flying, hauling from Stevenson Lake. Don Orchard had an old beat-up Tiger Moth at Grace Lake, which eventually became a lifesaver for me.

I said, "Bert, let's boil the kettle and decide what we're going to do."

The snow in the willows along the lakeshore was four or five feet deep, but we soon had it kicked back and a willow wood fire burning with a pot of snow melting in the flames. With the cold settling in as it got dark, we soon decided we should head for the railroad. I knew that there was a section-house at mile 17 on the railway, and we should be able to make it there by sometime after midnight. With that decision made, we ate our one tin of Spam, followed by a couple of cups of tea each. So much for supper.

Trying to determine what course we should follow, we decided to wait till it was dark and travel by the stars. By the time we had finished our Spartan meal, the sun had gone down and the stars and northern lights were shining brightly as they do only in a northern sky.

As we stood on the east shore of Mawdesley Lake, we easily picked out the big dipper, which pointed to Polaris (the North Star). Wanting to travel in a northwesterly direction to the railroad, we left our fire burning and set our course halfway between Polaris and Cassiopeia, slightly to the west. We waded through the deep snow out onto the lake. I looked at my watch and said to Bert, "It's now six-thirty, three hours since we left The Pas."

We were traveling light, carrying only our little tea pail and the half-pound of tea. We both wore heavy wool pants over our fleece-lined underwear, and sported good parkas with fur-trimmed hoods, each with two pair of mitts, wool on the inside and moose hide on the outside. I had on two shirts, a flannelette over a cotton, and a red tie around my neck. I always maintained that a tie was one of the warmest articles of clothing, as it helped to keep the body heat in and the cold out.

We walked without difficulty the mile or so across the lake as the drifts were well packed, but before long we were wading into the snow on the west side of the lake. Here we ran into real trouble.

The snow was drifted in four or five feet deep, and we sank into it up to our waists. Our heavy fleece-lined flying boots made each step an effort. Finally we left the lakeshore behind and headed out into what seemed to be an endless muskeg. The walking improved a little, but with each step we sank up to our knees. Though it was bitterly cold, we were both working so hard we were again perspiring.

Breaking the trail was such hard work we could go no more than two or three hundred yards before letting the other fellow take the lead. Even with the temperature far below zero, the one breaking trail soon began to work up a sweat. Dropping back we would cool off a little, but the soft muskeg demanded our complete effort with every step we took.

For five hours we trudged across that muskeg. Finally we reached some light timber, which soon turned into a heavy spruce and jack pine forest. We knew we were getting onto higher land and the railroad couldn't be too far ahead of us. By this time it was nearing 11:30, and being in bad need of a refresher, we made a fire, and soon had the kettle boiling. The only sustenance we had was the tea; however, a couple of cups of hot tea did wonders for us. Even in the heavy timber we could still pick out Polaris in the northern sky and stick to our course. I suppose it never entered our minds that 2000 years before our time, wise men had also followed certain stars in our heavens.

Walking in the spruce forest was just as difficult as it was out in the muskeg. Besides trying to keep our course, we had to negotiate around windfalls, through ravines, and up onto ridges. The lift we had experienced from the tea soon wore off, and before long we cleaned the snow off a fallen tree and sat down for another rest. I can see us now, like two babes in the woods, sitting on a log in the forest, deep snow all around, and the temperature somewhere between 25 and 30 below zero. Bert turned to me and said, "I'm not sure just how long I can keep going." I didn't say so out loud, but I was having the same thoughts. We had no alternative. We had to keep going. Surely the railroad track couldn't be too far ahead of us. Peering up through the snow-covered pines, we once more found our guiding star, and headed to the northwest. At last we saw a clearing ahead of us. Sure enough, there was the right-of-way. The train tracks shone under the light from the stars and northern lights.

Down through the ditch, where the snow was again four feet deep, and up onto the railroad. There we stood, first looking north towards Cormorant Lake (mile 42), then south towards The Pas (mile 0). We weren't sure just where we had hit the railroad; however, we never had any doubt as to which way we would head. Stopping less than a minute, we started south, walking between the rails. At that time only one train a week ran between The Pas and Churchill, and it had been several days since the snowplow had cleared the track. Snow to a depth of five inches lay between the rails, making walking extremely difficult.

After twenty minutes of hard walking, a strange thing happened. A cloud cover came across the sky, and within minutes we could no longer see the stars. If this had happened

when we were in the heavy timber, we would not have survived. With no means of navigating, we would have been completely lost.

Our spirits rose when we spotted the first milepost, mile 24. Seven more miles to go, and the possibility of a warm section-house at mile 17.

One o'clock in the morning. Time for another cup of tea. So back into the bush, and kindle another quick fire. Sharing our one enamel cup, we agreed that the tea now tasted bitter. Not wasting much time, we forced ourselves to swallow a cup or two. Then back up onto the tracks, we plodded our way south. We decided that we wouldn't stop again until we had made at least one, and if possible, two miles.

After what seemed to be an eternity, the next milepost came into sight, mile 23. Bert looked at me and said, "Let's not stop here. We can make it to mile 22." I nodded agreement. With our heads down and the fur on our parka hoods well frosted up, we forged on, finally making it to our objective, mile 22. Here we stopped once again to boil the kettle and have a little rest. The last two rest stops at mile 20 and mile 18 revived us but little. The intense cold seemed to sap our strength. Four-thirty a.m., and one more mile to go.

Finally, about 5 o'clock, there on the right hand side of the track was the section-house, and what we hoped would be a warm reception by the section foreman. We approached the front door eagerly. Great consternation. Nobody home. A large CNR padlock dashed our hopes momentarily. We hurried around to the back door to find it equally well padlocked. We walked all around the house. Heavy boxcar grain doors covered the windows. Wondering how we could get in, we reluctantly concluded it was impossible.

There was one saving grace. We found the front porch next to the rail tracks open, and inside the porch a CNR telephone hanging on the wall. We both crowded into the little porch, and Bert took the receiver off its hook and started to crank the handle on the side of the phone. He kept this up for over a minute, until finally a voice answered. It was the railroad agent in The Pas. We had wakened him from his slumbers and he was not too pleased. Bert got the message across to him that we were a couple of aviators who had had a forced landing, and we were now at the section house at mile 17 and in dire need of help. There was a road in to the section house, and would he please phone a taxi and have it come out and pick us up. Yes he would.

In the woods behind the section house we soon had another fire burning. By this time we just couldn't drink any more tea, so we stood near the fire, glancing down the road, hoping to see headlights shining through the trees. Now the cold really set in, and even with a good fire blazing we found ourselves turning around and around to warm first our fronts then our backs. Finally, after waiting nearly an hour, we saw headlights. As tired as we were, our spirits rose, knowing that our long ordeal was nearly over. The warm taxi and congenial driver added to our relief.

With daylight breaking in the east, we pulled up to the Cambrian Hotel in The Pas. It had been a long night. The taxi driver must have felt compassion for us, as he only charged us a couple of dollars for making the trip out to mile 17 and back. As we walked in the door of The Cambrian, the thermometer tacked to the outer wall read 40 degrees below zero. Bruce Zess, the manager of The Cambrian, was up and soon had us in a room on the second floor. When I took off my shirts, there on my fleece-lined underwear was the imprint of the red tie I had been wearing. I had perspired so much and so often that my underwear had absorbed the dye from my tie. Dog tired, I lay on the bed waiting my turn for the bathtub at the end of the hall.

PART 2: Recovering the Taylorcraft and the trip home

Bert decided that he couldn't stay away from his business, so caught the evening train out of The Pas for Tisdale. My concern was how to get my little aircraft from Mawdesley Lake back to Grace Lake where, working in the nose hanger, I could find out what was wrong with the engine. During the day, Ervine Crane had come in with the Norseman, and he said he would fly me over to Mawdesley Lake. We would add some oil to the crankcase, and I would try to fly the plane the 25 miles to Grace Lake.

That didn't work. After warming up the engine and adding a gallon of oil to the crankcase, I taped the filler cap on tightly. Pressure in the crankcase had blown cap loose two days previously. A few swings of the propeller, and the engine caught, and we were in business. Or we thought we were. The engine should have revved up to 2300 revolutions per minute, but the best it would do was about 1950 rpm. In desperation I decided to see if I could get airborne and maybe stagger over to Grace Lake. At 65 mph I lifted off the ice, and at 300 feet altitude, pointed the nose south towards Grace Lake. I didn't get very far. No more than four or five miles, and another forced landing. No oil pressure and a hot engine. Cut the switches, and over the trees into a little pothole no more than 500 yards across. Getting out of the plane, I waved to Ervine, who circled above me looking at the little lake where I had landed. He must have decided that the lake was too small for his big Norseman, so headed back to our base at Grace Lake.

Now what to do? Here I was all alone out on this little pond, probably five miles from the railroad and twenty miles from our headquarters, and the temperature still well below zero. I knew that Ervine would have someone rescue me or drop me a sleeping bag and some grub. I also knew that the engine had to be taken off the plane and into the shop (nose hanger), so we could ascertain what the trouble was and order parts from Winnipeg. With the few tools I had, I started to work taking off the propeller, disconnecting the magnetos, the tachometer cable, gas line, throttle, and carburetor heat controls. Finally, I loosened the four bolts holding the engine to the firewall. I was nicely finishing this work when I heard an airplane in the distance. Looking towards Grace Lake, I recognized Don Orchard's yellow and black Tiger Moth coming to my rescue.

The Tiger Moth, a two-seat biplane, was powered by a 145 hp de Havilland Gypsy Major engine, and rode on Federal skis. The young lad flying Don's old oil-covered plane

probably had no more than 50 hours flying time to his credit, and it showed in his first landing. I stood transfixed as he came in a little too fast, skidded across the little lake and up into the jack pine on the far shore, and came to a stop fifty yards into the scrub timber. He had cut the switches, so no damage was done to the propeller, but the little trees had poked a dozen holes in the bottom wing. The aircraft was still very much airworthy, but I knew the lake was not large enough for a takeoff. Grabbing our axes, we started to clear trees for a runway leading onto the lake.

On completion of our extended runway, we struggled to fit my little Continental engine into the front seat of the Tiger Moth. The engine was just too large to fit that little cockpit. The only solution was to tie it on top of the bottom wing, next to the fuselage. We first laid my engine tarp on the wing, then, placing the engine on top of it, tied the bundle securely to the wing and the fuselage.

With the engine as secure as we could make it, I crawled into the front seat, and my young friend took the controls in the rear cockpit. I was a little worried. With the extra drag from the engine strapped on the wing and the two of us on board, I feared a dicey takeoff.

Taxiing up into the bush where we had cut the runway, we got out and turned the plane around so it faced the lake, pointing to where the trees were shortest on the far side. Full throttle and a couple of kicks of the rudder pedals, and we were on our way. My apprehension mounted until three-quarters of the way across the lake we became airborne. In a few seconds the skis cleared the treetops, and we set course for Grace Lake.

With both Lamb Airways engineers at Wabowden, I decided to fix the engine myself. Working in the warmth of the nose hanger, I soon found out that I needed a new piston. The cause of all our problems was a tiny hole in the top of one of the pistons. Consequently the compression in the cylinder had blown all the oil out of the crankcase. I had to wire to Standard Aero Engines in Winnipeg for the piston, so I also asked for piston rings and new connection rod. Service from Winnipeg was good, and in a couple of days I had the engine repaired and ready for the trip back to the aircraft.

This time Ervine Crane would fly the Tiger Moth. In the meantime, Herbie Dolman, one of the engineers from Wabowden had come to The Pas, and he offered to come with us to help me put the engine back on the plane. The Tiger Moth was designed to carry two people, so we were slightly overloaded. With the engine tied on the wing, Ervine doing the flying from the back seat, and Herbie and me squeezed into the front cockpit, we were ready for takeoff. Fortunately, we had the full width of Grace Lake in which to take off. It took the better part of a mile for the overloaded little Moth to lift off the ice. We all breathed a sigh of relief when we landed safely beside the Taylorcraft sitting forlornly, waiting for its engine.

After unloading our engine, Ervine bade us farewell and departed for Grace Lake. Herbie and I went to work, and within an hour had the engine back on and all controls hooked

up. A couple of swings of the prop, and it was ticking over nicely. One problem. The tachometer wasn't working, and we didn't know how many revolutions per minute the engine was turning over. On investigating, we found a broken tachometer cable. I had no choice but to try a takeoff using only the throttle setting. I hoped that at full throttle the engine would have enough rpm's for us to get airborne.

Taxiing over to our makeshift runway and up into the bush as far as we could, we got out of the plane and turned it around by hand, then pushed it back as close to the trees as we could get it. Now the moment of truth had arrived. I advanced the throttle as far as it would go. We skidded across the lake with our eyes glued to the trees on the far shore. No problem, except the bottom of the skis cleared the treetops by no more than six feet.

Safely back at Grace Lake, I was getting 'homeitis'. I had been away for a week, and was getting anxious to be home with my wife Rhena, and little boy, David. The flight to Tisdale would take about an hour and a half. In spite of the weather deteriorating and the plane having no tachometer, I thought I would give it a try.

There were dark clouds in the west, and what looked like snow showers up the Carrot River Valley. Shortly after leaving The Pas, I leveled out at 1000 feet. Suddenly, I noticed the airspeed indicator drop back to 40 miles per hour, and then fall to zero. Now I had no airspeed indicator. Apparently, with the plane sitting out on the lake, some flakes of snow or frost had entered the Pitot tube, and now it was 'u.s.' (unserviceable).

This was really flying by the seat of my pants. No tachometer and no airspeed indicator.

By the time I neared The Pas Mountains fifty miles west, the sky ahead was darker, and snow was starting to fly off the Perspex (windscreen). Now I was down to 500 feet and following the Carrot River. If I stayed with the river, it would take me to the town of Carrot River. From there I could follow the railroad tracks as far as Armley, then a short hop south, again following the tracks, to my landing field at Tisdale.

With no airspeed indicator and no tachometer, and visibility down to half a mile, I kept my eyes glued to the river. Like most rivers, the Carrot runs a course that could be compared to a snake in motion. Zigzagging along just above the treetops, I spotted Bert Huttie's trading store at Red Earth Indian Reserve under my starboard wing. Following the river to Carrot River town meant fifty miles of heavy timber below, and absolutely no place to land should my overhauled engine give out.

There was no turning back now. Determined to make it home, I nudged the throttle ahead, relying solely on my few working instruments, the oil pressure and oil temperature gauges, and a bank and turn.

Finally, peering ahead through the snow, I discerned grain elevators and then the town of Carrot River. Walter Johnson's landing strip tempted me, but the urge to get home was too great. I left the river and followed the CPR tracks coming up from the south. Making a 90-degree turn, I followed those tracks to Tisdale. It was snowing so heavily, and

visibility was so poor, I knew my first try at landing had to be my only one. Having to go around would mean losing all ground references, and flying over an open field would mean a whiteout and disaster.

Passing over the cemetery at Tisdale, I banked left, and using a fence line for reference, landed in Jim Down's field. Taxiing over to my tie-down place under the spruce trees to the west of Jim's house, I tied the plane down and put on the engine cover. It was snowing so hard not a soul had seen me land. There was no one to greet me. I turned and walked the half-mile home.

✍