

THE BUSH PILOT SPR



Cree snowshoes seem a far cry from the plane parked beside them on a frozen lake near The Pas. Tom Lamb oversees the packing of the plane for the spring muskrat trapping season



Planes and canoes are close neighbours in the summertime. Here in the air harbour at Grace Lake, east of The Pas, Tom Lamb chats with his son Jack, in the canoe

SPREADS

Wings of Mercy

By LYN HARRINGTON

Photos by Richard Harrington

A YELLOW Norseman swung low over Island Lake in north-eastern Manitoba. Clear blue water sparkled in spots, rimmed too sharply with jagged margins of ice.

Bush pilot Tom Lamb studied the situation. He could get in all right, but could he get out again? Those hills were too close, he decided, with all that ice floating down there.

But he had to land somewhere. Down below was an Indian who needed a delicate operation, and had to be taken to The Pas, 275 miles west. The patient had already been carried three miles through the bush on a stretcher.

Tom soared higher. Five miles to the east he saw a small V-shaped lake from which the ice had melted. He ripped the top off a box of chocolates he always carried in the plane,

and scribbled a note. It fluttered down to the waiting Crees.

"Take him to the lake east of here. That is long enough for me to take off and get over the hills," they read.

The Indians signalled that they understood, and again picked up the stretcher for a five-mile crawl through the tangled Manitoba bush. Tom Lamb landed at one end of the lake, and while fragments of rotted ice sloshed against his pontoons, he waited.

And waited.

Finally, fearful that darkness would clamp down before he could take off, Lamb went in search of the stretcher-bearers. He marked his trail through the dense willows by sticking clods of muskeg into the crotches, as he had learned from Indian children long ago. At length he reached the trail taken by the party, noting the crushed grass and broken twigs. Then he met a couple of Indians on their way back to the Island Lake post.

"Where is the sick man?" Lamb asked in Cree.

"Long time Mamegasick waits for you at the end of lake," they replied.

And Tom realized that while he was waiting on one arm of the V, they had waited with equal impatience at the other.

The Indians followed Tom back to his plane, noting the clods stuck in the willows. "Your trail is very crooked, said one, smiling, "but it is also very straight."

Tom knew what they meant, and flashed a grin before taxiing down his arm of the lake and up the other. It was nearly ten o'clock of a long May twilight, when he lifted the plane off that thin strip of water with the tree-covered hills just a few feet below his pontoons.

Flying due west, he circled over the Norway House Indian Hospital. Every light flashed on, and floodlights of the melted rink shone on a tiny bit of open water. Mamegasick got temporary relief from his suffering, and next morning Lamb flew him the remaining 150 miles to The Pas.



Bunny McAree, sitting in the window of her playhouse, owes her life to one of Tom Lamb's mercy flights.

It was just one more episode, a little tighter than usual, in the crowded career of Tom Lamb. He has flown mileages equal to sixty times around the world, and his fleet has grown from one to eleven aircraft, without a fatal accident in all 22 years of the Lamb Airways. The legends that collect around Tom Lamb in the North are no more fantastic than his actual experiences.

Tom and his five aviator sons have flown on hundreds of mercy flights for ailing Indians, Metis and Whites: brought out crazed patients—one of whom bit a Mounted Policeman on the seat as he bent to tie the ankles of another. They have many times hurried expectant mothers to hospital. Once a baby was born right on the dock, when the mother was about to get into the aircraft. Another baby was born in the aircraft, and Jack Lamb had to hunt through his pockets for a bit of string.

When the call doesn't come soon enough, it can even be fatal.

Last December, Greg Lamb had to fly a diesel engine into Nelson House in northern Manitoba. The power plant there broke down, and the nursing station had no lights. He loaded some patients for the hospital at The Pas. One woman had advanced tuberculosis. Sitting there in the cold aircraft—it was 36 degrees below zero—she coughed so hard that she broke a blood vessel, and died in the aircraft. But their mercy flights have saved uncounted northern lives.

A rush call from Herb Lake one day was relayed to the Lamb office in The Pas—a three-year-old boy had been severely mauled by sled dogs. He was in danger of losing an eye. A Lamb plane rushed to the mining settlement, 90 miles from The Pas.

