

## **North to Adventure**

**by  
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### **Chapter Twenty-Six - Wings Over Ice**

There came a bad feeling round the air base on one certain day. A plane flight had been planned. I shivered superstitiously, and my natives were restless. I suggested that the flight should be abandoned, but I had no reason with which to back up the suggestions, because the weather was perfectly all right for flying.

So it was that I watched the six passenger Fokker CAHG slip over our landing field of Bay ice, and on a bright cold morning, in a beautiful take-off, leap suddenly into the air and fly out on her appointed task of sailing high in the ether above ice-spotted Hudson Strait. The idea was to look over conditions at Resolution Island, and they were also to observe Savage Island, the place which had so nearly become my grave on the first hunting expedition of my first year in northern service.

The plane was piloted by Flight Lieutenant AL Lewis, and was carrying Flight Sergeant NC Terry and one Inuit known as Hungry Bobby, to distinguish him from One-eyed Bobby, brother of my friend Tommy who had been killed and a son of Nashula, which also made him my foster brother, since Nashula had proclaimed himself my foster father.

All the natives loved the airplanes. Women and children clamored and begged to be taken up for rides. On the first patrol flight in which I participated, I turned in my seat, startled, when a small voice at my side said: "Auk shu ni, Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-Nook-Ka-Sak," and there was the nine-year-old son of Ee-alak who had become a stowaway because he, too, wanted to enjoy flying through the air at great height.

I was away from the air base maybe three hours that day on duties which could not be put off, and so I got in again just in time to hear Hall, the radio operator reading out certain of the air messages as they came in. I was surprised to find that Lewis and Terry had not returned.

"There's something queer about these messages," said Hall, as I reached for his flimsy to read the last news of them. It appeared that Lewis and Terry and Bobby were lost.

"Petrol gone, Lewis." The message told all we needed to know that here was a serious emergency.

"No land in sight - rough heavy ice - visibility twenty miles - landing - so long, Lewis." The radio cracked to silence. The operator of the little one-way station at Base A could do no more. This was a horrifying message, and it was the climax of messages which had been coming, each one of them getting weaker in reception.

I read through the written reports. There was one which had come earlier in the day, and Hall said it had been Terry speaking, and when his cheerful tones had taken up the radio rhythm he had remarked; "You went too far and you stayed too long," which was a line from a popular song of the time. The next message had been from Lewis who said: "Must be over Ungava Bay, will soon be back, visibility getting better."

Then there had been a delay, and Terry's voice again saying: "I see something green ahead; we must be heading for Ireland."

And the final message spoken by Lewis:

"Landing - petrol gone, Lewis."

The story of the plane's progress up to that point had been reported in by radio to us at the base, so I reread the whole log. She had cruised along, crossing the strait, and reported that there was not a great deal of heavy ice then. There was shore ice on the north side of the strait, and it was thick and wide. They had spent some time flying over the islands as they had intended, and then turned for the home port.

They had experienced a heavy snowstorm at eight thousand feet, and they had flown high over the clouds. By the time a message came in from Lewis, "May land at Cape Chidley, flying over Button Islands, he should have been making his landing at Port Burwell according to his flying schedule. And it was only a few minutes later that he had acknowledged: "Must be off my course, now see Akpatok on my right."

That, of course, told me that Lewis was in bad trouble, for it would have been impossible for him to drift or fly as far west as Akpatok Island.

Nick, for whom I had sent to come up from the detachment home, looked at me and I looked at him.

"That damned infallible compass," I muttered. Lewis always swore by this pet direction finder, believing it could not go wrong. Nick and I both knew that any compass could go wrong within the Arctic Circle, and most evidently this perfect one had gone wrong. Now it was impossible to guess in which direction Lewis might have been flying.

"Nick," I said in an aside, "do you think Terry was trying to tell us that they had been traveling east off their course, when he said they were heading for Ireland?"

"If that were so," said Nick, "then they are out on the Atlantic ice by now, or they might be down in Ungava Bay."

"Hell," I said, "maybe they are at the bottom of the ocean - they might be anywhere..." I strode off to join the other ten men at the air base. I was nervously irritated, furious because there was nothing we could do at the moment, and the flight had been launched against my better judgment.

The radio operator flashed messages to Base B at Wakeham Bay, and Base C at Nottingham Island, then we outlined a plan so that a plane from one of these stations should be sent up on a search flight as soon as daylight broke.

Darkness fell, and fortunately it was a clear and cold Arctic night. The responsibility of this emergency was mine as Mounted Policeman at the air base, so the first thing I thought of was a signal fire. I directed a dozen of the natives with all the men remaining at the base, and two men of the Hudson Bay Post who had come in unexpectedly, and with Nick and myself, we all plied up and down to Ship's Hill, as we had named a headland close by, carrying dynamite, black powder, gasoline, with wood from crates, oil and anything else that would burn, to keep the great fire going in the hope that the lost trio would be close enough to the base to see the flames or at least to catch a reflection of them in the sky. All night long this vigil kept up.

The next morning the men of the wrecked *Canadian Raider* came in on the search, and two relief planes arrived that afternoon, one from Nottingham Island and the other from the Wakeham Bay base, with Flight Lieutenant A Leitch and Squadron Leader Tommy Lawrence. A short flight was made that day with no result, and at night the signal fires were kept blazing again.

Another dawn came and I flew with Leitch in the Nottingham plane. We made a wide circle of Burwell, but our planes carried five hours of gas, so we landed back in Burwell with very little reserve left. Everyone realized the danger there would be in further loss of planes and possible men, so as yet no unnecessary chances were taken.

A Conference was held and it was decided that an emergency fueling station should be set up on Ungava Bay between Burwell and Wakeham. Nick flew with Flight Lieutenant Coghill on another short reconnoiter, but on their return the weather had changed and the ships could not be take up again.

It was the fourth day since Lewis, Terry and their native companion had last been heard of. It seemed to me that salvation for the missing men must lie in dog team and sled. I had been over the country before where the majority of the group thought the plane must have come down. There might be some hope but not much chance of finding them. But personally I had not a great opinion of the idea of establishing a refueling depot. I knew the sort of ice the gasoline cans would have to be dragged over and Nick agreed with me; the others in the council did not. However, I loaded two sleds with four-gallon containers of gas which were to be left at an Ungava Bay cache.

There was heavy snow, a wind blowing and bad weather when we left Port Burwell. I had with me Lukas, Nashula, One-eyed Bobby, another native whom we had named John, and four others, all volunteers in the attempt to rescue the missing men.

From the first the sea ice was heavy and bumpy, just as I had expected, and the thin tins of the gasoline could not stand this hard usage of travel as the dogs dragged and pulled and tugged the huge loads over hummocks and ice peaks. I abandoned the leaking containers at last in a snow house, and started off with very slim equipment to look for the missing men and the plane. Meanwhile, five hundred miles more or less away from me, Lewis, Terry and the natives were struggling against terrific odds.

From Terry and Bobby, the native, I have heard the story at different times, and their experiences tally in exact detail. That without Bobby their bones would long since have gone dry and white into the silence of the North, we white men know. The native actually knew all the time where he was, but he was inarticulate because with him were two men who could not understand the language. Bobby tried to explain that he recognized the direction, but the one white man insisted on trusting that compass, and Bobby, no doubt mutttering the familiar "wheyanna," prepared to go where the white man went. He felt, because of their

ignorance which was not their fault, that they were in his charge. The native could have left the white men. It was his right, according to the rule of the North, to take his rifle and share of supplies and equipment, but Bobby stuck, and in so doing saved the white men's lives.

Flying high on this cruising flight, Terry says he believed the pilot had missed the little port just off Cape Chidley. But actually the compass was off, and they were flying over the North Atlantic Ocean. When the five hours' supply of gas gave out, they landed on ice hummocks which were thirty feet high. One ski was smashed coming down, and although the three men looked for this they never found it. The struts were broken, too, and the engine nosed into the ice, bent back and under, and came within an inch of crushing the pilot, Lewis.

Terry tells me the floor of the cabin seemed to be rising as the plane settled into its crash, so he grabbed Bobby by the shoulders, threw the native to the floor of the cabin and held him down. This he did to save possible broken bones, but Bobby thought the big white man had gone crazy and was terrified. The plane ricocheted to a full stop, tilted and was still, the angle so great that the door would not come open, so Bobby, now free from Terry, with a despairing wail, pushed himself through the plane's top window, and landed ten feet below on ice, yet with all bones intact. Terry followed by the same exit, and looked around for Lewis, of whom there was no sign. They crept up to the almost concealed cockpit and found Lewis standing up and rubbing his eyes, although he was far from asleep. He spoke to Terry:

"I say, old chap, are you all right?"

Terry assured Lewis he was all right, and added:

"You're not hurt, Lewis, are you?"

"Oh, no, but this is a pretty pickle we're in, isn't it...rather!"

It was a pretty pickle, and only Bobby could have explained in detail the fine mess the three were in.

They took from the plane a small Primus stove, sea biscuits, seal meat and bacon, and an air raft which later they inflated, and still later lost. They had two sleeping bags, a snow knife and a rifle which Bobby carried.

Bobby built an igloo. That night their sleep was fitful, and in the morning they found they had somehow lost all their matches in the wreck. They secured a

hand generator from the plane and managed to get a small amount of gas out of the feed line to fill the stove. They lifted rifle and ammunition and with a persistent faith that augured ill, Lewis removed the compass, and headed with the party due "west" as the compass indicated.

The three plodded for a day with the ice getting heavier, and every few hours the Inuit pointed with more excitement back the way they had come. At last the attention of the white man was drawn to a mirage of mountains which appeared in the sky, directly back of them. It was not until then that they realized their direction; those peaks were reflected mountains of Labrador, and they must steer their course by the sun. They doubled back toward the real west.

In the early part of the travel over the ice, the air raft was used for crossing leads which became more numerous as they neared the coast line. But this air raft, badly damaged, and with many items of their clothing and equipment, had to be left behind. Without fuel, the Primus had been thrown away long before.

The strides of the men were weak now and shaky; they were to find they had been seventy miles off shore in the North Atlantic, and all around them was a desert of horrible packed ice and no trace of game. The rations were running very low, their boots worn through, cut to ribbons on the ice furrows, so that they had wrapped lengths of torn engine covering round their feet to serve as boots. Bobby built an igloo for them each night, and as Terry counted the igloos left behind, there were eight. They had been already eight days and nights on the frozen Atlantic.

Bobby, enduring as no tenderfoot white man could be, forged ahead of the distressed couple. He was intent upon sighting game, and climbed hummocks of ice, to shade his eyes and stare out intently on the watch for some living thing.

It was the ninth day when Bobby called out to Terry: "Puyee," and disappeared behind a hummock. Leaving Lewis for a few minutes, Terry crashed on until he could see Bobby, who was just sighting his rifle. He fired four shots at a black mass which was lying on a floating pan of ice. Bobby dropped the rifle and ran forward. He leaped across the lead and landed on the ice pan, which was moving with fair swiftness. The native took a tremendous chance of death, for the animal on the pan was not a seal but a very young walrus. Realizing that he could never handle the carcass alone, and not sure that the beast was dead, but probably only stunned by the shots, Bobby drew his hunting knife and carved off a flipper which had probably twenty-five pounds of meat. He skipped, hopped and jumped from floating ice pan to ice pan and, hugging his bloody treasure of fresh meat,

retrieved the rifle and ran to greet Terry. Both men ate, and returned to Lewis, who was very weak, and to him they fed the raw meat.

Early on the following morning the three, strengthened by the food, went ahead, and then came up against open water. With an ingenuity born of their desperation, they utilized the floating ice pans as ferries, and now following the gestured instructions of the native, who took advantage of the flowing tide, they made the mainland ice.

On the tenth day, ragged, minus rations again, and beginning once more to feel the pangs of hunger, they climbed the last ice-raft barrier of the Labrador coast, and made land fifteen miles north of Nachvaki. Presently Bobby sighted a native encampment. It was the resting place of a friend, Ee-ay-tok and his wife, who, on a hunting expedition, were taking fish from a cache they had established. The woman, the moment she saw them thrust the fish she had in her hand at Terry and saw him eat it and even gain strength. But not too flush with rations themselves, Ee-ay-tok guided the three to his home camp where another native, Kug-mak, waited with the dog team. All night the woman labored to make new boots for Terry, Lewis and Bobby, giving of the small stock of furs the party had with them. They broke camp as the brief daylight dawned and headed for Port Burwell. Fatigued, somewhat frostbitten and with their eyes very sore, but withal happy, the returned party were heartily welcomed at the Burwell Air Base A.

"Where," enquired Terry, "is Montague?"

And no one knew.

"He'll come in all right," said Nick; "he always does."

But Nick was worried about me and my party. Natives who had come up to the Post had not reported seeing us, and that was not usual at the time of the year. Nick sent out two scouting parties of natives to enquire at trading posts; the men at Nottingham Island and Wakeham Bay kept on the alert for us. Weather kept the planes grounded, and there was no word of us.