

# **Flying adventure in the sub Arctic**

**by Jim Newell**

As I wrote last May, I was not a pilot, but an air traffic controller during my 10 years in the air force, although I did some flying when I could.

Fifty years ago I was stationed at Ford Churchill in the sub Arctic for a year. My flying was limited to occupying the right hand seat in a single engine Otter aircraft piloted by F/L Al Chute. The plane was stationed there for search and rescue duties.

One January afternoon, Al called and asked if I would accompany him on a rescue flight to the village of Gillam, a Cree Indian Village located about two hours flying time south of Churchill. Gillam is just at the northern edge of the tree line. A First Nations woman had been shot and needed to be transported to the large hospital at Fort Churchill. We departed in the early afternoon with a nurse from the hospital and an air force crewman also on board.

The Otter was on wheels when we took off, but Al lowered the skis because the runway at Gillam, considerably less than half a mile long, would not be plowed. Navigation should not be difficult because the CN railway runs very close to the village. The railway was built on a long esker, a left-over reminder of the days when a glacier covered that part of the world, millions of years ago. Eskers are now a series of hard-packed sandy dunes winding around lakes and marshy Arctic territory. We would follow the railroad south until we spotted the village, located some distance back from the tracks.

## **Uh . . . where are we?**

The problem was we didn't know how far we had come. We had a tail wind of about 15 knots from the northwest, but that didn't help much in calculating ground speed because we didn't know where we were. That part of the country has so many lakes, small and large, but only the large ones are on the map. When they are snow-covered, finding them on a map is nearly impossible.

I was doing the navigating, but finally told Al I was lost. He told me to do the flying while he read the map. He soon agreed locating ourselves was indeed impossible and decided we would just fly on and try to spot the village.

We finally did and flew a low pass over the runway to see what shape it was in and was it clear of obstructions such as snowmobiles. To our surprise, there was a track down the centre of the landing strip the same size as the one we would make.

An RCMP Otter must have been there for police investigation of the shooting. We landed and picked up our passenger. The nurse had inserted an IV in the woman's arm and the crewman had strapped her to a stretcher. She had been shot in the abdomen, but the nurse could not tell how seriously.

"I'm going to retract the skis and use wheels for take-off," Al told me. "The track is packed hard enough." So he did, except . . .

## **Hang on!**

Except that he got airborne by about three or so feet and sank back down, but not onto the track. The plane slipped sideways into about two feet of snow. "Hang on, Al said, and pushed the throttle to full power. He couldn't pull the yoke all the way back to climb steeply because we'd stall.

I could see the trees, in particular a giant pine coming closer and closer as the Otter struggled to free itself and climb. We finally got airborne again, but I was about ready to close my eyes so I wouldn't see the crash. We skimmed the top of that tree by not more than two or three feet.

"Scared?" asked Al. All I could do was nod. "Me too, for couple of minutes," he added."

A couple of minutes! That was a long couple of minutes.

The return trip gave us the same navigation problems plus early darkness. We took turns flying and trying to navigate. This time with a headwind, calculating ground speed was next to impossible. By 3.30, the sun had set. Finally, Al gave up.

"Call radar," he said. "Tell them we'll be there in 15 minutes. They can get the ambulance to meet us."

Would you believe exactly 15 minutes later, we touched down on the runway at Fort Churchill. "Told you," Al said. "I knew where we were."

Sure he did.

P.S. Our woman with the gun shot lived.